

# All Those Tiny Little Murders

By: Noah Regan

## CHAPTER ONE

It's cold. I've seen it get much colder than this. But I wasn't forced to spend an entire night out in it. The frost covered grass and light branches crush beneath my shoes. My arms are tightly crossed in front of me, trying desperately to warm my core. I pull my arms from their sleeves and cross them again, keeping them pressed against my chest—the empty coat sleeves swaying at my sides. I step across slippery white rocks and slosh through shallow, frozen creek beds. I lose my footing climbing the other side of the creek bank. With nothing to break my fall, I go face first onto the frozen dirt. I press my hands outward from beneath my jacket to push myself up off the ground that's as hard as pavement, and onto my knees, then onto my feet. I trudge on, having no clue how much further I have to go, or if I'll even know if I'll be where I need to be once I get there.

My heartbeat is growing faint and recessing deep into my hollow, empty chest. Billows of condensed breath fog my view in front of me. My breathing rhythmically keeping beat, like a song. I press on. I reach an open field. It seems bright, just coming from the thick, dark forest. A sharp gust of chilled wind sends me scurrying back into the tree line. I squat behind a large trunk, huddling my body into a standing ball. My knee joints aching from the cold, they tremble together, knocking into each other. I'm assured by the pain from my legs that I still had feeling. I would be in far less pain if I couldn't feel them at all. But I know I won't be able to last much longer if that was the case.

The long gust ceases, and I stand up and venture out into the open glade, my footsteps leaving frozen indentations in the blue, frost covered grass. I look up to the moon, then back in front of me to the tree line that lay on the other side. I choose a large tree off in the distance that grew below the North Star to set my sights upon. I use that tree to focus my path, to make sure I'm walking in a straight line. The tree isn't a goal of any sorts. It will be just as cold in that group of trees as it was in the last. But I can't stop, even though I desperately want to. There is no place to stop. It's all frozen ground. It's not like I'm going to come across a cave with a warm inviting fire. I know that isn't going to happen. But I still think about it regardless. I need something to keep my mind off of my painful midnight walk. A cave, I could be away from the wind inside a cave. Perhaps I could even rest branches against the entrance so my cave-home could fill with warmth. I could pull off these wet shoe and socks and rest my feet mere inches away from the open flame until my feet would tingle and pinch with the return of sensation.

Believe it or not, it's working. I'm beginning to feel warmer. I will have to walk through the night and into the morning. If I stop, I'm dead. I have to keep the blood flowing to my extremities. I have to keep pumping my legs.

I approach the large tree that I had set my sights upon across the open field. I keep moving past it, and trudge into the next forest, occasionally looking up to spot the

brightest start in the sky, and then pick out the tree below it, walk to it, then do it all over again with a new tree.

Why am I doing this? Why am I walking through a frozen forest with a thin layer of clothing in the middle of the night? It's a long story. It all started with my brothers and me drinking. The way the majority of our stories start. I'm not even certain that I can even call them my brothers anymore. Not after what I did to them. They certainly wouldn't call me their brother, that's for sure. But it wasn't my fault. I wasn't the one that pushed and pushed and pushed until we were in over our heads. But it's not like they're out here in the wilderness walking to God knows where. I'm not saying that they are better off. I'm just saying they aren't nearly frozen to death.

My feet are freezing. I place them closer to the fire in my mind.

Let me start from the beginning, when I was in a place much warmer than I am now—the back seat of my brother's car.

“A mall?! A mall is the worst place!”

“You're nuts! A mall is perfect!”

“You want a place that is easily fortified and will give you the advantage of higher ground. Like a clock tower,” said Joe.

“A mall has everything that you could ever want as a safe refuge and for resources. Haven't you ever seen the movie *Dawn of the Dead*? Pizza, pretzels, soda in the food court, clothing at a *JCPenny*, books at a *B. Dalton* to pass the time, and most importantly guns and ammo at *Sheels*! It's the perfect spot!” said Eddie.

“You're not thinking this out. A mall has far too many entrances, you could never seal them all off. And not to mention the mall employees that are already in there. You could have some pasty emo chick from *Hot Topic* approaching you, and you're not going to know whether to blow her head off with a shotgun or not!” said Joe.

“Well...”

“And,” continued Joe, “*B. Dalton* for books so you could pass the time?! I don't think they're around anymore. Plus, you've never read a book in your life!”

“I'd start if there was no TV—”

“You're not even taking this fucking seriously!” interrupted Joe.

“A houseboat,” I muttered from behind my beer.

“Explain.”

“You load up a houseboat with all of the essentials: food, clothing, and weapons. And then you simply drift into the center of a river or pond and wait it out. As far as I can tell from the movies, zombies can't swim. They lack the coordination. They'd probably just run into the water and not even know not to breathe. They'll most likely only make it ten feet or so from the bank.”

“That's actually not too bad,” Eddie said behind the steering wheel.

“Just drop anchor,” I continued, “and hang a fishing pole off the side of the boat and you could also catch your food too. You could boil the river water and drink it. Bathe in the river. It's perfect.”

“What about when it freezes. Come winter the lake will freeze, and the zombies will just walk across the ice to the houseboat,” Joe said.

“Well, I didn't quite think that far ahead,” I said. “Can zombies freeze to death?”

“Zombies are already dead,” Joe said.

“Obviously not if you can kill them with a shotgun,” I said.

“I suppose they wouldn’t find shelter or warm clothing, all they care about is human flesh. They would probably freeze to death before the water froze over.” Eddie said.

“You can’t count on that,” Joe snapped. “Also a houseboat wouldn’t work, Jacob. Just look at *Romero’s Land of the Dead*.”

“Huh?”

“In *Romero’s Land of the Dead* the zombies could walk under water.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Just because you never seen it doesn’t *not* make it a possibility!” said Joe.

“Well if there’s a zombie outbreak I’ll be sure to ask the infected if they are *Land of the Dead* zombies or *Dawn of the Dead* zombies.”

“Be sure you do that! And while you’re doing that I’m going to be collecting supplies and weapons, and climb to the top of a clock tower,” Joe said.

“What clock tower? I’ve never seen a clock tower around here!” I scoffed.

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be a clock tower. Any tower will do. A church steeple would work. You just need some place where you have the advantage of higher ground.”

“I’m with Jacob on this one. I’d just assume that they’re *Dawn of the Dead* and not *Land of the Dead* and steal a house boat.”

This is what we did. We would drink and talk about stupid, asinine shit just to pass the time. We wouldn’t accomplish anything. It’s the story of my life really. Not accomplishing shit that is. The only thing tangible in my life is a stream of empty beer cans I’ve left on the gravel roads in my wake. It’s the only thing I have to show that I lived on this earth.

I was riding around that night in the back seat of my brother Eddie’s Lincoln that night. I announced that I had to take a piss. Joe, my oldest brother, told Eddie that he didn’t have to piss so they would keep driving. This happens every time I need to piss and Joe doesn’t.

“You should have properly emptied your baby bladder on our last stop.”

“Fine, don’t stop. I’ll be happy to piss in the car.”

That also happens every time Joe tells Eddie not to stop the car. It’s strange how many times we have the same conversation over and over again. But nobody else seems to remember it. We all spend so much time together. We have the exact same stories because we were all a part of the story. Yet we still repeat the same stories with each of us chiming in if any part of the tale is untrue. Or, if not enough emphasis was placed on something that was important to one of us. Here we are again going through the same dance over and over. No wonder it felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere in life. I keep reliving my past. I swear we’ve had the stupid *zombie survival* conversation at least twice before.

“Go ahead and piss on the floor mats. I’ll just end of rubbing your nose in it like a dog when you’re through,” said Joe.

“You treat me like a dog and I’ll bite you in the balls like a dog.”

“Joe, I’ve gotta piss too. I’m pulling over.”

“Oh,” said Joe, “You should have said something earlier, Eddie.”

Joe, as always, refuses to disagree with Eddie. Not because he fears Eddie, simply because he antagonizes me, not Eddie.

That's the way it works. Joe asserts his dominance until he's satisfied. Then he relents... over and over and over again.

This happened a couple months back. I was, and still am, twenty-two years old. I had no dreams or aspirations. I was only concerned about the present. It's as if the future didn't exist. It was obscured by a pile of empty bottles. This is also what we did back then. We drove around on vacant gravel roads at a slow plod while getting drunk. Eddie would keep the Lincoln below thirty miles per hour, and we'd roll down the windows and lean our bent arms out the side, and continually comment how it's a gorgeous night out, even if it wasn't. But when you have enough to drink, a rainy October night can appear gorgeous.

Joe is the oldest. He's only older than me by about five years, but it might as well be twenty. I was the little brother to both of them, especially him. And he wasn't about to let me forget it. He was always seemingly the most responsible out of us, but that didn't take much.

Eddie's the middle brother, but by placement alone. You see, Eddie's less than a year younger than Joe. It's what's called an *Irish Twin*. It's what you get when you have parents that don't believe in contraceptives and you end up with two children born within the same year.

Eddie's the looker out or our group. Girls seemed to magically be drawn to him. It's not like he oozed charisma, or has a silver tongue. It was more the fact that he was quite fit with pecks and arms that could fill out a t-shirt with ease.

I could never get girls based on my looks. I'm awkward and lanky in appearance. There were times when I felt like I was making headway with a girl, buying her drinks while in the midst of a great conversation. Then Eddie would inevitably come over and talk to us. The girl that I was talking to would no longer find me fascinating, or find me anything at all for that matter. This happened all the time. The girl's eyes would light up as soon as Eddie would approach. Then once he walked away and she would ask me if he was seeing anyone.

It's that thing that I was missing—the eyes lighting up. No matter how well I think that I'm doing with a girl I don't see them *light up*. I never have. I would tell that girl that in fact Eddie is not seeing anyone. Then I would take the chopped liver that is me outside for a smoke. We look similar. People get us confused all the time. But he is a better me. Girls like me, Jacob. But they lust after Eddie. Eddie is *Jacob 2.0*—bigger, faster, stronger.

Back then the days seemed long and the nights so short. We all worked at a can redemption center. We didn't make shit for money, but that didn't matter. All three of us brothers lived together, and lived cheap.

We would spend our days counting cans, and our nights emptying them. It seemed like a vicious cycle really. The meager wages that each of us made would immediately be put towards cheap beer, even cheaper whiskey, cigarettes, over-processed, over-salted ready-made meals and of course three-hundred dollar rent split between the three of us.

We rented a house from our great aunt. She lived in it for over forty years and only moved out because she said that she could no longer do the upkeep. She moved into an apartment complex in town especially for people over the age of 65 and offered the place to us, her dear nephews. Ironically we don't keep up with the upkeep either, not for the reason she couldn't. We were simply far too busy with our own devises. The grass was over-grown, carpet was filthy and there were always discarded dishes in the sink.

The house was situated a quarter of a mile at the end of a dead-end gravel road. The only traffic on that road was from my brothers or me and the occasional car of drinkers that got turned around on the back country roads, or people that simply assumed that the house was abandoned.

It was a small house, as far as farm houses go. And, it was expensive to heat in the winter—which is why my brothers and I would sit around in our coats and sometimes stocking hats inside the house during the chilliest months of the year. We kept the heat set just high enough so the water pipes wouldn't freeze. We didn't mind, we would sit around watching TV while drinking whiskey to stay warm. On a particularly humid winter night we got a big laugh when we could see our breathes as we sat on the couch.

The buildings that were on the acreage sat empty. They had been empty for as long as I can remember. My great-uncle used to farm the surrounding land, but he died before I was born. Years ago the roof of the barn was partially torn off by a tornado. It was never repaired so now the hay loft is filled with old rotten bales of hay and heaps of raccoon shit. There was a pump house and a grain shed both with cement floors that we used as storage. And a rusty windmill that I sometimes climbed on nice days to look over the rolling tree covered bluffs. You could see for miles. I loved it up there.

It was strange living in my great aunt Elena's house. We used to visit her every Easter Sunday. The house was full of old black and white framed photos of ancestors that I never knew, doily covered end tables with lamps, and glass bowls filled with ribbon candy. Little shelves used to be lined with hundreds of *Precious Moments* figurines. She had a small towns worth of little ceramic dolls with innocent child faces and eyes that looked like they were on the verge of crying, and big, stupid, round heads all playing together in all sorts of positions: hugging, praying, sleeping.

My aunt didn't even like us boys looking at them, and certainly didn't like it when Joe saw how many he could balance on top of his head years ago. I never saw her so pissed in all my life. When she stepped in the living room and saw what Joe was doing she screamed and Joe, who was probably twelve at the time, was startled by her scream and all of the figures fell from his head. The figurine that featured the little child bride and groom caught the corner of the coffee table as it fell and broke into pieces. She somehow convinced my mother that that one was her favorite, although I don't know how. There were at least two other child wedding variations in her collection.

Mom felt awful and apologized profusely, and Joe was forced to not only apologize, but to glue it back together. My great aunt said that she didn't want a broken figurine displayed in her collection, so Mom made Joe prominently feature it in his bedroom for years as a reminder of what he did.

I can still picture Joe's bedroom filled with *G.I. Joe's*, baseball cards, *matchbox cars*, comic books, and in the middle of all that on a little wooden shelf sat a pair of big headed cracked kids on their premature wedding day. That's a precious memory of my own.

The house looks much different now. The floral print wallpaper is covered by thumb-tacked posters of dogs playing pool, and beer promos featuring girls with outdated hair and tiny, ill-fitting bikinis drinking imported beer that we could neither afford nor care to drink. There was no overhead lighting in the living room. We never put in any lamps so at night to only light in the room was radiating from our flat-screen television, our prized possession. It's really the only thing in the house of any worth.

Joe convinced Eddie and me that we needed a big TV. We all pooled our money together to buy it. It was a stupid purchase since we couldn't afford a satellite dish. We had a choice of three television stations with a grainy picture on a high definition screen. We all knew in the backs of our minds that it was a stupid waste of money but none of us, especially Joe, would admit it.

The carpet smelled of the stale beer that had been spilled on it countless times since our residency. But you could only smell it when you lay on the floor. Really the entire house had a bit of a smell to it that we had grown accustomed to.

It was only after a long night drinking at the bar, when all of us had left the house, that it smelled the way it used to. We would step in through the front door, and as we entered the house we would briefly be able to smell the scent that used to permeate the entire place when our great aunt lived there. Memories of childhood would come flooding to the front of my mind and I would have this unsettling feeling while I stumbled to my bed. When I smelled that distinct scent was the only time that it felt like I was in my aunt's old home. Other than that the house was almost entirely unrecognizable on the inside.

The kitchen that used to prepare us honey-cured spiral ham, potatoes O'Brien and cinnamon rolls every Easter now sits largely unused. The kitchen table is always filled with junk. The only appliances we used were the refrigerator, microwave and the oven for when we would bake a frozen pizza.

With our meal prepared we would adjourn to the living room where we would plant ourselves in front of the big screen TV and balance our paper plates in one hand and shovel food in our mouths with the other.

It wasn't a great life, it wasn't even a good life... but it wasn't bad. It suited our needs at the time. There was no future that lay ahead of us. No great dreams or aspirations that we would share with one another. If no one had said a word I think we would have been quietly content counting cans all day and drinking each night. It should have stayed that way, but it didn't. This night was different. We had all three just lost our jobs. It's not like we were career men. We were fucking can counters. I hated my job, but at least I had a job.

The day started out just like any other. Then at six o'clock the owner of the redemption center, Stan, strolls up to Joe, Eddie and me, and hands us each an envelope and says not to show up tomorrow. Apparently he sold the place and the new owner was bringing in his own work force of Mexicans. It was as simple as that. The place that I had worked at for the past four years told me to hit the bricks. Inside the envelope contained an early pay check along with a \$100 (I'm sorry/fuck off) cash. We never bothered stopping back at home. We hopped in to my Eddie's Lincoln and immediately hit the gravel roads. That is after Eddie swiped a couple cases of beer out of the coolers. Apparently he didn't think the \$100 was enough. I agreed.

## CHAPTER TWO

Eddie had the bright idea to go to the Pioneer Graveyard. We had all been there countless times before. Hell, we grew up only a couple of miles or so from it. The Pioneer Graveyard was a favorite stop of ours. It was this old graveyard at the end of a dirt lane that had in it row upon row of dilapidated gravestones of the people that first moved to this corner of the Iowa. These folks homesteaded, fed their families with the crops that they produced from the surrounding miles of land, and inevitably died and were buried in the very same land.

We stepped out of Eddie's car that he parked at the end of the lane, and made the slow walk to the cemetery. We used to come here all the time when we were kids. We would ride our bikes here and walk through the gravestones. The oldest grave that we could find was etched 1798. There could have been older ones in there, but we couldn't tell. A lot of the limestone gravestones had an overgrowth of moss that couldn't be cleared away with bare hands. Some the etchings were too shallow to be read. They were eroded by decades of rain and wind. Or they were toppled and broken all together.

There were some gravestones that sat in the same row that shared the last name. You could see multiple generations all in the same line of sight. There were the oldest gravestones, ones barely legible, and some more recent that were made from granite instead of limestone. Those seemed to hold up much better to the elements.

The stones had things like angels carved into the face. Or a single hand with an index finger pointing to the sky to allude to where they ended up, I guess. They never had epitaphs or final words carved into them like you see on TV. All they stated was their name and the years that they spent on this side of the ground. I never recognized any of the last names. No one that I knew shared those names. The individuals that were laid to rest there either all died and didn't have anyone living to carry on their name, or everyone that used to live there eventually packed up and moved the hell away—except for one that is.

Supposedly the small marker in the very corner of the graveyard, away from the rest, is of a distant aunt of mine. I don't know how she died, but none the less she died at a very early age. A large picture of her hung in my great aunts bedroom which is now Joe's room. I'd never seen the picture before because when we were children we were never allowed in Aunt Elena's room. It wasn't until we were moving her out of her house that I saw it. It was eerie. I couldn't tell if it was a painting or a picture. The little girl in it was dressed like one of those antique toy dolls, wearing a silky soft tunic with an embroidered hem at the bottom. That wasn't the eerie part though. This little girl in the picture wore large boots that were somewhat opaque. You could see the details of the seat she sat on through her ghostly feet. And she had an enlarged head. It didn't look right, and you could spot it immediately—this strange, young girl with a tiny torso and little, chubby baby hands playing with a piece of her dress, with a regular size head and feet. When I asked my mother who that was she had no clue.

It was Aunt Elena that explained how we were related to her. I don't remember how it was. This child lived a long time before my great Aunt Elena even. I asked her why her head was so big and Aunt Elena didn't know why, but assumed that it was why she died at such a young age. Her gravestone isn't much bigger than a text book. You can barely read the inscription. As I recall her last name wasn't familiar to me.

The saddest markers were those of children. They were always much smaller than the adult ones. There were large gravestones that featured the parent's names and their respective dates of birth and death. And surrounding the parents' stone you would see a semi circle of smaller stones of their children that only lived a handful of years, sometimes just weeks.

As we three walked up the long dark lane we could see the tall, black formidable trees that surround the graveyard at the top of the hill. There was little conversation. The only sounds that came from us was the occasional sipping noise from a can of beer, or the labored pants from our crippled lungs that was soon followed by the lighting of a cigarette.

When we reached the front gates Joe reminded Eddie and I the *Irish rules of the graveyard*. They were: don't leave any beer bottles or smoke butts. And especially don't piss on any gravestones.

Not quite as eloquently stated as the rules to walking in nature: take only pictures and leave only footprints. But it worked all the same.

Joe would always state what he called the Irish rules of the graveyards every time before we entered. It always confused me. Joe or any one of us boys weren't really ones to follow rules of any kind. We were constantly called into the principal's office or to detention when we were younger. The cops knew us all by name. And all of us on one occasion or another have had to spend the night in the drunk tank. But these grave yard rules Joe took very seriously. Therefore, Eddie and I always followed suit.

Once inside the gate we worked our way through the tall prairie grass trying not to trip over the gravestones that were hidden within them. It always felt odd, especially after feeling a little drunk, that we were walking over the resting places of people that most likely did the exact same thing that we were doing then. I'd pointed this out to Joe and Eddie in the past, but it fell on deaf ears. Perhaps I get too sentimental when I'm drunk.

We used to ride our bikes up there when we were kids. Once Joe got his driver's license he would drive Eddie and I up there. Our father left us few things when he died. A couple of outdated dress suits that none of us boys could fit into (Dad wasn't a very tall man apparently) an old steamer trunk that contained his army uniform with a few medals and ribbons that I had no clue of their significance, an old leather band watch that I wore and still wear now for years even though the crystal is cracked, and his rusted *AMC Eagle*. It sat dormant for years. My mom never drove it because she had a car of her own. Her car was no better than his, but she never knew how to drive a manual shift. So there she left it, parked next to the garage for years.

Once Joe and Eddie were in their early teens, and suddenly began to see that car as a prospect, they got it back into running order and mom would let them drive around in the farm fields to trap gofers. They didn't spend that much time trapping. The quarter per gopher paw wasn't enticing enough for them to really try at it. They spent more time just



driving around the dusty farm lanes, sneaking cigarettes while sitting with the bench car seat as far forward as it would go, but still barely able to see over the steering wheel.

Sometimes they would let me go out with them, but when I did it was my responsibility to dig the holes for the traps. I would carefully aim the narrow spade shovel precisely on the faint beer can sized ring on top of the pocket gopher mounds, dig down six or eight inches or so until I found the underground hole and cautiously (as to not catch my fingers) I would set the pan-trap at the entrance of the hole and place a metal rod with a flag atop of it so we could find it again the following day. After all six of our traps were set we'd just drive around the lanes of the field while smoking a celebratory cigarette. The first time that I had ever smoked a cigarette was out trapping gophers with my brothers.

As time passed, Joe eventually received his driver's permit. He and Eddie were allowed to take the car on real roads, not just field trails. That's when they stopped letting me tag along.

Back then Joe and Eddie used to bring girls up to the graveyard. They said that it was the perfect place to bring girls because the girls couldn't help but to grab onto your arm and press their breasts against you when they were frightened. Three different times Joe and Eddie dropped me off at the graveyard at dusk and had me hide so they could bring girls there and have me scare the girls. I just liked to be included in something that they were doing. It made me feel important. After dropping me off at the bottom of the lane, they would pick up their dates and bring them to the graveyard. I would have to wait there for what seemed like hours.

I would usually wander around the scattered stones and lay in the nice, thick, tall grass or I would climb some trees trying to find the perfect spot to scare the girls. Then I would find my spot and wait. The sun would eventually set and it would get very dark in the graveyard. I was never scared of being in there at night. I was so accustomed to the place that it felt like a familiar playground to me. My eyes would adjust to the complete darkness and I would feel like a cat walking in the dark, being able to see the shapes of objects that the human eye couldn't detect.

After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, I would spot car lights glide down the adjacent gravel road far off in the distance not stopping, I would know that it wasn't Joe and Eddie. Finally a car would slowdown and come to a stop at the end of the lane. Bingo! I would always get a jolt of adrenaline when I saw the car park. Then I would plan my attack: *crouched, standing or lying?* I would ask myself. The muffled voices would slowly become clearer as they approached. I could always hear the girls before I could hear Joe or Eddie. The girls' high-pitched, nervous voices were always loud in the still night.

The first time we played this trick I positioned myself behind the trunk of one of the large trees that stood in a row surrounding the small graveyard. Once they were inside and walking about, I would shallow my breathing. I was excited and my heart felt like it would pound out of my chest. I was afraid that the girls would hear me breathing and that it would give me away. In hindsight though I think the sound of a little boy panting could only add to the terror. Once they came within a couple of rows from me I dashed from one tree to another and then stopped. One of the girls shrieked, *did you hear that?!* Joe, playing like a pro said, *hear what?* The girls responded, *the rustling over there! I heard something move!* The other girl said *I could hear it too!* Then Eddie chimed in, *probably*

*a deer. I'm sure we startled it when we came in.* I can only assume that Eddie and his coconspirator Joe's faces looked at each other's with grins as their plan was working out perfectly. Before another word could be spoken I dashed another twelve feet to the next tree trunk for me to hide behind. One of the girls shrieked *I heard it again.* And the other one pleaded with Eddie to leave.

By now all of their eyes were peeled to where the sound was coming from, except Eddie's date. She was looking back toward the entrance wanting to leave, but certainly not alone. It was the third time I ran that Joe's date got a good look at what looked like the ghost of a little boy scampering under the blue moonlight. She screamed at the top of her lungs and that was enough for Eddie's date to run out of the cemetery without even seeing what the other girl had even screamed about. It all went perfectly except Eddie's date tripped over a low gravestone mid-escape. Eddie helped her back up and told her that it was his little brother playing a joke. I walked toward them and Joe's date was still a bit skittish until she was able to confirm for herself that I was just your average, living, little boy.

We all walked back down to the car with Joe and Eddie doing their best impressions of what the girls said and just how they said it, while laughing. Then they drove me back home. I got to sit next to Eddie's date in the back seat. She was much taller than I was back then. I only came up to her shoulder. I sat there sneaking quick smells of the perfume that she had put on for her date with Eddie. I can't remember what she looked like but I can still remember how she smelled.

Joe later told me that the prank worked perfectly. He told me that scaring girls made them horny. He told me—without flat out telling me—just how far he got with his date. I couldn't fully understand what he was talking about, but I smiled all the same.

Joe told me that we would be doing that trick again soon. Eddie apparently didn't fare as well. When his date tripped over the headstone, she ripped her brand new *Guess* jeans and was resentful to Eddie for being a part of the prank. Though he wasn't successful, he was willing to give it another go.

The next Friday night Joe and Eddie were able to dupe two new girls into coming to the graveyard after dark. Once again they dropped me off at dusk. And, once again I waited. Although this time I waited in the tall grass instead of behind the trees. I lied on my stomach at the very center of the graveyard just off the trail of trampled grass that had been pressed against the earth by deer. The same as before the car parked at the bottom of the lane and they slowly made their way up the path. Even though it was two different girls with Joe and Eddie, they sounded the same as the other girls with their high-pitched, loud voices. I lay in wait as they crossed the front gate and walked through the easiest available path. My path.

With wet grass penetrating my clothing and sweat dripping from my nose, I cautiously calmed my excited nerves. I felt like a pheasant waiting in the thicket as hunters approached.

Finally the group slowly passed by my hiding spot. Joe and his date led the way. I couldn't scare her since she was desperately grabbing onto Joe's left arm, the side that was away from me. Eddie's date, on the other hand, was attached to his right arm, and would soon be in grabbing distance of me. I waited for Joe and his date to pass. Just behind them were Eddie and his date. As soon as her right foot landed in front of me, I interrupted her shallow steps by grabbing her ankle. A scream that was even louder than

the first girl that I scared screeched through the graveyard as she quickly leaped to one side and shook and kicked her foot. I held on for dear life as her jolts and kicks pulled me out of the brush, which, seeing a little boy gripped to her foot made her scream even more. Joe, learning from Eddie's bad luck last time, firmly placed his hands on his date's shoulders, preventing her from running into a shallow headstone. Eddie didn't have to worry about his date running away since she had nine-year-old anchor clamped to her foot. Once it was explained that it was all a practical joke the girls took it in great stride and Eddie's date even commented that she thought I was cute.

With the success of the first two practical jokes the third was inevitable, although the third didn't go so well. The third was on a chilly fall evening. At least it was that way once the sun went down. I had only a long sleeve shirt on and was shivering in the darkness. There was no moon or stars out like the previous two times. It was one of the darkest nights that I could ever remember. The sky looked empty. I no longer felt like a cat, I couldn't see a thing. With the tall trees blocking the little bit of light that was in the sky, I had to grope my way through the darkness, barely regaining my balance as I stubbed my feet on short graves and bumped my shins on tall ones. I climbed one of the trees that was in the middle of the graveyard and waited on the lowest branch. I had decided that I was going to drop the eight feet or so from the bottom branch, hopefully right in front of Joe and Eddie's dates. I shivered in the cold and continually glanced at the distant gravel road, waiting for their car to arrive. I wondered if one of the girls would find me cute like Eddie's date did last time. I wondered how much longer they were going to be. I began to grow impatient.

After a while I was certain that they were taking longer to get there than they did last time, but not as long as it took to get there the first time. After a while longer I was positive that this was the longest by far that they had ever taken to get there.

I became angry and really cold. I pulled my arms in under my chest to lie on top of them to try to warm myself, all the while keeping my legs straddled on either side of the branch to prevent falling off. My teeth began to chatter, my legs began to numb. I saw a car drive along the gravel road, the fourth one that night. But the headlights kept moving, it didn't stop, it wasn't them.

After more time had passed I had had enough. I sat up on the branch, lifted one leg over the branch to meet the other, and hopped to the ground. My legs had fallen asleep and folded like an accordion beneath me. I fell hard against the cold ground with my shoulder and arms taking the brunt of the impact. I slowly got up, feeling the invisible pins and needles prick my legs as they regained consciousness. With a slow trot I made my way down the beaten path and through the cemetery gates. I kept looking down the lane thinking that if a car did stop at the bottom I could still make my way back into the cemetery and back up the tree. I'd forgive them even though they were running late and I was so cold. As I made my way to the usual parking spot I knew by that point they were not coming and I started the two mile journey back home.

It was still very dark outside but not as dark as the cemetery, nothing was as dark as that. With arms folded and head leaned down, I walked the entire way back home. When I got back, Joe and Eddie weren't home yet. I didn't care if they ever came back.

I didn't bother changing. I stayed in the clothes that I was in. I was too cold to undress. I climbed under the covers, but still was not able to get warm.

Sometime later, Joe and Eddie came home. I could hear them laughing and carrying on as they entered the front door and soon climbed the steps to the upstairs. Joe and Eddie walked up to my bed where I was curled up into the fetal position, pretending to sleep because I didn't want to talk to them. I could hear Joe say, *see I told you that he would make it back*. Joe climbed into his bed and Eddie climbed into the bed that we shared. I couldn't stop shivering and Eddie could feel me shaking. He asked me if I was awake. I never responded. I was afraid that my only response would be to punch him and then I knew that he would just beat me up. I certainly didn't need that.

The next morning I was so sick that I couldn't stand. Eddie and Joe alerted Mom and she immediately came to see how I was doing. Joe and Eddie were standing right behind her when she asked me why I was wearing wet clothes from yesterday.

I told her exactly what happened. How Joe and Eddie didn't bring their dates to the graveyard and how I had stayed there for hours waiting for them to show up but they didn't. As it turned out, Joe and Eddie weren't only not supposed to be driving the car on the roads, but they weren't supposed to leave the house at all on Friday nights. They were supposed to be watching me. Since my dad died some years ago, my mother had to work two jobs and wouldn't get home until early in the morning. When she found out that Joe and Eddie had been leaving me to go out on dates they were grounded and Mom had taken away Joe's driving privileges all together. But not before taking me to the hospital.

It was Eddie that told me—on what felt like my death bed—that the girls that they were taking out had heard about how they brought other girls to the graveyard to have their little brother scare the wits out of them. So Joe then changed the plans and decided not to retrieve me from the graveyard, despite Eddie's protest.

I never forgave them for that. It's still a touchy subject. Joe and Eddie often bring up the stories of the first two times—how I scared their dates—but never the third. I don't bring it up either. It only reminds me that now, just as it was back then, I am their little brother and will never be their equal.

Joe took a long swig of beer and surveyed the area. There wasn't much to see in the dark. The graveyard looked exactly the same as it did those dozen or so years ago. Many other things have changed, the car we drive, the house we live in, certainly our appearance has changed. We've grown so much since then. It's the years between ten and twenty that you change the most. Yet in that period of time the graveyard hasn't changed at all. Not one bit. Its disintegration is so slow that it will probably go unnoticed within our entire lifetimes. It looked so much the same that I found myself looking for the same spot on the ground where I laid the second time I hid in some vain hope that I could still see the matted grass. But of course the grass continued to grow and die and grow back again. And any evidence of me had long since vanished. It had reset itself the way that nature tends to do. Eventually all signs that anyone was ever here will be gone and this world will go back to the way it was before any of us were here.

But there I go getting sentimental again.

We left the graveyard leaving no traces of beer bottles, cigarette butts and especially piss spots behind, and made our way down the long trail back to the car.

## CHAPTER THREE

We slowly made our way down multiple gravel roads with macabre names like Dead Horse Hollow and Ghost Hollow. As well as other roads named after long dead presidents; Van Buren, Jackson, and Fillmore. We drove along rocky bluffs and calm streams that were a part of the familiar backdrop that we had spent our entire lives in front of. It's God's country. It's beautiful scenery that people traveled all over the tri-state region to gaze upon. Scenery that we had always taken for granted.

Eddie pitched his empty beer can out of the window of the moving car and automatically, like so many times in the past, reached his bare hand over his right shoulder as I pulled a fresh cold beer out of the cooler that I was sharing the back seat with, and placed it in his hand.

The music of *The Tossers* threaded throughout our conversation as it often did. A plaintive violin and rapid plucks of a banjo were heard as they sang "The Valley of the Shadow of Death". It was one of the few albums that we could all agree on so it often provided a soundtrack to our consumption.

The sound of dried leaves under Eddie's bald tires along with the constant rumble of gravel beneath us put all of us at ease as we soaked up the crisp, cool night air as it rushed through the open car windows. My arms were rough from goose-bumps, but I wasn't about to roll up my window. I merely folded them close to my body and breathed in deep.

At nearly nine 'o'clock we made our way to the bar. *Marv's Bad Decision* is the name of the place. We regulars simply refer to it as *Marv's*. Marv was apparently a pessimist. He named the place *Marv's Bad Decision* because he thought the place would financially sink him. Ultimately it was a bad decision. Marv committed suicide right in a tiny back room just behind the bar. The same little wooden desk and chair where he was sitting when he did it is still back there. I never met Marv. He shot himself in that back room years ago. I don't believe I was even old enough to walk.

All of the regulars still refer to Marv with great reverence. I don't know how good of a guy he was. All I know is if you *off* yourself, even the people that thought little of you will begin to speak favorably, if you deserve it or not.

The place changed ownership multiple times over the years, but the name stayed the same. A middle aged woman by the name of Vera owns the place now. I've seen the desk and chair where Marv supposedly killed himself. It's in a tiny little room behind the bar as I said. You have to walk through a door that can't be more than four feet high to get back there. The room is just large enough for a wall of stacked cases of beer, boxes filled with hard liquor, an ice machine on the opposing wall, and the little beat up desk and rolling chair beside it. I recall looking for any stains of blood or anything to show that it happened there. I couldn't see anything. It just looked like an average desk and chair. It's still used by Vera.

