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Burning Bridges As We Go

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The Last Journal of the Blue Blooded Hound

He was nervous about telling his children he would be dead soon – Jake, Maya, Shawn, and the twins Abigail and Lily. Not directly by his own hand, mind you, but they still might consider what he was about to do a form of suicide. Especially if things went south. Regardless, broaching the subject of death with your adult children – all of whom lost their mother years ago – was not something he felt keen on doing. Better to act first and confess later.

So he bought a journal -- the inexpensive kind you get for five dollars on sale at any Barnes & Noble -- and began writing out his plan.

Yes, he block printed on page two, answering what he imagined their first question would be, the damn doctor's report had been sure in its finality. And yes, he had gotten a second opinion. And a third. All conclusive and in agreement. Cancer, rare, malignant mesothelioma, stage 4 metastasis across all three zones of his body – local, regional and distal. Chances of survival, less than twelve percent. Hospice care to begin immediately at three thousand dollars a day with insurance willing to cover up to forty percent. Prognosis, at best guess, four months to live. Maybe.

“We’ll fight, Daddy! We’ll pull together and fight! Miracles happen every day in ways even doctors still don’t understand. I’ve seen it,” his faithful daughter, Maya, would emphatically say. “We just have to pray for intercession.”

"Aren't you a doctor too?" her older brother, Jake, would tease.

"You know very well I'm a psychologist, so don't start with me! We've talked about your penchant for using humor at the wrong time to avoid your fears. Well, here we are right in the middle of our worst fears, so deal with it!" she'd fire back, though not entirely unsympathetically.

"Ouch," Jake would growl, "I call penalty for a low blow," his feelings hurt.

"No, Maya, there is no fight," he'd reply, "All I can do is accept my fate, even though I don't believe in fate, and use the remaining time to right a few wrongs that've been on my mind of late." *And maybe, just maybe, he thought, leave each of you a legacy to remember me by. The Legacy of the Blue Blooded Hound, as his buddies used to call him.*

But he didn't want to have that conversation with his children. Not yet anyway. He first wanted to put his plans into action before any one of them could stop him. So he picked up his journal and, on page seven under entry number three, wrote, *Transgressions are to be understood and corrected, not dwelt upon or agonized over.* Then he put his plan into effect.

Sam McKenna died violently several days later. He was 39 years of age. Divorced from a wife he hadn't treated very well, with two kids he never bothered to see, and unemployed while living back at home with his parents. He could often be found on a bar stool at The Watering Hole, late into the night, telling the regulars, "That fucking bitch ex-wife of mine still thinks she can serve me child support paperwork. Thinks she can steal my hard earned money. Well, you can't get blood from a turnip and she sure as fuck ain't getting nothin' from me."

He died three hours past midnight on a Wednesday staggering through the alley behind The Watering Hole on McPherson Ave. A black, 1984 Dodge Charger waiting at the end of the alley, gunned its engines and charged. Sam, drunk as usual and blinded

by the car headlights, turned and flipped the vehicle off yelling, "Go fuck yourself!" as the vehicle hit. He was dragged under and spit out a hundred yards away looking like bloody bacon.

No one witnessed the hit and run except the driver of the Dodge, who smiled the entire time as he sped away. Nor did the driver stop for another forty-five minutes till reaching an unmarked dirt road circling behind Elkhorn Slough just outside Moss Landing. Once there, the driver exited and shoved a two by four against the accelerator, cut to length for just this purpose, wedging it to the floorboards, making the car leap forward and splash into the deep, muddy water. The car sank in totality five minutes later. After which, the driver climbed into his reliable, beloved 1978 Chevy pickup, lifted his new journal off the passenger seat, which he'd recently purchased from Barnes & Noble, turned to page seven and lined out entry number three -- *Kill the bastard who raped Maya after her prom when she was sixteen. Check.*

In the morning, after sleeping deeply and peaceful, the man rose to continue his work. He took out his journal, turned to page ten and wrote, *The glutton is barely more than an animal and much less than a man.*

Benedict J. Walsh, 52 years, silently raged during a staff held potluck lunch, knocking over the buffet table while turning red then blue in the face. Till an astute employee, the bank's assistant manager, realizing what was happening, grabbed him and administered the Heimlich maneuver causing a chunk of sourdough bread the size of Walsh's fist to shoot out from his mouth and land messily on the plush carpet in front of everyone.

