Don’t Trust the Butterflies

Jason Pingel · Free opening preview

Chapter One

The Day I Met Staci

Somewhere in a galaxy
not far, far away...
Actually, this galaxy.
Missouri, to be specific.

I realize that takes some of the mystery out of it, but stay with me. There were still strange creatures, questionable living conditions, and a woman capable of making a grown man forget every useful thing he had ever learned and sending my mind to a galaxy far, far away.

That man was me.

The woman was Staci.

And this is a love story, although several witnesses might reasonably classify parts of it as a disturbance.

There were no spaceships. No ancient prophecy. Nobody handed me a glowing sword and told me I was special.

I had a truck, some free time, and absolutely no adult supervision.

Apparently, that was enough.

I didn't know it at the time, but the night I met Staci was the kind of night that sneaks into your life wearing dirty boots, kicks the door open, breaks something shiny, and then somehow becomes the beginning of everything. The beginning of all things good and evil.

It started at my friend Dave's apartment in Mountain Grove, Missouri.

Dave lived on the second floor of one of those apartment buildings that always seemed like it had seen more secrets than fresh paint. The kind of place where the stairs creaked like they were snitching on you, the hallway smelled like old cigarettes, burnt coffee, and somebody's bad decisions, and every door looked like it had a story hiding behind it.

I had driven over late that evening because I was bored.

Not "watch a movie" bored.

Not "go for a walk and clear your head" bored.

I mean the dangerous kind of bored. The kind of bored that makes a man think, You know what would improve my life right now? Absolutely nothing good.

So there I was, at Dave's place, hanging out, killing time, chasing trouble because trouble was apparently the only thing open that late and I was the guy that kept that trouble from going out of business.

A few hours passed. We were sitting around doing what people do when they have nowhere important to be and no good reason to be there. Then came a knock at the door.

Not a polite little tap either.

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It was one of those knocks that says, I am either bringing a problem, running from a problem, or I am the problem.

Dave opened the door, and in walked this guy named Ratatouille.

Now Ratatouille had the energy of a man who could turn a quiet Tuesday night into a court date by accident. He came in like he had news from the underground.

He looked at us and said something along the lines of, "You guys wanna smoke some shit?"

And my brain, being the highly trained professional disaster that it is, immediately went, Some shit? Like poop? This dude smokes poop and wants to share his little poop-smoking ritual with us?

Then another part of my brain stepped in like a tired manager at a failing restaurant and said, Okay, scratch the humor. Keep it simple, Nate. At least hide your weirdness until you've known the guy a whole day.

So I looked over at Ratatouille with a face that said, Fuck yeah.

Not just a little "sure, why not" face either.

I mean full excitement.

I was happier than a fat kid in a candy store, and I know that saying is true because I was that fat kid in the candy store. Back in the day, once I got inside that candy store, it no longer mattered if my brothers called me Porkchop or Fatso. I was in the candy store, yo, and I was proud of it.

That was joy.

Pure, sugary, no-shame joy.

So after all that thought, and after years of extensive practice perfecting the look, I smiled big enough to scare a church lady and said, "Fuckin' yeah, I wanna do some shit."

Then I kept that big cheesy candy-store smile on my face like a bass in the Bass Pro tank that had just seen a free minnow.

So there we were.

Ratatouille went over to the dresser and found what might have been the cleanest spot in the entire apartment, which is saying a lot because that spot was only clean by comparison. If that dresser had been inspected by the health department, the health department would have quit and joined a monastery.

He busted up three lines like he was preparing some sacred ritual for idiots.

And we, being the idiots, leaned in like those little lines were the last bit of go-fast left on planet Earth.

Gone.

Just like that.

And I swear, no sooner had that happened, another knock hit the door.