Vera claims that the bar is haunted by Marv, particularly the back room where it happened. She claims that certain nights after closing time, when she is grabbing the beer from that back room to restock the coolers, she's felt a breath on the back of the neck. There have also been occasions she swears that Marv will whisper right into her ear, or that she will sometimes smell *Tabac* cologne—the scent that Marv always wore.

I'm not one to believe ghost stories. And, the mere thought of a guy that wanted nothing more than to escape his existence is now hanging around the very same place for a couple of decades I find depressing as hell.

Vera's been running *Marv's Bad Decision* for years now. She let each of us boys belly up to the bar and drink when we were far too young. I guess that's one of the reasons why we were beholden to that dump. The place was never anything special and Lord knows there were certainly better bars in town; bars that had people closer to our age instead of the forty and up crowd that patronized *Marv's*. But we knew every single soul that sat in that place. Also, we drank at *Marv's* because we've been kicked out of every other establishment in town.

It was nice to have a place to get drunk after I graduated from high school. You hit a point after school when all of the people in your class go off to college and you find yourself the oldest guy at the cornfield kegger. It was nice to go to a place where I felt young. Hell, Joe used to bartend part-time at *Marv's* a couple of years back before he lost his job. Joe had the nasty habit of drinking as much beer as he served.

The atmosphere was dark. There were no windows, and most of the time the mood wasn't celebratory. But the drinks were cheap, the music wasn't too loud and we were with a group of people that drank as much, and most importantly, as often as we did.

We entered the dark, cavernous environment and were able to easily find three empty barstools to plant ourselves. Vera had already poured three mugs of Budweiser before we sat down. Vera had the look of a woman who has spent all of her life either behind or in front of a bar. Hell, she looked like she was conceived on a pool table. She was always sweet to us boys. She treated us like we were her children. The past few years I've seen Vera much more regularly than my own mother.

The old drunk, Herman, always sat in the same spot every day, right at the very middle of the straight bar top just past the taps. An empty glass of beer sat before him and a glass with brown rusty water sat in front of that. For years the water pipe just above his head had leaked. The stained ceiling tile had been removed and a slow drip of water leaked from a rusty lead pipe and into the waiting glass. This wasn't the kind of crowd to complain about something as trite as a little scummy water dripping above their heads.

I immediately made my way down to Herman and began talking to him. Most of the time Herman remembered my name, some of the time he wouldn't, even though we had and countless long conversations over the years.

Though he didn't always remember my name, he was always happy to see me, and would remove his hand from his glass long for a handshake.

I had the same conversation that I usually did with Herman; conversations that dealt with politics, sports or whatever else was displayed beneath the nicotine filmed television screen.

Herman was difficult to understand. Decades of drinking had left his speech almost entirely indecipherable. He spoke with quick slurs, broken up with multiple stutters and stammers. If I couldn't understand him, I would merely agree with what he

had said. He knew that at times I couldn't understand him and he would repeat what he had just said to me. Sometimes I would get it then, most of the times I didn't. I ordered Herman a beer as I tended to do when I talked to him. He thanked me and shook my hand once again.

It's strange really. He was difficult to understand, but by the end of the night I could understand him perfectly. I don't know if it was because I would grow accustomed to his speaking style, or if my brain had become comparatively alcohol addled which put us on the same plateau.

Eddie was steeped in a game of cards in the back corner table. Joe was deep in conversation with Vera, the bartender. And I was feeding multiple quarters into the juke box and repeatedly playing the same *Journey* song, "Faithfully", to the irritation of everyone in the bar. That is until Vera began pressing little red button right next to the speaker volume dial that canceled the song that was playing.

I made my way over to the bar and sat next to Joe and pleaded with Vera not to cancel the songs that I had selected. Vera corrected me saying that she wasn't cancelling songs that I had selected. That she was canceling *song* that I had selected, over and over again.

After five taps of the red button she waited to hear what song would come over the speakers. It was the same familiar guitar riff from the same agonizing *Journey* power ballad. She tapped the button three more times and paused once again to hear what song would play. Once again it was the same *Journey* song. She asked me in disbelief how many times I chose this song. I informed her in a light hearted manner that this was no way to treat a faithful customer. She pressed the little plastic red button ten times in a row then was relieved to hear nothing coming from the juke box. She poured me a beer on her and made me promise that I wouldn't play that damn song for the rest of the night.

As time dwindled, along with the money in our pockets, it was nearly closing time. The multiple glasses of beer with a few whiskeys tossed in for good measure were sitting heavy in our gullets. My head was beginning to dizzy. Every time I shut my eyes I had difficulty keeping my head balanced on my neck. So as a response to the unfavorable sensation, I made it a point to blink less. Shouts of playful excitement jolted my attention. It was from Eddie in the corner playing cards. He gets far too excited when he's places the *clincher* card on the cardboard table top. He was having fun though. I can't complain about that. I got up and made my way to the restroom, using the walls and tables as guiding crutches along the way.

I stood before the end urinal and began relieving some of the pressure. I administered my regular field sobriety test when pissing. I choose a specific drainage hole at the bottom porcelain urinal, and see if I can direct my stream through it without touching the sides of the hole. It's akin to filling plastic clown's mouth with water from a squirt gun on a carnival midway. My aim was off and I was having a difficult enough time simply making it into the urinal itself, let alone one of the tiny button-sized holes at the bottom. I did much better at the beginning of the night.

I created a more stable tri-pod position by leaning the top of my downturned head against the wall above the urinal. I spit a spindly threat of saliva into the bottom as I finished. I took a long look in the small, cracked mirror that hung above the sink. Through the yellow film, I appeared to be much older than I was. It didn't help that my eyes were blood-shot and featured dark bags beneath them. I wondered if I would be

looking in that very same mirror when I'm the age of everyone else there. Twenty years down the line would I be doing the same shit? Even worse, would I look back at this shit time in my life with admiration, as if my life will be so much worse in the future that this time now will be the highlight?

I realized that the only thing that I had going for me was my age. I'm in my early twenties. Talking to some of the regulars there at *Marv's*, they called me a kid. They'd remind me constantly how young I am. I don't think they do it to belittle me. I think it's because they're jealous. At one time they were the young kid drinking in a bar. They were on a free ride that seemingly has no end. But it does. And when you look back at the first half of the life you've wasted it's gotta be a shit feeling.

I made my way back to my barstool in front of the tiny television. I sat by myself nursing the fresh beer that was before me. I was drunk and didn't have any need to keep drinking, but I'd never left a full beer at a bar yet. On the TV was a rebroadcast of the local news. It showed Iowan entrepreneur and philanthropist Jeremiah Cohen at a ribbon cutting ceremony for new boathouse that his agency invested in. Joe made his way down a few stools and sat beside me.

"That's the life, isn't it?" I asked.

"What, that guy?" Joe said nodding his head once to the TV.

"Yea, that guy's a millionaire. And now he's opening a club house for him and all his elitist friends to play in. It's hard to believe that he lives in the same state as us. He lives a completely different life."

"It's probably not as great as you imagine."

"Are you serious?! Of course it is! The man is living the dream! Look at him."

Displayed on the nineteen inch screen was the polished Jeremiah Cohen wearing a grey pin-striped suit with a white sea captain's hat.

"Who does he think he's fooling? This is Iowa, not Nantucket. Why are they opening a ritzy boat house beside a river?"

"I don't know. Who cares? The point that I'm making is that he is much better than we are. Just look at him standing before cameras surrounded by his affluent friends and perfect family. Now look at us, sitting here drinking tap beer, jobless and possibly soon to be homeless."

"He's not all that he's cracked up to be though," Joe began. "He got his money from his dad. He was a bridge builder or some shit."

"How do you know that?"

"I watch the news you know. That Cohen guy is supposedly going to make a run for political office soon. At least that's what everyone's saying."

"I wish our dad was successful and handed a company down to us."

"That's my point! That guy's had it easy. He hasn't had to do shit. He got a great education and was probably VP of Daddy's company when he was our age. A beautiful wife, big mansion of a house, a fucking boat, that's what getting a leg up on life gives you," Joe said.

I suddenly had it out for Jeremiah Cohen. I suddenly hated his stupid starched collared shirt and artificially whitened smile. "Someone ought to take him down a few notches," I suggested.

"Yea? And just how would you do that?"

"I don't know. Rob his house or something."



“You don’t think his place has a security system? I’m sure his house is protected like Fort Knox in his gated community.”

“Alright, how about a couple of *Molotov* cocktails through the windows of his precious club house?” I stated in slurred stutters.

“And what will that do?”

“I don’t know! I just want to send him a message is all.”

The card game that had occupied Eddie’s time had ended. He walked up to the bar and joined Joe and me. On the TV Jeremiah Cohen’s young daughters answered a question from the reporter about how they felt about the boat house. The little one said that she was looking forward to feeding the ducks. She spoke with a little kid lisp. The kind you have when you’re missing your front baby teeth. The reporter laughed and threw it back to the studio anchor.

“We hold his daughter’s for ransom,” I said with my eyes locked on the television screen. Joe didn’t say anything. He just looked up at the television with me.

“What the hell are you two blabbing about?” Eddie asked.

“We’re thinking of ways to even the score with this asshole on TV. So far we’ve ruled out robbing his mansion and setting his club house on fire. As of now the best prospect is abducting his daughters,” I said in a jovial drunken tone.

“Count me in. I’ve got nothing but time on my hands.”

“How much do you think that guys worth?” Joe said, his eyes still glued to the television.

“No clue. Millions the way *you* made it sound.”

“How much do you think his daughters are worth to him?”

“At least a million apiece,” I said before a drink.

“Two million buck, we would be set for life,” Eddie said.

“How tough could it be? I mean, they’re little girls. We could drive down there, snatch them, hold them ransom, make off with two million then flee the country. It sounds simple,” Joe said.

Herman walked up behind us. “S-say, what’s the skinny ova’ here lads?”

“We’re going to abduct a millionaire’s daughters and hold them for a king’s ransom,” I slurred. Joe jabbed his elbow into my side. I let out an audible yelp.

“It’s good t-to see ya’ boys workin’ together. I never got ‘long too much with ma-my brothers.”

Herman stood there behind us with the drunken posture of a toddler who was just getting the hang of walking. His back was arched and his butt was sticking far out behind him from his overly corrected posture. His arms hung carelessly to his side, and he seemed to have a top heavy locomotion. It’s as if he would tilt the top of this body in the direction he wanted to go and with his arms hanging limply, his legs did the best they could to keep up with his top half. Just as usual, I was now able to clearly understand Herman’s “speak”. I’m not saying that I could be an interpreter for him. All I know is by the end of the night he sounded pretty damn comprehensive.

Herman lifted his nylon jacket off the back of his barstool, and clumsily fought with the sleeves to get his arms inside of them. Eddie stood up and grabbed the other half of the coat that Herman was struggling to reach behind him, and lifted it so Herman’s right arm could find it. “Thanks lad. N-now ya’ lads... ya’ lads have a good’n. S-stay outta’ trouble,” Herman said, before pushing through the front door.

“What’d you hit me for?”

“You don’t need to be telling Herman what we’re talking about?”

“Tell him about what? Abducting those little girls?”

“Keep your voice down!” Joe said.

“What the hell for? You’re not serious about this are you?”

Joe looked over at Eddie. I soon did the same. Eddie had a look of confusion on his face, having stepped midway into our conversation.

“You do know that I was kidding right?” I said.

“It’s late, we need to get going.” Joe said.

We said our goodbyes to Vera and stepped out from the warm bar into the chilled night air, with me walking in a similar fashion to Herman. I opened the back door of Eddie’s Lincoln and walked on my hands and knees across the wide bench seat. I shoved the full cans of beer off the seat and onto the floor. I lied on my side in a fetal position with my hinged arm placed under my head to act as a pillow. Before I fell asleep to the hypnotic rumblings of the gravel roads, I could hear Eddie and Joe discussing something in hushed tones. I didn’t care enough to crane my head up. Before we left town I was already fast asleep.

## CHAPTER 4

I awoke the next morning in my bed. I couldn’t remember walking from Eddie’s car into the house the night before. I tilted my head slightly and felt dizzy and nauseous even making that slight adjustment. I could feel my brain pressing and pulsating against the sides of my skull. I lied in bed and wondered why I always did this same routine—drink far too much the previous night, not thinking about the consequences the next morning.

I sat up in bed with my hands pressed on either side of my head to steady it. My joints ached and I had the usual horrific taste of a hairy tongue. At least I didn’t have to worry about making it into work and counting cans. That was the only consolation I could find.

I carefully made my way downstairs, taking careful precaution not to step with a hard heel that would send shock waves of discomfort through my brittle frame. The living room was empty, so was the kitchen.

Where were Joe and Eddie? Did they leave somewhere? It was then that I saw the basement door that was located just off the kitchen was slightly ajar. I could hear them speaking below my feet. I wondered what the hell they were doing down there. I’d hardly been in the basement since we lived there. The day I moved in whatever of my junk I couldn’t find a place for, I boxed up and stored it down there, along with Joe and Eddie’s stuff. That’s all we used it for, storage.

I made my way down the basement steps, keeping a stern grasp on the railing and continued my careful foot placement as to not further my agony. Joe and Eddie were standing in the center of the room that was all concrete floor and cinder block walls. They both had their backs to me and their arms crossed as if they were surveying the area.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Drunky finally decided to get up,” Joe said over his shoulder.

I stood there barefooted on the cold concrete floor. Wearing the same cloths I had on the day before.

“Really, what are you guys doing?”

“We’re planning our retirement,” Eddie said.

“Huh?”

“I told you he wouldn’t remember what we were talking about last night,” Joe said to Eddie. Eddie reacted to the comment with a pompous smirk. I was the little brother on the outs once again.

“Wait, you guys aren’t still talking about the Jeremiah Cohen thing are you?”

Eddie and Joe looked at each other, then back to me.

“You guys can’t be serious. We were joking. It was a fucking hypothetical.”

“That’s all we’re doing right now,” Joe said. “We’re just thinking about what it would take.”

“Yea, you guys do that,” I said dismissively as I stepped my cold toes off the concrete and back onto the steps. I turned and asked if they had eaten breakfast yet. They didn’t seem to hear me, or didn’t care what I had to say.

I sat on the couch eating an apple toaster strudel while watching one of those daytime court shows—the ones where the judge is overly rude to the plaintiff and defendant, and speaks in a *no nonsense* fashion. They were still down there. Joe and Eddie were still discussing the possibility of abducting two little girls. I decided then and there that I needed to hit the pavement and find a job for us. Then I thought why would we all work together at our next job? And what kind of place has three job openings to employ three fuck-up brothers? I may have to go out on my own. Look after myself.

Naturally I didn’t begin my job hunt that day. Even though I didn’t have much for funds on hand, I was happy to have a break from the day to day rat race.

I filled my afternoon with nothing. I bummed around the house and managed to fit in an early afternoon nap. By the time I woke up the damage I did to my body was gone. It was that afternoon that Joe and Eddie sat me down. I knew exactly what they wanted to discuss.

“Just hear us out. Two weeks worth of work and we’ll be millionaires!” Eddie said with great enthusiasm. Joe had him convinced, hook, line and sinker. I considered myself a much more independent thinker than Eddie. I wasn’t about to be swayed by Joe’s half-baked scheme.

“No!” I said. “You guys do what you want. Go have your fun until you realize that it is way too difficult and risky. Then you can give up on it and join me in the legitimate working world.”

“You don’t get it, Jacob. We all have to be in this together. You live in the same house as us. You would be an accessory no matter how you slice it,” Joe said.

“Well then it’s simple. No.”

“You don’t have to agree to the whole thing right now. Hell, we’re not even fully committed either. We just need you aboard before we take the next step.”

“And what would that next step be?”

Joe hesitated before he spoke, “Surveillance.”

“You guys want to spy on the Cohens? That is really creepy!”

“Not spying, surveillance. We simply take a harmless trip down to Des Moines and see their day to day activities. Just to see if this idea is even possible.”

“And if we actually went through with this harebrained scheme, where would we keep these girls?”

“The basement,” Eddie answered. “It has a sturdy door that we can toss a couple of deadbolts on. The only escape is through that door. There is no getting out unless those girls are capable of tunneling through a concrete floor.”

“You guys are really putting some thought into this.”

“Neither of us got any sleep last night,” Joe said.

“Let me think about it.”

I wasn't planning on thinking about it. I just wanted to give them time to lose interest in the stupid idea. I figured in a few days we would all be employed again and we could put the crazy idea behind us. They weren't thinking straight. I was certain that they were just a little freaked out about what we were going to do once we ran out of money. That would make anyone consider ridiculous things.

I tossed on a jacket and walked across the leaf covered lawn and climbed the old windmill that was located next to the little red bricked pump house. It was one of my favorite spots to sit. I would often climb the old, rust covered ladder and sit at the top and admire the ridged hillsides and green dales that surrounded the farm in that special corner of Iowa.

You could see for miles. On clear days you could see Minnesota. I steadied myself on the small, wooden platform, and after wrapping one arm around the metal skeleton, I used my free hand to light my first smoke of the day. My throat and chest ached in protest having smoked far too many the night before. I took a drag and surveyed my surroundings as if I were a king surveying his land, claiming all of the area around him as far as the eye could see. I was far from a king though. I had no house, no land... nothing to my name.

I thought about the bathroom mirror at *Marv's*. I wondered if in twenty years I would be looking in that very same mirror. If looking back at me will be the same person. I imagined myself taking the place of an old man that talks to young guys. Reminding them how young they are, being jealous of their youth.

Inactivity hampers change. If I continue to coast that will be me looking at the reflection of an old man, thinking about that night a couple of decades before when I let an opportunity pass me by. Even if I found a different job I'd still be a lower class jerk-off just making rent and never gaining anything great in life. Now was the time to do it. There wasn't any more time to lose any more years.

I finished my smoke and made my way back down. Joe and Eddie were seated in the living room, discussing quietly the topic at hand.

I stood in front of them and said with much conviction. “Ok, you guys win. Let's do this.”

Eddie stood up immediately. With a big grin he grabbed each of my shoulders and shook me with uncontrollable excitement. “Christ! I knew you'd come around!” Eddie was bouncing around in place. There was no containing his excitement.

I felt like I just scored the winning touchdown. Joe stood from the couch and with a hand outstretched said, welcome aboard.

## CHAPTER 5

The plan seemed to take off after that. It happened so fast. It was the very next day, a Thursday, we decided to drive down to Des Moines to begin a surveillance of the Cohen family. I packed a cooler with cold meat sandwiches and cheese sticks. I filled a thermos with ice water and tossed a half a bag of chips and a package of *Chips Ahoy* cookies in a plastic bag.

It was four in the morning. The sun was far from rising. I stepped out the front door and placed the cooler and treats into the back seat of Eddie's Lincoln. When I went back inside I saw Joe packing a cooler of beer. It seemed a little inappropriate since it was so early in the morning. I gave Joe a bemused look and he told me that we were going to be spying on the girls all day, not just the morning. I agreed, but in the back of my mind I knew that the first beer would be cracked before ten that morning. Eddie had with him a pair of hunting binoculars, a steno pad and a pair of little plastic walkie-talkies.

"What the hell are those for?" Joe asked.

"What these? It's in case we get separated. We can still be in communication."

"Leave 'em here," Joe scowled.

"It won't hurt to bring 'em along just in case, you know?"

"That's a kid's toy."

"They still work!"

"Jesus!" Joe yelled, "Those things have like a fifty foot range! Not to mention when they're on they have a loud static noise! Also, we won't be separating! We won't be leaving the car! Leave them here!"

Eddie set them on the counter. Joe went back to packing the cooler. Eddie quietly picked them back up, gave me a wink and walked out to the car.

We drove the dark, lonely highways to Des Moines. I lied down in the back seat trying to retrieve some of the sleep that I had lost. I couldn't fall asleep, but it was soothing listening to the tires echo against the pavement. The soft hiss and crack as the wheels tracked over the segmented concrete was rhythmic and calming.

We arrived in Des Moines a little after seven that morning. The big city was bustling and alive with the traffic of people beginning their day, driving to their jobs. We were sort of doing the same.

It didn't take us long to find the Cohen residence. It was a ritzy neighborhood just off a golf course. All of the houses in the rich enclave had brick facades, prominent front doors, grass that looked so green and thick that I wondered if it was fake turf, and horse shoe driveways that lead up to tall awnings.

"Just look at how these fuckers live! It makes ours look like a shit-shack," Joe said.

"Ours *is* a shit-shack," I said.

We took every precaution when searching for the Cohen's address. Joe wouldn't let me Google search it from my computer. I found the news story online about the ribbon cutting ceremony. I printed the story because it featured a photo of the entire

Cohen family. All four of them lined up in front of an oversized red ribbon, the older daughter holding the pair of scissors. He made me go to the library to do it. The same piece of paper that I scrawled the address from the Yellow Pages was now in Joe's hand, double checking it as we pulled up to the mansion.

He told Eddie to slow down as we passed before it. We all stared wide-eyed, craning our heads to see the entire house. Personally, I thought that it would be bigger. I mean, it was a nice house, but it wasn't nearly what I expected. I guess I was picturing something between *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and the *Playboy Mansion*. It was just an ordinary large house.

We could see that there were a couple dim lights penetrating the windows that faced the street.

"Looks like they're awake. Circle around the block and find a spot to park three or four driveways down from the house," Joe told Eddie.

We circled around the block and found the perfect spot to park, which wasn't difficult. No one in that neighborhood parked on the street. Eddie turned off the car and it was now noticeably quiet. No one said anything. There wasn't anything to say. After ten minutes passed, Eddie broke the silence.

"What the fuck is taking them so long?"

"It's going to be a long day. If you're bitching after ten minutes..." Joe said.

More time passed. Eddie turned the key backwards in the ignition and turned on the radio.

"Shut it off," Joe said.

"Why?"

"We can't be running the radio all day. We'll kill the battery."

"We can listen to a little radio without killing the battery," Eddie said.

"Your car is an unreliable piece of shit! You're going to listen to the radio and the next thing you know they're going to leave the house and you won't be able to start your car and this whole trip will be a waste."

Eddie turned the key one click forward and pulled it slightly out of the ignition to appease Joe. The car went back to silence. Eddie picked up the binoculars and began to peer at the dimly lit house.

Eddie looked at the house for a couple of minutes with his mouth slightly agape. Joe and I sat there listening to his chortled breathing.

"Let me have a look," Joe said.

"Fuck off, I'm using 'em."

"You've looked long enough. There's nothing for you to see."

"There's nothing for *you* to see either."

"It wouldn't hurt to have fresh eyes look through them. I might be able to see them moving around inside."

"I can see just fine."

"Just...let me—" Joe reached over to grab them. Eddie slapped his hand.

"Come on, just for a second!"

"After I'm done using 'em!"

"Well how long's that gonna be?"

"Hard to say."

It was like watching a couple of kids fight over a toy. I was convinced that the only reason Eddie was still looking through those binoculars was because Joe wanted to.

Joe crossed his arms, huffed, and passively gazed out of the passenger side window.

Eddie continued to look through the binoculars, his breathing mouth echoing through the quiet car.

“Alright, times up.” Joe said, reaching for them once again. Joe grabbed the strap and began jerking Eddie’s head down while he looked through the sights. Eddie fought back, pushing Joe against the door, fending him off.

“They’re *my* binoculars!”

“You’re just trying to be a prick! Let me have a look!”

They continued squabbling back and forth. I looked past them and saw the garage door slowly open.

“Guys...” I said. They continued.

“Jackasses!” I said louder. “They’re leaving!”

Joe and Eddie paused. Joe’s hand was still wrapped around the binocular strap and the other pressing against the side of Eddie’s face. They quickly snapped back into pseudo professionals. A large Cadillac Escalade carefully backed out of the driveway.

“It’s show time!” said Joe. “Eddie, start the car.”

Eddie started the car and was preparing to pull away from the curb, ready to follow. The Escalade turned and faced the direction of our car. We hadn’t anticipated that.

“Fuck! Duck!” Joe said.

We shot down in our seats and the Escalade slowly passed by us. We carefully peeked our heads back up and looked behind us. The Escalade was turning around the bend at the bottom of the hill and out of our sight.

“Quick! Follow them!” Joe shouted.

Eddie cranked the wheel and steered the boat of a car out onto the sleepy suburban street and proceeded to make a clumsy, time consuming, three-point turn, with Joe swearing at him the entire time.

“Hurry the fuck up! We’re gonna lose ‘em!”

“I’m trying!”

Eddie turned the car around then floored it to catch up. We rounded the corner and they were nowhere to be found.

“If we lost them...” Joe began.

“How was I to know that they were going to go our direction?”

We raced up to a stop sign at a T-intersection. We looked in both directions. Far down the road to the left we saw the black SUV turn another corner.

“There!” I shouted.

Eddie floored it once more. The bald tires made a faint squealing noise as we took the corner. It was when we began to catch up to them that a little white sedan pulled out in front of us and positioned itself between us and the Cohens. The little car was driving much slower than the Escalade. They were gaining distance between us once again.

“Shit! Pass ‘em!” Joe said.

“That’s gonna look suspicious!” I said. “Just keep your eyes peeled. We can still see them!”

Further and further they gained ahead of us as we tailgated the little, white shit-box. The Escalade took a turn to the right a couple of blocks ahead of us. The white sedan continued driving straight and we turned to the right onto a four lane highway. Eddie accelerated putting less distance between us and them.

“How do we know that the girls are even in there? This could be their father driving to work,” I said.

“It’s a gamble we have to take,” Joe said.

The light turned red at the intersection ahead of us. The Escalade slowed to a stop. We were positioned in the lane next to them, and were slowing to a stop as well.

“Shit!” Eddie exclaimed. “Do I pull up right next to them or stay back a bit?”

“You have to pull up next to them. We don’t want to look suspicious,” Joe said.

“Any more suspicious than we already do?” I added.

“Just look forward.”

We pulled up next to the black SUV. We locked our heads forward. Eddie spoke like a ventriloquist, hardly moving his lips as he gazed ahead. “Can you see the girls in there?”

I casually looked over. “I can’t see anything, the windows are tinted. Wait, I’m pretty sure there is someone sitting in the back seat.”

“That’s promising.”

The light turned green and traffic slowly moved forward.

“Get in the same lane as them,” Joe said.

Eddie looked over his right shoulder, then back ahead, then quickly once again over his shoulder as if he were balancing on a tight-rope.

“I can’t. There’s a car right next to us.”

“This is the big city. You have to just budge your way over. Flip on your turn signal and they’ll let you in.” Joe said.

Eddie did what Joe said. He signaled and slowly began to creep over into the parallel lane. The car next to us fired his horn. Eddie jolted back into the previous lane.

“Shit! Fuckin’ asshole is drawing attention to us!” Joe shouted.

“He’s backing off. There’s room to merge,” I said looking off to the side.

Eddie slid his large Lincoln in between the Escalade and the irritated horn-honking driver.

The Escalade continued just ahead of us and took the next exit off the highway. We followed as they hung another right and pulled into a convenience store.

“Hold back, hold back. Park a ways off to the side here,” Joe instructed.

The Cadillac parked in an empty spot right in front of the store. The driver side door opened and a woman stepped out and walked inside.

“I don’t see anyone else getting out,” Eddie said.

“Fuck, the girls are probably still at home or with their father in a different car takin’ them to school.” Joe said.

“Should we keep on tailing this car or should we go back to their house to see if another car leaves?” Eddie asked.

“It’s too late. We’ve gotta stick with this one. You said you could see someone in the back, Jacob?”

Now I was no longer sure.

“It looked like it. It looked like someone was moving back there.”



The woman exited the convenience store carrying a plastic bag weighted down with items. She hopped back in her vehicle and drove away with us following.

It began to feel like a lost cause at this point. But what else were we going to do? She continued a few more blocks. Joe was telling Eddie to stay further back. The streets were pretty desolate. We were afraid that she would recognize the car that she had passed earlier just outside of her house. We continued to follow her down oak and elm lined streets. Soon traffic began to increase and we began to see children walking on sidewalks carrying backpacks.

“I think she’s driving to a school! All hope isn’t lost!” I said from the back seat.

Soon after, we saw a large brick building with yellow school buses pulling up to the front. The Escalade stopped in front behind a long line of cars. Eddie began to pull in right behind her.

“No, no. Keep goin’. Find a spot further down the block,” Joe said.

Eddie drove further down the street, trying desperately to find a spot. Finally there was an open spot a ways away from the Cohen’s black SUV.

“Can you see anything?” Eddie asked.

“No. Jacob, can you?” I turned around in my seat and pressed the side of my face against the rear window.

“Not really. I don’t want to stick my head out of the window.”

Joe let out an exasperated exhale.

“Wait!” I looked in the mirror on the passenger side. I could see the black door of the SUV open. “She’s letting the girls out right now.”

Eddie and Joe fidgeted in their seats, turning their heads, desperate to see what was going on.

“Pink shirt, green shirt, pink shirt, green shirt!” I said while staring at the reflection in the side mirror.

Eddie and Joe looked through the crowd of kids trying to find them.

“Pink shirt, green shirt?” said Joe. “I don’t see ‘em. All these little shits look the same!”

“By the landscaping wall. They’re just about to cross in front of the big tree!” I said, leaning down even further to catch the correct angle.

“Big tree? There’s like a row of fucking trees in front of this place! Which one?” Joe asked.

“Right there! Right there! They just rounded the corner to the front door!” I said.

“I see ‘em! Pink shirt, green shirt!” Joe said.

“I don’t see ‘em!” Eddie said in a whiny tone.

“Jot down the time and address,” Joe said, flinging the steno pad into the back seat.

*8:15 Aurora Middle School. 2030 Orchard Blvd. Front entrance.*

As I was jotting this down there was a knock on the side window. We nearly leaped out of our skin. There was a large, black woman wearing an official looking uniform looking into our car. Joe looked at her, reluctant to roll down the window. She looked right at Joe and knocked once more. Joe rolled the window down just a crack.

“Gentlemen,” she began, “this area is for pick-ups and drop-offs. If you have dropped your child off, I ask you to drive away so someone else can use your spot.”

“Of course,” Joe said with a relieved tone. “We’re just leaving.”

He rolled the window up the two inch space it was down, while the woman gave Joe a disapproving look.

“Fuckin’ Nazi bitch,” Joe said in a low tone.

Eddie pulled out into traffic and we were on our way.

“I’d call this a success. This calls for a beer. Jacob?” Joe said, while reaching his empty hand to me.

8:18 I guess I was off on my ten o’clock prediction.

## CHAPTER 6

After the girls were in school we figured we had some time to get breakfast. We went to a quaint little diner a few blocks away from the school. I liked the place—delicious, greasy food, strong, black coffee and a waitress that calls you *hun*, and doesn’t feel the need to write down your order.

Nobody knew us there, which was nice. No reputation to precede us. To that waitress we were just three nice guys enjoying a nice breakfast.

We still had more time to waste, but Joe was anxious to get back to the school to continue our surveillance. We still didn’t know when we could possibly abduct them—certainly not before school, possibly not after. We parked down a side street and got comfortable. Eddie was much more patient this time. I think it was because he knew he was going to be trapped in the car all day and not much was going to happen in the few hours before school would be dismissed.

“What about a fire alarm?” Eddie asked.

“No, if we do that the girls will be standing outside with all of the other children and the faculty. We wouldn’t be able to approach them and separate them from everyone else. Not to mention if we did, there would be a few hundred witnesses as we drove off.” I said.

“Really, snatching ‘em while they’re standing outside after we pulled the fire alarm would be the worst possible time to do it. I tell you what, how about we wait for their high school graduation, then grab them off the stage as they’re about to receive their diplomas!” Joe chided.

Joe was beginning to get drunk and belligerent.

“I’m just spit-ballin’ is all! It’s more than I can say you guys are doing,” Eddie said.

“That’s because we think of ideas like that, but instead of just saying them as they come to us, we think about it for a couple of seconds before deciding that it’s a stupid fucking idea that shouldn’t be said out loud,” Joe said.

Eddie leaned back in his seat, crossed his arms and passively stared out the window, trying not to raise Joe’s ire.

About midday after we each had a cold meat sandwich and a few cheese sticks, a bell rang out across the school yard. Soon after, children began filing out of the double doors, and ran to various playground equipment; tether ball poles, basketball hoops or the white bases painted on the concrete where they would play a game of kick-ball.

Each of us eagerly sat forward trying to pick out the girls. None of us could. There were so many kids that it was hard to keep track of the ones you've looked at and the ones you've yet to comb through. "Green shirt, pink shirt," Eddie was murmuring to himself.

"I don't think they're out here," I said.

"What about that one?" Eddie said while pointing to the swing set.

"No, that shirt is more florescent green. You need to look for a dark green and a pastel pink," I said.

Joe had given up the search and was now concentrating more on the bottle he had in his hand. I'm not so sure his eyes could focus through the bright sunlit playground. After twenty minutes or so, the bell rang once again and all of the kids lined up in single file in four lines by the same double door they came out of. We took this opportunity to really sift through the kids to see if we could find them. Still no luck.

The lines of children walked single file into the building and soon after that, another lot of kids came running out. Eddie and I peeled our eyes while Joe casually looked at the playground between gulps of beer.

"I see a pink shirt!" Eddie exclaimed!

"Where?" I said.

"Look over by the slide. There's a group of girls sitting in the woodchips talking in a circle."

I leaned between the two front seats to get a better view. Then I remembered the binoculars and snatched them from between the seats. I could see that Eddie and Joe were jealous that I picked them up. I'm sure they would have been using them all this time if they had remembered we had them. I scanned the playground and focused in on the group of girls talking by the slide. Sitting off to the right of the group was a little girl wearing a pastel pink shirt sitting *Indian style* as she talked and picked up woodchips, passively dropping them just in front of her.

"That's her! Long blond hair with soft curls and wearing the very same pink shirt!" I ecstatically said.

"Well, right it down!" Joe said.

I handed the binoculars to Eddie, grabbed the steno pad and jotted down the info.

*Recess 12:20-East End of the school.*

"So which daughter is that one?" Joe asked.

"Ah, let's see," I said. "I believe it's the younger one so..." I shuffled through some notes that I had taken down before. "Olivia."

"So now we just need to find..." Joe asked.

I shuffled papers again before finding it. "Ashley."

"Alright, we found pink, now we need to find green," Eddie said while looking through his hunting binoculars. We continued to search for the green shirt but to no avail.

The bell rang and the children lined up by the same door. Pink shirt was standing right in the middle of a line still gabbing away with her friends.

“I think we missed green shirt,” Eddie said.

“They may be in different recesses,” I said. “They are like two years apart in age.”

After the kids went inside, the bell rang and another crop of youngsters ran out of the glass double doors and we went back to work. I snagged the binoculars from Eddie telling him that I was the one that spotted pink shirt so it was only fair that I get to use them. I slowly panned the large lenses over the crowd of energetic youngsters when I spotted a girl in a green shirt over by a swing set casually seated talking to another girl sitting in the swing next to her.