"Holy cow, you just saved his life!" Walsh's secretary, Bev, exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like that."

Walsh, gasping, was more mortified than grateful realizing he'd embarrassed himself in front of all his employees at West Port Community Bank. His gluttony led to the choking incident which made him vulnerable. And since Walsh was the managing director of the bank who prided himself on the control and fear he held over his staff, he believed this put him in an awkward position and made him look weak.

"Thank you, young man," Walsh croaked to his assistant manager, who saved his life, before excusing himself. And later, in a small ceremony held in his office, acted magnanimously enough to reward him with a "lifesaver award" along with a small raise. But two months later, in order to prove a point, but more honestly because seeing the employee week in and week out had become a constant reminder, Walsh fired that same employee under the pretense he had "*continuously failed to meet departmental expectations and uphold the standards of this institution*" during his annual review.

"It was so horrible!" Bev the Secretary gossiped, "And sad! I've never seen anything like it. Mr. Walsh fired him right on the spot and had him escorted out the back like he was taking out the trash. Wouldn't even shake the poor man's hand when he offered."

The assistant managing employee, Jake Hillsborough, had just turned thirty, recently married, and was expecting his first child in the spring. He'd been a hardworking, decent man all his life.

"I don't understand, Dad," Jake said to his father that night knowing his father would have the answer. "I don't know why he did it. I've worked there eight years and only ever given him my best. And now he does this. Says I haven't lived up to his expectations. But he's never indicated I wasn't one of his better employees."

"Don't trouble yourself, son. The pride of men in this life condemns them in the next. I'm proud of the way you're handling this. And you and I know the truth. It may be hard now but facing unfair circumstances in life with grace make us better men. You'll

find a way to turn this to the better. For you and your family. In the meantime, I'm here for you. And I'll cover any expenses till you get back on your feet, so don't worry. Worry profits a man nothing, neither adding to his days nor benefitting him in any way. Go home to your family – you're a good husband and father and they need you. We'll face tomorrow together and get through this."

"Thanks, Dad. That means a lot."

Benedict J. Walsh was still pridefully the directing manager at West Port Community Bank fifteen years later. Still gluttonous, but more careful in public with his eating manners. Still controlling and feared by his employees. Until the pictures of him having sex with an underage prostitute -- himself a disturbing image of fat and lecherously vulgar hovering over such a tiny girl – were discovered on just about every car, tree, window, and downtown shop window within a half a mile of the bank.

Walsh hid in his office all day afraid to leave till the flyers could be collected and disposed of. But he couldn't hide that afternoon when two men in suits arrived and removed him from his office in handcuffs.

"I can't say officially," Bev the Secretary gossiped, "but those men were detectives with the West Port Police Department who were investigating a report of child pornography, child endangerment, and engaging in acts of child prostitution. Can you believe it! I've never seen anything like it."

Walsh didn't return that evening. Nor the next day. Or the next. Eventually his employees learned he was fired in disgrace after being sentenced to a lengthy prison term in upstate Folsom, which he certainly wasn't likely to outlive.

The *Blue Blooded Hound* didn't consider the matter closed till he received a call from a fellow retired cop confirming Walsh's arrest. Then he picked up his journal, turned to

page ten and crossed out the number five entry -- *Get even with the bastard who fired Jake from his job at the bank.*

The Blue Blooded Hound decided to add a note in his journal about how surprised he was revenge could be so easily arranged. Just a quick visit to an old informant -- one he'd developed during the old days working as a vice detective for the West Port Police Department -- had done the trick

"If I can help," Sally, the old informant told him, "I will. I still owe you."

"You don't owe me anything. Not anymore."

"Yes, I do."

