

A Shade of Mind

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A Shade of Mind

by

Roger Jackson

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Cover by Eric Winton

<http://www.ericwinton.com/>

For my wife

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A Shade of Mind

Chapter 1 – Homecoming

Bobby stared at his house knowing what waited for him inside. He'd rather go back to the hospital than go in there. It was safer. He didn't notice his sister had walked around the car and was startled when she opened the door. Waving aside her hand, he gritted his teeth as he pulled himself up out of her Subaru.

"Easy," Jennifer said as he stumbled on the uneven sidewalk. "You're going to fall down."

Even with the hand-me-down forearm crutches fully extended, he had trouble maneuvering his six foot four inch frame on the damn things. They made his knees hurt, his hips hurt, his ankles. Everything hurt. He wanted the kind of crutches his doctor told him about, but his dad flipped out about the cost. The insurance wouldn't cover it.

"You try dragging yourself along on two toothpicks," he snapped.

He glanced back at her. Jennifer pursed her lips, saying nothing, but he could see it in her face.

She wanted to bite his head off. He'd been bitchy with her all day. Thinking about coming back here made him jumpy. He looked at the ground while he rested, mad at the crutches, at broken sidewalks, at shitty insurance – at himself. He supported his full weight on his arms. Fortunately, they hadn't gotten too banged up in the accident. He waited for the sharp pain in his right leg to ease back down to a throbbing ache.

"Patience, Bro," Jennifer said. She was trying hard to be patient with *him*. "Drop the attitude."

"Sorry," he mumbled.

He still didn't get it. He wanted to sneer at his sister, call her a bitch; like he used to. But now he felt gratitude. She had helped him out in the hospital – a lot. She deserved something for that. But why should he care? He wouldn't have cared before.

It had to be the pain-killers, but it was more than that.

It wasn't just him either. Jennifer noticed it too. She even said something about his attitude adjustment, when, instead of bitching to everyone about everything, he kept bugging his doctor to start rehabilitation – and then worked through the pain when he finally got to rehab, pushing himself to the limit of endurance. That wasn't his style. He used to prefer the easy route to everything.

And there it was. He *used* to think the easy way was the only way. Now he somehow knew that wasn't right. He had to work for what he wanted – and work hard.

One day, while Jennifer watched him working with the physical therapist, and he was being nice about it, she asked him, "Who are you anyway?"

She had been joking, but he took it seriously. "Sometimes I wonder," he had said.

He overheard Jennifer talking to the doctor after that.

"It's not uncommon for a person to have a pronounced change in attitude, even some small, inexplicable changes in personality, after a traumatic, near-death experience," the doc had said.

Yeah, right.

Bobby eyed the front porch stairs. Stairs were not his friend. He gritted his teeth and placed both crutches on the first step. Pulling his body up with his arms alone, he repeated this until he reached the top. He looked back at Jennifer. Her expression said it all. *Who kidnapped my kid brother and replaced him with this unstoppable seventeen-year-old?* But he hadn't been kidnapped. More like hijacked.

When their mother opened the screen door to let him into the house, Jennifer stopped short. "Miriam, I thought I had to bring Bobby home because you had to work."

"I worked this morning," Miriam said, keeping her eyes averted. "I finished early."

Miriam followed Bobby inside and let the door swing shut in Jennifer's face. Jennifer jerked it open and came in behind them.

"Can I get you anything, Bobby?" his mother asked.

He shook his head as he stood in the arched entry, eyeing the small, cluttered living room, as if he were seeing it for the first time. But everything was in its place, just as he remembered. The beer stained couch, black cast iron lamp, and dirty, threadbare chair all sat in the same spots. The baseboards still lay unattached beside the walls as they had for the past year. His dad hadn't replaced them after the water leak. It still smelled musty. The dust on the back of the television was thick. Only the screen was clean. Bobby shook his head again, trying to clear the little buzz in the back of his mind, and headed for his bedroom.

"Thanks, Jenn," he said.

She was really mad at their mom, but he couldn't do anything about that. The hate between them had been there for as long as he could remember.

"I can help him now," Miriam said as she stepped in front of Jennifer. "Honey, take my arm and lean on me."

"Stop, Mom, I can do it," he mumbled as he hobbled down the hallway.

*** **

Jennifer stomped into the kitchen. She got a glass from the cabinet and wiped it out with a towel before filling it with water. How Miriam got jobs cooking and cleaning for other people was unbelievable. Obviously they had never seen her house.