“Found green shirt!” Eddie said.

“Sitting over on the swing?”

“Playing basketball.”

I lowered the binoculars and saw a different girl wearing a green shirt awkwardly dribbling a basketball before failing to put the ball through the hoop.

“Where are you talking?” Eddie asked.

“Over by the swing set, sitting on the swing that is furthest to the right!”

We both looked back and forth between the two girls, trying to figure out which one was the Cohen daughter.

“Oh, I couldn’t see this coming,” Joe said in a mocking tone.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that the one we’re looking for is the one playing basketball,” Eddie defended.

“Why would you say that? You didn’t even see her this morning,” I said.

“Call it a hunch.”

“You would say the exact same thing if you spotted the girl in the green shirt sitting on the swing set.”

“Well, why don’t you put your money on it? Ten bucks says it’s the girl on the swing set!”

I felt that I had the advantage since I was the one who was actually able to see her enter the school. “You’re on.”

I lifted the binoculars back up to my eyes and compared the two young girls. Shoulder length brunet hair, green shirt and blue jeans. I looked at the other. Shoulder length brunet hair, green shirt and blue jeans. They looked practically identical.

“You know we’re never going to know for sure,” I informed Eddie.

“Joe, you saw her this morning? Tell us which one she is,” Eddie said, snagging the binocular out of my hands and giving them to Joe. Joe clumsily raised the binoculars up to his eyes then lowered them, situating the strap that was grazing his lips and nose off to the side, and then brought it back up to his eyes. He lowered them and began to fiddle with the focusing dial at the top. He returned them back to his eyes and fiddle with the dial once more.

“I can’t see a damn thing out of these, the focus don’t work!” Joe said.

“I don’t think it’s the binoculars, I’m pretty sure it’s your eyes,” Eddie said.

Joe angrily stuffed the binoculars back between the front seats and said, “It don’t matter. She’s one of the girls in the green shirt. Write it down.”

I took down the note while Joe finished off his bottle of beer.

Recess 1:00-1:20. Sitting on swing.

The bell rang and the children lined up by the same double doors, the same as the previous two recess periods did. I compared once more, trying to decipher which one was the Cohen daughter. I noticed the recess monitor standing by the head of each line and jotting down something on her clip board.

“I think she’s taking a tally guys.”

“Who?”

“That teacher. She’s taking a head count before the students go back inside.”

“Shit! I already had it in my mind that recess wouldn’t be the best time. But this seals the coffin,” Joe said, mixing up his idioms.

Two other groups of kids each had their allotted amount of time on the playground. Eddie and I searched the group. But I admit that we didn’t try as hard. We felt that we had found them.

“You boys just keep looking out the window,” Joe said.

“Why?”

I could see Joe press his back firmly against the passenger seat, straightening his legs. This was followed by the sound of him unzipping his pants.”

“You are not pissing in the car!” Eddie said.

“I’ve gotta go!”

“I’ll drive you somewhere.”

“Too late.”

I could hear the distinctive sound of piss striking the glass bottom of a beer bottle.

“Christ! I can smell it!” I said.

“Wow, that’s hot!” Joe said, grabbing the side of the clear bottle.

“You filled the entire car with your sick piss stench. Eddie, turn the key so I can roll down the window.”

“Don’t do that. We don’t need people looking it at us. Shit! Honestly, you guys, feel the side of this bottle, it’s like I pissed coffee!”

The afternoon after recess seemed to drag on. Joe was asleep (or passed out) in the passenger seat. Eddie used that opportunity to quietly listen to the radio. I stared out at the empty playground wishing that there were kids out there. Even if it wasn’t the Cohen daughters, just so I’d have something to look at. The hours dragged on as we waited for three o’clock. Even though I was bored out of my skull I was still in a way enjoying myself. It sure beat sitting around the house all day with nothing to do.

An hour or so passed and Joe snapped awake, jerking his head up from his seat. Eddie quickly turned the keys back to the *off* position, making a loud snapping noise as he did it. He looked over at Joe assuming he was busted. Joe didn’t say a word. He only looked around the car with dazed, half shut eyes as he smacked his dry tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You got something to drink back there?”

“I reached for another bottle of beer out of the cooler.”

“No, no. I need water or something.”

I opened the cooler that I packed and handed him a blue *Gatorade*. With more effort than it should have taken, he unscrewed the plastic cap, and then proceeded to

drink two thirds of the bottle without stopping. He lowered the wide-mouth plastic bottle and quietly caught his breath while looking forward at nothing.

“Ok, now hand me a beer.”

While I was digging back in the cooler searching for a beer, I could hear Joe filling up another beer bottle with his piss.

I handed Joe a sweaty beer from the cooler that was more water than ice by that point. Joe managed to free up one hand while he was cautiously recycling an empty bottle, and grabbed the beer from me. I also helped myself to a beer as well. Eddie followed my lead and held back his hand without a word. I filled it with a chilled bottle.

A couple of hours or so later and a handful of beers between the three of us, the sound of school busses began to rumble up the quiet street. We could no longer hear the soft sounds of birds chirping and lips sucking beer through glass top openings. It was now drowned out by the sound of large diesel engines. I was feeling more awake, more aware knowing that we would soon be escaping the monotony of staring at a playground, and will finally be able to see something different.

“Alright,” began Joe, “pull around the block and park on the other side of the entrance so we don’t have to look behind us to see when they come out.”

Eddie drove around the block and found a prime spot that was out of the way of the line of busses, but still a good view.

“Hopefully that bitch doesn’t tell us to move along,” Joe said while looking around for her.

We sat there amongst a fleet of SUVs and minivans. All of them containing soccer mom’s with short hair waiting to pick up their precious cargo. The kids soon exited the school. Half of them boarded a bus and the other half wandered to an awaiting parent’s vehicles or strolled down the sidewalks through the residential neighborhood of modest ranch style homes.

“Do you see the black Escalade?” Eddie asked me.

“There’s like five of them in a row. It looks like a presidential motorcade.”

Kids shuffled past our car and a couple of the cars pulled out from in front of us once their children were safely fastened inside. A car gave us a quick blip of a honk behind us.

“What the hell does she want?!” Eddie said.

The car honked a louder the second time.

“What the fuck!” Joe said, looking past me through the rear window.

“I think we’re supposed to pull ahead,” I said.

Eddie pulled the car ahead two spaces and the line of cars behind us slowly followed.

“I didn’t realize there were rules to picking up a goddamn kid!” Joe said.

“I think that’s them!” I said, signally with a nod ahead of us.

Walking down the sidewalk were two little girls holding hands. One with long blonde hair with soft curls wearing a pink pastel shirt and the other, taller one, with shoulder length brunet hair and a florescent green shirt. I still couldn’t tell if she was the one playing basketball or the one sitting on the swing. Eddie began to duck down. Joe shoved his hand against his shoulder and called him a moron. The girls were walking

down the sidewalk right past our car. We all looked, without overtly looking, peering out of the sides of our eyes until it hurt.

“I wish we could just grab them now and toss them in the back. They’re right there!” Eddie said in a hushed tone.

“You *would* do that,” Joe said.

There they were, our meal tickets for the rest of our lives, walking by us and out of our grips... completely unaware of us. They continued further down the block and climbed into the awaiting black Escalade that was four or five cars behind us.

“Get ready to follow,” Joe told Eddie.

The black SUV pulled away from the curb and drove past us. Eddie waited a few seconds and began to follow it.

“Write it down, Jacob.”

*Front Entrance 3:25 Black Escalade driven by Mrs. Cohen.*

“You know, Joe? I’m not seeing any opportunities to kidnap them. They’re dropped off at school in the morning. They’re monitored at recess and receive a headcount, and are picked up by the front door after school,” I said.

“Something will come up. These girls can’t be watched the entire time.”

“Yea, but they really could be. Parents are on guard now. It’s not like when we were growing up and Mom would let us run around wherever we wanted,” I said.

“It wasn’t that many years ago,” Joe said.

“Well, obviously this woman is a different parent than our mom.”

We continued to follow the Cohens. Eddie seemed to have improved in his tailing skills. He seemed much less anxious and was keeping just the right distance from them.

The car backtracked on the newly familiar streets that we had taken that morning. It stopped at a grocery store. We parked on the other side of the parking lot and watched the mother and her two daughters grab a cart from the outdoor coral and walk inside.

“I’m getting hungry. Are there any sandwiches left?” Eddie asked me.

“Fraid not, have a cheese stick.”

“Beer me,” Joe said in his grumbled voice.

They eventually exited the grocery store with a cartful of goods. The girls climbed back into the SUV with candy securely gripped in each of their palms as Mrs. Cohen pressed a button on her key fob and the rear lift gate of the Escalade smoothly opened with the assistance of hydraulics. We watched her load the plastic bags into the back along with a gallon of milk and a cardboard box containing a twelve-pack of pop.

“What the hell?” Joe said, leaning forward in his seat. Mrs. Cohen crouched down to the bottom wire shelf of the cart and lifted a large bag into the back. “They have a fucking dog! This isn’t going to be easy.”

We followed them back onto the road keeping a safe distance all the way to their neighborhood.

“Don’t follow them up their street,” Joe said. “She may begin to recognize our car.”

Eddie continued driving straight as they turned to the left and up the street to their home. He stopped a short ways down the street, and we watched up the hill as the girls trotted to the house before their mother called them back and gave them each a plastic bag to carry in. We didn't drive any closer to the house, deciding that we would sneak the car back up to our previous sight come nightfall.

It wasn't long after, a tiny BMW convertible rocketed up the street. Behind the wheel was Jeremiah Cohen, our target. He took the corner at the bottom of the gradual hill without slowing, and then wound the engine a couple of revs before he sped up the incline to his home. The garage door was climbing up the guiding rails. And, as if it were perfectly timed, he slid the tiny car under the rising door and into the garage. Without anything more to see, we rested back into our respective seats and continued our boring surveillance.

## CHAPTER 7

They say that time is relative. That it's all a matter of perspective. The three minutes you spend on a rollercoaster go by in a flash, whereas the same three minutes spent waiting in line to ride the rollercoaster seem like an eternity.

This was definitely not like riding rollercoaster.

Once the sun went down the interior lights began to emanate through the windows. Eddie drove the car up the street and parked it closer than it was that morning. Joe grabbed the binoculars before Eddie or I could, and directed his magnified gaze into the Cohen house that had now become a fishbowl for us to look into.

Joe didn't have a great advantage using the binoculars. We weren't parked very far away from the house. There wasn't much to see inside. We could see the track-lighting that provided a dim luminescence in the kitchen. There was a flickering glow from a further back room. I assume it was from the Cohen's television. One light was on in the upstairs. I wondered if it was the girls' room. Or perhaps it was just one of their rooms. The house was quite large. They probably didn't have to share a room like we did growing up. The front door opened and we each unconsciously began slumping deep into our seats. It was Mrs. Cohen tying out their dog. It was a fluffy, white Pomeranian pup. It looked immaculately clean for being a dog with such long hair.

"It's a little yippy dog," Joe said. "We'd be better off with a Lab."

The little dog walked through the Cohen's landscaping trying to find the most favorable spot to shit. It sniffed the white rocks and various colorful plants and green shrubs. It squatted and did its business. Now with that off its little canine mind it looked at its surroundings beyond its bathroom. It turned its attention over to the strange dark car that was parked on the street. The little fur-bag walked as far as leash would allow, sniffed the air, and then proceeded to bark at our car.

"Shit!" said Joe, "this isn't going to be good. Everyone down!"

We bent down into our seats. I peered between the front seats as the Cohen's front door opened. It was Mrs. Cohen. *Motsie! Motsie!* she said to the yipping dog. *What on*



*earth are you barking at?* I gleamed just over the dashboard as she walked to the edge of the landscaping rock and looked in the direction Motsie was barking at. Mrs. Cohen brought her hand up flat against her brow to block out the bright street light. She stood there for what felt like an eternity, and then scolded the dog before bringing it back inside.

“Should we go?” asked Eddie.

“I don’t think she thought anything was suspicious. You heard her, she bitched out the dog,” Joe said.

“What if she just said that just so she wouldn’t raise suspicions? She could be calling the cops right now,” Eddie said.

“She’s not going to call the cops because there is an unfamiliar car on her street,” Joe said.

“The same car that she noticed in traffic this morning and this evening, that is now parked outside of her home?” I said.

“I wouldn’t... I wouldn’t think she’d call the cops,” Joe stammered as he thought.

“Look,” I began, “let’s just leave for now and come back later. It’s not like we’re seeing anything right now.”

Eddie looked at Joe with pleading eyes. Eddie was nervous and wanted to bolt.

“Alright, get us out of here. We’ll come back later tonight.”

Eddie started the car and did a u-turn. We drove away from the Cohen’s suburb and attempted to find a place to empty our bladders and refill them with booze.

We cruised down a main drag in Des Moines and stopped at the first neon sign. It was a tiny glowing sign that was positioned in a dim window. If a person wasn’t paying attention they’d drive right past it.

The bar was much different from the hole-in-the-wall bars we were accustomed to. This place was a lounge. There was soft indie rock music playing through tiny black speakers located throughout the dimly lit room. There were multiple black leather couches facing each other in horse shoe layouts with decorative tapestry rugs placed within each cozy section. Adorning the exposed brick walls were tall acrylic paintings that depicted delicately rendered naked women—though not naked enough for Joe and Eddie.

“This is like the gayest bar I’ve ever stepped in to,” Joe said looking around.

“Do you think it’s a gay bar?” Eddie said.

Joe continued surveying our environment trying to determine if Eddie was correct.

“It’s not a gay bar,” I said embarrassed enough for all of us.

I walked up to the bar where a girl about my age was dressed in what looked more like an undergarment than a dress. I guess it could be best described as a corset with a short, black skirt. I made my best effort *not* to affix my eyes on the swell of her breasts that were pushed up just below her collar bones.

“Three draws please.”

“What kind of draw?” she said, her eyes penetrating my insecurity.

“What do you got?”

“We have Blue Moon, Kettlehouse, Barrio, Loose Cannon IPA, Second Street Scotch Ale, Back 40 Blonde, Tumbleweed IPA, Public Haus, Ale Asylum, Dogfish-Head...”

As she rattled off her laundry list of beers I'd never heard of, I peered past her ample kegs and saw that behind her was a row of beer taps the same length as the endless bar.

"Ah," I said cutting her off, "you have any Budweiser?" She laughed slightly to herself.

"We have it in bottles?"

"I'll take three, please."

She carelessly pushed away from the bar and walked a couple of steps to the low coolers with sliding door beneath the bevy of beer taps. I admired her scant wardrobe as she walked away. She bent over at the waist to retrieve the cheap domestic beer bottles I requested. The short shirt climbed up her nylon-laced thighs as she bent over. Suddenly it seemed all too easy to sneak a peek and I felt like a pervert. So I quickly glanced back up to the taps, admiring the distinctive heads on each. Goose head, goblet, dog head, pyramid, handgun, cigar... no two were alike.

She was still in the midst of grabbing our beers. I don't think many people ordered Budweiser there. I figured *what the hell*, and went in for one more free look. The further she reached the further the tight black shirt climbed. She looked over her shoulder before she stood, busting me. I quickly returned to admiring the distinctive taps from all of the oddball beers. She warmly smiled at me as she inserted each beer top into the metallic opener that was affixed out of sight below the bar, bringing her into close proximity to me. She looked straight at me, unflinchingly as I politely smiled and broke eye contact.

"You're not from around here are you?"

"What gave it away?"

"Your lack of pretentiousness."

"Thanks?"

"That'll be fifteen."

"Excuse me?" I said, leaning in.

"Fifteen dollars."

I pushed the five dollar bill back into my wallet and snagged the only other bill I had in there, a twenty. She typed the exchange into a touch screen cash register and handed me back a five. I wanted to give her a tip, but couldn't part with five dollars. I sheepishly thanked her, and feeling like a cheap-ass, I collected the bottles by their necks and walked to Eddie and Joe who managed to look uncomfortable sitting on cushy leather furniture.

"This will be our only beer here."

"I told you it was a gay bar!" Eddie exclaimed.

"It's not a gay bar! It's just steep is all."

I took a seat on the same couch Eddie was sitting on. Joe sat on the couch across from us, divided by a glass topped coffee table. I looked around the desolate lounge. I felt underdressed. We were the only ones there wearing jeans. Eddie's suspicions didn't seem far off base after I looked around. It was just groups of well dressed guys in there. The only women were the pretty bartender and a couple of similarly dressed waitresses.

One of the waitresses walked over to our couch and gave us a soft greeting as she lifted each of our beers one at a time to place a cardboard coaster underneath. I politely

smiled and nodded at her greeting. Shameless, Eddie and Joe admired their view of the corset wearing waitress as she leaned forward. She asked us if we needed anything. We each sat wide-eyed and simultaneously shook our heads *no*. She was not more than ten feet away before it started.

“Jesus Christ! Can you believe that?” Joe said in a far too audible tone.

“You’d get arrested wearing that in public in Ellsworth!” Eddie said.

“Guys!” I said in a hushed tone. “Reel it in. We look like a group of small town yokels.”

“Compared to those guys we are,” Eddie said looking around.

“What do you care, Jacob? It’s not like anyone knows us here,” Joe said.

“You still don’t have to act like jackasses.”

“Sorry your highness, perhaps you could find a puddle to throw your jacket on top of.”

I looked back over to the bar. The bartender was looking in my direction. Our eyes met. I gave her a head-nod as I awkwardly raised my bottle. She smiled and went back to wiping off the bar top.

We finished our beers and Eddie asked if we should bother going back to the Cohen’s or make the long trip back home. Joe said that we might as well wait to go back until they go to bed, before we case their house.

“You guys want another beer?” Eddie said, standing up.

“I don’t think you want to buy those here,” I said.

“Well, where then?”

“I dunno, let’s just walk down the street and find a place.”

We walked past the bar on our way to the front door.

“You boys leaving me already?” A voice said behind us. I turned, the cute bartender stood eagerly behind the bar, both hands resting on the counter top. I broke away from Eddie and Joe who were standing by the door.

“Yea, we’re going to take off.”

“Where are you boys going?”

“Don’t know.”

“Going somewhere cheaper to drink?”

She caught me off guard. I stumbled, not knowing how to respond.

“I can show you a place that’s probably a little more up your alley.”

“Where?”

“Gimme me two minutes.” She stepped a couple feet away from me then turned around, “You don’t mind me tagging along with you boys do you?”

“Well, no... can you just leave?”

“Sure, this place is dead. Christie can take over from here.”

I nodded and she stepped out from behind the bar and trotted over to one of the waitresses, then walked through a swinging door behind the counter. I looked over to Joe and Eddie who were standing by the entrance door, looking at me questionably. I slowly strolled over to them with my hands in my pockets, trying to figure out what exactly was going on.

“What’s her deal?” Joe asked.

“She’s tagging along with us for a bit. She knows a good place to grab a beer.”

“You just invited her along?”

“Well, no. She sort of invited herself.”  
“She doesn’t even know us,” Eddie said.  
I just slowly shook my head confused with my mouth slightly agape.  
“Do you think she’s a hooker?” Eddie asked.  
“She’s not a hooker! Hookers sit on the other side of the bar... I think.”  
“What if she walks us down an alleyway where she has some goons waiting to mug us?”  
“She’s being nice! She could tell we’re not from around here.”  
“I’ve seen it on *Dateline*,” Eddie began, “she’s the bait and she’ll lead us into a dark alley where we’ll get mugged!”  
“We’re not gonna get mugged! Not to mention, mugging us would be a waste of her time! I mean, look at us, we dress like shit. Why would she burn calories mugging us schmucks?”  
“She could be a kidney harvester,” Eddie said.  
“You’re being stupid. And lower your voice.”  
“Wherever she takes us order bottled beer, and don’t take it out of your sights,” Eddie warned.  
“Let’s just leave,” Joe said opening the door.  
“We’re not ditching her!”  
“Why not?”  
“Because it’s too late to do that,” the bartender said, walking up behind my turned back. “I’m not so sure I like you,” she playfully said to Joe. “So far you’re alright,” she directed to Eddie.  
We all three stood there red-faced and stupefied as she walked between us and through the door that Joe was still holding open.  
“Eye on your beer,” Eddie pointed and whispered to me in his sincerest tone.

## CHAPTER 8

The beautiful stranger led the way down the sidewalk wearing tight, faded blue jeans and a black turtleneck beneath a cream colored leather jacket that stopped just above her knees. A long leather strap trailed behind the open coat, draping from loose hooped bands. I sped up my pace, passing Joe and Eddie who were trailing suspiciously behind our new friend.

“You changed?” I said, once I caught up to her side.  
“Yea,” she said with a bemused giggle. “I don’t wear that outfit on the street. That would be asking for trouble.” She stopped dead in her tracks. Joe and Eddie stopped four paces behind her with their brows furrowed. “Where did you boys park?”  
“We’re not walking there?”  
“No,” with another giggle, “It’s like twenty blocks!”  
I looked over to Joe. He was looking at me biting his lip. I could see he was thinking about what fine mess I was getting us into.  
“It’s back the other way,” I said pointing behind us.

She carelessly turned around and walked between Joe and Eddie who each had a scowl on their face and said, "Cheer up you two, you'll love this place!"

We strolled to the end of the block and around the corner to the dimly lit street where Eddie's Lincoln was parked beneath a lonely street lamp.

Without a word we walked to the car. She was still wearing the high heels she had on before. She clicked and clacked, echoing off the cracked sidewalk pavement. We reached the car and she hung off to the side, awaiting my lead. Eddie unlocked the driver's side door with his key, opened it then clicked the button on the door unlocking the other three. I opened the back door for her. There sitting on the back seat was Joe's big double handled cooler which at one time contained beer, now just melted water, and my small blue cooler that once kept our sandwiches cold.

"Eddie, pop the trunk. I'm going to toss some things in the back."

Eddie opened the trunk as I stood holding the big cooler with the small cooler balanced on top. With the hatch blocking us from sight Eddie looked at me and said, this is a bad idea, in an intense whisper. I think he was more scared than anything.

"Beer in the front seat? Bad boys, huh? Mind if I have one?"

"They're warm," Joe said, steadily walking past her, cradling his bottles of piss. Joe stepped behind the hatch and looked at me with the same intensity that Eddie had just exhibited.

"This is a fucking awful idea!" he whispered. I looked at him with a plea of forgiveness in my eyes.

I stood by the back door as she climbed in and slide to the middle of the seat. Eddie and Joe gave me one more *you stupid asshole* look before they got in the car. I sat down in the back next to the stranger.

"So what brings you guys here?"

No one said a word. I think we each hoped that one of us would answer the question, so the other two could stay silent. But instead no one did and there was a guilt stricken silence in the dark car.

"Just a little trip, a vacation of sorts," I finally said.

"Huh... are those binoculars?"

"Yea," I said slowly.

"What are you guys looking at with binoculars?"

"Whatever crosses our path," I said.

Joe and Eddie were stone silent and staring straight ahead in the front seat.

The silence was excruciating before Eddie broke it. "Where am I going?"

"Oh, take the first left. Keep going straight and I'll tell you where to turn from there.

Eddie drove the car back onto the main drag. We drove beside empty sidewalks and multiple dimly lit store shops that sold vintage clothing, vinyl records, hookah pipes and handbags. We were a long way from home.

"So what kind of guys goes vacationing in Des Moines?"

"The kind that doesn't like to travel far," I said.

"Really? Where are you guys from?"

"Not far from here," I answered.

She looked at me with slanted skeptical eyes as if she were trying to read small print. The smell of her perfume was filling the Lincoln, masking the stink of three guys

that treated the car as a home and bathroom for a day. I hoped she couldn't smell the stink of stale beer and even staler piss scent that had compounded in the car.

"Where're you from?" I ask.

"Here."

"You don't say? Did you grow up in the liquor store or porno theater?" I said while looking out of the car windows at the depressing store fronts.

"West Des Moines."

"I see. I never did catch your name."

"Cynthia."

"It's nice to meet you, Cynthia." I reached out my hand catching her off guard with my formalities. I gripped too early; grasping just her extended fingers, but gave them a friendly shake all the same. She paused and looked at me as if she were going to say something. I looked at her, anticipating her voice.

"And your names are?" she said with a chuckle.

"Oh! Sorry, I'm Jacob and that's Eddie behind the wheel and Joe."

"So where did you three meet?"

"At home, we're bothers."

"Brothers? I can't say I see the resemblance."

I thought it was odd when she said that. People confused us three throughout the majority of my youth. But now that she'd mentioned it, I realized that the older we gotten the further our appearances had grown apart. Also, I think it helps that we haven't received the same buzz-cut that our mother would do on *hair cutting night* for years.

"Do you have any siblings?" I asked.

"Me? No, I always wanted a little brother though."

"A brother? Why not a sister?"

"A sister would have been fine, but I had plenty of girlfriends growing up. I wanted a little brother that I could protect—to look out for."

"Protect from what?"

"Don't be getting all *Freudian* on me. There's nothing more to it."

"I didn't mean—"

"No, it's just that I think I was maternal at a very young age. I wanted someone to take care of. You know?"

"Not really. I'm the youngest. My brothers never took care of me. And presently I can hardly take care of myself, let alone a little brother or sister."

"You can't take care of yourself?"

"I'd say that I'm just responsible to take care of myself, barely, but certainly not anyone else."

"You're kidding?"

"No really, I sometimes forget to feed myself."

"How do you forget to feed yourself?"

"It's pretty easy," I began, "I'll eat breakfast, fill my day with whatever, then seven o'clock rolls around and I think about making something quick for dinner and I realize that I completely skipped lunch. Just like that, just plain forgot."

"Ha! I've never meet anyone who forgot to eat? Do you ever forget to sleep?"

"That I can handle, but my point is imagine I had a young child. The little thing would starve to death as I lived in my selfish world. It would be like *Trainspotting*?"

“Trainspotting?”

“You’ve never seen Trainspotting? You have to watch it! Actually you shouldn’t now that I think about it. I’m sure you’d hate it.”

“You think you know what I would like and hate?”

“You personally? No. Girls in general? I think I have a good idea.”

“And you don’t think that a girl would like that movie?”

“No.” I said.

By that time I’d already forgotten her name. I wondered why I always did that. I’d introduce myself, then I’d be too busy making sure that my handshake is correct to even remember their name.

“Huh... I’m still trying to figure you out, Jacob. Obviously you have me figured out, but I still need to figure you out,” said the nameless girl.

Between the passing lights of the street lamps I admired her face with every passing flash of light. With each brief bright spot of lighting I admired something new.

*Flash*

Her deep hazel eyes.

*Flash*

The freckles on her upper cheeks.

*Flash*

Her luminescent smile that was so wide it would seem painful to replicate.

*Flash*

Her nose that was tiny and so cutely upturned.

*Flash*

Her dimpled cheeks... then darkness.

She sat next to me with one foot propped on top of her other foot that was resting on the floor of the car, her chin placed against her open palm.

She looked to see where we were going. “Take a right after the *Burger King*... ah...”

“Eddie,” he said.

“Eddie, yes, Eddie.”

Ask for her name! Ask for her name! I thought. I wanted to telepathically communicate with Eddie to ask her for her name. He could ask her, he has hardly said a word to her, and she had forgotten his name. It was too late for me. She knew my name and we’d been talking for far too long.

Name-wise she may have been a stranger, but she had an odd familiarity to me. It’s like I would have known her growing up, like I had known her all my life. She was quirky. She was peculiar. That I know for sure. She was interesting, unpredictable, and comforting all at the same time.

We arrived at a random hole in the wall that my brothers and I were much more accustomed to. The bar had a simple, rundown appearance. There was a brick façade that was in desperate need of tuck-pointing, and from it hung a yellow sign with the title *Galaxy’s* written in a large serif font. The sign had the appearance of being coated in tobacco grease even though it was outside of the establishment. We stepped inside, Joe and Eddie leading the way. I held the door for our new friend.

Inside we saw the backs of regulars sitting spread out amongst short, backless barstools that were bolted to the gritty, checkerboard, laminate tiled floor. Ah, home, I thought. The place was much like *Marv's*. I must admit I was feeling a little homesick. The heads of the random patrons all turned like cattle as if we were stepping into a barn. Eddie walked up to the bar, the rest of us in tow.

"How you doin'?" I'll take three *Buds* and..." Eddie paused and pointed at our new acquaintance.

"Four Buds," the girl said.

Eddie seemed to appreciate the simple order, and not having to pay a premium price for a *girly mixed drink*. Not that they would make them there. It seemed like the kind of bar that you ordered a mixed drink with the ingredients right in the name: Jack & Coke, Rum & Coke, Seven & Seven, Vodka Sour. We were in the midst of real drinkers, the kind of people that sip stiff drinks through the chapped lips beneath their bulbous, rosy, Irish-bloomed noses.

"Six even," the bartender said to Eddie.

That was more like it.

We walked to one of the many empty tables and took a seat. Eddie and Joe's asses hardly kissed the stool tops before Eddie asked Joe if he wanted to shoot some pool. They obviously wanted to break away to talk about how stupid I was I'd imagine.

She sat right next to me. It was appropriate when Eddie and Joe briefly sat on the other side, but looked a bit odd after they walked away. She took what looked like a polite sip of her beer. I, feeling self-conscious cut my long gulps to short drinks.

"So do you get along well with your bothers?"

"Yea, of course... I mean as much as one could expect." There was much hesitation in my voice.

"It doesn't sound like it."

"Well, it's one of those things. You know the phrase, you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family? I'm not so certain they would pick me."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's hard to say. It's like... when we were growing up, I was always on the outs with those two. Out of a group of three, two are naturally going to pair up and exclude the third. I spent my entire youth just trying to be on their level. Not even that now that I think about it. I was merely trying to *be* with them. There was no brotherly comradely, at least not between those two with me."

"Oh, I'm suddenly feeling bad for you, Jacob?"

"No, don't say that. Within the past few years we seem to be on a more even plain. I think it had to do with me entering the workforce. We all live in the same house, and did the same job."

"So now you felt accepted?"

"Well, yea. But now I realized we have nothing in common. Friends tend to be like minded individuals. That's why they're attracted to each other. That's why they continually go back to each other."

"So you don't have anything in common?"

"We do. We watch the same TV shows, we like to drink the same beer and booze. We smoke the same cigarettes. We even have the same taste in women."



“So what’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem,” I said after taking a large gulp of beer. “It’s just that if we were friends I can’t help but to feel that we would quickly drift apart.”

The gravity of the conversation was dragging us both down. I changed the subject.

“So how long have you worked at... whatever that place is?”

“*Yesterday’s Papers*.”

“Yesterday’s Papers?”

“Yea, I know. It’s a horrible name for the bar. That’s why there’s never anyone in there. People look at the sign and don’t know that it’s a bar.”

“I guess we didn’t see that sign, just a little neon one. If we didn’t, we probably wouldn’t have stopped.”

“And you wouldn’t have met me,” she said with a wide grin.

Although, yes I did meet her, I had absolutely no clue what her name was.

“So what kind of name is *Yesterday’s Papers*?”

“The owner is a huge *Stones* fan and I guess it’s a song of theirs, that and because of his back story. He was a guy that grew up in a poor family and at a young age he decided that he was going to make it big. He was going to grow up to be rich or something. So he began to make all sorts of goals and one of them was to know current events and what-not so he could hold conversations with rich people about foreign affairs and stuff. You know? So he could rub elbows with them. He couldn’t afford the paper, so everyday he would dig in the dumpster behind the *Des Moines Register* and grab yesterday’s paper, the papers that didn’t sell. He would read it all, front to back, and he claims that was what got his foot in the door at his first job—how he climbed the corporate ladder and how he got the finances to go out on his own.”

“You don’t say? That’s pretty incredible.”

“It’s one of those rags to riches story’s that he likes to tell. I don’t know if it’s true.”

“I like to think it is.”

“Who knows? He’s a business man, a bit of a blowhard, you know? He pulls up in his red corvette and pops his head in to see how everything is going and gathers us for a pep talk if we’re not busy—which is always. Then hops back in his car and takes off.”

“It sounds like he’s worked hard over the years. He’s probably just taking it easy now.”

“He’s retired. He’s like seventy and on his third wife. She’s like thirty and was a waitress in one of his restaurants. They have two young kids together.”

“Interesting life led.”

“Yea, if he’s not careful he’s going to have a rags to riches to rags story. I hear he had to pay out of the ass to his ex-wives over the years. Like a ridiculous alimony.”

“He may have to stay longer than a pep talk to turn around business.”

“He doesn’t do much with the lounge. His oldest son from his first marriage manages it. He gives me the creeps. He’s married and has a kid. But he hits on all of the girls that work there. I think he’s trying to follow in his father’s footsteps.”

“Either way, it makes for a good story.”

“He thinks so. His dad published his own biography. All of his employees are given his book on their first day. You can have mine. I never read it.”

“You have to respect people like that though. They’re a certain breed of individual. You’re either born with the entrepreneurial mindset or you’re not. Most of us just work for these people until we can stand it no more and quit. Then we find another job and work for another person who is exactly the same, never creating our own destiny, merely financing theirs.”

“I’m assuming you’re not an entrepreneur.”

“No, far from it.”

“What do you do?”

I was embarrassed. I kicked myself for leading the conversation to my own failures in life. I said I was between jobs.

“What *did* you do?”

“Truth be told I counted cans. Both of my brothers and I counted cans for a living.”

“And what are you onto next?”

Nothing as of now.

“You said that you were ‘between’ jobs. That would imply that you were onto something next.”

“I only said that to soften the news that I’m an unemployed can counter.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation I think that you are far over qualified to count cans for a living.”

“Thank you, that means a lot. Next you’ll say that I’m far too qualified to dig ditches, or run a tilt-a-whirl.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. You know what I mean.”

I smiled a pathetic glimpse of a smile as I stared ahead at Joe and Eddie who were not so much shooting pool as they were standing at the far side of the table speaking closely and looking over at me and mystery girl.

“You don’t seem like a can counter is what I’m trying to say.”

“Well, I can’t even say I’m that now.”

“Why did you get into it to begin with?”

“I was out of options and Joe and Eddie worked there. They got me the job. It’s funny, when I needed a job they made it sound like it was a big deal—that they were going to bend the boss-man’s ear, pull some strings and hook me up. It wasn’t until later that I realized that I was going to be a peon right alongside them. Three peon brothers standing in a row counting cans like trained monkeys.”

“You should be happy then that you don’t work there anymore.”