Sally was, well, not really a friend, but someone he'd kept in contact with over the years, even into retirement, because he felt responsible for her. Unlike most informants who crashed and burned when their addictions raged out of control, causing the same detectives who recruited them to cut them off, he'd done right by Sally and made sure she ended up sober, with a job, and a place to live a few towns over in Pescadero. It'd cost him, but after all she'd done for him as an informant, risking a great deal to secretly expose hidden criminals and suspects, he was grateful. Thanks to her information, he'd solved quite a few cases, located many missing teens before the streets swallowed them up, and brought closure to several families whose loved ones had been victims of violent crimes over the years.

"I just did it to make money and get high. And avoid going to jail," Sally always tried to demur. "It was decent of you treating me so fairly though."

But he knew it was more than that. Sally had heart. And she did get out. Mostly. She wasn't necessarily committed to sobriety all those years, but she did appreciate his efforts on her behalf enough to reform most of her ways. Which, in turn, allowed her to

provide a fairly decent life of stability and happiness for her son. The same son who went on to college and much better things. Who still came back around to look in on his mother and make sure she was comfortable and didn't need for anything. He was a good son.

"You still have your old contacts?" he asked Sally when he visited.

"You know I do, sugar." She did because she still liked to dabble every now and then. But she didn't tell him that.

One week after he asked, Sally returned a thumb drive filled with incriminating digital video and pictures against Walsh, along with an index card of the juvenile's name, date of birth, and the pimp's contact information. With assurances the girl would be willing to testify. The money the man paid Sally to pass on to the pimp for his troubles, and a little extra to possibly get the juvenile clean once she entered the system, had been a lot, but worth the price. The rest was even simpler -- drop the thumb drive, index card, and contact information off with an old retired cop buddy -- whose son was the current, active Lieutenant in charge of West Port Police Investigations Unit -- and wait till midnight to paper the half mile radius around the West Port Community Bank with the photos of Walsh he'd spent two hundred and fifty bucks buying a new photo printer at Target for the occasion.

The choices we make are ultimately our responsibility, he wrote.

The number two entry in his journal on page four was a real challenge. Trickier. Much more personal. He wasn't sure he could actually pull it off or even whether he should.

Find a way to help Abigail and Lily forgive their mother for killing herself. Help them find closure. My fault for letting it happen, not theirs. My responsibility to fix.

And then he got to work.

Number two affected Abigail and Lily the most, having cost them valuable developmental and social milestones, taking them the better part of a decade to recover from. They were better now, after years of therapy and the blessings of *storge*, but the tendrils of number two still haunted.

It wasn't their fault their mother devolved into a miserably unsatisfied woman after giving birth to them. Or that they'd never known her as the lively and ethereal woman of beauty like their brothers and sister did for a short while.

And none of you had the chance to know her at her best, when she was young, wrote the Blue Blooded Hound, though I wish each of you had. She was something truly amazing.

He'd met their mother, Annabeth Temple, at a party in Oakland back in 1975, when she was 22 years old, recently graduated from Julliard, and performing as a soloist ballerina with the Smuin Ballet out of San Francisco. Soon to be promoted to Prima Ballerina just after her winter performances of their Christmas Ballet, and at the height of her youthful powers, she was lithe and beautiful with an athletic talent that embodied both the best of classic and contemporary dance. Her belief, her desire, was selection to the historic New York City Ballet where all the best went.

So when their courtship began, highly romantic and passionate, Annabeth loving his young, virile Tarzan qualities, and he mesmerized by her ephemeral, esoteric nature, he promised her he would never stand in the way of her dreams – even if he had to follow her to New York despite having goals of his own and a good job in law enforcement with West Port City Police where he'd been working for several years.

They'd married, and, as promised, he didn't stand in her way. Annabeth continued with the company in San Francisco while he lived and worked seventy-six miles to the south in the city of West Port. Driving up weekends for her and her returning to his home for holidays and summer break – their time together romantic and passionate,

communicating through lots of photos, poetry, and love letters – made their marriage special for a while. And true to herself to the end, Annabeth made only one honest concession for him.