She took a drink and the water cooled the fire in her gut. Get the anger under control. Bury it. Don't feel it. Ignore it.

"You still here?"

She jumped at her mother's voice. Her insides still quivered with anger, but she wasn't going to show Miriam any of it. Don't give her the satisfaction. She put the glass down and pulled a ten out of her pocket.

"That's all I can give you this week," she said as she placed the bill on the counter. "I got Bobby some McDonalds before I brought him home."

Miriam's eyes never left the money. "You think I can't even feed my own son?"

Jennifer kept her eyes downturned as she walked out.

"Dirty up my kitchen and then leave, like always," Miriam muttered as she passed by.

Jennifer had planned to help out with Bobby, but she couldn't stay in that house another second. She got into her beat up Subaru and inserted the key, her hand poised on the ignition. Slowly, her fingers relaxed and her hand fell to her lap.

She was pissed. She took off all day from work to bring Bobby home, knowing she would catch hell from Butch for having a short check. Miriam knew it too. That's why she had done it. Hateful bitch.

But it was worth it. The change in Bobby might be confusing, but it was good. She hoped that change would stick now that he was home. She decided to stay. Butch wouldn't be home until late that night. At least, she didn't have to get his supper ready or take any of *his* shit. Their father would get in from work in a couple of hours. After that, Bobby would need all the help he could get.

*** **

Bobby sat on his bed, exploring his bedroom just as he had the living room. Everything was in its place, but it was so different. No, not different. It was unfamiliar. He'd been in the hospital for two months and had almost forgotten what home was like. His Pitt Panthers and 76ers posters were on the walls, but he wondered about the Steelers. He had never paid much attention to football before, but now a curiosity about the Steelers' upcoming season flickered in the back of his mind. A basketball sat next to his Washington High Prexies (short for Presidents) gym bag. Something seemed foreign about basketball now, even though he had played since he was seven.

His legs ached. He pulled them onto the bed and lay back, but he couldn't get comfortable. He laid his arm across his eyes, once again trying to remember what had gotten him into this mess, but there was no memory of the accident that had killed his three friends.

They'd been out drinking. Kellett said he wanted more vodka so they headed back to town. He remembered going to the car, Jeremy by his side, and they got into the back seat. That was it. Nothing after that.

They had told him Kellett was going at least sixty-five when he lost control on the overgrown dirt road near Reservoir Number Three. The car had flipped, ejecting him and Jeremy, and kept going until it landed on its side against a tree. Jeremy died instantly when he hit the ground head first. Kellett and Mason was crushed by the tree. Bobby was clinically dead when the paramedics arrived, but they revived him. No one could explain how he had dialed 911 on the cell phone cradled in his lifeless hand. He hadn't spoken a word to the dispatcher. They tracked the open line to find him.

He hadn't been able to go to the funerals. They were over by the time he woke up in the hospital. Kellett's and Mason's deaths didn't affect him as much as he would have thought. Of course, they weren't really his friends. He didn't even like them that much. Just a source of alcohol. Jeremy though...

Bobby suppressed the ache rising in his chest. At least, they didn't charge him with anything since he hadn't been driving. No priors concerning alcohol. So AA wasn't mandatory. He wouldn't have gone anyway.

He swallowed hard and rubbed his eyes. His friends were gone. He should be too, but they had brought him back from the dead. And put him back in this house. He thought he'd rather be dead, but there was that little thing in the back of his mind assuring him that really wasn't what he wanted.

Bobby shook his head. He didn't want to think about that other thing. Back to the accident. The next thing he remembered was coming off the vent. The next few days were blurry from the

pain-killers. He didn't remember much of that, except for one thing. One day, he opened his eyes and there was a woman.

Who is this? the other – whatever it was – had asked.

This is my mother, Bobby told It.

One time, when a nurse was checking his vitals, he asked, "Is somebody else in here talking to me?"

His voice had been so slurred he had to say it again.

"No, honey, nobody's here but me," the nurse said. "You're so full of drugs, you're probably seeing and hearing lots of things that aren't there."

Those half-conscious talks with something, or someone, continued until they had weaned him off the meds. At first, he'd accepted what the nurse told him. Just side effects. But after that, something remained in the back of his mind, constantly prodding him to do more than he was inclined.

There it was again. He couldn't stop thinking about it. He *had* to think about it – to try to figure it out.