“I am in a way. Whenever I pine for my job in the least bit I think about the spit soaked empty cans, sticky fingers, soggy cigarette butts, smelly chew tobacco, stale air, sweat on my brow that I had to be sure to wipe away with my forearm and not my hand. And my fingers...I spent my days sprawling out my fingers in a certain orientation to grab two cans in one hand and three in the other. Left two, right three. That’s how we kept count. You grab five cans of the same variety from the trough and throw them in the sack while keeping count. You work as fast as possible. I hated it. But I have to admit I still miss the meager paycheck.”

“At least you live with your brothers. They can help you out if you need it.”

“We all lost our job. We’re all in the same boat. How’s that for a level plain? I hated my job while I worked there, and now all I crave is the security it provided. Certain

mornings I would wake up from fantastic dreams—dreams that provided a break from my life. One dream in particular, my whole family moved to Ireland, all of us, us three boys and my mom. We were going to farm the green dales of Ireland. Well, we were standing around the kitchen table and my oldest brother Joe said that it was going to be my duty each morning, bright and early, to make the long walk to herd the cattle to milk. I would have to get up at five each morning, toss on my work boots and walk through the wet grass to wake up the herd and drive them up to the barn. I agreed immediately. I told him that I could handle it. What we were going to be doing wasn't going to be easy work. In fact it was going to be quite hard. It was long days working outside, tilling the land, feeding the cattle, harvesting our meager crops to provide for ourselves. In my dream I was ready to take on the challenge. It was heaven. I was happy as I had ever been, standing there in that kitchen in a small Irish cottage, which looked suspiciously like the kitchen that we all grew up in. I felt this sense of fulfillment—this anticipation for working in a job that would produce tangible results. The kind of thing that you could stand in your yard and look out into the field to witness and reflect upon your days labors, you know? Well, I woke up to my alarm clock and I was in my bed, back in Iowa. I thought about the dream that I had. I thought about it long and hard. I know that once you wake up the memories of a dream tend to fade away. I lied there, and thought about every minute detail, and especially every thought and emotion that I had. I figured that it would give me something pleasant to think about while I was at my job. Then I thought about my job. Oh Christ my job! I thought about the energy that it was going to take for me to get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, drive to work... all of that, all of that so that I could go to work to count cans. I sat up at the edge of my bed and I folded my hands around my face and I stomped my feet in protest. I really did. And like a little kid I was repeating out loud, *I don't wanna, I don't wanna, I don't wanna!* Like a goddamn kid, I swear to God! I wanted nothing more than to put my head back down on that pillow and go back to sleep. Go back to Ireland, where I was in a dream. Far away from the life I was living. So, I eventually gathered up the courage to pick myself up by the boot straps and all that shit, and went to work. Where I counted cans once again. A place where I toiled away at my life's work... a life's work that would become as disposable as my legacy. Jesus, I've brought this conversation down. I'm sorry."

"No you didn't. I mean, yea, that's depressing as hell. But that's something that we all go through."

"But why do we? Why do we go through this daily drudgery? That isn't a life. That's no way to live. Why do we push ourselves through that complacent agony? Why do we admit defeat and sleepwalk through our existence?"

"Because we have to."

I realized that I was sulking.

"But now you have the benefit of finding what you like."

"I guess."

"No really, you do! You don't have a job. You wouldn't have quit that job on your own. But that's what happened. Now you have endless possibilities."

"You're right,"

"I usually am," she said.

"There was a moment before work that I was in a particular mood you might say. I sat behind the wheel of my car on a bitter cold winter morning. I was letting my car

warm up. It was below zero. I remember that for sure. I sat there watching my breath and I had the thought that I don't have to go to work. I could just drive and keep on driving to wherever I wanted. The gravel driveway that leads to my home is connected to the very same roads that lead to... Portland, Oregon... Boston... Pasadena... Manhattan. Manhattan for Christ's sakes! It was that morning that I had that thought. It sounds stupid, I know. But have you ever had that thought? We are connected to this great artery of roads that lead from our garages to... I don't know, Miami! Wherever you want to go! There is nothing stopping you except gas money and time. I could have driven east that morning and at some point I would be in New York. It blew my mind and I wonder why I never did it."

There I sat staring my thousand yard stare as if the open highway was projected on the dank bar wall just in front of me. I took a long satisfying drink of beer.

"And?" she asked.

"And what?"

"And what did you do after you came to that realization?"

"I drove to work," I said with a shrug.

"Will you ever just drive one day?"

"I sure as hell hope so. Just hop in the car with bags packed and drive. It wouldn't even matter what direction. You just drive. You drive as long and as far as you can in a day. At night you find some lodging. A cheap motel, something, or you just sleep in the backseat of your car. Then get up the next morning to do it all over again. Stop at places to eat, meet interesting people. All that stuff."

"What do you hope to find on the open road?"

"I dunno. Something that is far from the life I'm living right now—literally... far."

"I've got to hit the bathroom," I said. "Can I get you another beer?"

"Sure."

I got up from the table and walked across the open floor. Across the dingy, black and (what used to be) white laminate tile. I looked over to Joe and Eddie who were now actually shooting pool. Eddie was in the midst of carefully lining up his bank-shot. Joe watched me carefully as I walked past. I looked for any sign of a restroom. It was a small one room bar. It shouldn't be difficult to find. I spotted a door off the side of the bar. It was a hollow core door with a hole in it where the door handle used to be. On the door hung a dinner plate sized slice of a tree branch that had the words *SITTERS & STANDERS* scrawled in fancy cursive writing on the face of it with a heat pen. I assumed this was what I was looking for. I gave the obligatory knock and hearing nothing, and wanting to escape the curious eyes of the regulars, I stepped inside.

Inside I saw the same dingy checker-board tile continue into the small side room. A toilet that looked like it was lifted from a crack-house was located in the small cinder blocked box. Above it was a plastic framed poster that featured six women sitting nude with their backs turned, and painted on each skin canvas were *Pink Floyd* album covers.

I liked this place. It truly felt like home.

I stood before the toilet that had a fist sized hole through the tank cover. As I was urinating, I took the opportunity to take in my surrounding. Above sink where a mirror

once hung was a piece of cardboard taped in its place that stated *DON'T DRINK THE SINK WATER*. Which made me wonder who would ever drink the water out of that disgusting faucet? And also, what's wrong with the sink water that it's unsafe for human consumption? As I stood there wondering, the door bathroom door flew open. There stood a man who appeared to be in his mid sixties. He was wearing a blue mechanics shirt that was rolled at the sleeves and tucked into a matching pair of blue slacks that had streaks of grease from his day's labor. I quickly said to him that the bathroom is occupied.

"Sure, sure, I'm sorry."

He turned and was about to let the bathroom door shut. Just outside of the door was the row of patrons sitting on their barstools, sipping their poison and beyond that was the small booth where my new friend was seated. I shuffled around to the side of the toilet so my back would be to the outside observing world. I didn't have to worry about missing the toilet. My stream switched off like a light-switch once that guy opened the door. The mechanic took two steps, turned around and caught the door as it was shutting and opened it once more.

"Say, I can't say I've ever seen you in here before."

I exasperatingly exhaled. "No, this is my first time here." I stared intently at the *Pink Floyd* poster that was now directly ahead of me.

"Where you from?"

I craned my head over my shoulder trying to see him, only because it felt weird speaking to a wall. "I'm from Ellsworth."

"What brings you in here?"

By this time the guy has leaned his bent arm against the open door to make himself comfortable.

"I... I was brought here by a girl I just met earlier tonight."

"Oh! Yea, she seems awful nice," he says looking straight across the filthy tile to the booth where she was seated... looking.

I realized that I wasn't going to overcome this horrific stage fright and I might as well zip-up and gather the remainder of my dignity before I left the tiny space. I was just about to cross the threshold, and in front of the intruder, but realized that I didn't wash my hands. If there was any time worse to *not* wash your hands I couldn't think of it. I backtracked one step and thoroughly washed my hands, all while trying my damndest to resist the temptation to drink the sink water, then passed before the man and said she's all yours.

I wanted to stand there and hold open the door for him while making conversation. Or rip the damn thing off the hinges all together. But I don't believe it would have bothered him one bit.

I stepped up to the bar with an unsatisfied sensation. With a bladder half full of piss, and a painful cramping feeling emanating from my loins, I ordered four *Budweisers*. I got back to the table to drop off half of the order. The girl had her head lowered and was attempting to muffle her laughter.

"Did you enjoy the show?" I asked.

"I know where I'm *not* going to the bathroom," she said amongst her chuckles.

I walked over to Joe and Eddie at the pool table and delivered their beers.

"How long we planning on staying?" Joe asked.

It wasn't a question really. That's Joe's way of saying *let's leave*.

“Just hold tight for a little while. Relax and drink. This day has been boring as hell. Let’s have a little fun.”

“We’ve got a big day tomorrow. And we still need to drive all the way home.”

“We’ve got plenty of time. It’s what... a quarter to nine. Relax, the night’s still young. And it’s not like we need to come down early in the morning. We know their routine until 3:20.”

“Lower your goddamn voice!” Joe said with an excited, but hushed tone with his eyes tearing into my flesh. I didn’t apologize. I took a step closer and lowered my voice like he asked.

“We can go back home late tonight, sleep in and make it back down here by 3:00.” I paused, stared unblinking in his eyes, more pleading than commanding. But still I wasn’t about to back down.

“One more hour,” Joe said, much more convincingly than I did.

Eddie wasn’t about to even attempt to stand between us. He heard that we were staying for another hour and took a pull of his fresh beer and began racking the pool balls for another game. If Joe said we were leaving he would have done just that.

## CHAPTER 9

I walked back to the table to the mystery girl and sat back down next to her. She said that she still had a half a beer and that she knew it was going to be trouble keeping up with us. I didn’t want to tell her that we had been drinking already for hours, Joe since that morning. But you could never tell when Joe was drunk. Joe doesn’t get sloppy when he drinks. He doesn’t slur his words, or get clumsy. And he certainly doesn’t get the least bit sentimental. He’s his usual cold self.

Seated back at the table I found that there was very little to talk to her about. I knew nothing about her. What do complete strangers talk about besides the weather? I cleared my throat, lifted my beer off the sticky table top tipped it slightly to the beautiful stranger and softly said, *cheers*. She clinked the bottom of her half full bottle of beer against mine and repeated *cheers* back to me. We both took a drink. Our eyes connected and didn’t let go, even as our heads tilted back. She lowered the beer back to the table and giggled, covering up her mouth as she did so.

What is it? I asked.

“It’s nothing, it’s just that... never mind.”

“You can’t do that!” I said with a laugh, “You can’t laugh and not tell me what it’s about.”

I allowed it. Only because she looked so adorable withholding her secret.

“Scuss me darlin’,” a voice said between us. “You mind if I snag your salt?”

A tall man wearing blue jeans, flannel shirt, and slip-on loafers stood at the head of our short table. He had a goatee that was more salt than pepper. It matched his hair that was swept back behind his ears and stopped a couple of inches past his lobes. He would be what you would call barrel-chested, the type of guy that you don’t see much in my generation. Sure there are guys around my age that are big, but not broad.

“Go right ahead,” the entranced girl seated across from me said.

The man reached between us and grabbed the salt shaker that was on the far side of the table that was crowded with the ubiquitous red and yellow squeeze bottles, and the spring loaded napkin dispenser. His calloused fingers gingerly pinched the shaker just below the neck. He tipped it into the top of his frothy beer glass and tapped the top of it with his index finger. He set it back onto the table. He smelled like my father. The way I imagined my father smelled like—like *Old Spice* aftershave. He took a sip and licked the bitter head that was trapped in his mustache. We just stared at him. As if we were waiting for him to speak. He took his time. Keeping the glass elevated at eye level, he looked at the light that penetrated the golden pour. He lowered the glass keeping it tight against his chest then said, “What brings you kids in here?”

“Just having a couple of beers,” I said.

He nodded and smacked his lips together, still enjoying the first taste.

“Those boys over there with you two?” he gestured his glass over to Joe and Eddie at the pool table.

“Yea, those are my brothers.”

He looked over at them, looked back at us, very deliberate in his movements.

“I can see the resemblance. Are you their sister?” he said to my impromptu date.

“No, we actually just met earlier,” she said.

“Of course, you’re much too pretty to be *their* sister.”

She laughed far too much for a joke that was at my expense. He looked over to me and gave a flash of a wink, and a pat on the shoulder to imply that he was just kidding. I couldn’t be offended, he was far too cool. I was swooned by his magnetic charm, just as she was. I felt honored to be a part of his little jab.

“I’m Jake,” he said reaching his open hand to me. I shook it. His hammer swinging hand swallowed my can counting hand.

“Jacob,” I said, as I increased my grip.

“Jacob? Well, I’ve never forgotten my own name, so rest assured I’ll never forget yours, friend,” he said with the corners of his moustache curled up in a smile.

The girl I was sitting with found this “clever” comment equally as funny as his last. She was gushing. I couldn’t believe it. He was like the older cooler version of me. I suddenly wanted to revert back to the name Jake.

Jake was my name until the sixth grade, when overnight, I decided that I wanted to go by my birth name. I thought that I would be taken more seriously with the name Jacob. I wanted to leave the joke reputation of Jake behind and become someone else. It was a pretty stupid theory though. How does the saying go? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet? Well, I couldn’t leave the stink of Jake behind. I simply transferred it over to Jacob.

“And you are?” my better-self asked.

“Cynthia.”

She extended her hand out to shake his. He gently put his fingers beneath hers, placing his thumb over top of her dainty digits. He lifted the top of her hand to his bearded lips and delivered what I would imagine be a ticklish kiss. Sitting across the table, I witnessed a wave of goose-bumps rise from her wrist then spread throughout her forearm. Her shoulders melted and she let out an audible groan that sounded like a whispered orgasm.

“It’s a pleasure, Cynthia. I must say in my six decades on this rotating rock you are the first Cynthia that I’ve ever met.”

“Really?!” she said, honored.

“I wouldn’t lie,” he covered his heart and closed his eyes as he spoke.

I repeated Cynthia, Cynthia, Cynthia, Cynthia in my head so I wouldn’t forget it this time. I tried my old name remembering technique where I think of a person that I already know with that name. Then I simply think of that person when I need to archive their name. I realized that I had never met Cynthia either. I would’ve said that, but not meeting a Cynthia in two decades isn’t as much of an anomaly as six.

Cynthia told Jake to have a seat.

“No, no. I’d hate to impose. It appears you two were in the middle of a…” he pauses to look at me, “moment. I simply like to make it a point to meet all the strangers that pass through these doors. You never know when or where our paths may meet again in the future. And, I like to be able to have a name in my mind if they do.”

That’s an incredible philosophy to have in life, I thought. I spend my existence never approaching new people, and avoiding the ones I already know. I asked him if he’s a regular.

“Let’s put it this way. If you come back in a year you’ll find me here. I hope it won’t be that long though,” he said, looking at Cynthia.

Eddie walked up beside our new friend with his empty bottle of beer. Pointing at us he said, *two?*

“Not yet,” I said behind my half beer. Cynthia was still trying to finish up her previous bottle and had yet to touch the full one.

“So you’re Jacob’s brother?”

“Yea, Eddie.”

Jake shook Eddie’s hand. “You’re quite a shot. I saw you clean the table over there earlier.”

“It’s just against my brother. He makes it easy to win.”

“Well, I’m a bit of a shark myself. How about I rack and you break.”

“Sounds like a plan…”

“Jake.”

“Jake. What are you drinkin’?”

“Bud tap.”

Eddie walked to the bar. Jake gave us a polite head-nod accompanied by his million dollar grin. “Don’t you two be strangers this evenin’. You shoot, Jacob?”

“Not really.”

“I hear ya’. I see you’ve got more important things to do,” he said, winking once more. Jake moseyed across the tile floor over to the pool table where Joe was standing with a pool cue in his hand and a suspicious look on his face.

“You have to admire that,” Cynthia said.

“Admire what?”

“That guy, Jake. He’s so confident, comfortable in his own skin.”

Cynthia never took her eyes off Jake as he walked away. Jake was now standing over by Joe, reaching his hand out for a shake. It appeared that Joe was under Jake’s spell as well. Joe looked befuddled and overly polite. There was something about that guy,



some cryptic charisma. I was getting a little tired of Cynthia fawning over Jake. I told her that she should ask if Jake was single.

“Are you jealous of him, Jacob?”

“Jealous? Absolutely not!”

“You *are* jealous! You’re practically turning green with envy! What are you jealous about? Are you afraid that me meeting that guy is going to ruin your chances?”

“No, why would... wait, chances?”

“You’re into me. I can tell. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“What?!”

“Now you’re going from green to red! Jacob, we are both adults, you don’t have to pass me a note on the playground after thinking it over for weeks on end. Do you like me, Jacob?”

I was taken aback by her forthrightness. Then with my most serious face I looked at her expressionless face and said yes.

“There we go. That wasn’t so bad. I don’t know why people play games when it comes to attraction. Guys are so hesitant to say that they like someone. What’s the big deal?”

“Well, we did just meet a couple of hours ago.”

“So? I know if I like someone within the first few seconds of meeting them.”

“Do you like a lot of people?”

“Are you calling me a whore, Jacob?”

“What?! No, no. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just—“

“I know what you mean. If you’re asking if I just hop in cars with any customer, the answer is no.”

“Why me then?”

“You seemed nice?”

“You don’t know that. I could be a bad person.”

Cynthia peered into my eyes, squinting as if she were looking into the sun. “Nope, just as I thought, you’re not a bad guy.”

“You just got that, just now by looking into my eyes.”

“Yep, I’m very intuitive. Right when I first saw you I could tell that you were a good guy.”

“I’m not though. I’m not a good guy. I’m actually far from it. I do bad things to good people all the time!”

“But you feel bad about all the things that you’ve done?”

I hesitated. I looked down like a shamed dog. I told her too much. Why did I say anything at all? I always wanted to escape my reputation and now I see that I’ve brought it with me.

“That’s what I thought,” Cynthia said nodding. “We all make mistakes, but it’s when you feel bad about your mistakes is when you stop being a bad person. Jacob, you’re a good person no matter what you say. I can see that it. Apparently you can’t.”

I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to tell her why we were there, who we were kidnapping, how much money we would ask for. I wanted to kneel before her and beg for her forgiveness, and ensure her that we wouldn’t go through with it. I wanted to tell her that I not only liked her, I loved her. She was the first person that didn’t see me as a cheat, a crook, a piece of shit. She could see the good inside me.

But I didn't say any of that. I didn't say anything at all.

There was laughter over my shoulder. I turned around to see Jake flailing his arms, gesticulating wildly as Eddie and Joe were nearly doubled over with laughter. Jake capped off his story saying, "...and after that I never touched a cow udder again!"

Jake was now laughing with Joe and Eddie, giving them both stiff pats on the back.

"How does he do it? He hangs out with my brothers for ten minutes and already he's their best friend."

"He's a likable guy." Cynthia said with a reverent smile.

"Yea, but what's so likable about him?"

"Usually what makes a person so likable is less about them and more about how they make *you* feel."

The evening wore on. Cynthia and I became closer. So did Joe, Eddie and their new friend Jake. They continued to shoot pool and trade stories. I was able to use the bathroom in peace after the incident, and Cynthia had me stand guard by the door when she had to go. Time seemed to speed up to a lightning fast rate in that dank little bar. One moment I looked at my watch and it was eleven o'clock, and seemingly minutes later it was last call.

We were the only ones left. The chairs were placed upside down on the table tops all around us. The jukebox hadn't played a song in at least an hour, but there was a continuous melody reverberating against the interior of my head. Joe walked over with a rarely seen grin on his face. He said that we had to get going. I said that we couldn't possibly drive all the way home yet tonight. He suggested that we would find the first motel to hunker down for the night.

Cynthia said, "Don't be silly. You guys are welcome to stay with me."

I know that Joe would have been against this on any other occasion, but oddly enough he took up her offer.

We followed Jake outside where he stopped at the edge of the street and drew in a deep breath of air with his eyes closed as if he smelled a bouquet of red roses. Cynthia asked if he wanted a ride. He politely turned her down and said that he welcomed a walk in the cool, crisp night. He gave Cynthia a hug and shook each of us boy's hands looking us straight in the eye and wished us luck, calling each of us by our name. Eddie said gushing that we'll come down and visit again. We parted in different directions from Jake. I turned and looked back. Jake strolled down the sidewalk with his arms slightly outstretched from his sides, embracing his surroundings.

Eddie drove while Cynthia played navigator from the back seat. I sat right next to her, leaving plenty of bench-seat on either side of us. The day of drinking had caught up with Joe. He fell asleep in the passenger seat.

Eddie had the radio on. Mick Jagger was singing about his heart of stone. It was a chilly night, but I had my window down. I enjoyed the feeling of crisp fall air striking my forehead before it combed through my hair. Cynthia rested her head on my shoulder. I cradled it beneath my extended arm. She remained awake, occasionally raising her tired head to tell Eddie to "turn left here", or "that road is a one way". I turned my head to the top of hers. Her hair smelled of wildflowers. Flowers are always difficult for me to smell, I would always have to bury my nose far into the bloom, and breathe deep to receive just

a tiny little scent. Now with my lips pressed against her hair, the scent that was so difficult to obtain was freely filling my lungs, and bringing a smile to my face. I never wanted to leave the back of that car. When you are sitting in the back seat in the dead of night you don't have to worry about prying eyes. We had the cozy dark space all to ourselves.

We arrived at her apartment building all too soon. I would have been content with her under my arm for the entire night, not realizing that it would only get better. Eddie gently nudged the ornery bum that was fast asleep next to him. Cynthia led us in to the large building and punched in a number code on an aluminum box to the right of the door. She lived on the eleventh floor. Thank god the place had an elevator. It was so alien to me, so strange. The thought of riding in an elevator every time you entered or exited your home. I simply had to walk past a screen door and across uncut grass.

We walked down a very wide, clean hallway that smelled like a hotel. I looked to my side seeing identical door after door after door. The only thing distinguishing them was their brass room numbers. Cynthia led us all halfway down the endless corridor to her indistinct door.

She had a very nice place inside. I'm sure her rent was quite expensive, even though it was only a one bedroom apartment. Through the blinds she had an incredible view of the sleeping city. You could see a spattering of illuminated windows in the various office buildings. I wondered if it was *tired suits* burning the midnight oil, or if it was cleaning staffs, readying the office for the next work day. I pressed my head against the window to try to see directly down to the city street. There were people walking on the sidewalks and a steady stream of traffic yet on the roads. I wondered if anyone slept at all. It's strange to see an environment like that when you're used to your closest neighbor being a farmer who lives nearly a mile away and goes to bed before *Leno*. It was then that I felt homesick. I wished that I was back home where the smells were familiar, and the people were much farther away. I felt safe though on the eleventh floor. The strange people walking around by themselves in the early hours of the morning seemed to pose no great threat from my high vantage point.

Around the apartment were various photos of Cynthia and her friends. Though noticeably absent were any photos of her family. It was a very well maintained apartment, which is usually a sign of a person that lives alone. On one the walls hung *Target* prints of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *West Side Story* as well as numerous other prints and trinkets that featured Rome, London, Paris, Torino and multiple other cities that she had probably never been to. Cynthia was over by the sink. She grabbed a couple plastic cups from her collapsible bamboo dish drying rack, and filled both cups to the brim with ice water from the tap. Joe made himself at home taking a seat on the couch. And with drowsy drunken eyes he clumsily removed his shoes. Eddie awkwardly stood with his hands in his pockets no more than five feet from the entrance door.

Cynthia turned from the sink and informed us that the bathroom was just down the narrow hallway before the bedroom. She walked with two cups of water in her hands down the hallway and flicked on her bedroom light with her elbow. I stepped into the bathroom lifted the toilet seat and drained my bladder full of suds while admiring the glass bowl that was full of popery on the back of the toilet next to the copies of *US Magazine*. I stood before her large vanity lit mirror and checked my appearance. My eyes were red and tired, and I had the look of a guy that had been sitting in a car all day.

I walked back into the living room. Joe was stretched out on the couch, informally claiming it as his own. Eddie had since managed to walk deeper into the apartment and admired the same photos of Cynthia and her friends that I had previously looked at.

Cynthia walked back into the living room with an arm full of blankets and a couple of pillows. She tossed one pillow on Joe's sleeping head and a folded blanket over his waist. She apologized to Eddie saying that he would have to take the floor if he didn't mind. I stood off to the side wondering where I would sleep, assuming, but afraid to ask. I offered to sleep in the upright chair that was in the corner.

Cynthia said, "I have a double bed. I don't mind sharing if you don't."

I shrugged and said *why not*. Eddie spread out his blanket and pillow just below the couch. Cynthia shut off the lights and told Eddie that if he needed anything just ask. She led the way to her bedroom. I looked back at Eddie who expressed his approval with an eyebrow raise and a single head nod.

Cynthia's cleared the multiple pillows off of her bed and folded over the thick comforter. I walked a few steps into her room and stood beside a wall tapestry that featured the *Mona Lisa*.

"It's strange," I began to ramble, "that we were seemingly perfect strangers only a few short hours ago. But I now feel like I really know you, even though when I think back on our conversations I really can't think of much that I've learned about you. Do you know what I mean? It's like people will speak simply to fill the blank air. As if it's so horrible to have some silence every once in a while. I think that it's a milestone in any relationship, friendship or otherwise—the ability to enjoy not what is spoken, but what isn't. Like how pretentious people describe freeform jazz and shit. It's not the notes that were played, it's the—"

"Shut up," Cynthia softly said pressing her index finger against my lips.

She walked past me and shut the bedroom door. Without a moment to waste she pulled me by my shoulder and began kissing me. I still recall the sounds of lips meeting tongue and gentle rumble of the street cars below.

We had sex that night. Looking back I don't think it was because we were both overwhelmed by passion—that we couldn't wait to get our hands on each other. I think it was because that was the last time we were going to see each other. It was now or never. After that night we would go our separate ways. Our paths in life were never to cross again. People don't like to say it, but they know it in the back of their minds. Cynthia and Jake... I will never see them again for as long as I live.

I woke up the next morning to the sensation of Joe lightly slapping me on my temple. It was soft enough that I could practically sleep through it, but constant and rapid enough that I had no choice but to open my eyes. Joe was crouched over me whispering that it was time for us to hit the road. I nodded my head against the pillow. I sat up and got dressed while sitting on the edge of the bed.

I looked at Cynthia sleeping on the other side. It was still dark out. The sun was just beginning to penetrate the window blinds that were so far up from the street below. I couldn't have gotten more than four hours of sleep. Cynthia was sleeping on her side facing me. I stood next to her bed for a few seconds, taking a mental picture of her face before I lifted the comforter over her naked shoulder and left her.

Joe and Eddie were standing by the front door waiting for me. They were impatient and ready to leave. I told them to hold on while I leave her a note. I thought it would be rude just to leave without saying so much as goodbye. I looked around her tidy kitchen where not a thing was out of place. I couldn't find anything to write on, or anything to write with. Joe impatiently said, come on, let's go.

I gave up and followed Joe and Eddie out. We walked down the long, wide hallway that looked and felt exactly the same in the middle of the night as it did at sunrise. My head was swimming and I was still a little drunk. I'm sure Eddie and Joe were as well.

Eddie made sure to expel an entire evenings worth of gas in the tiny elevator as we slowly descended eleven floors. I knew he willed with all his might to save it until we got into that tiny cramped space. Even though I didn't know another soul in that apartment building, the mere thought of the elevator stopping before it reached the bottom and a complete stranger standing in Eddie's putrid stew mortified me. He tittered and giggled the excruciatingly long ride down to the ground floor, until it got to be too much for him. We were each desperately looking forward to fresh air that would settle our sensitive, shrunken stomachs.

We drove away from Cynthia and out of her life. I probably wouldn't be able to find Cynthia again if I tried. I had no recollection of what exact apartment she lived in, only the floor. I could always stop back at the bar she works at, but who knows how much longer she would work there, or if the desolate place will even still be open.

I think it's best that we left it at that. Leave it in my memory as an incredible night. If you meet someone for one night you often see their greatest attributes, and only that. I don't know if she has troubles with her family and that's why she didn't hang up any pictures of them. I don't know if she struggles each month to pay the bills. I will never have to learn that we have little in common. That she may spend her free time watching stupid celeb-reality shows. I won't ever know her last name.

And she can remember me as the guy from that one night and only one night. She won't remember me as a low life, as a crook, as a guy that made his mother cry on numerous occasions, or can't get a decent job because of his shit reputation. She won't remember because she never saw that side of me. So in the future when she thinks about me, a smile will appear across her face and nothing else.

As we put more distance between us and all of the tall apartment buildings, the structures crowded together and mixed around like tree trunks in a dizzying, thick forest. I could no longer even distinguish which building was hers—where she will wake up with only memories.

## CHAPTER 10

We didn't stick around Des Moines that morning. Each of us sore from the previous night, the last thing we wanted to do was sit in a car with booze oozing out of our pores. It's silly to think, but I thought that the whole idea of kidnapping two little girls died that morning. Neither Eddie nor Joe spoke about it on the long car ride home. In fact no one spoke about anything at all. I thought, or perhaps I prayed, that we could

move past this whole thing. We made our little trip, had our fun, and now it was time to continue on with our regular lives. It would be a funny story that we could look back on. Not that it was a story that we could tell anyone else. But a story that we could look back and laugh at.

It turns out I was completely wrong. It was far from over. It was that night, a Friday, Joe mentioned that we would be traveling back to Des Moines for more surveillance. I cringed. Eddie didn't seem overly enthusiastic. But it's not as if Eddie would ever protest.

We journeyed south once again early that Saturday morning. We didn't pack nearly as much on this trip, just a few sandwiches and a few bottles of *Gatorade*. No beer on this trip, which I thought was a wise move.

Thankfully we didn't have to spend the entire day in the car like we had a couple of days before. The seemingly perfect plan hatched before us that morning.

After camping a block down from the Cohen's house that morning, we followed the shiny black SUV to a dance studio across town. There Mrs. Cohen dropped off the girls then was on her way. Not a word was spoken, but a flashbulb went off in each of our heads. It's as if we each simultaneously said *eureka* in our minds.

That was the place. Not the perfect place, but there wasn't ever going to be a perfect place. The Cohens weren't the type of people to drop off their daughters at a playground at the edge of town at dusk. This was it. This was our best chance. We would never be able to take the Cohen daughters from their home, not with a possible security system and a yappy dog. School would have never worked. You can't just steal them from a playground. That would be stupid, not to mention you would have a few dozen witnesses to your crime. The dance studio we could actually pull off. This harebrained idea now seemed somewhat plausible. I wrote it down.

*Lisborn Dance Academy 2846 Fincher Ave.: Saturday 11:00AM.*

We stayed parked outside. A full hour later, random cars, minivans and SUVs returned. Parents strolled inside to pick up little versions of them, Mrs. Cohen included. We followed the SUV back across town. When it was obvious that the Escalade was returning home, Joe told Eddie to stop following them. We took off for home. The day was a success, a quiet success. There was no rejoicing or high-fives. But it was a success none the less.

That night we all sat around the kitchen table and Joe laid out the plan. He used cereal and cracker boxes as buildings lining each side of the street, and a white Camaro matchbox car (one of his various prized possessions from his youth) as our vehicle. He took us through it step by step, reading off a piece of notebook paper that he had scrawled in sloppy pen ink the times and locations and actions of each of us.

"10:30, we park Eddie's Lincoln around the corner a half a block from the dance studio. We sit and wait for the Cohens to arrive. 11:00, Mrs. Cohen has dropped off the girls and has left. 11:15, we pull the car closer to the front entrance to a closer parking spot just in front of the studio."

"We're not gonna follow them from their house?" asked Eddie.

Joe froze his arm that was carefully pushing the matchbox car around the corner and in front of the box of saltines. “No, it’s not necessary to raise any more suspicion by following them there. We know where they’re going.”

Eddie rustled in his seat and looked at the mock street layout formulating his next thought. “But what if they don’t show up?”

“Then we abort the mission, go home and try again the next week. Now…” Joe continued, “at 11:24 we walk into the studio.”

“Why 11:24? Why not 11:30?” Eddie inquired.

“Because I don’t want us walking in at the top or the bottom of the hour. I want it to look impromptu, like this is when we are here, not like we are sitting outside in a fucking car until 11:30.”

“Fine,” Eddie said defensively. “Continue.”

“At 11:24 we stroll in. Jacob you will stand by the door. If any adult tries to walk out you stop them.”

I wanted to ask how I would stop them, but I didn’t want to receive the same snide toned response that he gave to Eddie.

“Eddie and I will find the dance instructor or anyone who looks like they are in charge at the studio. We will not approach the girls. We won’t even look at them when we walk in. Eddie, as I said, will accompany me. I will inform the instructor that I need to remove the girls from her dance class immediately. I will flash my fake identification that Jacob will make on his computer to show her that we mean business. Jacob, you will make fake I.Ds for you two as well, just in case she asks. Jacob will still be guarding the entrance door. The dance instructor will hopefully hand over the girls.”

Eddie interrupted, “But what if – “

Joe raised his index finger and cut off Eddie, “If she doesn’t release the girls, I will stress that it is imperative that the girls come with us immediately. I will lean in close, lower my voice and inform her that Mrs. Cohen has been in an automobile accident and we need the Cohen daughters so we can escort them to the hospital.”

Eddie nodded his head with approval. He had the appearance that he was impressed with Joe’s plan. I swear he was downright proud of him. Joe looked back at Eddie and nodded his head as well, as a way of saying; *it is pretty genius isn’t it?*

Joe continued. “The dance instructor will call the girls over. Eddie, you will immediately escort them to the front door where Jacob will be waiting. You both will walk the girls out to the car giving them little information as to what happened. Keep it vague. Don’t tell them about the accident.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I’m not going to spend the three hour car ride home with two little girls in the back seat screaming and crying their eyes out about their dead mom.”

“Well, that’s downright considerate of you,” I scoffed.

“You will tell the girls once you are outside that their parents told us to pick them up. That they are planning a special surprise for them or some shit. Kids are much easier to fool than adults. I’ll stay behind only briefly to smooth things over and ensure that she isn’t running to a phone. If she asks, I will jot down some bullshit contact information to reach me to give her peace of mind. I will thank her for her cooperation and exit out of the same door where you guys will be parked, and I will hop in the awaiting car. Eddie you’ll be driving. You will drive away fast, but not too fast. We want it to look urgent,

but we also don't want it to look like we are making a getaway. Hopefully she won't even follow us outside. It would be best if she doesn't get a description of the car at all.

"What if she takes down our plates?" I asked.

"That's where your computer will come in once again. You're going to make fake paper plates that look like official cop plates that we will tape over Eddie's."