“When my time dancing is done, my dear Hercules,” she promised in one of her letters, “when I’ve exhausted my window of opportunity and my youth has faded, when I have danced in the immortal steps of Fonteyn and Kirkland, from the stage of the greatest company America has ever known, then I will return to you, my love, in peace and fulfillment. Then I will give you the family you so very much desire. And I will be happily overjoyed to live out the rest of my days as your wife and their mother. Content because you supported me while I lived out my dreams.”

She promised. As did he. But neither knew what to do when, just a few short years later, her dreams crashed and burned due to an all too avoidable injury that ended her career on the spot. She returned to him broken and unfulfilled. Which changed her and broke her promises.

A freak accident to some. Not to her. She blamed him. She blamed others.

“I didn’t need to perform that move. Nor did I feel ready for that performance. But I was so determined to move ahead, to accomplish my dreams right there in my grasp. I should never have listened to them and done it my way.”

Blame turned to bitterness as the years continued, as the pills and alcohol took root, contesting the truth she had known because her pride and regret disillusioned her.

“I wouldn’t have been so needlessly reckless had I not known you were growing impatient. Had we not argued. I would’ve respected my inner voice and not tried to dance before I was ready,” Annabeth bitterly cried during one of their failed marriage counseling sessions. “It was right there, but when I reached too far, I fell. And screwed all my dreams up. Because you wouldn’t stop pushing me to return home to you.”

“When did I do this?” he occasionally asked in return. To no response.

She'd made it to New York Ballet two years after they married, but only as an understudy. A backup dancer only performing when other girls were either sick or injured. Which frustrated her because she felt her window of opportunity was closing. She was already twenty-six by this time, a senior citizen in ballerina years, and fast approaching the twenty-eight year old cut off mark when you were no longer viable, professionally speaking, and consumed with fighting off all the incoming eighteen year old ingénue's from around the world who were younger, prettier, and more talented. But then an unexpected miracle. The first week in December just before the premier of New York City's annual Nutcracker performance, when the lead principal, THE prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet, Ella Vaishnava, revealed she was six months pregnant and taking an immediate leave of absence. Annabeth was quickly selected and thrust into the lead role, rushed to the stage to begin rehearsals, have alterations made to her new costume, sign contracts, and be wined and dined as the next big thing to bolster her ego as defense against the anxiety over the last minute change.

As long as she doesn't fall flat on her face, the director told the board. And even if she does, she'll carry all the blame and be the one audiences and critics vilify. Then we can easily dispose of her and bring in Martilova. But if she succeeds! Oh, if she pulls this off, we can hype up the PR and receive credit for discovering her talent. At a tenth of the cost we'd have spent bringing Martilova in. That's a win-win for all of us.

Annabeth didn't know all this. But she probably wouldn't have cared. She believed in her talent and this was her big chance! Her opening! Overjoyed and willing, she rushed in headfirst. Scared, but willing.

“Am I crazy?” she wondered calling him late that first night to tell him the big news.

“It's so fast, and I haven't a clue what I'm doing, choreography wise. But everyone is so

helpful. I'd be crazy to pass up this opportunity, right? It's everything I've worked for all my life."

"Can you do it?" he asked in return. "Should you?" He knew it would be near impossible for any girl, let alone Annabeth, to give up such an opportunity, but he was worried for her. He knew she was only asking for a little reassurance, but still. "Is there enough time to get ready for the performance? Maybe they can delay the show, just a little even? I'm worried for you."

"You're so sweet. But don't be a fool. Of course I'll be ready. And even if I'm not, I'm going to do it anyway. It's everything I've worked for my whole life. Imagine. This will be the story of legends."

"Of course. You'll be wonderful. You'll break a leg. Isn't that what I'm supposed to say?"

"No. We say '*merde*' before going on stage because its bad luck to say break a leg to a dancer. That's what those ridiculous stage actors all superstitiously tell each other."

"Should I fly out? I should. Of course I should! I'll be there for your debut performance watching from the audience. You'll be wonderful! I'm so proud of you."

"Would you? That would be lovely. I'll be busy much of the time, but we can still have a late dinner after the performance and enjoy a beautiful Christmas in Manhattan together toasting our future. It's snowing like a winter wonderland right now. Very romantic."