After coming off the meds, the "It" or "He" who had asked questions wasn't like a little voice in his head; it was more of an impelling feeling, or a sense of inspiration. Somehow, without knowing how or why, he knew what he had to do, and was willing to do it. Not forced to do it. It just seemed like a good idea.

It was freaky at first. When he'd think about yelling at the therapist working his legs back and forth or the nurse changing the sheets on his bed, something inside him would make him feel kind of bad. Like that was wrong. So he'd keep his mouth shut. He tried to be patient. He felt better. That was good.

Yeah, he knew people were nice like that. *His* friends weren't though. *His* family wasn't. *His* dad – right. Being nice was for losers.

But when he had been nice to people in the hospital, they had been nice to him. And it felt right. That thing, the buzzy little annoyance in his mind, made him feel better when he was nice.

He hadn't told anybody about it. It wasn't like he was hearing voices or anything like that. And it didn't seem to want to hurt him. Actually, it was like it wanted to help him. It pushed him to work harder. When he did, his legs got better, stronger. It encouraged him to not be such an ass to everybody. People talked to him more. Including Jennifer. It was hard getting used to this other thing hanging out in the back of his mind, but he benefited from it. So he listened. He just didn't tell anybody.

It was kind of like that Disney movie he watched when he was a little kid. Pinot. No, that was wine. Pino something. Pinocchio. There was a bug, a cricket. What was its name? Jim. Jimmy. Jiminy. Stupid name. He was this kid's conscience. That's what it was like: his conscience. Sort of. Only it was stronger, or more pushy, or more – it was just more.

It was more than his conscience, but it was definitely a part of him. It didn't feel like something foreign or alien. He smiled. No, it wasn't like the alien thing that popped out of the guy's chest in

the movie. But it was all tied into him, bound to him, a part of his life. Maybe it was his life.

Yeah, they had brought him back from the dead. Given him his life back. Maybe he just got back more life than he had before. Or more life than he had realized he had.

Whatever it was, it was working. He was getting better faster than the doctors expected. Even though it scared him at first, he decided to follow along. At least for the time being. What else was he going to do? If he told them about it, they'd lock him up with the crazies.

But Jennifer had definitely seen it. She kept asking the doc about it that one day.

"You could call it a will to live, or perhaps a motivation to accomplish something more with his life," he had heard the doctor say.

If that was the case, he had no idea what it was he was supposed to accomplish. He just knew when he was on the right track.

But then, he started waking up and remembering things. Things like in dreams, but not exactly dreams. They were stronger than that; more vivid, and they didn't fade. More like ideas that made him think he should do certain things. And then those ideas came together; like a plan. That plan had worked itself out in his head by the time he was ready to go home.

Now he had twenty-two days to become mobile enough to start school. His doctor didn't think it possible, but that thing in his head, his *motivation* as the doc had called it, was relentless. He would do this. He would get to school in order to find a person he didn't know.

*** **

When Jennifer went back into the house, Miriam was in the living room watching *Jeopardy*. She rolled her eyes and said nothing. Then she slipped into the kitchen to see what was cooking. Meat, potatoes, and carrots thrown together in a pot unattended. No thought to Bobby, of course. She got out boxes of broccoli and spinach from the freezer and started them cooking.

When she went to Bobby's bedroom, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, stretching his legs outward. As he fully extended them, he winced and whispered "Fuck!" He stopped when he caught a glimpse of his audience.

"I thought you'd gone home, Sissy," he said, staring down at his knees.

She paused. He hadn't called her Sissy since he was eight years old. "Decided to stick around 'til Dad got home."

An incredulous look came across Bobby's face as he looked up at her. "*Why?*"

"Don't know," she replied. "Just thought I should be here for the big homecoming, this being your first night back and all." Bobby's eyes narrowed. "Look, Bobby, you've – I've kinda liked hanging out with you the past few weeks. I'd like it to stay that way."

Bobby looked straight ahead and said, "Okay." He used his crutches to heft himself off the bed.

As he passed her, he paused, but didn't look at her. "I've liked hanging with you too."

As they headed for the kitchen, their father was planted on the couch with his first beer of the evening. Jennifer thanked God he didn't look their way. In the kitchen, their mother stood over the stove with her hands on her hips. Miriam turned as she and Bobby came in.

Her eyes hardened. "I guess you thought you had to cook more since you're staying for dinner."

"The doctor said Bobby needs to eat greens," Jennifer said without meeting her mother's glare. "So I fixed some greens for him."