I was skeptical. "I don't know where you get the idea that I have designing abilities. First I need to make fake I.Ds and now I need to make fake plates?"

"They don't have to be professional. All they need to be is somewhat believable as we drive away. She's not going to walk up and touch them. They're mainly there to prevent her from seeing the actual plates below."

Joe stared into my eyes to make sure that I understood what he was describing. "It should take no more than four minutes from when we enter to when we exit. We will all be in the car and on the road leaving town at a quarter to twelve," Joe's steady hand pushed the car past the cracker box and drove it in front of the *Cheerios* box that was resting on its side. "Eddie, you will drive the speed limit and no faster. I have the roads mapped out of what we will be taking as we leave town. I'll be your navigator, but I want you to review and memorize the highlighted map anyways. We will return home by 3:00, not stopping on the way home for anything. I don't care if the girls piss themselves. We will not under any circumstance stop for anything. Those doors don't open between the dance studio and here. Got it?"

Eddie and I looked at each other, a bit confused. There was a lot happening at once.

"I thought so," Joe said, flipping over the top sheet of the note pad and tearing out the two sheets below it. Joe had hand copied the itinerary for Eddie and me. He carefully handed each of us a copy and told us that these sheets of paper don't leave the house.

Eddie glanced at the sheet of sloppy handwriting then looked back down at the highlighted map, tracing the streets and interstate highway with his finger. He looked up at Joe, "What if... now don't get mad. But what if the lady doesn't let us take the girls?"

"Why would I get mad? We'll calmly collect ourselves and act as if what she is doing is a great inconvenience. Then we walk out of the studio, hop in the car and drive off. As soon as we turn the corner we'll tear ass out of there, taking the same roads that I've laid out," Joe said, tapping the map that was in front of Eddie.

"How are we going to pass as detectives... or whatever we're supposed to be?" I said.

Joe leaned back in the squeaky kitchen chair, folded his arms and said with great victory in his tone, "Our matching suits of course!"

The suits that he was referring to I had almost completely forgotten about. It was about a year ago or so that Joe decided to buy a suit, and convinced Eddie and I that every man should own at least one suit. That it's a necessary part of being a man, to have a nice suit to wear. I don't know where he got that idea. Perhaps he was swayed by an issue of *Playboy* or *GQ*, but it worked. We all decided to get suits. I recall making the trip an hour away to La Crosse where we went to a clothing shop called *The Knights Tavern*.

We spent that Sunday standing in front of full length mirrors as a couple of guys measured each of us with cloth tape, telling us to straighten our backs, exhale, straighten one arm, and so on. It was a pretty cool experience. They guys that worked there were



real men. They wore suits themselves. When we first entered the store they were standing in front of this old TV that was built into a shelf on the back wall. The TV had a football game on, and they leisurely stood leaning up against the back wall with cloth measuring tapes draped around their necks like a doctor's stethoscope.

They looked like the the way men were supposed to dress and behave. Not like the way me and my brothers, along with every other man I knew behaved. The guys that worked at this suit shop wouldn't be caught dead sitting in a hole in the wall bar drinking cheap domestic beer, wearing tattered t-shirts and jeans with clunky *logger's boots*. No, I envisioned these guys sitting in a dimly lit lounge, wearing a three piece suit and sipping scotch out of crystal glasses while talking about literature or politics. They would maintain their composure and stop drinking as soon as their tongue began to slur.

Joe, Eddie and I each purchased a black suit, black skinny tie, polished black leather soled shoes and a crisp, white button down shirt. I had previously turned down the button down shirt when the salesman showed me then. I informed him that I owned a white button down shirt. Joe noticed that I wasn't wearing a button down shirt when I had the suit on. He told me that my button down shirt would look like shit since it isn't white and crisp. He said that it lacked the quality that the white shirts here had. So I ended up getting a \$68 brilliant, crisp, white shirt as well.

I drew the line at the black socks. I decided that black socks were black socks. I would buy a pair at Wal-Mart for far cheaper. I ended up spending close to \$700 that afternoon. It was almost all of the money that I had to my name. I didn't say a word. I didn't want to look cheap. We each spent about the same amount. Except Joe purchased black socks, and Eddie's shoes were a little more expensive than mine since he has freakishly wide feet for their length. I was wondering, while I was swiping my debit card, why we were being so legitimate while we were buying suits, and yet we'd stolen cars in the past.

The suits were bagged up in *The Knights Cavern* black suit bags, and the hand written receipts were placed inside. Once we were home I hung that suit up carefully in my closet. And there it has sat ever since. I've never worn it once since the day I tried it on. None of us have. It was a stupid, unnecessary purchase. But it's not like I would tell Joe that.

I knew in the back of my mind that we would never have any opportunity to wear a suit. Where would we ever go that would require us to wear a suit? I guess we would get that opportunity. Perhaps that's why Joe decided we would go as agents. So we could actually use those stupid fucking suits.

## CHAPTER 11

The week leading up to it was one of the longest weeks of my life. I was constantly conscious of exactly what day it was and exactly how many days until Saturday; the day we were going to kidnap the girls.

Joe put me in charge of readying the basement. I was to remove all of our personal belongings and any and all tools that could be used to harm us or to escape with. I immediately moved the multiple cardboard boxes and plastic storage totes that contained memories from our past. Toys that we'd long since outgrown, comics we no longer read, and clothes that no longer fit. I moved them into the empty grain shed, along with all of our assorted hammers, screwdrivers and handsaws that we kept down there.

With all of those things out of the way, the basement was pretty empty. It was just a simple, cracked concrete floor with a water heater and furnace in the corner, and a toilet and sink in the very small room off to the side. I scrubbed the tiny, never used basement toilet and sink, and soon came to the conclusion that the brown rings on the sides of the toilet and sink were there to stay. I placed a fresh light bulb in the small room that had much needed brightening, and tested the toilet and sink personally to make sure that they were in functioning order. Finally, I placed a fresh roll of quilted toilet paper on top of the back of the toilet, being that there was no toilet paper dispenser.

I swept the dusty floor and felt the need to open a window, but Eddie had already knocked them out and replaced them with mortared cinder blocks the day before. I wanted to make it nice, not so dungeon like. I figured that the girls would be afraid enough. I wondered where they would sleep. I didn't like the thought of them sleeping on the floor with blankets. There had been known to be a mouse or two down there. I decided that I would move down my bed and just sleep on the couch.

I carefully slid my twin mattress, followed by my twin box-spring, down the narrow steps that led to the upstairs, through the living room and kitchen, and finally down the even narrower steps to the basement.

After *Fabreezing* the air to try and eliminate the depressing, musty basement scent, I felt that the basement was still missing something. I went back up to the kitchen and cleared off the little used kitchen table. I moved the table and accompanying four chairs down to the basement and placed it on the wall opposite to the newly made basement bedroom. I figured that the girls would need a place to eat after all.

With the bed made and the toilet scrubbed, the basement seemed to be ready for our guests. That was an odd thought to me, *our guests*. They really weren't going to be our guests. They were going to be our hostages. It was a disgusting thought really. Perhaps I was thinking of them as guests to avoid the realization that we were going to be kidnapping these little girls and forcing them to stay with us until we stole money from their father. Not enough *Fabreeze* in the world was going to make this place not feel like a prison to those little girls.

I decided that they would need a television down there so that it would feel more like home. I didn't think that Joe and Eddie could hardly protest. Even prisons have TVs in jail cells. I removed the nineteen inch television from my bedroom and placed it on a milk crate that used to hold my CD collection. I spliced the antenna cable from the living room and fed the coax cable next to the nearest furnace grate where I connected it to the now basement television. I was becoming more content with the setup. I wondered why I didn't do this before. I could have had my own little escape from my brothers—the same guys that I saw every morning, worked eight hours a day with, then drank and watched TV with every night.

When Joe came home I was eager to show him the work that I had done to the basement. Naturally he was pissed.

“This isn’t the *Four fucking Seasons*”, he said.

I told him that they have to have some amenities. Who knows how long we’re going to have them here.

“No bed frame,” he said.

I told him that there may be mice down there.

He repeated, no bed frame, we can’t have anything down here that they could use as a weapon. I reminded him that they are just little girls, but he wouldn’t budge. I removed the metal bed frame brought it back up to my room where I piled the pieces against the wall where my bed used to be. He didn’t much like the TV either but let it stay. He was simply content that I moved *my* TV down and not his.

“Listen,” Joe said. “I need you to do me a favor. Who’s that piece of shit drug dealer friend of yours?”

“Sam?”

“Yea, I need you to talk to him. See if he can hook us up with a *throw away* cell phone?”

“Throw away?”

Joe let lose an impatient scoff as if I was supposed to know the term that I’m sure he found out about only moments earlier.

“Yes, a throw away cell phone. Drug dealers use them because you don’t need a name attached to a contract. It’s like a pre-paid loaded thing or something.”

“I thought that I wasn’t supposed to talk to Sam? I distinctly remember you telling me that.”

“I’m not talking about inviting him over for dinner, dick. All I want you to do is talk to him and see if either he or one of the other piece-of-shit stoner friends can hook us up.”

“I haven’t talked to him in at least two years?”

“You know where he lives, right?”

“Well yea, unless he’s moved—it’s been a while you know.”

“Just stop by and ask, alright?”

“What do you need a “throw away” (speaking with air quotes) phone for?”

“So that we can get into contact with Jeremiah Cohen once we have his girls. We’re gonna need a way of communicating with him so we can work on an agreement.”

“Fine, you don’t have to get so snide with me. Just ask. We’re a team here, remember?”

“Just get your ass going. We don’t have a lot of time.”

I trounced up the wooden basement steps, passing by Eddie as he installed the deadbolts while he whistled—pausing his jaunty tune only while he fired up the cordless drill, then immediately resuming his tune once done.

## CHAPTER 12

I hit the road and drove to Sam's. He used to be my pot connection. Joe hated the fact that I smoked pot. He would bust me all the time in my room as I sat next to the box-fan that I placed in my windowsill to direct the familiar scent outward. I never hurt a soul when I smoked. I minded my own business, occasionally creeping down the stairs and raiding the pantry for sour cream and onion *Pringles* and *Mr. Freeze* popsicles.

Joe said that our Irish forefathers drank booze, and if it was good enough for them then it's plenty good for us.

I like to think that if pot was readily available to our ancestors they wouldn't turn it down. Sam was a good guy. He was mellow as could be, and he laughed at everything with his signature breathy laugh.

I always appreciated his philosophy in life. It was something like, "everything you will ever need in life will provide itself". He wasn't what you would call motivated. But at the same point he wasn't the guy that busied himself with material possessions. He was happy and content on his couch.

My high school buddy who was a couple years older than me, Larry Duchene, along with Sam and I used to sneak out of Study Hall to smoke pot in a storage room where they kept musical instruments. It was easy to do. Study Hall took place in the lunch room. After attendance was taken by the Study Hall monitor, about half of the kids in attendance could go to the library to study, while the other half stayed behind. The library wasn't large enough to accommodate all of us. Larry, Sam and I would be the first to get up from our chairs when it was time to go to the library, but the last in the group to walk down the hallway.

The group would enter the library and we would keep walking to the storage room that was just off the auditorium, which was always vacant. We did this everyday my sophomore year. We would sit on the big, black instrument cases and light up a joint and talk. We had a lot in common. We liked *Weezer's* first two albums, and Kevin Smith's first three movies. We had great talks, during our "jazz sessions" as we referred to them. At least I think we did. We would get pretty baked.

It was the perfect crime really. We would take off our shirts and leave them by the entrance door so they wouldn't reek of pot. We knew in the backs of our minds that it would have been wise to take off our pants also, but it was strange enough that we were all lighting up together shirtless. It did eventually come back to bite us when Larry, Sam and I were blitzed, and Sam took a trumpet out of its case and began doing his best Louie Armstrong impression. He was puffing his cheeks out like a blowfish with his eyes rolling around while bugging them out of his skull.

He didn't blow into it at first, but after Larry and I were both red faced with laughter with tears rolling down our cheeks, Sam felt that he had to keep it going. He began blowing into the trumpet with all his might, maintaining the round cheeks and eyes that looked as though they were going to pop out of their sockets.

After that it was over for us. The band teacher, Ms. McKenna walked into her storage room to find three stoned, shirtless teenagers rolling on the floor, crying with laughter.

Sam was still blowing into that damn horn when she stomped up to us with arms akimbo. It was one of the funniest things I had ever witnessed. The pot helped make it the funniest I'm sure. The sound of that horn, it started off as a sharp note then quickly

became a horn-laced laugh. It was as if a trumpet could laugh, that's exactly what it would sound like. All three of us got suspended for that one... two weeks.

Larry and I went our separate ways after he graduated. I moved in with Joe and Eddie and began my unsatisfying career counting cans and bottles, and Larry went on to law school. I saw on *Facebook* not too long ago that he's married now and is expecting a child.

He and his wife are building a new home. She updates photos of the construction to the web. It hurts a little when I realized that my friends have moved on with their lives after high school. Some of them are married, have careers, have 401k's, a reliable car, a kid or two. But there I was suspended in time.

Sam and I kept in touch for a while after high school. We would still occasionally light-up together. But for the most part I bought my shit and after a little small talk/catching up, I would go my separate way.

It all came to a head one night when Sam a couple of his stoner buddies went out on a late night drive on the country roads while they were high. He ended up ditching his car at the sharp bend on the gravel road about a half a mile from my house.

Sam knew that I lived nearby so he and his buddies hoofed it to my house. They let themselves in through the front door in the middle of the night, since we never locked it, and made their way up to my room.

Joe nearly took Sam and his buddies out with the bat he kept under his bed. Joe thought that it was a home invasion. I awoke to Sam's scream. I sat up in bed, and on my bedroom floor doing a military crawl was Sam. His friends dashed out of the house during the commotion to escape an underwear-clad Joe wielding an oak bat.

It didn't help matters that I was stoned also. Back then I had my nightly routine of getting stoned while I watched *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, before drifting off into a heavy sleep. My television was still on and Sam was scurrying across the floor screaming for my help. By this time Joe knew who it was, but that just barely stopped him from taking a swing. I never saw Joe so angry in all my life. He was red-faced, seething, and cursing with words that didn't even exist. I think it was a combination of scared and pissed that turned him into a monster holding a bat like a battle axe—fighting back every inclination not to take a swing.

Eddie's room was downstairs, just off the living room. He was awoken by the commotion and raced up the steps to see what was going on. I sat in my bed watching the surreal situation unfold before me, reacting slowly in my impaired mental state. Joe then directed his ire toward me. Sam, still lying on the floor, began explaining what they were doing there. How they needed help pulling his car out of the ditch. Joe told him to fuck off and said that if he doesn't leave now he'll start swinging. Eddie, being much more calm and collected, told Joe that he would handle this, to go back to bed.

Joe pointed the bat at Sam's face, hovering the tip just millimeters away from his nose. Joe said, in a now calm voice, that he was to never step foot on this property again.

He turned and left, using the bat as a cane as he shuffled his underwear-clad ass back into his room, then slammed his door with all his might.

Eddie just looked at me with disappointment. I don't think he cared so much about Sam and his friends letting themselves in. He just didn't want to have to deal with Joe tomorrow, full well knowing that this wouldn't be the end of it.

With great labor, I was able to toss on a pair of jeans and shoes. Eddie, Sam and I made our way outside. Sam's friends poked their heads around the old pump house located across the lawn. Sam yelled to them that it was alright to come out. They were two guys that had to be in their thirties. I'd never seen them before. I don't remember exactly what they looked like, only that they looked alike. They both sported a combination of shaggy hair, torn leather coats, scruffy faces and an air of body odor. One of them said to me with a laugh that my brother was a psycho. The first and only words I said to him were to shut the fuck up. Neither guy said a word after that.

We walked to the detached garage and saw that the side window had been busted. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked over to Sam. He immediately apologized and explained that they didn't want to bother us so they decided that *they* would get a chain out of our garage, but they couldn't get the door open so they busted a window. I just looked at Sam with a combination of disbelief and exasperation. I was beginning to realize why Joe couldn't stand Sam. Sam continued his explanation saying that they were able to find a log chain, but then realized that they didn't have anything to pull the car out of the ditch out with. So he was planning on waking me up to ask for help. That is before shit hit the fan.

I didn't believe him. Joe and Eddie parked their cars inside the garage and neither one of them left their keys in the ignition. My car was parked outside with the keys pulled as well. If any of our cars had the keys in them I think Sam and his buddies would have stolen it. We all climbed into Eddie's Lincoln with the log chain that they "acquired" and drove the half mile down the road and pulled his car out of the ditch. Sam apologized to me profusely and thanked Eddie for pulling his car out. Sam's friends knew not to say a word. That was the last time I saw Sam, over two years ago. I stopped smoking weed after that. I didn't like Joe treating me like a child, telling me who I could and couldn't hang out with. But in this case he was right.

I pulled up to Sam's old address, hoping that he still lived there. He got the house right after high school. Sam came from money. His father bought him the place so that he would move out and stop being a bad influence on his younger half-brother. Most everything was paid for by his father, and what wasn't was supplicated by selling marijuana to all the working stiffs that led lives of quiet desperation. Individuals like me that wanted to get high to escape it all, at least for a short while.

Sam had a successful cottage industry. He was his own boss, the American dream. I soon found out that when you have no motivation whatsoever in life it can prove hazardous. I walked around to the side of the dilapidated house to the side door. That was one of the rules back when Sam was my supplier. You never use the front door, it made him nervous. Clients and friends use the side door, law enforcement uses the front.

I gave the side door a firm knock. When that didn't receive an answer I knocked harder and harder till I was soon beating on the wooden door, rattling the thin panes of glass within it. I could hear movement deep inside the house. Eventually I saw a hallowed, skeletal figure peer his head through the window just down from the side door. I gave a hearty wave to the strange figure, just hoping that anyone would let me in. The man slowly made his way to the side door and opened it a crack. An emaciated face looked through the thin gap of the door. It looked like another one of Sam's loser friends.

"Hey, how ya' doing? I was wondering if Sam was around, I need to talk to him?"

Without saying a word the figure closed the door, unlatched the chain then opened it and walked away. I didn't think much of the informalities. I was in a drug den after all. I let myself in and followed the man through the kitchen. I was immediately hit with an awful odor, like a combination of rotten fish and cat piss. The cupboard doors were open and had filthy dishes and empty food containers spilling out of them.

I followed my skeletal Sherpa through the kitchen. The shuffling of feet had cut a well worn path from the back door to the living room. The ghostly trail was the only area that didn't have a tar-brown coating.

I was amazed by the tolerance that one could build when it came to stench. I had hardly stepped six feet into the place and already I wanted to retreat outside to the fresh air where I might possibly puke and pass-out—not necessarily in that order. This guy seemed completely inured to it. I couldn't imagine being able to sleep with that stench filling your lungs with every unconscious breath.

I walked the same path through the debris, passing walls with speckled stains from cockroaches and stepping on little pellets of mouse shit, desperately careful not to touch anything.

"Listen, I'm a friend of Sam's, I was just in the neighborhood and had a quick question for him. I can come back if this isn't the best time..."

"Jacob, I know who you are."

I stopped amongst the clutter. The guy continued walking into the living room. I followed a few steps behind. He took a seat in a tattered recliner and picked up the lit half cigarette that rested on an ashtray that was balanced on the arm of the chair. I stepped just a few feet into the room.

"Sam?"

"Did my Dad send you?"

"What? No."

"He's been sending friends over to talk to me."

I never considered Sam a friend for years. I felt bad that he still considered me one.

"Carl came yesterday, Brandon a couple days before."

"Oh yea? How's Brandon been?"

Sam simply shrugged his shoulders. I looked around the dark room. There was no other place to sit. There were blankets hung up over the windows. The only light in the room came from the television that had a freeze frame of an episode of *South Park* on the screen.

Sam was hardly recognizable. He was no longer the portly, lovable stoner. He was now skin and bones. His eyes looked sunken passed his pronounced cheekbones. His head was unevenly shaved—his face was chewed, pocked and blistered. He wasn't smiling.

It sound silly, but that was one of Sam's identifying qualities. He was always smiling. It's not that he was always happy. If you were to run over his dog he would be sad with a smile. Now his expression seemed beyond despair. As if he was lamenting his lost Lenore until I came rapping on his filthy chamber door.

He never looked at me once, only straight ahead.

"My stepmom could care less if I die. It's Dad that's behind all these visits."

"You're Dad didn't send me. I just came to talk."

I felt selfish thinking in the back of my mind about the throw-away cell phone.  
“Don’t bother looking for weed, Jacob. I don’t sell it anymore.”  
“I didn’t come here for that.”  
“Well tell that fucker I’m still breathing then.”  
“Who?”  
“My Dad!”  
Sam was becoming angry, paranoid.  
“Honest to god Sam, I haven’t seen your dad in years.”  
“Well then what the hell are you doing here?”  
“Just came to see how you’ve been.”  
Sam relit his cigarette after realizing that it had gone out from when he answered the door. He took a long drag and then opened the cupboard of an end table next to him. He pulled out a dime bag of weed and pitched it at me. “That’s what you’re lookin’ for, ain’t it?”  
“I didn’t come here to buy weed.”  
“Keep it. I don’t touch the shit anymore,” he said before taking another drag,  
“Cranks where the money’s at.”  
I looked around his shit-hole of a house. I think he could see the irony of his comment. I thanked him and stuffed the baggy into my pocket.  
“So Jacob, how you been?”  
“Fine.”  
I decided not to be polite in asking him how he had been.  
“How’s that piece of shit brother of yours?”  
“Which one?”  
“Which one?!” he repeated with a cough riddled laugh, “The fucker that pulled the bat on me!”  
“Joe? He’s fine.”  
Sam paused, looked at me and smiled. He smiled only for a second as he said, “Glad to hear it,” in a sarcastic tone. He looked like his old self, but for only a glimpse. The old Sam that was happy, animated, full of expression swam to the surface of that sickly corpse for a brief moment.  
“So my dad didn’t send you and you’re not here to buy weed—what are you here for, to talk about the weather?”  
“Well, to be honest, Joe sent me. I’m supposed to ask you where I can get my hands on a throw-away phone.”  
“A what?”  
“A throw away phone... or junk phone, I guess.”  
“You mean a prepaid phone?”  
“Yea.”  
“Why did he send you to me?”  
“Joe was under the assumption that you may use one of those.”  
Sam stared at me unflinching. I was afraid that I had offended him. I didn’t know if he was going to get violent. Possibly attack me. He leaned forward in his recliner then finally said, “Your brother’s a smart man.”  
I breathed a stench-ridden sigh of relief.



“I knew the minute that fucker booted me out of your house that he was a smart man,” he said, with animosity lightly veiling his joke.

“I’m sorry about that by the way, Sam. I’m sure if you talked to Joe he would apologize as well.”

I knew that Joe wouldn’t apologize in a million years, particularly for actions that were justified.

“Apology accepted,” Sam flippantly said while lighting another smoke. “Just for that, buddy, I’m going to hook you up with my junk phone seller. It’s a little operation not too far from here. You drive down Highway 38 ‘till you see a blue brick building with Wal-Mart printed on the side in huge white letters.”

“You can buy ‘em at Wal-Mart?”

“Yea, stupid. They ain’t illegal! I’ve got a bunch of ‘em!”

“And nobody can trace them?”

“As long as the phone’s turned off. When it’s on they can figure out roughly where the call is coming from? Why do you want one?”

“I don’t. Joe wants a phone. Can I just buy one off you?”

“Take this one,” he reached into the pocket of his jeans that were cinched at the top from a braided belt. He lifted out a simple blue cell phone and tossed it to me.

“How much do I owe ya’?”

“I run my business like an old timey doctor, Jacob. It’s a sliding scale. Not to worry, I’ll give you the *can counters* special.”

I didn’t bother telling him that I had lost my job. Any problem that I had would seem trivial to a guy that’s on a downward spiral.

“How’s fifty sound?”

“Sounds fair.”

I reached into my pocket and pawed out the crumpled bills that Joe had given me and handed him the money. I didn’t stay much longer. I felt horrible leaving him though. But I don’t know how much longer I could take it in that house. Sam didn’t bother seeing me to the door. I told him to take care before I walked over the faint path in his kitchen. There really wasn’t much more that I could do. I did look straight at him with all the sincerity I could muster when I told him to take care. He didn’t look at me though. His mind was on other things.

I left his dreary house and was greeted by a fresh breeze and blinding sunlight. I looked at the neighbors’ quaint clean houses as I walked back to my car. I wondered if they had any idea what was happening just a couple doors down. If they knew that there was a man... a boy slowly killing himself with his addiction. Sam knew that he wasn’t going to last very long with his lifestyle. He was fully aware of it, yet it didn’t seem to bother him in the least. His priorities had shifted from living to feeding his meth addiction. He was fading right before his own eyes and he didn’t care. I guess when you don’t have much to live for you don’t mind cutting your life short. I inspected the phone once I got into my car. It was then I realized that I had no way to charge it. That didn’t matter. I would buy a cord, or see if any we had would fit it. I wasn’t about to step back into that house. Not ever again.

The little plastic phone managed to fill my car with the same stink of Sam’s living room. Even though there was a sharp fall chill in the air, I drove the entire way home with my windows down.

## CHAPTER 13

Joe and Eddie weren't home when I pulled in the driveway. After tossing the phone onto the cluttered kitchen counter, I assessed the mess that our house was in. Though it paled in comparison, I immediately scrubbed every dish in the sink, then placed them in their respective spots in the cupboard, cleared the papers and boxes off the kitchen table and gave the entire counter a good wipe-down. The stink of Sam's place had penetrated deep into the fabric of my clothes. I stripped naked and tossed everything into the washer and poured heavy amounts of detergent over top of them. Just before I shut the lid I remembered the rest of Joe's money and my pot was still in the pockets of my jeans. I quickly reached back in and saved both stashes from the washer. I hopped in the shower and washed myself with liberal amounts of scented body wash and a heaping palm-full of shampoo.

After my shower I felt better, not great though. I felt bad knowing that I was clean and Sam was still sitting in his recliner, surrounded by his filth.

With Joe and Eddie not home, I decided that it would be the perfect time to sneak a little of that pot Sam gave me. I went up to my room, and like old times, I sat right beside the same bedroom window to light-up. I used my old one-hitter that had a stereotypically stoner silver wizard on the outside of it. I took one long cautionary look up the driveway before I began.

*Flick, flick, suck.*

I breathed deep the acrid smoke and held it deep within my awaiting lungs. I felt dry skin across my chest expand, and then tingle with the ticklish sensation. After a few hits I looked out of the window to assess my surroundings. It was a gorgeous autumn afternoon. The leaves—that we never raked—tumbled across the lawn. The chorus of song birds tweeted along with the song that played in my head. My brows grew heavy, my shoulders melted at my sides, my heart slowed to an elephant's pace.

It had been far too long.

With every exhale I blew out of the window, half of it curled against the screen and hovered just before me. I pursed my lips and recycled that smoke like a true conservationist. Across a field I saw a little fawn all by its lonesome. It lightly stepped through the cut cornstalks, occasionally lowering its head to eat, then raising it to gaze around. I continued to get high, watching the little deer closely. I gently exhaled the smoke through the window screen as to not scare the little thing. My eyes were so latched on the fawn that I'd forget to blink. When I would blink my eyelids stuck to the dry orbs, making a smacking sound. My heart beat remained at its slow rate, but increased in intensity. Soon the palpitations thunderously echoed through my head and eardrums. I imagined a crimson tide of blood rushing and receding through my ears canals.

The little deer walked closer, making its way across the baron field. I seemingly guided the fawn on its path with my mind by saying, *closer, closer, come closer to me.* The deer did just that, walking all the way to the edge of the lawn, favoring to leave the

dried corn stalks behind in exchange to what our yard provided. The fawn was no more than fifteen feet away from me, although I was sitting one story up. It rummaged through the bushes, and then made its way passed the large LP tank. I watched with subdued interest, hoping that the flick of my lighter wouldn't scare him off as I went in for another hit.

I wanted to get the most out of the situation. Another deep breath, holding the smoke in my lungs, the deer making its way ever so closer, holding, holding, the smoke climbed up my throat and wisped out of my nostrils like cat whiskers, then a tickle, my throat seized together and I could hold it no more. A billow of diluted smoke blew from deep within my lungs. Tears welled under my eyes. It felt as if every muscle and bone in my body turned from solid granite to watery *Jello*. I could no longer support my frame. I slouched forward with gray air still exiting out of my mouth. My forehead slowly merged with the window screen. By that point my lungs were almost completely wrung of air and I was making a mild croaking sound of relief.

There meeting my gaze was the fawn, standing right in front of me, its head looking up as I looked down. I drew a deep intake, of now precious oxygen, and sat there with my face pressed against the window screen, looking deeply into the eyes of this now very strange creature. I wondered what was going through the deer's mind. What it was thinking at that very moment as it looked at me? There was a connection, a bond that we seemingly shared. At least I thought there was. I was stoned out of my mind. I began talking to the deer. Not with my lips, but with my mind.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?" I asked.

"I could ask you the same," the deer answered.

"Are you cold?"

"Why should I be?"

"Because you're not wearing a coat. You're naked."

"My fur is my coat."

"That makes perfect sense. Do you ever get hot wearing your fur in the summer?"

"I wouldn't know? I'm only two months old?"

The little deer took two steps closer, never looking away from me. And I never looked away from him. I looked deep into the large, round black marble eyes.

"Why do you want to take those little girls?"

"How do you know about that?"

"I can hear you and your brothers talk about it."

"Do you have any brothers?"

"Answer the question." said the deer.

"I don't want to take those girls. It's Joe and Eddie that are pushing for this to happen!"

"How would you feel if some men took you and your brothers away from your mother when you were young?"

"Shitty, I guess. I mean, if they were nice it wouldn't be so bad. We'll be nice to the girls. You have my word on that."

"You think that being taken away from loving parents and stuffed into a basement will be nice?"

I lifted my head away from the screen. I felt the need to defend myself against this little deer. "Listen, there isn't a whole lot that I can do about it. If I opt out, they're going

to do it anyway? This way if I'm helping I can make sure that those little girls are taken care of."

"Why don't you convince Eddie to back out as well? Joe wouldn't go through with this plan by himself."

There wasn't anything I could say in response. That little two month old deer was making sense.

It continued, "If you and your brothers go through with this, it will end horribly. Everything will be changed forever. You will wish you had never gotten caught up in this mess. You will see yourself as who you really are, and you won't like what you see. You will wish you could go back to the simpler days, like where you are at now."

"I'm not living a great life. It's pretty much shit come to think of it. What if I don't care about throwing away what I have now?"

"Then go through with it and see."

A rumble on the horizon—Eddie's black Lincoln crested the hill with a cloud of gravel dust rising in its wake. My head jolted up to see. I looked back down to the little fawn. He was looking at Eddie's car climb up the long dead-end gravel road. The little deer dashed to cross the driveway. He stopped just behind the brush next to the gravel road, trying to make the correct decision in a split second. Eddie's two tons of steel barreled down the driveway at far too fast of speed. The little hind legs shook with a clumsy quiver, ready to bolt at any moment.

The young fawn decided to go for it, cutting out in front of Eddie's car. I held my breath. The little guy stopped dead in the center of the road. Eddie locked up his brakes and his car came to a grinding halt mere inches away from my new friend.

The fawn high-tailed it across the driveway and bound past our farm buildings and out into the open fall field. I exhaled a sigh a relief, happy to see its little white tail twitch and flicker behind his escape.

I placed my marijuana hitter back into the pencil box I took it from and put the clear sandwich bag with the remainder of the reefer in the box as well. I hid it deep within my closet before I went down the steps.

Just as I rounded the corner into the kitchen I heard Eddie and Joe enter through the front door.

"That's just what I'd fucking need. Front grills to Town Cars ain't cheap. I bet I'd be dropping at least \$200 for a used." Eddie said in an aggravated tone.

"Quit 'yer crying. That thing was a baby. It wouldn't have done any damage. It'd be like hitting a big dog. It would have ended up under the car is all."

Joe stopped in his tracks once he saw me.

"Did you get the phone?" Joe immediately asked. He'd hardly even stepped into the house yet. I nodded and pointed to the counter where it rested. Joe picked it up and began to inspect it. "Jesus, this thing reeks!"

"Sam fell on some hard times. He sort of let his place go."

"Where did he keep this phone, up his ass?"

"His place went to shit. I don't know how much longer he'll be around."

"Good riddance."

I was disturbed by how callous he was. Joe didn't really want Sam to die... at least I thought.

“So this thing is untraceable, right?” Joe said looking up as he played with the phone.

“Not exactly, it’s not connected to a name is all. They can still figure out roughly where the call is coming from. And they can still track it if the phone is left on.”

“What a piece of shit!” Joe said. “How much did you pay for it?”

“Fifty.”

“Jesus, you got ripped off.”

“You gave me the money for it.”

“Shit, that’s right. Where’s my change?”

I handed him the change and he said that I still owe him twenty-five on top of that. He explained that since I purchased a phone that was not only a piece of shit, but also literally smelled like a piece of shit, I had to foot half the bill. I agreed, full well expecting him to forget about the whole thing in time.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold this thing up to my face!” Joe continued. He began mock gagging. “I mean it’ll be right up to my nose! I’m going to have to smell this fucking phone while I try to sound tough demanding money!”

Joe and Eddie walked past me to go down to the basement. They both carried shopping bags with them. I needed to talk to Eddie. I needed to talk him out of this ridiculous plan.

I only wish I had the young fawn with me for moral support.

## CHAPTER 14

In the time leading up to the big day, the house was quiet. We were the walking dead. That one thing was on all of our minds. Nothing else needed to be said. On Thursday evening, two nights before the abduction, I stepped into the kitchen to grab a beer from the fridge. I noticed the garage light was on. Eddie was in there. I grabbed an extra beer and walked out. He was seated in the back seat of his car with the door open, removing the interior handles. I told him to take a break and handed him a beer.

“How’s it coming?”

“About as well as you’d expect. I’m cutting the hell out of my car. This thing better pay off big!”

“It might not pay off at all.” I said. “We could be getting in over our heads with this one.”

Eddie just looked down at his beer. I think the same thing had been running through his mind as well.

“You know, if we both back out of this, Joe will have no other option than to let this go.” I told him.

“What do you mean?”

“If I wanted out you guys would probably still do this. But if you pulled out with me he would have no choice.”

“You don’t want to do this?”

“Not really. I mean, we had our fun. I enjoyed playing private dick with you guys, following around the Cohens and planning all this out, but I just think that this has gone too far. We need to take a step back and really think about what we’re doing. How much shit we could get into if this whole thing goes south.”

“What do you think we should do then? Just go back to our regular lives? Listen, this is a gamble, I know, but if this pays off we’re set for life. We can move away from this shit-hole and start over again.”