"I'll talk to my boss tomorrow and fly out by the end of the week. I'll stay through New Year's so I can see all of your performances and you can show me Manhattan!"

Annabeth never made it to opening night. Two evenings before her debut performance as Clara Marie in Tchaikovsky's classic holiday ballet, *Nutcracker*, during live dress

rehearsals, she miscommunicated a timed leap at the end of Act One during the Snow Scene. While she was supposed to leap into the waiting arms of the Mouse King and be lifted high overhead among a flurry of snowflakes, she mistimed her leap early, and he, in the flurry of snowflakes, didn't see in time. Annabeth landed hard, tripped and fell landing fifteen feet below the stage in the orchestral pit -- the impact completely destroying her left foot in totum at the ankle, ripping all four chambers of meniscus, breaking her femur, and rupturing discs from S1 and S2 up to L4 and L5 along her vertebrae, shattering her left elbow, and giving her a concussion. Not to mention, giving her the most searing crescendo of agony and pain from head to foot she'd ever known.

Needless to say, her dancing career ended. As did her health. Neither of which Annabeth ever really fully recovered from. She returned home in the spring to him physically limited, emotionally devastated, and with a heavy addiction to opioids for the pain.

He made room for her and did his best to care for her. Adjusted his schedule and tried to be more available. But it was hard. He'd recently been promoted to detective, with a great many cases to work, along with bills to pay, and goals of his own to attend to. The world didn't stop turning just because Annabeth's had, much to her disappointment.

After the accident, after surgery and rehab, after moving back to the west coast with him, Annabeth realized she needed something to fill the hole dancing left. So she chose to substitute her dreams for his. She asked him to start their family and make her a mother.

"It would be better if we had a family," she begged. "I'll be better if I had a baby to love and care for. You're always gone now and I have so little to do here."

"Will your back be strong enough? You'll most likely have to lie in bed for most of your pregnancy."

Even though he knew she wasn't the same woman he'd married once upon a time -- she just wasn't -- he still wanted to have a family with her. And give her what he thought she wanted now.

So I agreed, he wrote. Men are always willing to do what they wish without much convincing. At least according to Julius Ceaser. I suppose I'm no different. I loved her and convinced myself the power of love could wrought miracles. In a strong way, it did. She gave me five miracles -- each of you, my beautiful children, to complete my life.

He and Annabeth started their family. Bought a bigger house, made friends around the neighborhood, went to church on Sundays, and began living the "American Dream." Jake came, as did Maya, and Shawn in quick succession. And while he threw himself into his work to provide for her and them, Annabeth spent long hours at home raising their children. It seemed to work for a while. The kids were happy, he was happy, but she wasn't. She only pretended to be. With a liberal dose of alcohol and prescription medications to help her along the way.

And when she could no longer pretend, he wrote, when depression threatened to overtake her, she asked for another child hoping desperately that would solve her feelings of anhedonia.

Despite an alarming reliance on alcohol and pills to get through the day and go to sleep at night, which she kept to herself, Annabeth gave birth to the twins Abigail and Lily. Who were healthy, thank God. And so she was busy again with five children for a while. No time to think, worry, or feel sorry for herself. She pretended again hoping to make it so. But her bitterness would not relent, acting as an anchor dragging her down again.

"Surely if we knew what bitterness fate held in store, we would shrink back in fear and let the cup of life pass us by untasted." This was a passage he discovered highlighted in

Annabeth's copy of Jacqueline Carey's Kushiel's Dart, sitting on her bedside table one fateful afternoon.

When the twins started middle school, and the older children matriculated to college and into lives of their own, when she could no longer pretend and her addictions and depression became overwhelming, everything within her she'd been pretending crashed down.

She felt empty, he wrote, but I was too busy to notice. Or didn't want to, I suppose. The signs were there. And I could've done something about it. But I didn't. I'm sorry Abigail. I'm so sorry, Lily. I should've done something before it happened to protect you better. She did love you! She just couldn't face her disappointment with herself. It was very selfish of her.

