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# **EDGEHILL COURT**

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**A True Story**



**Chuck Trunks**

## Overcooked

“Dude! I said I got it!” yelled Ross from the other side of the portable gas grill. Letting go of it, I watched the six-foot, barrel-chested 35-year-old lift and carry the bulky three-burner Weber from the carport to the side yard. A light midsummer rain was falling, making his mop of wavy black hair look longer and greasier than usual. Standing under the carport, I continued watching my hot-tempered housemate and the still-warm grill with both dismay and amazement. It was like I was witnessing a real-life version of the Incredible Hulk, anger, and all. The sound of a clanging propane tank, rattling grates, and swear words made the scene feel even more traumatic for the thin-skinned.

Earlier in the day, Ross had announced that he was planning to fire up the grill at the start of the Carolina Panthers’ preseason game. Knowing that the battered rust bucket was safely located in the backyard on a crumbling cement pad surrounded by weeds and empty vape cartridges, I didn’t give his Sunday plan a second thought—until I walked out to the carport hours later to retrieve something from my truck. As soon as I opened the kitchen storm door, my eyes seemed to dart everywhere at once. I wasn’t expecting to see the mother of all poor decisions. Like the hero of a cheesy movie who saves the day in the last possible moment by defusing a ticking time bomb, I immediately sprang into action.

“Hey, Ross, do you really think it’s a good idea to barbecue under the carport?” I asked while gesturing toward my truck and the dilapidated storage cabinet in the corner, whose doors could no longer close properly.

“It’s fine,” he huffed from behind the open lid. “What am I supposed to do? Grill in the rain?”

I had only been living in the modest split-level brick house on Edgehill Court in North Raleigh for two weeks. Now, I was about to get into it with a pimply-faced

bully prone to mood swings, most of them somewhere between sulking and brooding. “No, but this isn’t the place to do it either,” I countered.

“Oh, really? And why is that?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t think my truck’s paint job is going to respond well to being within a meter of a 500-degree grill,” I replied, stepping closer to Ross. “Plus, that cabinet is full of oil cans, fuel additives, and gas-soaked rags.”

“Fine!” he bellowed, slamming the lid shut.

“It’s the right thing to do, Ross, and you know it,” I said, trying to be both his parent and the voice of reason.

“Whatever!”

Although he was already dragging the grill toward the stairs that led to the side yard, I couldn’t stop myself from pointing out that even the rug underneath the gas cooker was covered in oil stains. “You already made your freaking point, Chuck!” he hissed in between violent jerks of the hefty grill.

Realizing it would be up to me to steer the situation toward something resembling civility, I quickly stepped forward and lifted one end of the grill. “Let me at least help you carry this thing down the steps,” I offered, getting an up-close look at a red-faced man with anger management issues.

“I got it up here by myself. I’ll get it back down by myself,” he proclaimed, making me believe that he thought of himself as some kind of martyr when in reality he was nothing more than a manboy having a hard-to-watch temper tantrum.

Like any exasperated mommy or daddy, I found myself actually negotiating with Ross after repeatedly warning him that he'd wrench his back if I didn't help him. "It's not like you can't grill the burgers in the kitchen," I suggested, feeling both disgusted and fascinated by his behavior. When two of the grill's casters snagged on the filthy carport rug, I again took hold of the grill and began lifting it.

"Dude, I told you that I don't need your help," he spat, double-downing on a herculean effort that only men twice his size should attempt. "Just go back inside!" He then lifted the grill in a way that made me wince and suck in air, sensing I had just witnessed the complete obliteration of a lower back.

After yet another attempt to help the wannabe King Kong, followed by his over-the-top insistence that I leave him alone, I backtracked into the house, choosing to observe him from the safety of my bedroom window on the second floor. Below, I watched Ross make his way to the backyard, pushing and yanking the grill toward the cement pad, his caveman strength emanating from what could only be adolescent fury. Then, as suddenly as it erupted, his demeanor noticeably changed as soon as he returned the now-wobbly gas cooker to its natural habitat. *Had Mr. Hyde turned back into Dr. Jekyll right before my eyes?* And just like that, Ross sat down on one of the three mismatched patio chairs, leaned back against the side of the house, and started vaping, leaving me to ponder what the rest of my six-month lease would be like on Edgehill Court.