“And what if it doesn’t go to plan?”

“Anything is better than what we’re doing now.”

I took a pull from my beer. “Do you really mean that? You really hate this situation that much?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t! We don’t have it so bad. We’ll eventually find new jobs, and we can go back to the way things used to be. That wasn’t so bad was it?”

“When this pays off our lives will be better. If we don’t do this we’ll regret it forever. We’ll sit around wondering how our lives could have been different.”

“Do you not like it here?”

Eddie hesitated and looked at me as if it were a stupid question.

“Are you unhappy or is Joe unhappy and convincing you to be unhappy?” I asked.

“You’re getting cold feet, Jacob. Just chill-out and have a few beers and this will all come into focus.”

I looked away and casually shook my head.

“You’re always the one that wants more! You were always the one that bitched about his job the loudest! Now this opportunity comes along and you just want to throw it all away? All of this work that we put into this? The planning, the prepping, you just want to forget it and go back to being a loser?”

I turned to walk away.

“I’ll go along with this, but not because Joe told me to, ya sheep!” I yelled over my shoulder.

“Yea, yea, yea, go have another beer!”

I waived my half empty beer over my head as I left. Eddie fired up his reciprocating saw and hacked off the rear door locks.

I didn’t get much sleep the night before the abduction. I wish I could say that it was because I was wrestling with my moral qualms about what we were going to be doing the next day, but I wasn’t. I was going over the plan in my mind. I was thinking about where we were going to park and wait by the Lisborn Dance Academy, when we would make our move, how we would approach them, how we were going to bind them if necessary. I continually reminded myself that I needed to get some sleep—that I was going to have a long, and most likely strenuous, day ahead of me, that I needed my rest. I would then clear my mind and think of nothing. Then, before I knew it, I was right back to laying out the plans in my head.

*10:30: Park Eddie’s Lincoln around the corner a half block from the Lisbon Dance Studio.*

*The Cohens should arrive some time before the class starts at 11:00.*

*11:15: We pull the car closer to the front entrance and get a parking spot just outside the front door.*

*11:24: Showtime. We enter the dance studio. Joe and Eddie confront the instructor while I keep guard at the front door.*

*After we have the girls in our possession, Eddie will drive the speed limit on the roads that Joe has mapped out. Three o'clock we will be home-free.*

Again and again I played out what would most likely happen the next day. The girls were faceless in my mental construction. I had forgotten what they looked like. I pictured their size and considered their light weight. They would be easy to strong-arm if necessary.

## CHAPTER 15

I woke up before six. Even though I could have slept-in later, I knew that I wouldn't be falling back asleep. Joe and Eddie were awake as well. I don't know if they got much sleep, I didn't ask. Really none of us said a word. We were silent and methodical as we prepared. There was nothing really to say. We all had the same thing on our mind. There was no use talking about it or anything else.

Each of us shaved our faces and combed our hair to appear as professional as possible. We each dressed in our simple black suit. Joe made eggs, pancakes and bacon for breakfast. It was the only time I had ever seen him make a big breakfast. Really it was the only time that *any* of us made a big breakfast—not the usual bowl of Fruit Loops or handful of Oreos as we ran out the door for work. No, we all sat down around the table as a family to eat that morning. Joe kept flopping pancake after pancake on our plates, before turning back to the electric griddle to pour more. I wasn't very hungry. It was the nerves I guess. I felt stuffy, confined, and nauseous in that black suit. It was as if I was going to climb into a coffin soon after breakfast.

At least the general malaise ensured me that I was still alive.

Joe told me that I had to eat up, that it won't be until late afternoon before we get another meal. I did my best to eat as much as I could. Eddie was struggling as well, but not as much as I was. It was a shame that that meal was wasted on that morning. Any other time we would have been in high spirits, talking and helping ourselves to seconds and thirds. But that morning the majority of the feast remained untouched. I chewed each bite of pancake thoroughly. The syrup-squishing noise seemed to echo throughout the living room as we sat in our pressed suits with paper plates balanced on our laps, trying desperately not to drip. The sound of a full glass of milk being slurped by Eddie jolted my attention. I had turned to him, hoping that he had said something, only to realize he hadn't. Joe continually looked at his watch. We were far ahead of schedule.

After breakfast we didn't bother cleaning up. We went back to preparing. I looked in the mirror and saw the unrecognizable figure staring back at me. I straightened the skinny black tie and adjusted the white collar so it sat straight. I realized that over the course of the three hour drive it will all be disheveled once again. It didn't matter though. I simply needed to be doing something with my hands.

We didn't pack a cooler, we didn't pack anything. We got into the car that morning with nothing but the suits on our backs, fake I.D. wallets in our coat pockets and real wallets in our back pockets. Already packed in a duffle bag in the trunk were the fake front and rear license plates and tape to adhere them, zip ties to bind arms and legs and two black sacks to go over the girls' heads.

Our arms swung free, our leather-soled shoes clicked and clacked on the sidewalk. There was a brisk chill in the air and morning fog was still nestled in the valleys surrounding our property. I sat in the back seat of the car. Eddie turned the heater on all the way, but I couldn't get warm. I couldn't shake the chill in my bones.

From my view in the back seat, I sleepily watched the sun climb above the horizon. I was beginning to feel my lack of sleep from the night before, but I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. I remained in a distant, dreamy state for the first half of the long car ride. I was becoming familiar with this path that we had taken the couple of times the last week. The leaning brick silo, the largemouth bass mailbox, large colorful shapes made out of ply-board that resembled quilt designs nailed to the side of old barns.

At a little after nine that morning we stopped by an old *mom and pop* convenience store an hour and a half north of Des Moines to take a leak and pick up the little provisions that we may need. Only Joe went inside. Eddie and I waited patiently in the quiet car. I think his stomach was tied in tight knots just like mine. Joe walked out proudly with a tiny plastic sack swinging from his hand. He handed each of us a pair of matching aviator sunglasses, and instructed us that when we enter the dance studio we will have these on and keep them on. That it will not only make us look more official, but it will also help conceal our identity. I tried mine on and checked my appearance in the rear view mirror. They looked comically oversized on my narrow head. I didn't look anything like myself. I guess that was the point.

We parked around the block from the dance studio at 10:15, just a little earlier than we planned. I laid back low in my seat listening to the sounds of breathing in the car. Eddie was continually rubbing his eyebrows as if he had a migraine, while Joe sat forward staring like a mannequin. There are few times in my life when I've been truly nervous about having to do something. I always forget how I feel because once it's over with I'm fine. I feel great and all is forgotten. But sitting there in the back seat I was reminded of how I felt before giving a speech in front of my *Basic Communications* class or before a junior high football game. It's exactly the same. Sweaty palms, numb pinkies, dry mouth, the need to piss, and the constant need to fill air into my lungs.

Joe turned slightly to the left, looking to the back seat, but not at me. "You're not going in, Jacob."

"What?!"

"You're not going in. You don't look believable. I've been thinking about it all morning, and the sunglasses just sealed the deal. You look like a little kid dressed up in daddy's suit. You're too young. You'll give us away."



I didn't argue with him. I was relieved in a way. I felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders. Coach said I was riding the bench this game. My breathing quickly returned to normal.

"This changes the plan, Joe. Am I going to watch the door now?"

"No, you'll do the same thing that we went over."

I leaned forward in my seat and spoke into Joe's ear. "Where do you want me then? Do I just stay in the car?"

"I don't want them to see you at all. To be honest we shouldn't have brought you," Joe said as he stared forward, frozen like a statue. "You're going to have to get in the trunk."

Any other time I would have taken great offense by what Joe said, and wouldn't have stood for it, but this time I sat back in my seat and nodded my head.

"Are you alright with that?" Joe said turning all the way around looking at me through the tops of his large sunglasses.

"Fine... its fine," my voice crackling as I spoke. It was the first time that Joe had actually asked me if it was alright to do something. Every other time it was an order, take it or leave it. I think he genuinely felt bad about what he was making me do.

At ten to eleven random vans and SUVs pulled in front of the studio and dropped off their little girls. At three to eleven the all too familiar black Escalade quickly drove past us and parked in front of the dance studio's main entrance. We all held our breaths. I could say that with certainty because leading up to that our breathing had become annoyingly loud. Mrs. Cohen stepped out and walked around to the curb side letting the girls out. We were all sitting at the edges of our seats, peering sharply past the corner of the large block building—two little girls wearing little ballerina tutus hopped down from the tall SUV onto the sidewalk and raced inside. Mrs. Cohen followed. We each simultaneously leaned back in our seats, waiting for Mrs. Cohen to exit back out of the building.

Joe flipped down the mirrored visor, checked his hair, and straightened his tie.

Mrs. Cohen left soon after.

"I guess it's on," Joe said with chilled ease.

At exactly a quarter after eleven Joe instructed Eddie to pull around the corner and park near the front door, but not right in front. From our new vantage point we could hear loud techno music pumping from the interior. It was better than silence. Joe looked at his watch repeatedly. He didn't need to. He checked his watch so often that I'm sure he could guess the correct time within a couple of seconds. At 11:21, three minutes to show time Joe told me to climb in the trunk. I said someone's going to have to let me out. I don't have door handles.

"You're not climbing into the trunk from the outside. The back seat folds down." Joe snapped. I could hear the hostility in his voice that was brought on by the stress. I groped the side of the cracked vinyl seat until I found a little leather loop. I hooked my index finger and yanked it. Half the back seat folded down. I climbed in head first pushing the duffle bag out of the way. Joe told me to hurry it up. It was clear that he didn't want to throw off his schedule. But now that I look back on it I think it was because he was going to be ready to do this at exactly 11:24. He didn't want to be sitting in the car at 11:25 thinking that he could be inside, getting this over with.

I climbed into the trunk, reached back out to lift the seat back into its upright position. Joe told me to hand out the license plates. I unzipped the duffle bag and snatched out the two license plates that already had duct tape looped and stuck to the backs of them. The taped sides were sandwiched together. I leaned forward reaching my shaky hand to the front seat and Eddie took them from me. I lifted the back seat without saying so much as *good luck* to them. I lied on my back with my knees bent and my head resting against the fuzzy hollow cover that concealed the spare tire. I had nothing to do but to just lie there looking at the ceiling just above my head. I felt safer in there, much less exposed than next to the window in the back seat. Joe and Eddie sounded only slightly muffled. I could easily hear them asking each other how they looked and Joe reminding Eddie not to take off his sunglasses when they stepped inside. It was surreal, thinking about how we had gotten to that point; all three of us wearing black suits about to abduct a couple kids, and me hiding out in a trunk all the while.

I could hear a deep inhale followed by a sharp pursed exhale. Then Joe said, “Alright, let’s do it.” The front doors cracked open and loudly shut. I heard the sound of leather soled shoes as they twisted on the loose grains of sand and salt that was on the street surface. I felt the car rock slightly forward as the rear license plate was being pressed into place. Then it was back to silence. I went over the plan in my mind just as I did the night before. Only this time I was nowhere to be seen. I imagined Joe and Eddie confronting the dance instructor as she turned down the loud music to see what these official looking men were asking. Her hesitation, then relinquish of the Cohen daughters. But in my mind it took much less time. In my mind they were already back in the car and we were leaving. In real life I lied there waiting, and waiting. It was taking far too long. I wondered if they had been caught. But if that was the case Joe and Eddie would have fled. A woman wouldn’t be able to hold both of them back. Then I wondered if she was stalling them as she had someone else call the cops. Then I thought if they were going to get caught, how long would it take before they found me? I couldn’t see in the dark if there was a button or another loop for me to access the back seat from the trunk. Would I even want to let myself out? Where would they take the car? If they towed it away perhaps I would be able to escape in whatever holding lot they parked it? Or would they search the car before I would be able to escape.

Before even more questions grew, I heard a car door open. I froze like a rabbit that had been spotted. My fingers were paused in place as they were nervously peeling at a yellow sticker on the ceiling on the trunk. The door shut, and then two doors opened and shut once again. Did they get them or are we fleeing? I could have sworn that I heard three doors. The car started and pulled away from the curb. I reached out my hand and braced it against the trunk lid to steady my balance as I listened for any sign of our captives, but I still heard nothing. The car felt just the same leaving as it had been leading up to it. I certainly couldn’t call out from behind the back seat and ask if we got ‘em. So I lied there and listened between my shallow breaths.

“Is it very far away?” a tiny voice said just in front of me. A jolt ran through my body as if I had been shocked. We did it! Oh my God! I can’t believe we did it?

What the hell did we just do?

## CHAPTER 16

It was too late to turn back now. The ball was in motion. The distant, muffled voice of Joe said that it was a bit of a drive. Back to silence. I spread my feet and hands against the corners of the trunk to steady myself around the corners, careful not to make a sound.

“Is she going to be alright?” a little voice asked.

“She’s going to be fine. She just got a little scraped up. But she wanted to make sure that she saw you two,” Joe assured.

I tried to picture in my head what street we were on. I had learned quite a few new streets that past week, but no matter how I tried I had no clue as to where we were. I could feel the car come to a stop at every red light. I could hear the rhythmic clicking noise of the turn signal. When I heard that I braced myself even tighter from all sides not knowing which way the car was going to turn.

Soon I could feel the car increase in speed. The sound of the highway beneath the tires grew louder and louder. It was becoming more difficult to hear what was going on. I didn’t know if I would be able to hear anything on the other side of the seat until a tiny voice piped up once again.

“Where is the hospital?” it said in a worried tone.

“It’s not in this town. She was taken to a different one far away,” Joe said.

I could feel them shifting on the other side of the seat.

“How far away is it?”

“Very far,” Eddie said.

That was the last of the conversation for a while. Or at least what I could hear. The car continued on the highway. I could hear other cars beside us slowly pass. It wasn’t until the car pulled off from the highway that I could hear Joe say take the next left.

This road was much rougher. Every divot and pothole bounced me around in the trunk. My arms and thighs were burning from holding myself in place. The car turned off the poorly surfaced road onto a gravel road. The deafening sound of loose rock beneath tires created a sound barrier that I couldn’t listen past.

The car eventually came to a grinding stop. I could hear the girls. They were frantically asking questions. “I don’t see any hospital! Where are you taking us? We need to go home! Can you take us home?”

One of the doors opened then shut. The girls continued their frantic pleas. The trunk opened. There was a blinding sunlight. I couldn’t see a thing until the figure leaned forward and blocked the daytime light. It was Eddie. He had the stoic face of a mortician. He was pale. The blood seemed to have left his face. He brought his head close and said in a hushed tone, “You doing alright back here?”

With my hand placed above my eyes acting as a visor, I nodded my head. He tossed the front license plate into the bag and reached down to grab the back plate. He froze in his movements and said, “Uh, Joe?”

Joe called back from the front seat, “What? What is it?”

Eddie sighed, "You might want to come back here."

I looked at Eddie with concern. He didn't need to tell me what happened. I had already guessed it. Joe circled around to the back of the car. Eddie's eyes were fixed on our exposed license plate. Joe stopped dead in his tracks, "Tell me you took it off."

Eddie crouched down and pulled a loose piece of rolled duct tape off his plate.

"SHIT!" Joe shouted, kicking gravel with his polished black shoes. "When did it fall off?"

"How should I know?" Eddie said defensively.

Joe looked at me with ire in his eyes. I awkwardly shrugged my shoulders in my hunched position. "FUCKING MOTHER FUCKER!" Joe screamed while pulling at his once neatly combed hair. He took another kick at the gravel road, this time missing the gravel beneath his feet, almost sending himself onto his ass. He stood facing away from us, arms akimbo, surveying his surroundings. I could hear the girls screaming from the back seat when Joe lost it. He turned back around, kneading his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "Well, we can't turn back to find it. Hopefully it fell off after we left town."

Eddie opened the black bag and searched through it. He grabbed the zip-ties and head coverings out, and without looking at me, he slammed the lid of the trunk shut. The back door opened. I could hear their little screams. They were ear splittingly loud even through the seat. The little bodies bounced around. I could feel them cowering in the corner on the opposite side, beating at the door. After much struggle and screams, I could hear the zip-ties fasten around their tiny, little wrists, and then the back door slam back shut.

Joe and Eddie slammed the front doors of the car and spun the tires as we left. The gravel sprayed against the thin wheel wells making loud pinging noises. The girls were much quieter now. The screams had lessened to murmured tones and lamenting groans. They were through asking questions.

I could do nothing but lie there. I could hear the vibrations of their muffled cries through the thin seat. They were both still cowering on the opposite side of the bench seat, right next to my head. I curiously placed the palm of my hand against the back of the seat. They didn't know I was just on the other side, or who I was for that matter. I will simply be another one of their captors, another monster that took them away from their parents. It was better that I wasn't sitting in the back seat with them. There would be no way on earth for me to console them in any way. It was better they didn't know about me.

The ride was miserably long. It's much longer when you have no idea where you are. When you can't see landmarks you have no clue how much longer it will be. I imagine it would be like being in on a deserted island and you lose track of time. What may feel like years to you would only be months, weeks, or days to everyone else.

After what felt like forever, I could hear Eddie's car pull off a highway and with it came the familiar sound of a gravel road. It was a comforting sound to me. I knew this had to be our gravel road. At that point I could envision where we were at, and roughly how long it would take before we would be home. It still took longer than I pictured in my mind.

The car angled one more corner before stopping in front of the house. I suddenly wished to stay in the trunk rather than face what was going to happen outside. I didn't want to deal with it. It had felt that it was a difficult enough day already.

Joe and Eddie's doors opened and Eddie opened the trunk to let me out. My eyes had to adjust once again to the blinding afternoon light. I squinted through the tears to see Joe standing by the back door looking in through the window at the girls who were still huddled in the same corner. He told me to open the basement door and to prop open the front door. It's as if we were herding cattle through a chute. I jogged up the sidewalk, propped open the front door and yanked at the unforgiving deadbolt of the basement door and left it open. I heard Joe yelling at me from outside, telling me to get the hell out there. I rushed through the kitchen. As I got through the front door, one of the girls was running up our lawn and past the side of the house. Joe was yelling at me to stop her. She ran right past me at an unbelievable speed in her pink ballerina onesie with the black sack still covering her head and her hands bound in front of her with a purple zip tie. She couldn't see a thing, but she still ran blindly with all her might. Joe and Eddie were trying to wrangle the other one. She was kicking as screaming. Once Joe had her in a bear hug while Eddie ran after the one that passed by me. Eddie made up ground quickly. In my hesitation, I think I wanted her to escape.

She didn't make it too far. After narrowly missing the clothesline post, she tripped over the dry stubs of harvested cornstalks and uneven ground of the field that was just beyond our back yard. Eddie violently grabbed her from behind and picked her up. Her little legs flailing in her pink tutu as Eddie carried her to the house. That is an image that I will never forget. The disturbing and absurd sight of a little girl in pink tights running with her wrists bounds together and a black sack covering her head, and on top of that, a formally dressed Eddie chasing after her. It was like a surreal dream that I wanted to wake myself up from.

Eddie walked past me with the one that tried to escape, Joe with the other. Our usually quiet home was now filled with the desperate screams and cries of little girls. The wails grew quieter and more distant as they were carried down the basement steps. I stood in the kitchen, collecting my composure. The smell of the breakfast bacon was still heavy in the kitchen. Joe and Eddie came back up the stairs. They had sweat on their faces and dirt on their pressed slacks.

Joe securely locked the basement door and asked me what the hell my problem was. I shrugged as if I didn't know what he was talking about. I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"When I called for you to help us," he began, "you just stood there. What's the matter with you? She coulda' gotten away!"

"I- I'm sorry. I guess it just sort of took me by surprise."

Eddie opened up a cupboard door and pulled out a half full bottle of whiskey. "Forget about it, we got 'em. The hard part is over with. We can relax for a little while," he said in a relieved tone.

Eddie grabbed three small glasses and poured an even amount into each. We each obligatorily lifted our glass in front of us. With none of us being much for toasters, Eddie mumbled *cheers* under his breath. Each of us took our celebratory shot. Joe refilled his glass and took another before I even brought my arm back down.

Joe looked down at his shoes and let out a light, breathy laugh. "Can you believe the energy those two have? Christ they can put up a fight." Eddie apparently agreed with Joe's musing. "Listen, all that aside, we did it. I gotta say it sounded a little crazy in my

head when Jacob first mentioned this scheme. But look at us now! I'm proud of us. We did it. We fucking did it!"

"Yea we did!" Eddie chimed.

I smiled a fake smile, joining Joe and Eddie in their cheerful sentiments. I had forgotten that this was technically my idea. Although it really wasn't my idea, all I did was plant the bug in Joe's ear and he ran with it from there. It was a fucking joke. I never would have said anything if I knew it was going to bring us to that point, standing in our kitchen with two innocent girls held hostage in our basement.

With much enthusiasm, Joe poured more whiskey into each of our glasses. Perhaps feeling a bit maudlin from his previous two shots, Joe delivered a proper toast.

"Here's to us three. May this be the beginning to our new lives."

Our glasses clinked, and we each downed another dose. I was afraid he was right. That this would be our new lives, but not the new life that he was thinking. I imagined that this would be the beginning of our new lives behind bars. This was it. This was where we three boys finally went too far.

Joe slapped both Eddie and I on the shoulders. It was a pat on the backs for our day of deeds, I guess. It's awful to think that it was at that very moment that I had felt closest to Joe in all my life. This horrible thing that we did brought all three of us closer together. There really is something to that saying *thick as thieves*.

Eddie would later tell me exactly what happened that morning. He and Joe walked into the dance studio and the instructor immediately greeted them. Joe identified himself as detective Elliot and quickly flashed the identification badge from his breast pocket. Eddie stood a few steps behind him. The instructor asked what the matter was, and Joe said that Mrs. Elizabeth Cohen had been in a severe automobile accident and that they have orders to pick up the Cohen daughters and bring them to the hospital immediately. The dance instructor hesitated and said that she would have to call the contact number that Mrs. Cohen had left before she released the girls. All of the girls, including the Cohen girls, were standing on the other side of the studio, watching. The dance instructor opened up a shoulder bag and began rummaging through a pile of manila folders. Joe stepped up close behind her and said it's not going to do any good. Mrs. Cohen won't be able to answer. The instructor said that she would have to get permission from Mr. Cohen then. Joe said Mr. Cohen is on his way right now to the hospital. The woman was exasperated and didn't know what to do.

Joe leaned in close and said that time is of the element. He said that he would write down his information, and, even said quote, "Hell, I can even get my commanding officer on the blower to confirm this with you, but time is not on our side right now. Mrs. Cohen may not have long, and this could be the last time that those little girls will see her alive."

The instructor called over her assistant who was standing over with the girls and told her to get the Cohen girls. She put the folders back in order and slid them back into her shoulder bag. By the time the assistant brought the girls over to them. The instructor was holding back tears and quickly wiping away the ones that were running down her face. The girls looked confused and the instructor said that they needed to come with us. She knelt down and gave both girls a hug and didn't say another word. Joe thanked her for her cooperation, and they all walked out.

The girls asked what was going on. Joe didn't say anything until we were outside and away from everyone else. Then he just told them that their mother was in a minor accident, and that she was going to be fine, that she just wanted to see them.

Then that was it. They were shuffled into the car... as simple as that.

That night none of us could sit down. We felt like we had to be doing something. We changed out of our *Reservoir Dogs* uniforms and cleaned the house. Joe, once again feeling like a domestic goddess, cooked a large meal. He of course made extra for our new house guests. We sat around the table as a family eating boiled chicken breasts and microwaved brown rice. Joe continually reminded us that it would all be downhill from here. He meant it as the hard part was over, but in my mind I continually interpreted it as, it was going to get worse and worse from here. Joe and Eddie had voracious appetites, cleaning their plates and helping themselves to seconds, while I picked at my plate and forced down my modest serving.

Joe loaded up two plates, with more than enough food for two little girls, and stood behind Eddie as he unlocked the tight deadbolts to the basement door. Once Eddie slid the bolts free he slowly opened the door peaking through the gap to ensure that the girls weren't waiting at the top of the steps for a quick escape. Seeing that the coast was clear, he opened it entirely and let Joe past. Eddie grabbed an empty plastic gallon jug that once held whole milk, rinsed it out, and replaced it with cold tap water. Then he joined Joe down in the basement.

I sat at the table listening for any signs of how the girls were coping. I couldn't hear anything from Joe, Eddie or the girls. Soon enough Joe and Eddie ascended the staircase and carefully secured the door behind them.

"How are they doing?"

Joe picked up a pack of smokes that lay on the kitchen counter, removed one, and packed the butt of it against the door frame of the front entrance. "Fine," he said as he walked outside for his after dinner smoke. I got up from the table and grabbed a cigarette to join him.

Joe stood outside looking up at the clear night sky, panning his head across the brilliant display of stars. Smoke shot up out of his craned head like a chimney.

"How's the one's knee? I saw that she scraped it up when she fell."

"Fine."

"It looked like a pretty bad scrape."

"She shouldn't have run from us," Joe said while pulling another drag.

"We want these girls to be in good health when we return them to their parents."

Joe ignored me, keeping his attention to the night sky.

"If it gets infected we could have a lot of problems on our hands. We can't bring them to a hospital."

Joe blew out a plume of smoke within his annoyed exhale. "I'll drop off some peroxide and a rag or something."

"You will? You'll do that tonight?"

"Yes!" Joe said, now getting aggravated.

"I'm just saying, I can take care of it now."

"I've got it! You've done more than enough today," he said in a sarcastic tone.

I went back into the house to avoid his cold company. I didn't feel like watching TV. I couldn't go to bed since I donated that to our little project. I told Eddie that I was going into town. He was sitting in front of the TV, hardly caring about what I had to say. I grabbed my car keys and walked out the front door. Joe was just walking back inside.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to *Marv's* for a couple."

"Oh, no. You stay home tonight. I don't need you getting drunk in town and spouting your mouth off."

"You think I'm going to brag about what we did?"

"No, I think you're going to drink too much and start saying stuff that you shouldn't."

"I just need to get out of here. I won't even go to *Marv's*. I'll just take a drive."

"Not tonight!" Joe said, starring me down. He was excited, I could tell. His voice had an uncontrollable quiver.

And, like a grounded child, I stormed back into the house, trounced past Eddie in the living room, and stormed up the steps into my empty room. I lay on my floor, where my bed once was, and stared at the ceiling. Hanging above where my bed used to be was a poster of young Pamela Anderson, pre *Baywatch* days. In the poster she was adorned in tiny cut-off jean shorts with a black *Stetson* hat that matched her black cowboy boots with a red hankie tied around one of them. The poster featured her leaning in toward the camera showing off her best assets. Lying on my back, I looked into her deep gaze and thought about Cynthia, and what she was doing at that moment. I pined for her company in her little apartment with the Mona Lisa wall tapestry, and an actual bed to lie upon.

I stayed on the floor in my room until I heard Joe and Eddie go to bed at a quarter to midnight. I then crept downstairs and substituted the living room couch as a bed.

## CHAPTER 17

That morning my curiosity got the best of me. I sat up on the bed/couch and listened for any other sound in the house. Hearing nothing, I assumed that Joe and Eddie were still sleeping. I looked at the clock. It was a quarter to seven. I wondered if the girls were up.

I crept over to the basement door and slowly unlocked the tight deadbolts, careful not to alarm Joe or Eddie. I silently stepped down the stairs. The girls were staring wide-eyed at me from the far end of the bed. The blankets didn't look disturbed. I don't know if they had slept at all the previous night. They sat with their knees folded up to their chins, arms securely wrapped around their legs, their bodies pressed against each other's. They watched me carefully as I entered the room.

"Hi girls," I said in my friendliest voice. This was naturally met with silence. Not knowing what to say, I looked around and noticed the TV was off. "You know girls you are welcome to watch some television. You can watch all of the TV you want. We don't mind. You probably couldn't do that at home, could you?"



They both just stared at me. The *cool uncle* approach was obviously not going to work on them. I was careful not to step toward them. I didn't want to frighten them at all. I merely stepped to the side and pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table and sat backwards in it facing them. I don't sit in chairs backwards. I don't know why I did it then. Perhaps I was trying to appear laid back so they could be more comfortable around me. On the table sat the meal that was prepared for them the previous night. It had gone untouched. The rice was still piled in pristine hills and the pieces of chicken had dried into rubbery chew toys for a dog. The jug of water sat three-quarters full. I didn't know how full Eddie had filled it. I hoped they drank some of it, but I suspected they didn't.

"So what are your hobbies?" I asked them. Still nothing, no eye contact was broken. They peered at me over the tops of their knees.

"You know that you girls will be going back home sometime soon, right? You're just hanging out here with us until we get this matter sorted out. Then you can go back to your family and friends and your dog. Do you girls have a dog?"

As expected, no response.

"I used to have a lot of dogs growing up. I mean not at once. When one dog would die we would get a new one." I continued, "It's not like we had dogs die all the time either. They would live to an old age and naturally pass. Then we would eventually get a new one, or a stray would come to stay."

The girls would not move or respond. They wouldn't even take their eyes off of me to look at each other. They were like life-size dolls. I couldn't figure out how to reach them. Then a light bulb went off in my head.

I stood up from the chair, "Stay put, I'll be right back."

After realizing how stupid it was to say that to the mannequin sisters, I jogged up the steps two at a time. After locking the door behind me, I ran out to the old grain shed where I placed all of the plastic totes that were in the basement. I searched through a couple of them before I found the tote that contained our childhood board games. I grabbed the game *Sorry* out of the bunch and brought it with me back down to the basement.

Once I was back down the stairs, I could see that the girls did indeed stay put. I asked them if they would like to play a board game. Again no response. I told them that it was my favorite when I was their age. I pushed the plates of old food to the side and unfolded the board and carefully set up the colored pieces each in their respective starting positions and then picked up the dice.

"Last chance if you want to play. Alright, if you girls don't want to play I'll play for you. You'll be the red pieces," looking at Ashley, "and you'll be the blue pieces," looking at Olivia, "and I'll be the green pieces. Ashley you'll go first." Then I rolled the dice for her.

I played the game for them while explaining exactly what I was doing and what number each of us was rolling. I had mock despair when Ashley rolled the appropriate number to knock my piece back to the starting position, and was gracious every time I did that to them, all while saying the title of the game in a teasing apologetic way as I reset their game piece back to the starting stable. I must admit, although I hadn't played the game in years, and I was technically playing it by myself, it was still quite a lot of fun. Though for their sake I wasn't playing as shrewdly as I could have.

The game was nearing the end and I announced that Olivia would be the winner if she could roll a seven on the dice. I picked up the dice and began to shake them in my hand. I could see Olivia's fingers fumbling together. She was staring right at my hand that was shaking the dice.

"Would you like to roll it yourself?" I asked.

Olivia's fingers trembled and fumbled some more. Then she sprang up from the bed and hopped off. She stepped much more slowly and carefully as she approached me. Her sister said, "Olivia!" in a shocked, audible whisper. I opened my hand and presented the dice to her. Olivia quickly snatched the dice out of my palm, careful only to touch the dice. She gave them a good shake all while looking at me and let them loose on the board.

"Four! That's not a bad thing. It just means that you will need a three on your next roll to win this game." I assured her.

She seemed content with her roll.

"Ashley? Care to roll the dice for yourself?" I asked.

She remained seated on the bed, but was now watching her little sister more than she was watching me.

"Alright then, I'll roll for you, Ashley."

Olivia and I continued playing the game. I was seated in the chair while she stood on the other side of the table. Eventually she rolled the four that she needed to win the game. She was very pleased by that.

"How about another game?" I asked her.

Without saying a word, she nodded her head and I began to reset the board.

"Ashley? Do you want to get in on this one?"

She still didn't move. I looked back to the game board and continued putting all of the pieces back into place. I could see Ashley slowly get off the bed and I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she joined her sister on the other side of the table. Both were standing next to each other in their matching pink outfits.

"Winner goes first," I said as I handed little Olivia the dice.

We continued to play *Sorry*. The girls seemed to be enjoying themselves almost as if they had temporarily forgotten their situation. They still remained standing on the opposite side of the table from me. But I assumed that they had been sitting long enough over the past day. Olivia seemed to enjoy herself the most. Though she was silent, she reveled in the moment every time she forced Ashley or my game-piece off the board and sending us back to the start. At one moment I heard her lightly say *Sorry* with a cunning grin, while not looking at anyone. I was happy they trusted me enough to play a board game with me. I assumed it was because they didn't see me when they were stolen.

We were in the middle of the third game when we could hear floorboards creaking above our heads. The girls' backs were perched and perfectly straight. They both scurried back to their familiar places in the far corner on top of the never slept in bed.

"Don't you want to keep playing? Ashley, I think you have a good chance of winning this one."

There was no response. They had reset their positions—legs bent up with arms wrapped securely around them—staring over the top of twin kneecaps.

"It's alright. I bet that's Joe, he'll play with us too if you like?"

I could hear footsteps traverse the kitchen floor. Joe must have notice that the basement door wasn't fully shut because I heard his loud steps dash to the door and quickly descend the steps. Joe stopped at the base of the staircase and drew a sigh of relief to see that the girls had not escaped. He then turned his anger toward me.

"Why the fuck did you leave the basement door open?!"

"Language," I silently mouthed to him.

"What?!"

"Your language," I said while hinting over to the girls who were now completely petrified.

"What do you mean my language?! I live here and I'll talk however the fuck I want!" Joe said.

"It's not so much that," I began to explain. "Your tone in front..." I stopped myself. "Let's take this upstairs."

Joe stomped up each wooden step and I followed behind much more softly. I looked back at the girls and put up both hands, fingers up, palms out and mouthed, "It's alright."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing down there?"

"I'm playing *Sorry* with the girls?"

"This isn't a fucking slumber party!"

"What did I say about the language?" I asked.

"We're upstairs! Their sensitive little kiddy ears can't hear me!" Joe shouted.

"Yes, they can." I said in a hushed tone. I continued, "If you want the girls to eat, sleep and not be complete traumatized wrecks when this is all over with, we need to start acting appropriately."

Joe glared at me with a look of disbelief.

"Language for starters," I said.

"You mean *fuck*? I said fuck all the time when I was their age!" Joe said.

"Well that's you. They don't say that all the time. They probably never hear it in their household."

"Mom called us fuckers all the time."

"Well our family's fucked up."

"Yea, but look how *we* turned out," Joe said with a tinge of ironic pride.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to avoid."

"Fine then, I won't offend their delicate ears." Joe said in a *smart ass* tone.

"And the tone of your voice, I was finally getting the girls to warm up to me and you came stomping down the steps and scared them off."

"Well what do you expect? First I thought that they had escaped and were halfway to a neighbor's house, then I find you playing fucking *Scrabble* in the basement!"