Miriam was about to spit out a reply but Bobby cut her off. "That's what he said, Mom. I need to eat greens."

Their mother looked away. "Of course, honey. I remember."

Bobby gave Jennifer a small wink. She shook her head, but smiled back at him. He sat at the table and laid his crutches on the floor next to his chair. Jennifer helped Miriam get the food into bowls and drinks made. No one spoke.

It wasn't all on the table when their father came in, so he went to the refrigerator for another beer. Jennifer chanced a look in his direction. He took a drink and stared at his wife. Jennifer knew he wasn't happy underneath that expressionless glare. Supper should have been on the table already. Charles Hawkins was not a tolerant man. It was his way – period – and patience played no part in it. God help anyone who didn't understand that. She and Miriam got the table set and waited for him to sit before taking their places.

"I'm not going to work on that car of yours tonight," Charles said as he filled his plate. He didn't look at her as he spoke. "I'm tired."

"You don't have to." She didn't look at him either. "It's running okay."

"Your boyfriend ought to have that thing fixed up."

"We're saving up for that," she lied. "He's trying."

Charles said nothing else and they ate in silence. Since no one's attention was on her, she watched Bobby. When he tried the spinach, he looked at it in disgust, but he ate all of it. The clink of forks against plates and the humming of the refrigerator were the only sounds in the room.

When he was finished eating, Charles took a long drink from his beer and leaned back. He looked Bobby up and down. "So, what are you going to do now? The insurance won't pay for any more rehab. They say you're better, but you don't look so good to me."

Not looking up from his plate, Bobby shrugged. "The therapist showed me how to do it on my own. I'll work on it. I'll be fine."

"I don't guess you can cut the grass yet?"

"Maybe in a week or two," Bobby said slowly.

"You shouldn't push it, Bobby," Jennifer said and then glanced at her father.

She looked back at Bobby, not wanting to meet her father's eyes. Eye contact with Charles was like staring at an angry gorilla. He'd take it as a challenge to his territory. Dangerous. But Charles ignored her and continued to stare at Bobby. Bobby's eyes darted back and forth, always on the table, never looking up at his dad's face.

Don't look up, Bro, she pleaded silently. Don't give him an excuse.

She shifted her chair, scooting a leg on the floor, hoping the sound would break the tension. Charles glanced her way. The moment passed. Then he got up, heading for the fridge for his third beer. On his way back to the living room, his foot caught the end of one of the crutches.

"You gotta keep *these* damn things out of my way," Charles said as he reached down to pick one up. "What'd happen if I tripped on 'em and got stove up and couldn't work? Look at you. You can't even play basketball anymore. What good are you?"

Charles poked Bobby's leg with the end of the crutch and dropped it on the floor out of his son's reach. Bobby's body stiffened as his face drew up in pain and he bowed his head. Miriam took a bite of food and gazed out the dirty kitchen window, acting oblivious to everything. Jennifer opened her mouth to spit curses at her father, but she stopped. That would just be bad.

When Bobby raised his head, there was no expression on his face. Her heart ached.

Don't give in, Bobby, she thought, wanting so badly to say it out loud. Don't go back to the way you were.

Bobby saw her looking at him and his eyes locked onto hers. It was still there. Whatever warmth had come back into her brother's eyes after his accident was still there, but his hand shook as he began eating his broccoli.

Chapter 2 – Basketball

Bobby winced as he stepped off the school bus. He had ditched the crutches weeks ago, but his legs still hurt. The pain was mostly just a dull ache now, but stairs – stretching those tendons that certain way – damn! Walking was pretty good; and he could trot. Running all out? Not yet. He wasn't great, but he was mobile. He worked hard the past two weeks and got his doctor's release. He had made it. It was the first day of school. Goal number one – *check!*

With that release, the doc insisted on sending his medical records and evaluation to his coach. "Bobby should not play basketball this season as it could result in serious re-injury to his legs," it said. No ball. That was cruel; but he had a plan.

Most people on the bus hadn't talked to him, just looked up as he walked by on his way to the back seat. A couple of them said, "Hey, Bobby, you don't look so bad," like they were surprised by that, and "You gonna get to play ball, Bobby?"

"Thanks," he mumbled. "Don't know."

No one asked about Jeremy or the accident. That was fine. He didn't want to think about it. Apparently, they didn't either. Of course, they didn't have to ask. The moment one person heard

about the accident, every detail of it got texted to everybody.