## **Dumb and Dumber**

The world is unkind to dreamers. Even after having swallowed that bitter truth hundreds if not thousands of times before, I still moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in the midst of a pandemic, hoping to rekindle a handful of 40-year-old friendships from my college days. I found the house on Edgehill Court through Craigslist and sealed the deal over the phone with Walter, a gay chef living with his husband in New York City, who I later

learned is the older brother of Ross. It wasn't the first time (and it certainly wouldn't be the last) that a homosexual feels the need to volunteer his or her sexual preference to me. *Hmm, maybe I should stop wearing French cologne and talking with my hands!*

The five-bedroom house, situated on one of eight quiet lots in a tree-lined cul-de-sac, was home to Ross, his younger brother, Jason, Eric, a 39-year-old computer technician, and Roland, a heavily tattooed 28-year-old project manager who drummed for two different bands on the weekends. Joe, a frail-looking, recently divorced 44-year-old lawyer, was the only occupant of a separate, yet attached, one-bedroom apartment. And lastly, Dolores, the big sister to Walter, Ross, and Jason, who I'd be giving my rent checks to, lived next door and rounded out the list of characters for this week's episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

Despite living in the main house with four others, I rarely saw them, giving me free reign over the kitchen, pantry, laundry room, backyard, and other shared spaces. Unfortunately, all of those places were unkept and filthy—the worst being the nest of cockroaches living in the skylight above the kitchen table, the oven whose interior looked like the entrance to a coal mine, and a dryer vent screen that collected what a bathtub drain typically gathers. You know it has to be pretty bad if you need to wipe down the washer and dryer interiors with isopropyl alcohol before dumping your clothes inside. I later discovered that the two brothers warmed their dirty clothes from the previous day in the dryer before going to work. *Yuck!*

Whereas Eric, Roland, and I inhabited bedrooms on the second floor, Ross's and Jason's rooms were on the lower floor—hovels they had occupied since they were in elementary school. On any given evening—since Eric spent most nights at his parent's house in an adjacent neighborhood and Roland spent his at his girlfriend's apartment—the two brothers and I would typically be the only ones spending the night on Edgehill Court. As someone who naturally picks up on the

behavioral patterns of others, it didn't take long to figure out and predict the daily routines—and moods—of my new housemates. For the most part, everyone kept to themselves—a sad yet winning mindset for those choosing to live with strangers in post-pandemic America. Since Eric and Roland rarely prepared and ate a meal in the house, let alone sleep there, I didn't get much of a chance to get to know them. However, Ross and Jason were a different story. Within a few weeks of living in the house, I quickly realized that if I wanted to leave at the end of my lease without wearing a pair of handcuffs or stuffed inside a body bag, I'd have no choice but to become a reluctant expert of the two brothers.

By the time I finished drinking my morning coffee at 7:30 a.m., both Ross and Jason would've left for their Monday-through-Friday jobs at an insurance company and tire shop, respectively. Ross seemed to like his role as a mailroom clerk, and Jason looked every bit like someone who could rip tires off cars and trucks all day. They would arrive home within 30 minutes of each other, beginning at around 6:00 p.m., each carrying a six-pack of beer and a drive-thru bag from places like Popeye's Chicken, Burger King, or Taco Bell. If I had lost track of time and didn't vacate the kitchen before the backdoor swung open in the evenings, I'd have to endure a half-hearted, "Hey, Chuck," as they'd shuffle past toward their bedrooms for a typical night of drinking, gaming, and vaping. These were men who didn't chase dreams—or women—acting like they had no choice in the matter, resigning themselves to what looked like self-imposed prison sentences without the possibility of parole.