When Annabeth crashed, she completely fell apart. First numb. Then rage. And finally, efforts to kill herself till she finally succeeded on the third try. He discovered the first two attempts before she could actually do anything. But on the third, she had bided her time and, when he was out on a case, made her move. Annabeth was successful leaving Abigail and Lily, now in high school and the only children still living at home, to find her lying dead on her bed that afternoon. They were the ones to call 911.

I'm sorry, girls. What a mess we made of it all, he wrote. Pretended things were great for many years trying to give you the best home we could when I should've just been honest and gotten the help for her she really needed. I should've seen it coming and taken her away. Put her in a hospital. I should've been more honest and not ignored all the red flags. I should've cared for you two better.

He had no idea how to help Abigail and Lily find closure now that they were adults. How to truly repair the deep impact their mother's suicide created in them, even into adulthood. How to heal the memory of their disappointed mother.

You've both been so brave and wonderful, he continued writing, for such a long time. And your willingness to let the pain go, accept the reality of your mother's suicide, and forgive speaks volumes to how truly amazing and resilient you both've become. But I can see those bad days with your mother still haunt you and I wish I could give you some peace. But I have no idea how to help. I am at a loss to help you find closure. I'm sorry for my weakness.

He wrote, Very few times in life do we get a chance at redemption. Or so says Henry Cejudo. I plan to take advantage, since the discovery of my cancer, and redeem a few overdue receipts. This is my chance. Maybe...obviously...my last chance.

In order to cross out number two in his journal, he did the only thing he could think of that might possibly mean something to them. He went down into the basement, into the locked storage room he'd built years ago, where he kept all his personal mementos, all the things passed down from his own father, all his old case files, his guns, ammo, and gear, and every stitch of every item from Annabeth. He collected every photo, letter, and poem, every dance program, ribbon, and newspaper clipping, everything he'd saved, including Annabeth's diaries written from the time she was a young girl dreaming of being a ballerina -- up to each and every diary she kept during her pregnancies when she liked to write poetry to her unborn children. He gathered everything he could find showing the ephemeral beauty and joy Annabeth had been once upon a time, boxed them all up, and loaded them into his beloved '78 Chevy. Then he drove across town to Abigail's house knowing she and her sister would still be busy at their clothing shop downtown. Abigail's husband, Seth, let him into their garage, where he began unloading everything, explaining to Seth it was a gift he hoped the girls would one day come to appreciate. And while a confused Seth begged him to stay till dinner when Abigail would be home, the man hugged Seth and got back into his truck. Then he drove over to Shawn's place.

He knew the time was near at hand and he still had a little more work to complete.

Eventually, he wrote in his journal, we all have to accept full and total responsibility for our actions, everything we have done, and have not done. So says Hubert Selby Jr.

At Shawn's house, sitting in the cab of his truck, he read number five, written on page fourteen. The last entry on his list. *This one is for Shawn, he thought, For them all really, but Shawn will understand most.*

At Shawn's house -- vacant because Shawn and his wife, Diedre, had taken their four children to visit her parents down in Monterey for the weekend -- he let himself in with his spare key and walked to Shawn's den at the back of the family room. He sat and wrote the final entry in his journal.

Number five had been hardest to contemplate, but easiest to set in motion. *Check into hospice and let yourself die, under the assistance of professionals, so your life insurance policy will pay out the full amount upon your death.*

My dear children, he wrote, You may not understand my choice to die till you're my age, but I already feel like I have a legacy living in each of you. The five people I value most. And because I do, I want to ensure there are funds to secure that legacy for generations to come.

Shawn, of all his children, would most understand his choices. How a lifetime of "protecting and serving" others could also tax a portion of your humanity and turn you into a harsher, more closed off person than he cared to be. With their mother. With them. But it never stopped him from loving them.

Nietzsche wrote, When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you. I didn't really understand what that meant when I was younger and your grandfather warned me. But I do now. I've spent far too long dealing with harsh realities and tough circumstances. And I'm ashamed to say I wasn't brave enough to take the deep dive and clear the emotional consequences. I became that which I had fought all my life to prevent. No matter the reason I justify my actions, I still accept full responsibility.

