

## The Devil's Bargain by Karter Kane Reed

I don't remember the first lie that I told my mother; I'm not even sure that I remember the last; but I remember the worst: *Don't worry*. It probably doesn't even seem that bad. It's not such a big lie after all. And unlike most lies that kids tell their parents, it wasn't even intentional—I didn't even know that it was a lie. In fact, it took about four years before it actually *became* a lie; four years before the whole world changed and my lie became a nightmare. I will never forget that day: April 12, 1993.

On that Monday morning fifteen years ago, I had never been in any serious trouble. By all accounts, I was a good kid. If you asked anyone who knew me, I was a "smart kid"—if you asked me, I was the *smartest*. I knew more than anyone—especially my parents. So I said things like, "Don't worry... I know what I'm doing... It's just a knife... I'm not going to do anything stupid... no one's gonna get hurt...." But they were lies, all of them.

My mother *was* worried, and should have been, because I *didn't* know what I was doing; it *wasn't* just a knife; I *did* do something stupid; and someone *did* get hurt—not just one someone, but lot's of someones: more someones than anyone can count, and more hurt than anyone can imagine.

You see, on that cold dreary April morning when I was sixteen years old and knew it all, knew more than my teachers and parents and everyone else, when I knew that knife in my pocket meant that I didn't have to ask for help because I didn't need it, when I thought that I could prove to the world that I was a man and tough and brave, I took that knife and proved that I was just the opposite—I jammed that knife into the stomach of another sixteen-year-old boy, in retaliation for one of my friends being beaten earlier that morning.

When I was taken to the police station I was still clinging to all those lies. I still thought they were true. "Don't worry... I know what I'm doing..." Then an officer stepped into my cell: "I'm sorry to inform you, but the kid that you stabbed, has died."

I will never forget what that lie did to my mother. It wasn't what I saw in her eyes, but what was missing. I didn't just kill another boy, I killed a part of my mother; I killed her hopes and dreams for her son, her peace and happiness, and replaced it with the knowledge that her beloved son, her baby, had robbed another mother of her son, of her precious gift. I didn't just jam my knife into that boy; I jammed it into the heart of his family and everyone who loved him, as well as my own family. And it can never be undone.

It has been fifteen years since then. I have spent every day of it in prison, serving the life sentence I was given for murder. Some days I spent depressed, feeling sorry for myself, longing for my freedom. Most days I pass in a haze of guilt and regret and self-loathing at having been so foolish and causing so much pain. And every day, I have wanted to take it back, to take it all back and make things right. But the only thing I can do, the only hope that I have, is that what happened to me, and what I've learned, can save you from following the path that I've made.

\*\*\*\*\*



As a kid, I was fascinated by knives—guns too, but in my neighborhood back then, you needed to have money and know the right people to get a gun, not like today. But knives, they were everywhere; in the kitchen drawer, the toolbox in the basement, or in your father's dresser. They were sold in hardware stores and sporting-goods stores. And there were so many different kinds: single-edge, double-edge, Rambo knives, Buck knives, butterfly knives, and switchblades. Any one of those knives could do something magical: it could give you *power*. And what kid doesn't want that? But that power doesn't come for free. It's a devil's bargain, and sooner or later, you'll have to pay.

Of course, you already know how I paid; and if you walk through the prisons that I've called home for half my life, you'll see how thousands of others have paid too. But there are plenty of others besides those who've paid a different price—just watch the news, read the paper, or walk through the cemetery. And then there are the victims you don't hear about, the teenagers and young men carrying knives and guns every day, lusting after the power they think that it can give them. But it's an illusion—a gun or knife doesn't give you power, it *takes* your power. It is a false front, a façade that assures you will always need that crutch, always be dependent on that piece of steel the way an addict needs crack or heroin.

When someone runs their mouth, looks at you the wrong way, or when you pass through a dark neighborhood, you might reach in your pocket or your waistband, to check, to reassure yourself that you have that power; you might pull it out to demonstrate to everyone else that you have the power—but it's a lie. The fact that you need that reassurance, that you desire to prove it to others, is proof that you are not in control—they are. But the answer is so counterintuitive to everything we believe, everything we see around us, or on TV, we never see it; and when someone suggests it to us, we say the same thing kids have always said: *You don't understand, things are different these days.*

Things *are* different, I agree. But don't think that I don't understand, because I do. I've spent a decade-and-a-half analyzing every detail, figuring out how every little piece of the puzzle fits, and what I've discovered is shocking: the power comes from *putting down* the knife or gun, or never picking it up; the power comes from not having the need to prove yourself to anyone else; the power comes from being able to be yourself without having to worry about what someone else thinks of you.

I used to think that carrying a knife would make me tough. I used to think that it was an undeniable statement, and that when it came time to use it, I would know I had done the right thing. And for a while, a brief space of time that seems now to have never existed, I still believed that lie. But it has been erased by fifteen years of heartache and tears, by the sobs that wracked the body of my victim's mother and have never ended. It has been erased by the truth.

Carrying a knife never made me strong. It never made me tough. It never made me popular or invincible. It never gave me power. It never did any of the things that I thought it would do or wanted it to do. Instead, it did the opposite. It made me weak and foolish. It made me ignorant and inferior. It made me a liar and a coward. And it made me a murderer. I want you to remember that, to think about it every day, because the minute you forget it, the minute you pick up that gun or that knife, you will open the door that I opened, of loneliness, despair, heartache, guilt, remorse, sorrow, emptiness. Maybe you will be lucky, and find a way to close that door, but chances <sup>are</sup> you won't. It's a devil's bargain, and sooner or later, you'll have to pay.