If I wasn't walking the footpath around Shelley Lake, exploring Raleigh on a bicycle, or picking up food at the Harris Teeter grocery store on the other side of Crabtree Valley Mall, I was sitting on a plastic swivel chair in front of a dented steel desk in the corner of my bedroom, which served as my writing nook. From my perch on the second floor, I could see and hear everything that went on in the backyard. Despite a near-constant intake of beer and nicotine vapor, the two brothers surprised me with their cordial and intelligent discourse, talking about a

variety of subjects ranging from quantum physics and climate change to politics and sports. The more I eavesdropped, the less inclined I was to keep referring to them as “dumb and dumber”—vindictive nicknames I had assigned to them since the “grill episode” and discovering that they had no interest in learning why I had moved to Raleigh from Idaho, what I did in my bedroom all day, or why I was alone all the time.

Their brand of genius was more in line with autistic savants than stuffy know-it-alls. Somehow, they had acquired knowledge in varied subjects like thermodynamics, computer technology, and horticulture while repeatedly locking themselves out of the house, forgetting to turn the stove off, and thinking that it was okay to wash dishes without dish soap. If I was unsure whether or not I was living with two manboy prodigies, I became more than convinced soon after Ross lost control of his 2007 Dodge Caravan, smashing the backend against a tree in a neighbor’s front yard. Having witnessed the event from the carport, I could overhear him telling the confused neighbor that his brakes had failed and that he’d buy them a new mailbox. After the brothers made several trips to multiple salvage yards to collect a junk pile of replacement parts, I watched Ross and Jason completely restore the backend of the minivan and replace the front disc brakes using nothing more than YouTube videos as their guide. I thought that by showing genuine interest and applauding their efforts, I’d build some kind of inroad where they’d feel more inclined to extend themselves beyond just saying, “Hey,” “What’s up?” and “Later” as they sailed by me in the kitchen and carport. Instead, they merely tolerated me, making me believe that my monthly rent check was the only reason they acknowledged me at all—either that or they were simply incapable of anything more.

## **A Death in the Family**

I knew something was up. Neither Ross nor Jason had come back to the monastery, and it was nearing eight o’clock on a weeknight. Thinking they were

most likely at a sports bar—an activity I heard them talking about in the backyard from time to time—I figured I’d have enough time to make and pack a lunch for the following day’s 30-mile bike ride to Durham, then retreat to my room before they returned. Somewhere between cutting apple wedges and bagging a peanut butter sandwich, I heard the lock rattling on the kitchen door, sending a sickening flow of dread throughout my body, like flop sweat on a bombing comedian. I expected to see both brothers stumbling into the kitchen, displaying the ramifications of having mixed alcohol with Asperger’s syndrome. Instead, it was only Ross carrying a case of Budweiser and wearing the kind of sad face a seven-year-old makes when they want everyone in the room to notice and ask, “What’s the matter?” Knowing there wasn’t a reasonable excuse to exit the scene without giving him exactly what he wanted, I succumbed and asked, “Hey, Ross. Everything okay?”

And then it happened. Ross sighed, complete with an overly demonstrative shoulder shrug, and replied, “Dad died,” in a cadence and voice I had never heard from him before. It was a long, drawn-out reply that sounded like *The Wizard of Oz’s* Cowardly Lion if he were speaking while underwater. To this day, I can still hear the “Dad died” response when I close my eyes and think about it.

“Oh, I’m sorry for your loss,” I offered, admonishing myself for not preparing my lunch earlier and flirting with the idea of being a jerk to him. I imagined saying to Ross, “That’s crazy! My dad died a week ago, and instead of seeking comfort from a transient housemate who’s no more than a stranger, I sought sympathy from friends and family—you know—from people who actually know me.”

In what sounded like a return to his normal voice, Ross said the following without a hint of sarcasm or self-awareness: “I’m going to be doing some heavy drinking tonight, so if you hear any crying or wailing, you’ll know why.”