And then how the rumors flew. Bobby Hawkins almost died in an accident. Oh, and the great basketball player was drunk. He was passed out in the back seat. No, he was driving – and he passed out at the wheel. He wrapped the car around a tree and killed everybody. It was a fiery crash. Exploded like a bomb.

It was all bullshit. There was no fire. Kellett had been driving, not him.

The accident wasn't my fault.

That's what he kept telling himself, even though he still couldn't remember exactly what had happened. He wasn't responsible for any of their deaths – except maybe Jeremy. They'd all blame him for Jeremy.

It was the same at school. Most people just stared, their lips moving while they watched him limp by. He tried not to care. It irritated him that he did care. He wouldn't have cared before the accident. He had a reputation for not caring about anybody but himself.

Standing at his locker, he recognized the clicking of Tina Jestand's stilettos behind him. He turned just as she threw herself on him. She was decked out in a brand new skirt barely long enough to meet school policy. Her top wouldn't pass if it weren't for the thin sweater covering it. Not that Tina cared about that. She was as high as a kite.

"Oh, Bobby, I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed with her usual melodramatic flair. She pressed her heavily lip-sticked lips to his cheek.

He leaned back against the lockers to help support the extra weight hanging on him. It was a strain on his legs, but he was willing to endure it to have Tina's triple D's press against his chest. His hand slid across her back to take up a strategic position under her sweater to get a better feel.

"I was so scared for you!" she said. "I still can't believe poor Jeremy's gone!"

He tried to ignore all the people around him staring. *Poor Jeremy*, they were thinking. *It's your fault.*

Not that these people had been Jeremy's friends. He and Jeremy had been social outcasts. They both had been bad, as in, an always-in-trouble kind of way. At least Bobby had some notoriety for being a basketball star. Jeremy had nothing. *Poor Jeremy.*

Bobby's lust sank along with his heart and he let Tina go. She put her hands on his shoulders, looking into his face.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sad about Jeremy too. I wish..." He took a deep breath and looked away.

"Nobody blames you, you know that. It wasn't your fault."

"Sure," he said, but he wasn't buying it. No one else was either. Jeremy *had* been his fault. "It's okay, really."

The seriousness in Tina's face changed into a smile. "Do you like my hair?"

"Sure", he repeated. Part of him wanted the stuff Tina had been smoking, but that other part – his Jiminy Cricket – wanted nothing to do with it. That little itchy feeling in the back of his mind had stuck around over the summer. Even though Bobby had gotten use to it being there, the thing still gave him the creeps. He came to think of it like a stowaway on a ship. Hiding out in the background. Staying out of sight. Coming up only when it needed something. Something from him. So he decided to nickname it Stowaway.

"Well, you take it easy today." Tina glanced behind her as if she felt someone sneaking up on her. Of course there wasn't. "I'll catch you later, okay?"

He stuffed his gym bag in his locker and tried to ignore everyone. That's right, Tina was his type. So what? Everybody knew that. So stop staring. He fished out a couple of pencils and headed for his first class.

"Hey, Hawkins, I heard you'd made it to school." Bobby glanced back just as two of his teammates, Vince Talbot and Jamal Roberts, walked past him. "I also heard you're off the team," Vince said.

Why don't you shout it just a little louder, Vince, Bobby thought. That jerk at the end of the hall didn't hear you.

But he said nothing as Vince and Jamal passed him by. What was there to say? And they didn't say anything else to him. The contempt in Vince's eyes said it all. He had let them down. The team needed him and he wouldn't be there for them. It was his fault.

Bobby wanted to flip them off, but he thought it best not to. Or maybe Stowaway had thought it. The back of his head was itching again – on the inside – where he couldn't reach it. Maybe it was right. It had been right a lot since it had shown up. Might as well keep listening to it for now.

*** **

Instead of going to the cafeteria at lunchtime, Bobby went to see his basketball coach. He was nervous, but he had to do it.

When Coach Ferrier spotted him hovering outside the open doorway, he asked, "What do you want, Hawkins?"

"I'd like to talk to you, Coach." Bobby glanced at the two assistants in the room. He wanted to keep eye contact with his coach, but it was hard. Hank Ferrier didn't take shit off anybody.

"Give us a minute guys," Ferrier said to his assistants. Bobby moved back to allow the others to exit before stepping inside. "Close the door, Bobby. I got the doctor's report. You're out this year."