You, my dear son, he continued writing, are so much better at it all than I ever was. I'm so proud of the man you've become and the upstanding police officer and detective you've become. You have a real gift. And I am most proud, in the face of that same abyss, you've become a much better husband and father than I ever was. You can deny or demur all you want, but I can see how sincerely happy Diedre is. And how happy and joyful your children, Zachary, Owen, Olivia, and Grace, are. And how much you're respected by friend and foe alike. There is your proof.

And here is my proof. My legacy in you. These documents ensure financial security for generations to come. All I have left to offer.

When he was a rookie police officer just starting out, his father made him take out a life insurance policy along with his retirement accounts. At the time, he didn't think life insurance was necessary -- he was twenty-two and going to live forever. But his father insisted.

The insurance agent he met with saw an opportunity and gave his best sales pitch. "My young friend," he coerced, "do not deprive your future wife and children from the best life insurance policy this company can offer. Even though the chances of you, heaven forbid, dying 'on the job' are statistically low, it happens. And you should realize, for those who do, one hundred percent of the deceased's family affected always struggle financially trying to live off every cop's 'meager' pension! If you really are the protector I see you to be, then purchasing an Allstate High Risk High Reward Life Insurance policy for emergency services personnel is not just smart, but an act of faith. Now I know the premiums are a bit higher than your average policy, but they also cover all violent deaths and serious diseases barring suicide. And the payout, God forbid, should this ever happen, is worth millions of dollars. Compared to the premiums, how can you refuse the reward of security for your family for generations to come?"

I don't know why I said yes, he wrote, I knew that insurance agent was just a carpet bagger looking to make an extra buck. But I did. And I paid those premiums near forty years. But guess what, the unthinkable happened and now I'm sitting on a goldmine thanks to my rare form of cancer. One distinctly covered in the fine print.

The man checked his watch. The time was here. In sixty minutes, he was going to check himself into hospice, sign all the appropriate forms, and agree to all their terms. Then he would move in and get on with the business of dying. But not before dropping a manilla envelope on Shawn's desk. Inside, he had placed the keys to his locked basement room, the keys to his beloved '78 Chevy, his life insurance policy, living will, power of attorney, house deed, pension documents, and every other important piece of paper he thought would be needed. The last thing he put in the envelope was his journal, which he had purchased on sale from Barnes & Nobel just about two weeks earlier. He sealed the envelope, dropped it on the desk, and then called for a cab to pick him up.

Number one, the first entry written last, explained it all -- *leave your entire journal to Shawn unedited.*

In the final entry, Shawn would learn his father regretted most not being a better father.

I'm sorry, he wrote to Shawn. Tell Jake, Maya, Abigail, and Lily so. I'm truly sorry for not being a better father to you than I was. You deserved my father and I gave you me. Well, I can't change the past or make up for all I failed to do for you. But I can leave this world letting you know two truths -- I loved each and every one of you to the very core of my being! And I hope your own paths bring you true comfort and sincere joy. I know each of you gave me the same many times in return. Goodbye then. Love and care for each other as you always have. I love you! Your father.

Thus, he concluded, ends *The Journal of the Blue Blooded Hound.*

Two short weeks later, David Michael Hillsborough, 72 years old, died under the state's assisted suicide laws based on an incurable, invasive form of cancer that had taken over his entire body. The cause of death was noted as malignant mesothelioma, stage 4 cancer, without chance of remission. An expected and painless death was arranged at the hands of certified medical professionals in accordance with policy and law to which he was surrounded by his family and friends. And a slightly overweight woman standing with her adult son just outside the doorway. Everyone had their chance to say goodbye. He had his chance to tell each and every one how much he loved them. And then he died.

After, when their father's body went off to be cremated, the five children, Jake, Maya, Shawn, and the twins Abigail and Lily, along with their spouses, and his twelve grandchildren, gathered together at their childhood home and held a small, private family ceremony together. His middle child, Shawn, read passages from their father's journal. The same journal that, for many years after, they would refer to as *The Last Journal of the Blue Blooded Hound.*

The End.