There's cringing, and then there's outright disgust, which is what I was feeling when I turned back around to fill a sandwich baggie with raisins. After a moment of awkward silence, a sigh of relief escaped me as soon as I heard Ross shuffle past me toward his bedroom, presumably to begin a night of uncontrolled sobbing and howling, fueled by none other than the King of Beers. By the time I returned to the relative safety of my upstairs corner bedroom, I had resigned myself to the arduous task of having to somehow find sleep despite Ross's weird proclamation. Surprisingly, sleep did come that night. But it wasn't my clock radio that woke me up in the morning. That would've been a luxury. Instead, that job went to four smoke alarms whose incessant, mind-numbing siren blasts awakened me in the middle of the night.

## **Fire in the Hole**

It wasn't until I moved into the house on Edgehill Court that I realized sound wasn't the only thing that could rip a person away from a peaceful night's rest—smell can be just as intrusive. Within days of moving in, I was rudely roused from a dead sleep at 1:30 in the morning by the smell of pizza. As far as smells go, pizza certainly isn't an unpleasant one. I'd put it right up there with warm cinnamon buns and sizzling bacon. But this wasn't the kind of pizza smell you'd salivate over on boardwalks in New Jersey or on street corners in New York City. What had wafted up from the kitchen in the middle of the night was a bastardized version of pizza—a chemically synthesized concoction created in a corporate food laboratory and dumped into the freezer sections of discount grocery stores. But what made this particular pizza smell uniquely intolerable was that it was laced with the nauseating scent of ancient grease from an oven that clearly hadn't seen a sponge or wire brush in a decade.

Even if it smelled like John's Pizza on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, nobody in their right mind would trade hours of precious sleep for the aroma of arguably the greatest invention in the history of mankind. Sadly, not only was I

subjected to the smell of food I wouldn't serve to a starving homeless drifter, but I soon learned that that wouldn't be the last time my sleep would be disturbed by the noxious odor from hell. Ross and Jason, for reasons only fellow creepy-crawly night owls would understand, established a routine where they'd toss a frozen pizza into the oven between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m., each time selfishly contaminating and choking the house with their horrendous dietary choice. Through strategic fan placement and rolled-up towels, I was able to circumvent the worst of it and resume sleeping within five or ten minutes after damning the two brothers to a scorching inferno for the rest of eternity.

On the night that Ross informed me that his elderly father had passed, I was, like always, awakened in the middle of the night. But the disturbance didn't emanate from the sound of Ross's crying and wailing. Nor did it come from the nightly assault on my olfactory senses. This time, besides being jolted awake, I was flung wild-eyed into utter mayhem as a quartet of shrieking smoke alarms wreaked havoc on my brain and shaved months, if not years, off my life. The smell of smoke, pizza, and rancid grease filled my bedroom, causing me to race downstairs still not knowing which way was up. When I reached the kitchen and saw fumes seeping from the oven, I knew exactly what had happened. According to my favorite detective, *Columbo*, this was clearly an open-and-shut case. The brothers had transformed my worst fear into reality: They threw the pizza in the oven at 425 degrees and forgot about it.

Still bleary-eyed, I turned the oven off and grabbed a filthy oven mitt from the drawer next to the sink. In one swift move, I opened the oven door, reached inside, and snatched the charred remnants of what remained of a Totino's party-sized pepperoni pizza. While still holding my breath, I threw the blackened mess into the sink and turned on the water. After discarding the mitt and closing the oven door, I turned on lights, opened every downstairs window that wasn't nailed or painted shut, and switched on the ceiling fans in the kitchen, living room, and den. Figuring the brothers were passed out in their rooms from a night of heavy

drinking, I retraced my steps up the now smoke-filled staircase, opened more windows, and quickly cranked up the ceiling fans in rooms I had access to. When two of the smoke alarms stopped spewing their lobotomizing frequencies, I could finally sense a light at the end of the tunnel, giving me pause to return to my bedroom and plop down on the still-warm bed. I was relieved no one would die this night; however, I still wanted to kill two people.