"Yes, sir, I know, but I wanted to ask you..." He hesitated. This was tough. He'd only get one shot at this, so he'd better get it right. A bit of a warm, encouraging feeling came over him and he managed to look straight into his coach's eyes. "I wanted to ask if I could still come to practice and dress out for the games. I know I won't get to play."

Ferrier sat still, saying nothing for a several moments. Bobby rubbed his aching knee, holding his breath.

The coach said, "That's a hell of lot to ask, don't you think? After what you did?"

"Yes, sir, I know it is." This was going to go as badly as he had feared.

Ferrier frowned. "Hawkins, tell me why you think I should do that."

"I didn't mean to..." That thing stirred in the back of his mind. This isn't what he had rehearsed over and over in his mind over the past two weeks.

Okay, he thought. I know this is wrong. Leave me alone. I can do it.

"Coach, I know what I did was wrong." He paused to let the next sentence complete in his head. He had to tell the truth, even though it might cost him everything. "Yes, I was drinking. We all were. People – they died. I can't give you any excuse for it. Even if I tried, I'm sure you've heard it all before. I just know I was wrong." He paused. Coach Ferrier gave no indication of acceptance or rejection.

"I made a mistake," he continued. "No, I really screwed up. I let my team down and I let you down." He cleared his throat to stall while he tried to control the embarrassment and fear beating against his chest. When he continued, his voice shook. "I don't know that I can ever make that up, but I want to do what I can. I'll break out the equipment and pick up the balls, carry the water – I'll do whatever you want me to do. I just want to be a part of the team. I wasn't a part of the team before. I – I was just out there, doing my own thing. I want to change that."

Coach Ferrier leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hand over his chin a few times. Bobby waited. The more the coach rubbed his chin, the deeper he was in thought.

"I don't know." Ferrier paused.

"Coach, I'm sorry," Bobby said. He almost didn't recognize his own voice as he pleaded his case. "I know I don't deserve this, but I know I can do more for the team than just play basketball. I want to show you I can."

Ferrier rubbed his chin one more time. "You're a top notch ball handler, Hawkins. Did you know you were in the top ten in the state for the number of assists last year?" Bobby frowned and shook his head. "Maybe you can't shoot three pointers worth a damn, excuse my French, but you can move the ball down the court and take it inside like nobody else. We could've used you this year."

Bobby bowed his head. "Yes, sir."

"In the past, you haven't shown me much reason to even consider what you're asking. You never gave your teammates or me any respect. You worked only when it suited you. Always in trouble. I stood up for you probably more than I should have."

Bobby had no idea how many times he'd been in the principal's office last year, but he remembered the coach coming to get him several times. And every time he did, Bobby would smirk. The coach would bail him out. He was too good of a ball player. The coach needed him. But now...

He couldn't play.

"I know you tried to help me, Coach." Bobby took a deep breath. "I never appreciated that, and I know I don't deserve your help now, but I'm asking you to please let me do this. I – I need your help."

The coach's chin rested in his hand unmoving, his eyes unblinking. "Bobby, I kept you on the team because you were so damn good and, well, I had hoped..." Ferrier rubbed his chin again before pronouncing judgment. When he did, his tone was more friendly than coachy. "Son, I don't care that you screwed up. Everybody does at some point. What matters is that you learn from your mistakes. I have to admit, I do see a change in your attitude, and it seems very sincere. Every time I've tried to work with you before, all I got back was arrogance. I thought you were going to come in here and spout off at the mouth and make excuses like always but, well, you showed me a little bit of character. It takes guts to admit you're wrong. If you can bring that character to the court, if you're willing to make things right, then I suppose that would be okay."

Bobby took a deep breath and was about to say something, but his coach cut him off.

"Bobby, I'm going to give you a chance because I think everybody should get at least one second chance in life. You admitted your mistake like a man and you seem willing to rectify it. I'd like to see you do that, son. Also, I've known your dad for a long time and..." Ferrier hesitated before continuing. "...and I know he hasn't offered you much of a chance to grow up the way you should. Sorry, son, I know Charlie can be trying at best."

Why did the coach have to bring his dad into this? He didn't know how to react. "Yes, sir," was all he could say.

"Don't try to play me for a fool because I'll know it," Coach Ferrier concluded. "Screw with me and you won't play basketball this year *or* next. However, if you show me what you're made of, and work hard to earn my respect, then I'll put you on I.R. You know when practice is. I expect you to be at every one."