"*Sorry*."

Joe gave a quick accepting head nod.

"No dipshit. I'm not apologizing, I'm correcting you. We were playing *Sorry*."

"They're not here for you to befriend! This is business, and only that! Go make friends on the outside! Go hang out at the middle school playground and make friends with those kids if you want friends so bad!" Joe said, shouting before he closed with a wry grin.

"I'm only trying to make this place tolerable for them, alright?"

“I know what you’re doing. And you shouldn’t be getting attached to them otherwise if they get harmed then you’re going to take it very personally.”

“Harmed? Why would they get harmed?”

“They won’t.”

“Why would you say that then?”

“If their fat-cat father is prompt and plays by the rules everything will be fine and no one will be harmed.”

I looked deep into his eyes. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Sure we weren’t *straight edge* kind of guys, but we would never harm anyone. I could see that Joe was beginning to regret what he had just told me. But his expression soon was resolute and hardened as he turned away and jogged down the basement steps. I followed close behind.

The girls were positioned exactly as they were before. I hoped they couldn’t hear our conversation. I especially hoped they didn’t hear the end of it! Joe bent his body in half like a Japanese business man, and said in an over the top courteous voice, “Sorry girls, no more games. Your playmate has work to do.” He looked back at me with an ear to ear plastered grin as he sloppily threw the game pieces and board into the shallow rectangular box, knocking half of the plastic pieces onto the concrete floor. He smashed the now bent game board on top of the assorted pieces. I stood there on the steps, absorbing his patronizing degradation while seeing the frightened looks on the girls’ faces. Joe smashed the lid on the box, leaving the discarded, colored pieces on the floor where they fell before running his shoulder into me as he passed by. I couldn’t face the girls to apologize to them. Their faces were buried against each other’s shoulders. I had no idea that Joe had the capacity to be that cruel. He didn’t care what he was doing to those girls. I had never seen him like that before.

I avoided Joe for the rest of the day. With no television in my room, I spent the entire day reading. At one point that evening, I saw Joe heating up two microwave dinners for the girls. I didn’t say hello. I made my sandwich and retreated back into my empty room. I sat on the bare floor where my bed used to be and listened to every movement that occurred downstairs to make sure he didn’t get violent. I later heard Eddie come home from *Marv’s* and Joe immediately was speaking to Eddie in a hushed tone, probably about me.

After that they went to bed. I went back downstairs and made my bed on the couch once again. I didn’t check in on the girls, I knew that Joe would hear me open the door. I just hoped that they ate something that night.

## CHAPTER 18

The next morning I awoke to Joe sitting in the recliner next to the couch watching the *Today Show* at a loud volume, paying no regard for me. I sat up without saying a

word, stretched, rubbed my eyes, and then reached for the half spent pack of smokes on the coffee table, lighting my first of the day. Joe was eating toaster waffles and kept his eyes trained at the television.

“High definition is definitely not Meredith Viera’s friend... especially in the morning,” he passively observed.

“We don’t get high definition.”

“You know what I mean.”

More silence before he finished his toaster burnt breakfast.

“I gave the girls’ breakfast so there is no reason for you to go down there.”

“Did they eat their dinner?” I asked.

“It’s of no concern to you.”

“You really wouldn’t hurt those girls would you?”

Joe got up from the recliner and walked into the kitchen, discarding his plate and fork onto the stacks of dirty dishes that were abandoned in the sink.

“I’m off,” Joe said, before slamming the front door as he exited.

I spent the morning cleaning the house. I scrubbed the plates, bowls, glasses and silverware that were in the sink. We didn’t have any dish soap in the house so I ended up using liberal amounts of hand soap from the bathroom. I wiped off the counters and swept the kitchen floor before cleaning the ground floor bathroom and sink, which was much easier than the basement’s I might add. I then folded the blankets of my couch/bed and placed them behind the couch and out of the way. I then made my way out to the old pump house and gassed up the lawn mower, and began mowing the large lawn. The grass was long, thick and overdue for a trimming. Every time I passed by the basement windows I wanted to look inside to see how the girls were doing. But I couldn’t. All that was there was amateur-laid cinderblock.

Once I had finished the lawn, I went back into the house. Eddie was finished sleeping off his hangover. He was sitting in the living room watching *The Price is Right*. It appeared that he had already managed to undo much of the progress that I had made that morning cleaning. There was a pizza box sitting on the floor and an empty glass that just recently had milk in it. I picked up the glass and ran water in it so that the milk wouldn’t curdle at the bottom, making it difficult to clean, as I witnessed earlier that morning. Eddie sat there like a bump on a log in the middle of the couch gnawing on a piece of cold pizza like a beaver to a log. I took a seat next to him.

“How was *Marv’s* last night?”

“Same old, I lost at Euchre. Everyone was asking where you were.”

“Really?”

“Fuck no. They were glad the retard that plays the same *Journey* song over and over on the jukebox wasn’t there.”

“I think I’m going to make some lunch for the girls.”

“Joe said that I’m not supposed to let you down there.”

“Someone has to feed them.”

“I’m supposed to take care of it,” Eddie mindlessly said as he watched the *Plinko* discs slide down the wall, hitting pegs along the way.

“How was Joe acting last night to you?” I asked.

“Fine, he was still pretty pissed at you though.”

“Did he say why?”

Eddie mildly shrugged his shoulders and continued to watch television.

“Joe isn’t opposed–” I stopped myself and leaned in close to Eddie and lowered my voice, “...Joe isn’t opposed to hurting the girls if everything doesn’t go as planned.”

Eddie continued to eat his rubbery slice of cold pizza and watched TV.

“Did you hear me? Joe isn’t– “

“Yes!” Eddie interrupted. “I know!”

“Well? What do you think about that?”

“It’s a last resort.”

“You too?! Are you both fucking nuts?”

“Listen, if someone told you that you could get three million dollars for cutting off a pinky toe or delivering a black eye to take a picture of it, would you?” Eddie asked.

“NO!!”

“Well what if you had to cut off a pinky toe to make sure that their father doesn’t rat us out if he figures it out who did it? Would you do that to keep your ass out of prison for the rest of your life?”

I hesitated, but then I thought of the girls. I thought about approaching them with a cleaver. The looks their faces would have as we severed a toe, or the very thought of throwing my fist into their soft, rosy cheeked faces. I thought about that and resolutely said *no*.

“Alright,” Eddie passively said as he delivered a quick glance to me.

“And you would?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You wouldn’t do that! You couldn’t do that. None of us would!”

“Well if you were to ask me a couple of weeks ago if we could bear kidnapping two kids, I would have to say *no* but... you know... here we are,” he explained flatly.

I had had enough. I grabbed the cigarettes off of the coffee table and walked to the back door for a little air. I was wondering who these sudden strangers were that I was living with.

“You know, Jacob, I don’t even know why we’re talking about this, you know. It’s a last resort!”

“It shouldn’t even be on the table,” I said in a huff as I walked out the back door.

As I was having a smoke, I could see Eddie get up and prepare the girls a couple of cold meat turkey sandwiches. He snagged an open bag of pretzels from the cabinet along with a couple of cans of orange soda. I finished my smoke, but didn’t feel like going back inside, so I sat on the back stoop and gazed at the infinite rolling hills. It was past harvest season, and much of the surrounding fields were barren. Short, grey corn stalks that had been severed at the base by a combine harvester weeks ago, stood up from the tilled earth like beard stubble. Freshly fallen leaves were already littering the lawn that I had just finished mowing. Soon we’d be preparing for the long, cold winter. I hoped that they girls wouldn’t be around for that.

Eddie opened the back door. I didn’t bother turning around. He said my name in a worried tone. I looked over my shoulder to see a look of concern.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s the girls. They haven’t eaten anything yet. I’m afraid that they’re starving their way out.”

I lowered my head and shook it disapprovingly.

“Joe said that it was only a matter of time before they would come around, but shit man, it’s been like two days. We’re going to end up with a couple of dead girls on our hands!”

“Have they been drinking anything?” I asked.

“It doesn’t look like it, I’m not sure, all’s I know is I went to put their food on the table and they haven’t touched a thing—the TV dinners, the chicken and rice, the bowls of cereal, nothing!”

I wanted to tell him how we were going to remedy this, but I didn’t know what to do either.

“Should we force feed them?” Eddie asked.

“No,” I said. Even though that thought ran through my head as well. I didn’t want them to starve. But how do you get two little kids to eat?

“I think I’ve got it,” I said. “Grab your keys. We need to go to McDonalds.”

We were half-way to McDonalds when I made him promise me that if the girls didn’t eat anything that day we’d drive them back to Des Moines and drop them off somewhere so they could get home. He was much more receptive now. The fear of the girls actually being in trouble was starting to sink in. I told him, “Fuck what Joe says, if they don’t eat, they’re gone”.

We pulled through the drive-through and I had him order two *Chicken McNugget* kids meals with *Hi C*, and a double cheeseburger meal for me. When I asked Eddie what he wanted, he said that he wasn’t hungry. I told him that he had to order something. With a note of worry, and a sense of urgency still in his voice, he ordered the same as me.

I informed him that we were going to eat it with them so they’d trust us... hopefully.

Once we got back to the house, I led the way down the basement steps. Eddie was carrying two *Happy Meal* cardboard boxes, a large paper sack containing our meals and four soft drinks on a cardboard carrier. I immediately removed the bowls of Cheerios, disturbing the flies as I did so; the dried, coagulated grilled cheese sandwiches, and TV dinners that still had the plastic coverings over top of the trays. The girls witnessed everything from their spot on the far corner of the bed. I quickly carried everything up the stairs and stuffed it all into the kitchen garbage.

Once back downstairs, I saw Eddie awkwardly standing still on the basement steps looking up at me as I descended. With the rotten food gone, I began digging through the large paper bag. I placed Eddie and my meals on the table, spread out the yellow paper wrapping and poured fries out next to the burger. The scent of delicious, greasy fast food was quickly filling the small basement. I then grabbed the *Happy Meals* and carefully stepped toward the girls, placing the boxes on the corner of the bed. Not knowing where to place the twin *Hi C*’s, I carefully set them on the floor, just before the bed. I walked backwards back to the table and grabbed a seat. Eddie didn’t bother sitting down, he just stood where he was standing the entire time at the bottom of the steps, carefully watching the whole thing happen.

I picked up one of the cheese burgers and began to eat it, all while looking at the girls and nodding my head approvingly. I even made the *Mmmm*, sound. I felt like I was trying to teach a chimp how to eat like a human. The girls weren't budging. I looked over at Eddie and told him to sit down and eat something. He jolted out of his frozen state and joined me at the table, and began to eat some fries. I kept on nodding my head approvingly and he began to mirror my nods. We both looked fucking ridiculous. I began to wonder if this was futile, that these girls must have made a pact with each other that they would rather die than to be held captive. I wondered if we would have enough time to abort this stupid heist and get the girls back to their home before Joe came home. I knew I would catch hell from Joe if we returned them back home. He'll probably punch me, or worse. I didn't know what he was capable of, at least not recently.

We used to fight all the time as boys, but we had a tacit agreement about punching in the face. That is until high school, then anything went if we were mad enough. Except for the nose if we could help it, none of us liked getting punched in the nose. It hurt so goddamn much.

Eddie was looking at me with a skeptical expression, ready to admit defeat to the girls' iron clad resolution. That's when little Olivia made the first move. She crawled on her hands and knees to the edge of the bed, reached out her hand and looped one finger around one of the yellow arches on top of the red box, and slowly dragged it to her. She opened the *Happy Meal*, and didn't waste any time digging in. She immediately began filling her mouth with *McNuggets*, not even using the dipping sauce. Ashley couldn't hold out any longer, she was much more tentative in her approach. She took the last remaining *McNugget* from Olivia's meal, and brought it up to her nose to sniff it. After deciding that we probably didn't tamper with it, she began taking small bites of it. By this time Olivia had mouthful of fries and a look of ecstasy across her face. After searching for more *McNuggets*, and seeing none, Olivia carelessly scampered back to the edge of the bed to retrieve the second *Happy Meal*, not once looking up at Eddie or me. The smile on my face matched Olivia's as I turned to look at Eddie.

With the second *Happy Meal* almost gone—this time the runt getting the lion's share—Eddie offered his cheese burgers to the girls. He put both burgers in one hand and slowly walked toward the bed with this arm fully outstretched. Olivia nabbed both burgers and handed one to her sister. Eddie had a grin on his face, as if the goats at the petting zoo had just eaten some brown pellets out of his palm.

The girls continued to voraciously consume their meals as Eddie and I looked on contently. Now that a bridge of trust seemed to be constructed, I took the opportunity to open up a dialogue with them.

"You know you girls are welcome to watch television. You can watch as late as you want! There aren't any bedtimes here!" I informed them.

Olivia just stared ahead with a blank look on her face. Ashley was still munching on fries and washing it down with orange *Hi C*. I could see that she didn't treat the gash on her leg. The wound was swollen and had a deep, red frayed edge. There were multiple stains on the bed from where the open wound came into contact with the sheets.

"Maybe I could move one of our radios down here for you girls. What kind of music do you like to listen to?" I asked.



Ashley was still far too busy searching the bottom of the red box for the last stray french fry. Olivia looked down to her lap.

“Do you girls like Katy Perry?” I asked.

Olivia vomited on the covers.

Eddie and I both stood up with arms ready to help her, but feared getting too close.

“It’s alright Olivia. Your stomach is a little tender from not eating for a while,” I assured her.

Olivia began to vomit again.

I rushed over and grabbed the empty *Happy Meal* box and held it under her chin. She began to return the food to the container from which it came. I sat beside her and watched her vomit undigested *Happy Meal*. There were large chunks of food that was still easily identifiable. She had hardly chewed it. The barely smaller nuggets of chicken were dispelled along with halves of french fries and orange-soaked chunks of hamburger bun. I began rubbing her back in a circular motion just as my mother did with me when I was sick with the flu and vomiting as a child. It appeared that she didn’t keep much of it down. I was shocked at how much came up. She couldn’t have eaten much more than that to begin with. I looked to Eddie who was still standing by the table wanting to help, but feared approaching. I told him to pour a glass of milk for Olivia. He scampered up the steps. I grabbed one of the unused napkins and handed it to Olivia so she could wipe off her chin, before her sat a puddle of puke. Luckily Ashley kept her lunch down, and so did I. I continued to rub Olivia’s back with a maternal-like touch until I realized that I’d better give her some space.

Eddie came back down the stairs and handed me the glass of milk and I held it before Olivia and told her to drink some, that it will help settle her stomach. Eddie stayed standing next to the bed. Olivia grabbed the glass out of my hand and gripped it with her tiny hands. She began drinking the milk making a deep slurping sound. While she was drinking the milk, she coughed a little causing a bubbly backwash before she continued drinking. I softly warned her not to drink too fast or the milk will come up also.

When it seemed that Olivia had regained her composure, I began pulling the sheet off the corner of the bed to cover up the vomit. I wanted to get it out of there so she wouldn’t vomit again—that is if there was any food left to vomit. I asked Olivia and Ashley to please stand, and I pulled the sheet and blanket off the bed. They stepped off of the sheet as I pulled on it and stood on the bare mattress. Then they immediately sat back down. I slid the little cardboard box over to Eddie and told him to get rid of it and to throw the blanket and sheet into the washing machine. Eddie took the bed covering and puke box upstairs without saying a word. I was a little surprised. Eddie never did anything that I asked, ever. But in this scenario I was in charge and he was following orders. I liked that feeling.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Olivia.

“Hungry,” she said in a shamed, light voice.

I let out a chuckle, and was happy to see that Ashley found it funny as well, although Olivia didn’t. I told her that I’d have Eddie make her a sandwich. I wasn’t about to move from that spot right next to her. I had gained a lot of ground in a matter of minutes, and I wasn’t about to let it be undone. I asked her what kind of sandwich she liked. Olivia continued to look down and shrugged her shoulders. I asked her if she liked

peanut butter and jelly. She nodded her head. I asked her if she wanted more milk. Olivia nodded once more, and without looking up, said chocolate. I told her we could do that.

Ashley could care less about what was happening with her sister. She was now occupied with her *Happy Meal* toy that featured a character from the latest *Shrek* movie. Olivia looked to see what prized possession laid in her sisters hands. She leaned in toward her to view it. Ashley pulled her precious toy tight against her chest and said *you puked on yours*.

Olivia looked back at me signifying that that wasn't very fair at all. Perhaps since I was an adult, any adult, even though I was one of the adults that kidnapped her, she looked at me as if I was to moderate this disagreement. I merely smiled with an exhale and shrugged my shoulders.

Eddie prepared a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Olivia, with a tall glass of chocolate milk. This time she had better luck keeping it in her bowels. I never budged from that spot. I talked, they didn't. It was a one sided conversation of me talking about how I used to make a triple-decker PB&J sandwich. I explained in great detail which sides of the bread contained what ingredient as to not have the jelly permeate the outer bread layer. They weren't very interested, but they were listening. I could tell.

I went on to tell them how my mother would sneak wheat germ into my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when she would make them for me. And, how I asked her not to buy chunky peanut butter anymore, how my mother agreed but told me that she had to use up the rest of the chunky before she got the creamy kind. I went on to mention how all the while I didn't know that she was putting wheat germ into creamy peanut butter. It wasn't until I found the wheat germ in the pantry and noticed that it looked suspiciously like the chunks in my peanut butter did she confess.

Eddie had pulled up a chair and was seated just next to the mattress and box spring that was on the floor.

"What's wheat germ?" Ashley asked.

I could see Eddie's head excitedly turn to look at me. I responded normally as to not make Ashley feel self-conscious.

"Well to be honest, Ashley, I still don't quite know. I think it's like a wheat seed or something. It's good for you. My mom had the best of intentions. Apparently she thought that I needed it, but I wouldn't eat it on my own."

"Why don't you tell the girls how old you were when Mom was sneaking the wheat germ in your PB&J?" Eddie said with a smile.

"I don't remember. I was probably ten or so."

"No, he wasn't. He was a senior in high school!" Eddie said to the girls with a smile.

"I might have been in high school, but I wasn't a senior."

"He was in high school and he was having our mom make him his special PB&J sandwich with wheat germ!" Eddie said, now laughing.

The girls were now laughing too. So I didn't mind that the joke was at my expense.

"What was I supposed to do? Mom would always offer and I didn't want her to feel useless!" I said with a defensive grin to Eddie.

The girls had these laughs that were like helium-laced giggles. It got to the point where Eddie and I were no longer laughing about Mom making me my PB&J sandwiches when I was eighteen. We were laughing at the girls' unbridled, high-pitched laughter.

It was a great relief to see the girls getting comfortable. I only hoped that Joe wouldn't mess it up. I knew that all it would take is one slam of the door, or him raising his voice in anger once for him to undo the progress that Eddie and I were making that afternoon.

I assumed that they wouldn't feel comfortable enough to begin relating funny stories of their own, so I began asking them simple questions.

"So how old are you, Ashley?"

She wasn't put off, but she wasn't about to answer me.

"Well, I'm twenty-two years old and he's twenty-six," I said while pointing at Eddie.

"How old are you, Olivia?" I asked.

Without saying a word, Olivia opened her right hand proudly displaying all five fingers before crowding her index finger next to her pink hand.

"Six! That's very impressive!" I said.

"Ashley? How many fingers are you?" I asked.

"Eight," she said, very matter-of-factly.

"You're eight?! I don't believe it. You seem so mature! I would have guessed you not to be a day under ten!" I said.

Ashley smiled, and took the misjudgment of age as a compliment. If there's one thing that I learned it's that every girl wants to be older than what she is. That is until they turn twenty-five, at that point they spend the rest of their lives wanting to be younger. I knew exactly how old the girls were before I asked. Hell, I'd researched them for a week.

"So what games do you like to play?" I asked.

No response.

"You girls can have fun here. There's no reason why you can't. It helps make the time go by faster," I said.

There was a brief bit of silence before Ashley began to speak.

"Why are we here?"

I looked over to Eddie, not quite knowing what to say, or how to say it. Eddie looked at me, and subtly shook his head as his way of signifying that he had no clue what to say. It appeared that it was up to me.

"Well, there really is no easy answer. There have been certain discrepancies with your father in the past, and for now... for a short time you'll be staying here until we get it all figured out," I stammered.

I intentionally talked over Ashley's head to hopefully confuse her. I didn't want her to know exactly what I was saying to her. And I certainly didn't want to tell her the truth: *we stole you from your loving parents so that they will give us a great deal of money so that we aren't compelled to remove any of your toes.*

It's an awful, ugly truth.

"Do Mom and Dad know that we're here?" Ashley asked.

"Well, we're working on that. We're going to talk to your father soon to let him know that you're with us, and that you are safe, and that you're eating," I said.

Ashley nodded her head, seeming to be content with that explanation. Olivia was sitting between us shifting her head back and forth to whoever was talking like she was watching a tennis match.

“That’s why it’s important that you eat regularly and drink plenty of water so that we can tell your dad that you’re fine and he won’t have to worry about you,” Eddie said.

I began to wonder if the girls knew what a ransom situation was. Could they see through me? Could they put the pieces together? I was pretty sure that Olivia didn’t know what was going on exactly. Ashley, I wasn’t so sure about. I couldn’t remember if I knew what a ransom was when I was eight.

“When can we go home?” Olivia asked in her soft, meek voice.

“Soon, I hope,” I said to her. I looked over at Ashley’s knee. It was looking red and possibly infected. Her pale, pink ballerina leggings were frayed and stained around the opening.

“Your knee is looking pretty bad, Ashley.” I said to her. She quickly covered the gash with her hand to hide it from me. “Will you let me help you?”

She ignored me and turned her attention back to her *Happy Meal* toy, feigning interest, and hoping that I would let her be. I grabbed the peroxide and the roll of gauze that Joe had left, off the table. “Ashley, do you mind sitting at the edge of the bed so that I can take care of this?” She didn’t look up. “It can hurt to treat a wound, but it’s not nearly as painful as if we don’t. If we don’t do anything, you can end up getting sick, getting a fever.” She maintained her gaze at the little plastic toy in her hands. “Ashley?” I paused and waited for her to look up at me. “I promise I’ll fix your knee as quickly as possible with as little pain as possible.”

She didn’t budge. My voice grew stern and intense. “Ashley, I have to insist that you let me treat your wound.”

Without saying a word, Ashley begrudgingly slid to the edge of the bed. I thought back to how my mother treated any of my scrapes and cuts. She would usually ask me how it happened. I would begin telling her about how I was climbing a tree, playing in the haystack or messing around in one of our abandoned farm sheds. She would be really impressed and ask me a bunch of questions like, *you climbed how high?!* And I would be completely enveloped in my story that I wouldn’t be paying attention to the pain of the peroxide or the damp rag she was wiping against the tender wound to remove the small bits of debris. It was a pretty clever rouse now that I think about it.

Asking Ashley how she got her wound would be a horrible idea. *Wow, you say that you were running for your life, blindfolded, hands bound, with a grown man chasing you? That is very impressive!*

I needed to distract her mind some other way.

“So how long have you been a ballerina?” I asked as I pinched the blood stained leotard and pulled it away from her knee. She didn’t answer me. She just stared at me as I observed her wound. “What was that? I didn’t hear you.” I said looking up at her. I knew she hadn’t said anything, but I figured I’d put her on the spot so she would have to say talk.

“Four years,” she sheepishly said.

“Four years! That’s half your life!” Eddie said, walking up to the side of the bed. He knew what I was trying to do, and he stepped up to help. Ashley looked away from me working on her wound and looked up at Eddie.

“Well, the first year we didn’t do much for dancing, we just did poses and stuff.”

“Really? But you know how to dance now? I bet you’re pretty good at it. Do you know how to stand on your toes?”

Ashley modestly grinned and nodded her head *yes*.

“I doubt I could do that.” Eddie then proceeded to try, bracing his hand on the back of his chair, then pointed the tips of his work boots to the concrete, and slowly let go his grip. He proceeded to walk two steps before tipping forward and catching himself before he took out the table. Both girls laughed and I went back to work.

I lifted the pink tights away from her knee once again. The dried blood acted as an adhesive. I gently separated the elastic cloth from her skin. Pulling the cloth away opened up the cut, and fresh red blood began trickling across the black, flaky, dried blood.

I told Ashley that I was going to have to remove part of her tights to treat the wound. She didn’t seem to mind. She was too busy informing Eddie that he was doing it all wrong. I went back to work. I had a pocket knife in my front pocket, but I didn’t want to pull that out in front of the girls. I quickly jogged up the steps to the kitchen and grabbed the plastic handled sheers out of the butcher’s block. As I went down the staircase, I could hear Olivia laughing while Ashley said to Eddie with a combination of laughter and exasperation, “No! You don’t stand on the tips of your toes! You stand on the bottoms of just your toes.”

“Like this?” Eddie said standing on the tips of his booted feet with his arms craned out like a menacing grizzly bear—taking dainty steps while barely maintain his balance.

“NO!” Ashley said, slapping her forehead laughing.

I took the sheers and started cutting at the top of the large tear. I cut the legging in both directions. I then lifted her tiny leg to finish off the intact fabric beneath her knee. I pulled the bottom half of the legging off like a sock. I saw that she had pink polished toe nails that matched her leotard perfectly. By this time Eddie had completely filled the roll of court jester and was now spinning around on one foot with his right arm craned above his head. I didn’t have a rag on me so I snipped off a length of gauze and ran it under the bathroom sink. I knelt before my distracted patient and began wiping the tender, torn flesh with the wet gauze. Her leg flinched, but she didn’t seem to be concerned. The dried blood didn’t want to seem to come off and the gauze pad was drying quickly, so I remoistened it under the sink once again while Eddie acted like a pro coming in at the clutch. He was now doing leaps while attempting mid-air splits. I went back to work on the gash on Ashley’s knee that was now looking worse upon closer inspection. I feverishly wiped away the dead skin and dried blood to reveal the tender, pink skin beneath. I snipped another length of gauze and drenched it in peroxide. I was about to warn Ashley that it may sting a bit, but she was occupied telling Eddie that he was doing it completely wrong. Eddie humorously stood his ground explaining that the way he was doing it is exactly how they do it on TV.

I pressed the peroxide soaked gauze against her exposed flesh. She winced and said *owe*, looking at me with annoyance.

“Almost done,” I said.

Just to be safe I drenched the gauze once more and pressed it against the now bubbly foam covered knee. The second time she didn’t even flinch. I patted away the excess bubbles and used the gauze strip that was damp with sink water to wipe away the

long drips of blood that had traveled down to her ankle. I squirted a liberal amount of *Neosporin* into a folded length of gauze, placed it over the now much healthier looking wound, and wrapped more gauze around her tiny leg to hold it into place.

I was finished. I was done. I was proud of myself. I was proud of Eddie. Ashley was still pointing out to Eddie exactly how wrong he was in his amateur performance. I said that she is more than welcome to show him. She just then realized that I was finished.

Ashley stood up from the bed. While keeping a safe distance from Eddie, she displayed exactly how to stand on tipped toes. She reached her right arm above her head then bent her wrist and elbow into an arch, as if she were picking an apple. Her left arm flowed out straight by her side like a gentle wave. She looked straight ahead with a satisfied smile.

Eddie and I both broke into applause.

## CHAPTER 19

Joe came home not long after I treated Ashley's knee. The girls in mild terror, retreated back onto the bed as the floor boards moaned above our heads. They looked up to the ceiling as if expecting to see Joe through it. Eddie and I left the girls to go upstairs.

Joe stood was standing in front of the microwave warming up a hamburger patty. He was drunk, and was fully involved watching the little greasy patty of meat rotating slowly. I stood behind him wondering when the last time we made hamburgers was. And, trying to figure out just how old was that piece of pre-cooked meat.

It was an unseasonably warm day, the sun was high in the sky and the calm autumn breeze was pushing the scent of harvested corn through our screen door. I thought about just how stuffy the basement was.

"How ya' doing?" Eddie asked.

Joe released a loud belch before he said, *nothing*.

Joe obviously didn't hear the rhetorical question, but it's not like either of us really cared how he was doing. The microwave dinged when it was done preparing his hamburger patty that was more than likely unsafe for human consumption. He slid it out of the microwave, pulling at the folded paper towel beneath it. He carefully placed it onto his finger tips then searched in vain for any bread or buns. Finding none, he squirted ketchup and mustard on the exposed patty and began enjoying his entirely open-faced sandwich.

He wasn't much for talking. He didn't seem to care that he was standing in the middle of the kitchen in silence as Eddie and I watched him eat. When he finally finished the antique pressed patty of meat, he looked around to recognize Eddie and my existence.

"What are you guys doing?"

"We were in the basement with the girls," Eddie said.

"What the hell were you guys doing down there?"

For all he knew the girls still weren't eating. For all he knew Ashley had a growing infection on her kneecap. He didn't care. My eyes shuttered in my skull. My

fingers began to quiver. I was just about to tell Joe off when Eddie butted in. And, as he always did, Eddie pacified the situation.

“We were just checking in on them. They’re fine.”

“Why did it take two of you?” Joe grunted.

“I stayed on the steps to make sure they wouldn’t make a dash for it,” Eddie said, keeping the peace once again. He didn’t say how we got the girls to eat, or how we treated Ashley’s cut. I didn’t know why he left that out. He could have shoved it all in Joe’s face the way I would have. But he didn’t.

Joe looked at me with a long judging stare. He could tell that I had no tolerance for him that day.

“I’ve been driving around trying to find a good spot to call their fuck-hole father with the phone that smells like shit.”

Joe said it in a way to imply that he was working his ass off that afternoon. I knew he wasn’t. He was merely driving around catching a daytime drunk. Although I can’t blame him—with this pressure, with this situation, I wanted nothing more than to do the same.

“I’m going to *Marv’s*, you wanna come with?”

He was specifically talking to Eddie and not me. I knew that one of us had to stay home with the girls, but regardless, I don’t think he wanted my company that afternoon, just like I didn’t want his. Eddie looked over at me as if asking if it was alright that he go out and play. I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head as a way of saying, *you’re an adult, do whatever you like*.

Eddie agreed to tag along. Before Joe walked back out the screen door he turned and said to me, “Stay out of the basement. Find some food to feed them at six or so, but don’t hang around down there.”

It felt like I was dog sitting for him. Joe left with Eddie close behind. I called out Eddie’s name. He turned back and poked his head into the kitchen.

“Hey, thanks for helping me out down there...distracting Ashley. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Eddie nodded his head, and with a humble grin he turned and left. I can’t say exactly why I said that to him. My brothers and I don’t have the type of relationship that we ever say anything to each other in appreciation. I think I maybe said it to him so that I would appear to be the nice guy. Perhaps I said it to drive a wedge between him and unappreciative Joe. I like to think I didn’t say it to him for that reason. But who’s to say for sure.

Against my own personal protest, I took Joe’s advice and stayed out of the basement for the rest of the afternoon, although, “advice” would be putting it lightly. Joe never gives advice. He only gives a series of instructions, because he has absolutely no faith in me and assumes that I’ll fuck up whatever I attempt to do.

At 5:30 I searched the fridge and cupboards trying to find something to feed the girls. I decided on breaded chicken patties. I stood by the oven while the patties baked on a cookie sheet. It seemed to take forever. I looked over at the oven timer and there was still twelve minutes left. I was growing impatient. Why I was abiding by Joe’s rules, I don’t know. I spent an entire childhood trained to do so. While I was impatiently waiting,

I tossed the washed bed sheets into the dryer. Finally, the oven timer buzzed and I scrapped the processed chicken off the metal sheet and onto three awaiting mayonnaise smeared buns. I made one for myself planning to eat with them just as I did before.

I was relieved to see that their appetites sustained. They not only enjoyed the sandwiches but they also devoured the pile of ranch chips I put on their plates as a side. There really wasn't much to talk about. It was then that I realized that I had absolutely nothing in common with a pair of young girls. But I didn't mind, just so long as they were eating.

Bereft of anything to talk about, I proposed that we play a board game. The game we played this time was another one of my favorites growing up, *Risk*. The game was much more complicated than I had remembered, and I don't think Olivia ever quite grasped the rules. Also, it didn't take me long to realize that little girls don't have a natural bent for games about leading antiquated armies into battles that ultimately lead to world domination. The girls were bored playing the game, but we grinded on. I was winning quite easily, but I didn't take much pleasure in it. It felt like I was attacking neutral nations that didn't want to go to war, but rather pick up a Barbie doll and pull a tiny plastic brush through its hair.

I handily defeated their apathetic armies and claimed all of their territories for myself. I didn't revel in my victory, not that they would have cared in the least. I asked them if they wanted to play a different board game. Ashley and Olivia didn't seem keen on the idea. It was getting late, but it's not like I could tell them to go to bed. It's not like I could say that they had a big day ahead of them, or that they need to get up bright and early in the morning. We all knew that tomorrow would be much like that day, and most likely like the following days to come.

They asked me if I would tell them a story. I had to think for a moment about what story I would tell them exactly. There seems to be a lost art to storytelling. On many occasions I've had to sit through lackadaisical stories from fellow drinkers down at *Marv's*. Stories about getting trucks stuck in the mud and just how they were able to free them. Or stories about how much they drank in an evening. They would tell these stories with little enthusiasm and would fumble and forget their spot—appearing as bored telling the story as I was listening to it.

I asked the girls what kind story they would like to hear. They didn't have any suggestions. I had the perfect story in mind. The story wasn't true. It was a story after all. I had heard it from Joe many years ago. But the story certainly wasn't created by him. Many people have told variations of it. And anyone of a certain age or older is familiar with it. But the good thing about telling a story to young kids is that most things that are old and tired to us is new and entertaining to them. It's also ironic how when it comes to telling a story, children have a fantastic attention span. It's as if they were made to tell stories to. Adults on the other hand won't let another person talk in monologue for an extended period of time. Adults are full of one-upsmanship, and are also far too self-involved to listen to someone tell a long story that *they* weren't personally involved with.

The girls hopped into bed and I pulled up a chair next to the bed to make myself comfortable. I went on to tell them the fictional story the way that any good storyteller tells a tale—I placed myself as the lead protagonist to make it relatable. None of that *a friend of a friend told me* bullshit.



With the girls literally my captive audience sitting up in their bed I began.

“This all happened just a handful of years ago. I was driving home from a friend’s house. He lived far out in the country. It was darker than most nights. And there was a thick fog hanging low in the night air. I began to lose my way and got turned around and lost on the winding country roads. I was beginning to fear that I wasn’t going to be able to find my way home at all—that I’d have to pull over to the side of the road and sleep in the back seat, which didn’t feel very safe to me at all. I continued driving for what seemed like hours, not seeing any houses or farms at all. I was far away from anything. I continued driving leaning forward in my seat with my eyes peeled to the road just trying to stay out of the ditches.