## **Circle The Wagons**

For the next four hours, until 6:00 a.m., I laid on my bed, staring at the ceiling, rehashing how I came to live in such an unnerving and unpredictable madhouse. Despite hours of open windows and a ceiling fan set to “helicopter liftoff,” my bedroom not only still smelled like the oven carnage, it was freezing cold. By the time I finished thawing out my extremities in the shower, I had figured out how I was going to address Ross’s and Jason’s not-so-little blunder. Ranting and raving, my preferred and most satisfying method, wasn’t going to help—especially in front of two large men whose levels of emotional maturity still eluded me. Ross had already shown that he was capable of morphing into a raging alter ego at the slightest inconvenience, and Jason was too quiet for my liking. While his brother had no problem expressing each and every emotion that passed through his mind, Jason seemed to hold it all inside, as if waiting for the perfect moment to go nuclear, most likely landing on the national evening news as the lead story. If I wanted to make it to the end of my lease without help from law enforcement, confronting Ross and Jason directly was simply out of the question. No, I had a better idea. I was going to tattle on them.

The entire downstairs was exactly as I had left it nearly five hours earlier. The smell was still there, but it wasn’t as strong as inside my bedroom. The open windows and whirling fans made the place feel and smell like an indoor ice rink whose Zamboni had caught fire the night before. Even the back door was still wide open. When I went to close it, I noticed that both of the brother’s vehicles

were no longer on the property. *What? Did they leave for work, pretending that the house wasn't an active warzone? Did they think they could ignore the situation and absolve themselves of any wrongdoing? Doesn't anyone think of me—the paying customer on the other end of this lame business deal?*

Prior to calling Walter in New York City, I reminded myself to offer condolences for the loss of his father first before telling on his two brothers. After explaining what had happened the night before, I waited for his response, feeling both justified and satisfied from having unraveled the unacceptable events from the very start—beginning with Ross's startling meltdown over the gas grill incident. Instead of hearing anything resembling an apology or a pledge to make things right, I listened to Walter verbally arrange his family's wagons into a tight circle where I was, of course, on the outside.

As if he were admonishing a telemarketer for interrupting his supper, he said, "Chuck, we just lost our father. Your timing couldn't be any worse."

"Yes, I know, Walter. That's why I offered my condolences up front. And to top it off, they left this morning without even checking on me or shutting the back door when they left for work."

"That's because they stayed at our sister's place last night," huffed Walter in a tone that did nothing to mask his growing annoyance with me. "I'll speak with them at the funeral. I need to go."

"So they put a frozen pizza in a preheated oven and just leave the house?" I pressed, suddenly feeling the dam inside me beginning to burst from nearly five months of pent-up frustration. "That oven is so filthy, I'm surprised it didn't catch fire, Walter."

“Chuck, I said I needed to go. Bye,” replied Walter, ending the call and making it clear that we were now at war.

Like a soldier weary from near-constant battling, I needed to get off my feet at that moment. I put my phone on the kitchen table and sat down, my eyes shifting between the blank screen and out the dining room window. The heavy morning fog made it difficult to see past the neighbor’s new mailbox, but I wasn’t looking for anything in particular because I was lost in my own thoughts. *Had that phone exchange really happened? What did I do to deserve such blatant disrespect? I paid my rent on time, worked around the nasty habits of two disgusting slob, didn’t complain when the water heater broke, kept a quiet and low profile, and always agreed, as a courtesy, to meet service people at the house since I worked from home.* Not only was Walter off his rocker like his brothers, Dumb and Dumber, but he was just as cruel and dismissive.

With hardly more than three hours of sleep, capped off by a disheartening phone call with the one person who had the power to remedy the situation, I suddenly felt so very alone in the chilly kitchen on Edgehill Court. Was anyone on my side? Could anyone see my point? I was coming from a position of logic, reason, and common decency where everyone—not just an entitled bully of a landlord—could win in a shared living space. These people make no sense to me. What would they have to gain by ignoring and chasing away a rule-following loner with the living habits of both a monk and a ninja? There wasn’t a doubt in my mind. It was time to go. It was anyone’s guess what the following 30 days would look like after informing Walter that I wouldn’t be renewing my six-month lease. Would that declaration get them to change their ways? Or would their circle of wagons tighten like a noose around my neck, choking me with even worse behavior? I didn’t need to consult my trusty Magic 8-Ball to find the answer. I already knew what it was: Outlook not so good.