When Ferrier stood up, Bobby did too and took the coach's extended hand. The warmth of the big man's hand felt reassuring. But as he left the office, his insides tied up in knots. He ducked into a nearby boy's bathroom. Finding an empty stall, he closed the door and wiped his hand across his eyes.

His hand was shaking, making the tear on the back of his finger shimmer in the glow of the overhead fluorescent lights. He wiped it off on his shirt and took a deep breath, suppressing the embarrassment he was feeling. He had begged the coach for a favor he didn't deserve to get; and he felt humiliated.

But he had gotten it. Relief replaced his anxiety as his victory hit home.

"It worked," he whispered.

Staying on the basketball team had been *his* goal. It hadn't been a part of Stowaway's plan, but that prickly little cricket hadn't been against it either. It had even given its opinion on what to say and how to say it. Prickly bad, warm feeling good. That was how it worked. It was damned annoying.

Now, he had to work on what Stowaway wanted. Track down the volleyball coach. Somehow repeat what he had just done with his own coach. Why? To find somebody. Who? He had no

idea.

He went to Coach Pippinger's office, but she wasn't there. Having no time to wait for her, he hurried back to the main building before his next class began.

Chapter 3 – Volleyball

Bobby went to the gym after school, knowing he would catch Coach Pippinger at volleyball practice. It wasn't a good time to try to talk to her, but Stowaway had already made it clear this was something he had to do as soon as possible.

He waited for the coach to finish adjusting the net exactly to her specifications and then trotted forward. "Coach, can I talk to you?"

Rene Pippinger glanced up from her clipboard. "What do you want?"

"I want to volunteer to help out with the team. You know, set up and take down the – the stuff." He nodded toward the net.

Bobby shifted his weight from foot to foot. This was even worse than going to Coach Ferrier. He had no idea why this was so important, but Stowaway wouldn't let him rest until he'd done it.

To make things worse, he used to taunt the scrawny nerds who scurried around the gym as they moved the volleyball equipment out of the way for the basketball team – the real athletes. He not only taunted them, he bullied them. Even to the point where his own teammates didn't think it was funny. Of course, he had only done it when no coaches were around. He wasn't stupid.

Now he was trying to join the ranks of those nerds. It was insane.

"Is this a joke?" Pippinger asked. "Do you think I don't know who you are? You're the arrogant twerp from the basketball team. If I could have caught you at your crap last year, I would've had you expelled." She paused, searching Bobby's face. A look of disgust came over hers. "Do you believe you can weasel your way back onto your own team by being here when they come in for practice? Yeah, I know you're not playing anymore. Get out of here."

"Coach, please!" Bobby pleaded.

"I don't have time for this, Hawkins," she said as she turned away.

"I understand, but this is important!"

She stopped. Bobby surprised himself with the strength and maturity in his voice. It seemed to have surprised the coach too. She turned back and crossed her arms.

"What?" she demanded.

He nearly withered under her angry glare, but he managed to say, "I already got Coach Ferrier's permission to practice with the basketball team. That's not the reason I want this."

When he hesitated, Pippinger said, "Well, go on. You have my attention."

"This isn't about basketball. I just – I want to be more – I just want to be a part of something." He tried to come up with a really good reason to be there, but his mind was racing. The back of his head felt warm and he calmed down. All this got worked out in his mind before this. He just had to remember what to say. He had repeated it so many times, he had come to almost believe it. "I need – I want to be more involved in school sports. I want to volunteer to help out with the volleyball team. I think it would be – be good for me."

Pippinger chuckled. "Did Hank put you up to this? Did he say you had to do this to get back on his team?"

"No, ma'am," he insisted. "This wasn't his idea. It's mine. Coach Ferrier doesn't even know I'm here."

"You know I can verify that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you know what my players and crew are going to do when they see you in here?"

Bobby swallowed hard. "Yes, ma'am. I think I do."

Pippinger shook her head and chuckled again. "God, Hawkins, I don't know if you're serious, or if this is some kind of stupid stunt, or if you're just plain stupid."

He closed his eyes, feeling the sting of her words, but he held his tongue.

"Hawkins, I didn't mean to call you stupid," Coach Pippinger said more gently, "but I think you're crazy wanting to do this. Do you think you're able to lift and carry? Are you recovered enough to do that?"

"Yes, ma'am." He hoped he was. He'd do it whether he was or not. "My legs are a lot better. I just can't run and stop quickly. My arms are strong."

