

Topher Duval took a deep breath and relaxed as he walked into the rooms. He never thought he'd be the guy looking forward to his weekly Narcotics Anonymous meeting, but he did. Being in the rooms centered him. It was corny but true. And he knew better than to skip a meeting. No mid-October snowfall was going to stop him from going either. He was from Wisconsin, and everyone here knew to prepare for fucking winter by this time of year.

He surreptitiously eyed the rest of the folks in the meeting, taking in the aromatherapy of coffee and cigarettes, the staple scent of most of these types of meetings. Others might find the combination repugnant, but it made him feel grounded.

A young man, face glued to his phone, walked in with a huge to-go cup of coffee. Topher wanted to say, *Wrong room, dude*, but he kept quiet.

It was clear to him that this guy wanted the bougie meeting at the Unity Church on 7<sup>th</sup>. There, everyone had their new drug of choice, a to-go cup of Americano. Those meetings had a different vibe and the people who attended those them all made bank. Not Topher's kind of meeting. This was an old-fashioned gathering where someone always brought high-calorie treats and low-cost coffee, and folks were willing to share a smoke with a stranger.

Topher tried to hide his smile as the dude frowned at the group of people, made an about-face, and left the room. His meeting was mostly blue-collar workers who didn't give a fuck that he was famous. It kept him his ego in check to be treated like a normal guy. Outside of this overly bright room in the basement of a Unity Church, he was the lead singer for Metalsome, the hardest rocking heavy metal group of the last decade. But here he was just another recovering junkie.

Life had been amazing for a long time. For years all he had to do was smile and someone handed him blow, smack, or even a good bottle of bourbon. It had been good to be the king. Until it wasn't.

"Hey, man."

Topher turned to find a younger man smiling at him. Shit. He hated this. Did he know this guy or was he a fan?

"I bet you don't remember me."

Topher rubbed the back of his neck and tried not to sigh heavily. "You look familiar." He paused, feeling like a dick. Then he took a good look at the kid and a brief memory filtered into his brain. A redheaded man with a friendly smile and vacuous eyes. A junkie just like him.

“Derek?”

“Yeah.” He beamed. His eyes now bright blue and not in the least empty.

“I suck at names, but yours stuck for some reason.”

Derek looked down, but a blush blossomed on his face. “I wanted to say thanks, brother. If it weren’t for you, I’d be dead.”

Topher raised his palms. “I’m glad I influenced you to get sober—but your success is your own.”

Derek shook his head. “No, man, you don’t get it. I was one of your roadies. I was fucking high all the time. So Diego fired me. You came up to me and told me if I went to rehab, you’d pay for it. You said that you and Ione were not going to survive your addictions, but I had a chance.”

That sounded vaguely familiar. Just before his girlfriend at the time, Ione Maeda had disappeared, he had been in a dangerous space. Thoughts of suicide played on rotation in his mind. “So, you took my advice and went to rehab.”

“Dude, I couldn’t afford to go to rehab! I went because *you paid*. You got on your phone or whatever and sent me to this swanky rehab in California. It changed my fucking life, brother. I have a wife and a kid and it’s because of you.”

Topher felt overwhelmed as pride coursed through him. He didn’t have a lot to be proud of during his darker days, but the idea that he helped change another junkie’s life? That mattered to him. A lot. He embraced Derek, knowing full well how hard it was to kick. He managed to choke out an “I’m happy for you, man.” And then he hugged the kid for a long time.

Derek wiped tears from his eyes as they broke apart. “Yeah. Me too. Thanks again. I don’t know how to repay you for what you did.”

“Continue to thrive, brother. That’s all the thanks I need.”