## Walter Has a Hissy Fit

Other than receiving a perfunctory thumbs-up from Walter—imagery he most likely had to settle for since the iPhone doesn't offer a middle finger emoji—I didn't get any responses from Ross, Jason, or Dolores after I sent them a group text indicating that I would be moving out at the end of the month. Having secured my next shared housing space nearly 3,000 miles away in Nampa, Idaho—another shot in the dark via the internet—I felt a kind of relief knowing there was an actual expiration date to the madness on Edgehill Court. What used to be upsetting only triggered me to roll my eyes and count the days until my loaded truck was heading west on I-40 toward Greensboro. No longer did my blood boil at finding my dish towel streaked with dried tomato sauce carelessly tossed on the counter next to an empty Totino's pizza wrapper. I hummed while closing my bedroom windows to avoid the vape smoke emanating from the brother's rooms below. I whistled while removing someone else's mildewy damp laundry from the washer so I could clean my own clothes. Did they leave it in there for two or three days? Who cares! I don't anymore!

With a little more than two weeks of eggshell-walking left to endure, I was reminded that every declared war needs its first battle. I received a text from the enemy commander, Walter, telling me that he'd need access to my bedroom so he could show it to prospective renters. After shutting down a Spotify playlist of Johnny Cash songs—a newfound appreciation for the man in black—and reviewing the six-page lease agreement, I replied to the self-serving bully, knowing that our text exchanges could very well be Exhibit A in a county courtroom. In my calculated response, I wrote, "Other than a medical emergency, there's nothing in the lease that grants you access to my rented space. If you're wanting a convenience that serves only yourself, what are you willing to give me in exchange?"

When his reply popped up on my phone in less than 30 seconds, I knew then and there that it wasn't going to be productive since Walter had a habit of shooting from the hip without a modicum of gamesmanship. "What is your problem, Chuck? I've been renting to people for over 20 years, and this is the first time anyone has reacted like you. What are you hiding in there? Did you paint the place? Did you break something? Are you growing marijuana plants?"

*Oh, boy. If he wants to get nuts, then let's get nuts!* "Well, maybe you and your brothers got to know the other tenants and became friends with them. That's called a relationship—something we don't have until one of you needs a favor from me. Within weeks of living here, you, Ross, and Jason have made it abundantly clear that this arrangement is strictly transactional. Last time I looked, rental transactions are dictated by a signed lease agreement—not one-sided conveniences."

Once again, Walter returned my text in record time. "I'm so done with you, Chuck. I work too hard to put up with this crap."

Who did this guy think he was? The more I thought about it, the more his reactions and responses reminded me of a resentful, spurned ex-lover. *Oh, God! Was he secretly in love with me?* I did meet him a couple of times when he flew down to visit his family—each time right after having finished a workout where I was both pumped and glistening in sweat. To get to the bottom of why his behavior was more in line with a TV drama queen than a competent landlord, I picked up my phone and called him. When he didn't answer, I called him again. Finally, I simply texted him back. "Walter, can we please talk over the phone like two mature adults? I have no idea why you have such a problem with me. Maybe you have something going on in your life that's making you act disproportionately to the situation at hand. Please, let's talk this over."

“I said I’m done talking to you,” replied Walter, who apparently wasn’t through throwing his little hissy fit.

And then it dawned on me. I had already seen this temperamental behavior in his younger brother, Ross, months earlier. Was big brother Walter the original hothead? Maybe their whole lineage possessed personalities that resided somewhere within the spectrum of neurodevelopmental disorders. Either way, both were the petulant types who’d ruin the game for everyone by picking up their ball and taking it home if they didn’t get their way.

Clearly sensing that I was dealing with an unstable psychopath, I opted to compromise by sending Walter yet another text telling him that I’d allow my room to be shown on two conditions: it would need to be scheduled at my convenience and that I’d need to be present. I also added that I didn’t want to go to war over a stupid room rental.

Two seconds later, my phone chirped. “Nope. Too late. I’m done.”