Pippinger paused. Bobby saw the conflict in her eyes. She knew he'd been abusive to her crew last year even though he'd made sure he did it out of her sight. But he could see she was considering this.

"I don't know," she finally said. "Maybe I'm crazy too, but if you really want this then I guess I'll let you. Girl's volleyball never gets much attention and we can use all the help we can get. But let me tell you something, Hawkins. You step out of line once, I'll throw you out of here and have you put into detention for the rest of the school year. I will watch you like a hawk. You say one wrong word, even look at somebody the wrong way." She paused. "Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, I understand," he said.

"All right then, don't just stand there. Go help them set up the chairs and the scoreboard equipment. Varsity and JV are scrimmaging today and I need another person to know how to keep score. Maybe you can learn to be a line judge too." She turned to walk away, mumbling to herself. "Bobby Hawkins on my volleyball crew. God help me."

Bobby trotted to the bleachers and dropped his backpack and gym bag. He grabbed a chair and

set it in line with the others. The other volunteers and the players coming out of the locker room all looked his way. They talked among themselves, not paying attention to anything but him. He spotted Coach Pippinger looking at him too and knew what she was thinking. If he was going to disrupt her practice then he would be kicked out. He had to do something – fast. He went up to a younger boy and extended his hand.

“My name’s Bobby. I’m going to help set up and break down.”

The five-foot-tall boy looked up at Bobby’s imposing height and slowly reached up to take his hand.

“I’m Daren – Daren Frazier. Aren’t you a basketball player?”

“Yeah, but I want to help out with volleyball too.”

“Okay,” Daren said, sounding unconvinced. “Then take those chairs to the scorer’s table.”

Bobby did what he was told despite the humiliation he felt at being bossed around by this kid. But it had the desired effect. Everyone went about their business, acting as if he wasn’t there. The coach returned her attention to practice.

He had expected Coach Pippinger to throw him out without a second thought, but all the preparation he had done had paid off. His words, his attitude; everything he had rehearsed, everything Stowaway had positively reinforced him to say, had worked. He glanced around at everyone again. They were ignoring him. That was fine. Their indifference was acceptable. He was used to that.

Daren followed him everywhere, giving him orders. Bobby tolerated it. Without this boy’s help, he would have been totally lost. But the kid wouldn’t stop talking and that was annoying. Really annoying. He started to think this was a big mistake. This was not where he wanted to be. That prickly feeling made the back of his head itch again. A little tweak in his gut.

Shove it, Stowaway, he thought as he looked around again. Could they see this thing stuck to the top of his head, like a squid or something? That’s how it felt sometimes. *Fine. I’ll keep doing this. Leave me alone.* And the pressure eased.

He didn’t have time to pay attention to the players as Daren kept him busy explaining the rules of the game and how the scoring worked. He quickly learned the referee’s hand signals and soon began changing the manual score cards without assistance. Then he watched the game more closely and asked Daren the names of the players. He was accustomed to keeping team rosters in his head and began committing the name and face of each girl to memory.

“That’s Angela Bryant,” Daren said as a girl moved into position to serve.

A chill ran down his entire frame and his insides began to hurt. It was her. She was the one. The one he was supposed to find. Who the hell was she? She was the reason for everything he had done in the last three and a half months. This was his goal, his purpose – and he had no idea why.

Bobby couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. Angela assumed her stance, took a deep breath, and struck the ball. It hit just below the top of the net and fell back onto the wrong side. She never changed expression as she stepped forward to take her place on the back row after her failed serve. *

When Bobby Hawkins wakes up in the hospital after a car crash, he's not alone. Something or someone has taken up residence in his subconscious. Occasionally, it even pops up in his conscious mind and freaks him out.

He doesn't tell anybody about it though. They'd think he was nuts. So Bobby deals with his psychic intruder as best as he can. Even when it pushes him to do things. Odd things. Like, hang out with the girl's volleyball team in order to find someone he doesn't know. Volleyball? He's a star basketball player. He doesn't want to have anything to do with volleyball!

But when he sees Angela Bryant on the squad, Bobby knows she is the one he's supposed to meet. Why? No idea, but Stowaway, as Bobby nicknames the shadow in his mind, is relentless. He has to stick by her, protect her, and only Stowaway knows why.

A Shade of Mind is an unusual love story. It's not only between a boy and a girl, it also portrays the love of a brother for a sister and a father for a daughter in a mysterious, paranormal, sort of way. Is Stowaway a benevolent spirit haunting a boy's mind or something more sinister?

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