Two seconds after that, I was done with Walter.

## **Place Your Bets**

“Where the hell is he?” I grumbled, pacing back and forth between the plastic desk chair and the foot of the bed while repeatedly looking at my watch. We agreed to meet at 11:00 a.m. to do the room inspection walkthrough, and Ross was already 10 minutes late. Although we lived in the same house, texting was the preferred method of communication. “Hey, Ross. I’m waiting upstairs for you. What’s the holdup? I have somewhere to be.” A few minutes later, a rough-looking Ross dragged himself up the stairs and into my spotless bedroom wearing what appeared to be an official Carolina Hurricanes hockey jersey. Even his choice of clothing annoyed me. I’ll never understand why adult men choose to



wear the name and number of another man on their backs. I don't get it. Plus, how could anyone in the hot and humid south become a fan of a cold-climate sport?

As soon as Ross came in, I switched on my phone's video function to capture him saying that everything looked clean and orderly. I knew it was unethical to record him without his consent, but after living with these degenerates for six months, I knew I couldn't trust him or the rest of them to do the right thing. Of course, I had taken all the before and after photos of my rented space, but the video would be the smoking gun of my court case should I need to force this bipolar family to return my security deposit.

"Hey, Ross," I said, trying my best to conceal the crime I was committing and the fact that I was about to leave this place and never look back. It wasn't easy since both thoughts were making me feel as giddy as a schoolgirl.

His nonchalant manner told me that he would indeed be a jerk to the bitter end. "Okay, I'm here. What do you want me to look at?"

"You've done a walkthrough before, right?" I said through gritted teeth. "Just check it out and let me know what you think."

After Ross scoped out the bathroom, opening and closing the shower door and all the vanity drawers, he came back into the bedroom with his hands in his pockets, looking like he didn't know what to do next. Instead of telling me that everything looked great—an assessment that I was expecting and used to hearing—he simply stared at me with his beady bloodshot eyes. Since the withholding anal retentive didn't deliver what I needed from him, I was forced to play my hand by asking, "And? What do you think? The place looks better than when I moved in, doesn't it?"

"Walter has the final say."

“What?”

“He’ll be here next weekend to look at the place.”

“Yeah, but he’s not here now,” I huffed while carefully positioning my video-recording phone closer to Ross. “Since *you’re* here, I’ll ask it again. Doesn’t the place look better than when I moved in?”

I watched him walk toward the windows and look down at the mess of a patio. Maybe he was wondering if I could hear what he and his brother had talked about over the last six months. “Walter will let you know,” he said without looking at me.

Unable to control my frustration, I tossed the house, bedroom, and shed keys on the desk and blurted, “Then why am I even doing this with you? And why would you agree to do a walkthrough inspection when you’re not the person to do it with? Thanks for wasting my time! Oh, and by the way, I have all the necessary documentation proving that I left this place in better shape than I found it, so I’ll be expecting my entire security deposit to be returned. Thanks for nothing!”

Without waiting for Ross’s response, I turned and left the bedroom. I went down the wooden staircase, through the filthy kitchen, and out to the carport for the last time. I had anticipated a speedy departure full of welcomed relief from a time in my life I mostly wanted to forget. Instead, I hopped in my loaded truck and drove out of the cul-de-sac with the same heavy heart I had been carrying around for months. Had this been a gambling trip to Las Vegas, I wouldn’t be driving to Idaho—I’d be hitchhiking. Edgehill Court was like a spin of the roulette wheel where the little white ball landed on black when I bet it all on red. I already knew the world was unkind to dreamers, yet I still believed I could walk away a winner.

I had moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, hoping to rekindle a handful of 40-year-old friendships from my college days at NC State University. None of them panned out—not even a spark—making me feel like I had busted at blackjack, rolled snake eyes at craps, and bottomed out on slots. How could I lose at every game? I called Raleigh my home in the early 1980s. Now it was a city I couldn't wait to get away from, exchanging it for a new state, city, and climate, complete with another set of strangers in a mad, mad world.

The End