As I was steering around a sharp corner, I saw a young woman who was about my age walking along the side of the road. I immediately locked up the brakes and nearly hit her. I looked through my back window to see her walking toward my car, seemingly unfazed that I narrowly missed her. I stepped out and hollered to her, asking if she was alright. She didn’t respond. She just kept walking toward me. I asked her once again if she was alright. She seemed distant and dazed, as if I had just woken her up. Once she was close she finally looked at me. She looked at me with a vacant stare and asked me if she could get a ride home. I told her to get in. She climbed into the passenger seat and stared forward, not once looking at me. I began to drive.”

“I told her that she really shouldn’t be walking on the side of the road, there can be some bad people out. She stared forward. She was wearing a white dress that went just past her knees. I remember this particularly because girls my age don’t wear dresses. Girls wear jeans. I asked her where she was coming from all dressed up like that. She said that she was coming home from a dance. I assumed that I must have been a long ways away from home. I knew for a fact that there wasn’t a dance happening at my school.”

“I drove further and the fog seemed to get even thicker. By this time I could barely see ten feet ahead of me. I asked her if her house was much further, and she said that it wouldn’t be long. She was a pretty girl, pale skin and hair that was so blond that it was practically white. I looked back to the road and there was a fallen tree blocking it. I didn’t have a lot a time to stop. I reacted quickly and was able not to hit it. There was something peculiar though when I stopped. From a knee-jerk reaction I reached my arm out and grabbed her shoulder to prevent her from slamming into my dashboard. I looked over and said ‘you’re so cold! You should have said something’. She faintly smiled as she stared forward. I told her that I would turn on the heat in my car, but I confessed that it hadn’t worked for months. I’d been meaning to get it fixed. Feeling that I should do something I pulled off my letterman’s jacket and placed it around her shoulders. She was chilled to the bone, but she didn’t shiver.”

“What’s a letterman’s jacket?” Ashley asked.

“It’s a jacket that people who play sports in high school receive. You can put your medals that you win on it. And it has a large monogrammed letter of the school you go to. I got mine while I was the quarterback on our state champion football team.”

I had never played any organized sports while I was in high school. But figured that I was telling a story... might as well have me come off well in it.

“So there we were sitting in my car in front of a downed tree with the mysterious girl wearing my letterman’s jacket—the substantial amount of medals clacking together on the breast of the coat. I saw that the tree was only covering half of the road and I assured her that we should be able to drive around it. I steered the car narrowly past the downed tree, just making it to the other side and we continued our journey.”

“Shortly after that she said, *my house is on the right*. I looked up to see a large house that I had never seen before. It had a large front entryway, tall windows and huge rooftop spires. I pulled up and she got out of the car and quietly thanked me for the ride before walking up to the house. I waited in the driveway and made sure that she was able to get in.”

“I was too busy thinking about the strange girl on the drive home that I had just then realized that she still had my letterman’s jacket. By this time the fog was beginning to clear and the scenery was once again looking familiar to me. I found my way home and went to bed, still thinking about the pale girl that wore the white dress.”

“The next morning I figured I would drive back to that old house to retrieve my jacket. I headed back in the same direction but had trouble finding exactly what road I was driving on the night before. Finally, I saw the downed tree sitting in the middle of the road and knew that her house was just past it. I drove further noticing that everything looked so different in the day light. I looked but couldn’t for the life of me see that large house. I kept driving knowing that it had to come up soon. I surely couldn’t have passed it. I stopped the car and looked around. I could see a group of trees framing an old stone-laid house foundation. I walked up to it. I was certain that this was the spot where the house had been, but it couldn’t have been, there was no house to be found. I walked back to my car scratching my head in confusion. I drove just up the road and saw a cemetery. I looked out of my car window as I passed and I noticed something peculiar. There was something draped over a gravestone. I immediately parked my car and walked up to the gravestone that caught my eye. It was my letterman’s jacket, the very same one, my name sewn on one breast, my various medals on the other. It was draped over the back of a headstone the way you would drape it over the back of a chair. I picked it up and put it on. I knelt on one knee to read the engraving on the headstone. It said, HELENA CLOVES 1945 -1961.

“It couldn’t be, I though.”

“A few days later I was telling people my story. Everyone was knowingly nodding their head and told me that I was not the first. Apparently, people for years have seen Helena Cloves on that very road that she disappeared on so many years ago. As the story goes, Helena was walking back home from a school dance one foggy night and a neighbor spotted her climbing into a stranger’s car to receive a ride home. After that she was never heard from again. And now and forever more she walks that country road at night, the way she did back then... trying to make it home.”

“They told me about people that knew of her and had seen her walking beside the road, and were too afraid to stop. Or how other people not knowing the lore, picked her up and drove a little ways with her until they look over to the passenger seat to see that she was no longer there, and they were driving in their car by themselves. But I was the only one that they had heard of that actually brought her all of the way home. I took some pride in that. I was the only person that took her all the way to her home... the place that she was trying so hard to get to night after night.”

I paused, signifying the end. I looked at the girls allowing them to steep in the gravity of the story. What I saw were two little mouths slightly agape, and a petrified look in their eyes. I then thought back to when Joe told me that story, and how I had the very same response. I realized that telling the girls a ghost story was an awful idea.

“She was dead?” asked Olivia.

“Well, yea sort of. You see I picked up her ghost, not *her* in the flesh.”

That did little to comfort them. I couldn’t leave the girls like that. I couldn’t say, *well goodnight, and pleasant dreams*, and leave them in the dark basement with that story on their minds.

I suggested that I read them a story that I enjoyed as a child, hoping that it would cleanse their pallets. I went up to my room and dug deep in the back of my closet where I uncovered a cardboard box with some of my old books. I pulled out *The Secret Garden* by Frances Burnett, and jogged back down to the basement.

With me in charge of the girls, and Joe out of the way, I began reading a bedtime story to them. *The Secret Garden* was one of my favorite books growing up. I figured that a little escapism in a beautiful garden that was hidden away for years could do them some good.

They seemed to enjoy it. It was a little awkward when I got to the part of the story where the little girl’s parents died from a cholera outbreak, and was forced to be raised by her miserable, crank of an uncle. I was afraid that they would begin to draw parallels between their situation and the fictional girl, Mary Lennox. They seemed unfazed by the dead parents, and held onto my words with intrigue and curiosity.

That night I avoided a nightmarish disaster. They were no longer thinking about my undead navigator in the passenger seat. They were thinking about the smell of fresh flowers, fragrant grass and the sound of a bubbling brook—an environment that couldn’t be more different than their cinder-blocked cell.

By the next night, they were quickly crawling under the covers. While reading the first few pages or so, I could hear the girls rustling under the sheets, situating themselves, trying to get the perfect comfortable position while they got transported to the old, sprawling mansion in Yorkshire, England. I was transported as well. The girls were fascinated by the story. They laid the bed motionless with bated breath as Mary Lennox investigated the strange, lamenting moans that were coming from the distant corner of the mansion, the place where she was forbidden to go—the dark hallway where she finds a young invalid boy by the name of Colin Craven. The little bedridden boy was born shortly before his mother’s death—and his father locked him away in the large chamber where he was constantly waited on by servants and out of sight from his father. His father couldn’t look at the young boy’s face that only served as a reminder of his deceased love.

I read to the girls each night until my eyes grew tired, and would tell them that I would pick up where I left off the next night, to their pleading protests. Thinking back, the times I read to them were my favorite moments I had from the entire experience.

## CHAPTER 20

Over the days that followed, both Eddie and I began spending all our time in the basement with the girls. It seemed like the thing to do. Why would you spend your time upstairs watching countless hours of television like so many other nights when you could have fun hanging out with the girls? I looked forward to it. I think that they looked up to us in a way. To them we were adults. But if you were to ask us, we would describe ourselves as grown children is all.

We were sitting on the floor playing *Jenga*, which the girls enjoyed even more than *Sorry*. Olivia could hardly contain her squeaks of excitement when each of us would poke at a rectangular block, seeing if it was loose enough to push through to the other side. Or, when we would gingerly ease out a tricky block with the tips of our index fingers, carefully balance it on top of the narrow stack in a cross-hatched stack. But if we let out one *oh*, or uttered the words *careful now*, during her turn, we would be looked at with dagger like stares for breaking her concentration. Olivia was the worst at *Jenga*. Her fumbling six year old fingers did not work to her advantage. But none the less, she would squeal with laughter, which would sometimes morph into maniacal cackles, as she tipped over the rickety tower of blocks.

After the third round, Ashley was no longer interested in seeing her sister knock over the tower once again and said that she felt gross.

“You feel gross?” I asked

“We’ve been wearing the same clothes for like ever!” Ashley said. Olivia nodded in agreement.

“Well, I’m sorry, but we don’t have any clothes that would fit you here.”

“Can you get us some? Olivia’s starting to smell,” Ashley said. Olivia nodded once more, not taking any offense to her sister’s statement.

“I don’t know, I guess we’ll have to see—“

“I can pick up some clothes,” Eddie interrupted.

“It’s not that easy,” I said in a lowered tone to Eddie.

“Why not? It’s no problem. I’ll do it right now.

“Let’s talk,” I said to Eddie, while signaling for us to go up stairs.

I told the girls to go back to playing *Jenga* while Eddie and I talked. Ashley didn’t seem interested in rebuilding the tower of blocks, Olivia was already working on it, but I doubted she would get past five layers before her sloppy stack would fall back over.

I pulled Eddie into the living room far away from the girls’ ears.

“What’s the problem?” Eddie asked.

“The top story on the news—fuck, everywhere, is about missing girls. How’s it going to look when one of us is picking up little girl clothes?”

“We don’t have to shop in Ellsworth. I’ll drive to Summerfield.”

“We can’t risk it. All it takes is one suspicious clerk and the next thing you know we have a cop tailing us. We can’t go to any stores. We need to not buy the clothes... we need to acquire them.”

“Steal them you mean,”

“Well... yea.

“And you don’t think that’s more risky than buying clothes?”

“We don’t go to a retailer. We need to hit up a second hand shop. We need to go to St. Vincent DePaul.”

“We’re going to knock-over the St. Vinnie’s?” Eddie said with a chuckle.

“It’s our only option. No cameras, no ink buttons or sensors at the doors. Not to mention, it’s used clothing. People don’t give a shit.”

“Alright, let’s do it.” Eddie said, with a note of excitement in his voice.

I walked back down the basement steps. Olivia’s attempts to rebuild the *Jenga* tower proved to be futile. She tipped it over as I walked up to her. She still found it hilarious to see the blocks topple. Ashley was lying on the bed with her arms folded behind her head and legs crossed, bobbing her right foot while she stared at the ceiling in boredom.

“Girls, we’re going to work on getting you some new clothes. We’ll see what we can do. But don’t get your hopes up.”

Both Ashley and Olivia were pleased by the news, and looked at each other with excitement. It brought a smile to my face, and now I certainly didn’t want to let them down.

I grabbed my old book bag out of the back of my closet, and slung it around my shoulder. The book bag was practically new. I wasn’t the kind of student that brought his books home. Eddie and I drove to the St. Vincent DePaul store in town. It was located in the far blocks of Ellsworth’s main street, the part of downtown that didn’t get a lot of foot traffic. The brick building that housed the second-hand store along with empty surrounding buildings were old and dilapidated. There were rust stains that ran down from the hundred year old bolts that attached the cornices. The upstairs windows that faced the street had cardboard covering them from the inside except for one window that you could see a pile of boxes stacked against it.

We walked up the sidewalk to the front entrance. Eddie stopped in his tracks and looked closely at the old brick façade that contained scrawls from generations of kids who used pocketknives or nails to etch their eternal message into the front of the old building.

“Let’s see...” Eddie said, grazing his eyes and index finger across the row of bricks that were waist high.

“Aha!” he said ecstatically, and then took a step back leaving his finger on a certain brick.

I walked up and leaned my head in closely to see what he was referring to. There, written in sloppy, juvenile handwriting, read EDDIE GETS ALL THE PUSSY.

“Still there after all these years!” Eddie said proudly.

“Yea, your false statement will be analyzed by archeologists hundreds of years from now,” I said while rolling my eyes.

“It’s as true today as when it was carved.”

“Come on,” I said, as I walked in through the entrance of St. Vincent DePaul.

The little bell that hung above the heavy, wooden door clanged as we entered the dark, stuffy store. A middle aged woman, wearing what looked like an itchy sweater, greeted us as we entered. She had unkempt hair and looked like the kind of woman that spends a lot of time reading paperback romance novels surrounded by numerous cats with names like *McDreamy* and *McSteamy* because of their opposing attitudes. She gave us a warm and inviting greeting, standing up from what appeared to be an old donated office chair. Eddie and I gave her a polite grin and head nod as we passed.

“How are you boys doing?” the woman asked as she walked toward us.

“Good, good.” I said while traversing the store, trying to keep my distance from her, hoping that she would leave us alone.

I handed the backpack to Eddie and told him to fill it up while I distracted her.

“How are you going to distract her?” Eddie asked.

“Look at her. All she needs is a little attention from a man.”

“And you think you’re the one to do it?”

“You’re saying I can’t swoon a strange woman?”

“All I’m saying is that I’m the guy to do it.”

“I got Cynthia not even a week ago.”

“Who?”

“The bartender!”

“Pity fucks don’t count. Leave a master to his craft.”

*Jacob 2.0* shoved the backpack into my chest, trained his eyes on his target, and went to work on the live action *Cathy* comic strip approaching us.

“Can I help you boys find anything?” she asked.

I think that she was excited to have anyone in the shop. I’m sure much of her shift was spent in solitude in that forgotten place.

“You certainly may, Miss!” Eddie exclaimed.

Eddie placed his hand on her thick shoulder and led her back to the front of the store. Finally he was using his charisma for someone else’s advantage and not just his own.

With the cashier distracted, I scanned the store to ensure that there were no other employees. It was all clear. I made my way past the racks of adult clothing, past the wooden barrels that were full of tennis and badminton racquets, past the partial golf club sets and grass stained sleeping bags. The entire place smelled like a closet. The establishment wasn’t big by any means. It would best be described as an enormous cubby space. It took hardly ten seconds to reach the back of the store, but there was quite a bit of merchandise to look through.

I quickly found the little girl section that contained racks of shirts, pants and shorts. I dug right in, grabbing shirts and holding them up, sizing them up and if they looked remotely close to Ashley or Olivia’s size. I stuffed the articles of clothing into my back pack after removing the wire hangers. Short sleeve, long sleeve, no sleeves, even a couple of sweaters, I then walked over to a different rack and began rummaging through

the tiny pairs of pants. Following my same system of selection, I found some pairs that looked approximately their size. I was quickly running out of room in my back pack.

I looked to make sure that Eddie was keeping the clerk distracted. He was standing near the front of the store with the clerk. Eddie was holding a large bronze colored brazier up to his chest and was speaking to the woman with his artful dodger smile. He spoke to her the way he spoke to girls that he picked up at the bars. He was good at that. He had a way of gradually moving his head closer to a woman as he talked to them, making the conversation more intimate. When he got to that stage, he would usually dust off his stupid jokes that weren't the least bit funny. He would say the most contrived stuff like quoting a movie that everyone knows. But, the girls would find it hilarious, and do that playful slap on his arm. I never understood it.

Eddie began jiggling the bra side to side as he held it against his chest. The clerk was letting it be known that she found him very entertaining with her chortled laugh.

*Underwear!* I thought. *Do they have used panties here?* I glanced around and across on the opposite wall I saw a sign that said NEW GOODS. There were new packages containing super hero underoos and multicolored panties. I could not do my same sizing-up method, so I grabbed three packages containing three different sizes of girl's underwear.

A loud snorting laugh jolted me. I looked to see that Eddie was now holding the bra against the clerk's ample bosom. She was having the time of her life.

With dwindling space left in the old back pack, I crammed two pairs of pajamas that featured unicorns on one and horses on the other. I pulled the cumbersome pack over my shoulder and wondered if we were going to get away with this. The backpack was distended like a pregnant belly. I was on my way to the front of the store to pull Eddie away from his fun and leave. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a large, orange rug rolled up and leaning against the wall. I thought that we should buy at least one thing or else we'd appear suspicious. I picked up the rug and threw it over my shoulder.

"An Aries you say!" said Eddie, feigning enthusiasm.

"Yep, Aries are known for being more perceptive of emotions," the clerk gushed.

"And you say that I'm a Taurus? What are Taurus' known for?"

"Taurus' are aggressive personalities. They know what they want and they always get it. Taurus and Aries are complimentary constellations," she added.

"Complimentary constellations?"

"Yep, personality wise they are a match. They seek each other out."

"Get out! Well then, I guess it's written in the stars!" Eddie exclaimed.

She giggled once more.

"We'll take the rug," I said.

She turned to me still flying on cloud nine from her conversation with *Casanova*.

"Sure thing," she said while reaching for the little paper tag tied to the corner.

"That'll be twenty dollars."

I reached for my wallet and asked Eddie if he had any money on him. He shook his head. He never seemed to have money on him. He's the kind of guy that will leave the house without a wallet, I was not. But I wasn't the kind of guy that carried a lot of money. She could see that we were short.

"How much money do you have, hun?"

"Five dollars."

“Let’s call that good enough,” she giggled.

“Ah, Sharon, coming to our rescue!” Eddie said while placing his arm around her chubby shoulders and squeezing them tight.

I handed her the last of my money and thanked her. I awkwardly tried to open the front door with a long rug over my shoulder, with countless clothing items hanging off my back. Eddie leaned in close, like he tends to do, and said, “Until next time, Sharon.”

Yet another giggle came from Sharon before she said, “you boys come back again soon.” She said *boys* plural, but she was only looking at Eddie.

Once we were outside and in the clear, Eddie stopped at his signature brick and repeated proudly, *Eddie gets all the pussy!*

“Yes, *all* the pussy! That doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s all good pussy,” I scoffed.

We couldn’t figure out how the rug would possibly fit in Eddie’s Lincoln, so we ended up rolling down the back windows and threaded it through one end and left it sticking out the other. We took side streets and gravel roads the entire way home to avoid any run-ins with the cops. A town car that is impaled by a dusty, rolled up rug is reason enough to get pulled over I’d imagine. It seems foolish to think now, but when we were driving home we were excited to show the girls the new clothes.

We drove up the long dead end road to our home and were disappointed to see Joe’s Hyundai parked in the driveway. We didn’t know what he would have to say about treating the girls to new clothes. If he had his way the girls would be shackled by their wrists to a stone wall.

Eddie and I walked into the house carrying the rolled up rug and my backpack of goods. Joe was sitting on the couch drinking a beer. It wasn’t his first. He had a mess of bottles around him and we hadn’t been gone that long.

“Where the hell have you guys been?” Joe barked.

“Nowhere,” I said without looking at him.

“You over here for a play-date with the girls?” he sneered.

“Yea, something like that.”

Eddie led the way down the basement steps where the girls were sitting at the edge of their seats at the table.

“Finally!” Olivia said, throwing her arms in the air.

“Did you guys get us anything?” Ashley asked.

“Yea, a rug. How do you like it?”

“Did you get us anything else?” Olivia said, in a raised voice.

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Did you get us any outfits?” Ashley said.

“Outfits no, clothes yes.” Eddie said, while unfurling the hideous rug and placing it between the bed and the kitchen table. It provided a much cozier environment to the basement.

“I tossed the backpack onto the rug, and the girls quickly opened it and began tearing into it—pulling the clothes out of the backpack like a hyena pulling out an antelope’s entrails.

“Underwear!” Olivia screamed with joy. I’m sure that was the happiest she had ever been to receive underwear.



The girls were extremely excited as they found shirts that they liked, or “tops” as they called them. And they used adjectives like *cute*, *tasty* and *adorable*. Apparently I didn’t do too bad of a job for a guy that was swiping any shirt that looked about the right size, as his brother horned-up a post-menopausal clerk.

They began laying the shirts and pants out on the bed, deciding what they wanted to wear first.

“Pajamas!” Ashley yelled with excitement.

As they say, *it’s truly is better to give than to receive*. Even if it’s stolen goods, and the reason why they are so appreciative is because they’d been deprived for nearly a week of a change of clothes. All of that aside, you see two little girls that were ecstatic. It’s as if they had a winning scratch-off ticket. Ashley stopped for a moment and turned to Eddie and I who were enjoying watching the girls go through the clothes.

“Thanks guys,” she said.

She then nudged Olivia, who was preoccupied rubbing the soft underwear against her cheek.

“Thank you!” Olivia said with a yell without turning around.

“Well, what are you girls going to wear first?” Eddie asked.

“Do you think... I mean... would it be possible if we could take a bath before we put on the new clothes? I’d feel kind of gross changing into clean clothes when I’m dirty,” Ashley said with pleading eyes.

“Joe will never let them upstairs,” Eddie whispered to me.

I felt horrible. Ashley stood before me in her filthy, pink ballerina tutu that was cut-off at one knee—and like *Oliver Twist*, she asked the cook for some more porridge. It was the simplest request, but we couldn’t fulfill it.

“We just need to get him out of the house.” I said.

“How?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t I order a pizza and ask him to pick it up?”

“Perfect! Do you girls want pizza tonight?”

Of course this was met with a resounding *yes*. Eddie went back upstairs and dialed *Godfather’s Pizza*. The good thing about this plan was that pizza restaurants never deliver ten miles outside of town. The few times Mom would order pizza for us growing up; she would either pick it up on her way home or would have to make a special trip into town for it. Eddie ordered a *Family* sized sausage pizza with an order of breadsticks. *Family* size, I’m sure we had to be one of the most fucked up “Families” that ever ordered a *Family* size pizza.

I went upstairs to locate clean towels for the girls. I knew that we would have twenty-five minutes tops once Joe left. I could hear Eddie talking to Joe in his nonchalant voice. The voice he has that never sounds nonchalant. Eddie always sounds like he’s up to something when he tries not to sound like he is. He made small talk with Joe who was sitting on the couch watching a rerun of *The Office*.

“Pam is ridiculously cute! I mean, I wouldn’t call her hot, she’s not hot. She’s definitely cute though,” Eddie remarked to the passive Joe.

Joe wasn’t saying anything. Eddie continued to ramble, “Her mouth is perfectly level. I mean, if you were to draw it, you would just draw a short flat line. That’s pretty fucked... oh, by the way, I just order a pizza from *Godfathers*, you mind picking it up?”

Eddie “nonchalantly” said. He always did the, *hey I just remembered* thing, when he was up to something.

“Yea, I mind.” Joe said.

“I’d pick it up but, you know... Jacob and I are taking care of the girls.”

“Why don’t *you* take care of the girls and Jacob pick up the pizza?”

“He’s setting mouse traps in the basement. The girls saw a mouse and are pretty upset about it. I’m worried that they’ll be too upset to eat. That’s why I ordered them a pizza.”

It was a bit awkward, the way Eddie brought it back to the pizza, but I was surprised by his quick thinking none the less.

“What am I missing here? *You* set up the mouse traps—that apparently take forever to do—and *you* send Jacob into town to pick up your precious fucking pizza,” Joe said, before he took a long drink of beer.

“Come on Joe, help us out here. We’ve had our hands full with the girls. I’m just asking you this one favor. Could you please pick up the pizza? It’ll be ready for you when you get there.”

Joe rolled his eyes and let out a grunt.

“I’m paying for it. All you need to do is pick it up.”

“Fine, I’ll pick up your fucking pizza!”

He groaned as he stood up from the couch like an old man. He put out his hand and said to Eddie, “money?”

“Do you think that you could spot me on this one? I’m a little light today,” Eddie said with a cringe.

“You’re kidding me!”

“I’ll pay you back, I swear!”

“Un-fucking-believable!” Joe said as he exited out the front door with a half a beer in his hand, and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Good work, Eddie,” I said, stepping out of the bathroom once the coast was clear.

“If we survive this whole ordeal, I’m going to still be on Joe’s shit list for forever.”

“We both are. You’ve got some balls of brass making him pay for the pizza and all.”

“Alright, we don’t got much time.” Eddie said.

“We *really* don’t have much time. He’s tearing-ass down the road.” I said while looking out of the bathroom window.

“Start filling the tub and I’ll think of something.”

“You’ll think of something?”

“Hey, I thought of the mouse didn’t I?”

Eddie called *Godfathers Pizza* back and asked them to slow up the pizza order. The woman on the other line said that the pizza is already in the oven. And, that *Godfathers Pizza’s* policy is to have the pizza ready at the time that was quoted. Eddie said that his brother will be picking up the pizza and we are throwing a little surprise party for him, but haven’t got enough time, so we needed them to stall him a little.

The woman on the other line reluctantly agreed and told him that they could postpone it for possibly ten to fifteen minutes or so. And then told Eddie to enjoy the party.

“Goddamn, I’m a fucking *MacGyver* with excuses today!”

“Go get the girls.”

The bath was about three quarters of the way full. I made sure that the water was nice and warm, but not hot. I didn’t want the girls to be hesitant to lower themselves into the bath water. We didn’t have time for that. I could hear the girls trotting up the basement steps. I suddenly had the thought that perhaps I should have locked the front door. If the girls wanted to make a break for it they could. I shut off the bath water and stepped out into the kitchen as the girls made their way past the basement door threshold. They were craning their little heads in all directions, looking out the screen door that Joe had just recently slammed, and over their shoulders into the living room where the television was still on. I pointed them into the bathroom. They didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry. I couldn’t tell if they were taking in their new environment, or keeping an eye out for Joe.

Once they entered the bathroom, I set two towels on top of the tank on the back of the toilet, and told them not to dawdle before I shut the door.

*Dawdle?* I had never said dawdle before in my life. My mom used to tell me not to dawdle all the time. Why is it when I’m put in a child care position I begin to mimic the traits of my mother?

Eddie was standing on the on the back steps having a smoke. I decided to take a well deserved break and join him.

“A forty minutes do you think?” Eddie said, while staring down our long gravel driveway.

“Tops I’d say. That is unless he stops to pick up more beer.”

“You don’t think that the girls would try to escape out of the bathroom window do you?” Eddie asked.

We both looked at each other for a couple of beats, expecting the other to answer the question. Eddie was just about to bolt around to the backside of the house to make sure they weren’t crawling out, when I laid my hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

“Listen,” I said.

There was loud laughter echoing from the bathroom.

“They wouldn’t be laughing if they were trying to sneak out.” I said. We both breathed a sigh of relief and snuffed out our smokes.

I tidied up the basement and put freshly cleaned sheets on their bed while Eddie kept watch upstairs. When I went back upstairs I saw that Eddie was impatiently looking out of the living room window to the driveway, seemingly expecting to see Joe’s car come rumbling up the gravel road with a dust cloud in its wake.

“We need to get them back downstairs.” Eddie said, never pulling his eyes away from his view out of the window.

“Give them five more minutes.”

“What are we going to say when Joe sees that they’ve taken a bath and that we got them new clothes?” Eddie asked.

“What’s done is done. He can’t say much if they’re already cleaned up and back down in the basement.”

“You know he’ll say something.”

“And I’ll remind him that I’m in charge of the caretaking and he’s in charge of the business end.”

“He’s not going to approve.”

“If we were to ask him if we could let the girls take a bath or if we could pick them up new clothes, he would’ve just turned us down.”

Eddie shook his head and continued to look out the window.

“Why are we so afraid of him? Is he in charge?” I asked.

“Well, yea.”

“Have you ever asked yourself why he’s leading this whole thing? We are all in this together. This should be a democracy, not his fucking dictatorship.”

“Yea, I know. But that’s the way it is.” Eddie said.

“I know, but why? It’s always been that way since we were kids!”

“You know... he’s the oldest.”

Eddie was content with his answer. There was only a five year age difference between Joe and me, and not even a one year age difference between Joe and Eddie.

I moved in with Joe and Eddie right out of high school. I wanted to move in earlier, but Mom wouldn’t let me. She was afraid if I did, I wouldn’t graduate. Joe was just a year older than I am now when I moved in. He seemed so old. He seemed like an adult. I felt privileged because he let me drink beer in the house. It was my first experience doing that. Before I would always have to leave the house and go to parties that took place in rock quarries, dead-end roads and dry river bottoms. Now I could come home, sit on the couch after a long day and crack open a beer. I didn’t even have to get drunk like all of my drinking experiences before that. I could simply put my feet up, flip on the idiot box and catch a buzz like an ordinary jack-off.

Now that I’ve aged I now realize that he wasn’t an adult. He was a kid, just like I am now—the five year age difference that always separated us, and provided him with his older and wiser perspective was shrinking more and more each year. I guess Eddie didn’t see it that way. Joe will always be the oldest, and therefore will always be in charge.

I knocked on the bathroom door. I could hear laughing and splashing echoing off the bathroom tile walls. I said through the door that it was time to get out of the tub. This was met by a chorused disappointed groan. Eddie was still staring out of the window, keeping an eye out for our *Stalin* of an older brother. Eddie’s anxiety was putting me on edge. I stood in the kitchen with my arms crossed leaning against the kitchen counter tapping my index finger against my arm.

Finally the girls exited the bathroom wearing towels that looked like enormous beach towels wrapped around their tiny frames, with a train of cloth dragging behind Olivia. They looked almost unrecognizable. I had grown accustomed to seeing them look exactly the same, even down to their ballerina outfits over the last few days. It was odd to see them look different. Their hair was dark and damp, and had a soft curl to it that wasn’t there when it was dry. They both smelled of *Old Spice* body wash as they crossed the kitchen with naked feet. I had shut the front door merely as a precaution before they

got out of the bath. They both began walking toward the closed door that led to the outside. I jolted upright and said, *wrong way!* This seemed to frighten them. It's not like they were trying to waltz out the front door right in front of me. They simply got turned around in the unfamiliar ground level of that house. They lowered their heads and turned the other direction toward the correct door. I felt bad. I told them that there was pizza on the way. Both of their heads simultaneously flinched and looked at me with a grin.

While they were making their way back down the basement steps, I closed the door behind them and walked into the bathroom. There was a brown, opaque murkiness to the bath water. The girls were much filthier than I had realized, I guess that's what happens then you live in a basement. I drained the bathwater and used the showerhead to rinse away the filmy ring left from the high water mark. Just as I was finishing up, I heard a knock on the basement door. It was Ashley standing at the top of the steps. She said that she was ready for us.

"The pizza isn't here yet."

"No, to show you our new outfits."

"It looks very nice!" I said, looking down at her.

"No! You have to come downstairs so that we can model them for you guys."

"Oh, of course... just give us a minute."

Ashley excitedly raced back down the steps. I walked over to Eddie who seemed to be more at ease since the girls were no longer upstairs, and in the forbidden bathroom.

"We're wanted downstairs."

"What for?"

"To see their new clothes, I guess."

"They want to show off their new second-hand clothes?" Eddie incredulously asked.

"Don't ruin the spirit, they seem excited about this."

We made our way down the stairs and neither girl was in sight. Ashley poked her head out from behind the basement bathroom door and told us to have a seat. Eddie and I pulled up an ex-kitchen chair, crossed our legs and made ourselves comfortable. Ashley led the way out of the bathroom with a slow, narrow walk, carefully placing one foot before the other, like she was a contender for *Miss America*. She wore dark denim jeans that seemed slightly too big, with a bedazzled butterfly on the rear pocket. Her shirt (or top) was a black v-neck with three-quarter length sleeves. She stepped into the center of the room and placed her hands upward as her way of miming, *what do you think?* Both Eddie and I began nodding our head approvingly and clapped our hands. She gracefully bowed and soon after Olivia trounced out of the bathroom with the swagger and conviction of an evening lounge singer. She had long, rhythmic steps to the music that was in her head. Eddie and I immediately started covering our faces to conceal our laughter. Olivia was oblivious to us. She seemed to be on a runway in Milan, thousands of miles away from her dark holding cell. She wore pin-stripped overalls with a collard polo tee underneath it.

"Spectacular!" I said, clapping frantically. Eddie joined in the applause as well.

"There's more!" said Ashley.

"More?"

"We want to model all the other outfits for you guys!" Ashley said.

"Alright, go right ahead."

“Let me get some runway music!” Eddie said.

While the girls were changing, Eddie had brought down his portable CD player with a 90’s music compilation CD. The bathroom door opened and Ashley was about to lead the way once again.

Eddie said, “Hold on, not quite ready yet”. He inserted the CD and flipped to the specific track that he had in mind. “All right, now you can come out.”

From Eddie’s old CD player blared *Right Said Fred’s*, “I’m too Sexy”. As the girls strutted out from the bathroom, they began to laugh loudly at the ridiculous song. I don’t think they had ever heard it before. After regaining their composure, they went back to modeling their new outfits. They modeled three outfits a piece, selecting the clothes that they most liked, even swapping some previous articles of clothing with each other to mix and match the way they seemed pleased. Eddie kept *Right Said Fred*, on a constant loop, only pausing when the girls retreated back to their “dressing room” for a change of outfit.

“It’s incredible,” Eddie said, in a low tone, while the girls were changing into their final outfit.

“What’s that?”

“It’s incredible that a pile of second hand clothes could do that. I mean, I figured that they would appreciate having a change of clothes, but I never thought that they would be this excited. This feels good, man,” Eddie said, with surprising excitement.

“It’s better than how we usually spend our evenings.”

The girls came out one last time, showing off their new outfits with a nineties one-hit-wonder scoring their strut.

“Which one do you like best?” Olivia asked us.

“Boy, I don’t know,” said Eddie.

“I’d have to go with the first outfit for you, Olivia, and the second outfit for you, Ashley.” I said.

Those really weren’t my favorites. I didn’t have favorites. To be honest, I really wasn’t paying much attention to what they were wearing. I was more admiring how they were having so much fun wearing it.”

“Alright,” said Ashley, “we need to change back into those.”

“You’re going to change again?” I said. “The pizza will be here any minute.”

The girls seemed to pay no attention. The pizza was merely an afterthought to them. They were far more interested in looking good while they ate.

From the basement, we could hear the front door shut, and the creak of footsteps across floor boards above us. Joe came down the basement steps with a large box containing the pizza, a smaller box containing the breadsticks and a case of beer in his other hand. He looked around the room and asked where the girls were.

“They’re changing,” Eddie said.

“Changing into what?”

“We got them new clothes,” I said.

Joe shot both of us disapproving stares and was about to say something when I cut him off.

“Don’t raise your voice, unless you *don’t* want the girls to eat tonight,” I said in a low even tempo.

Joe paused before he said, “Doesn’t it look suspicious, you guys picking up little girl clothes?”

“No one except us knows that we got them.”

“No one?” Joe asked through gritted teeth.

I looked him in the eyes and shook my head.

I appreciated Joe not raising his voice. He kept control of his anger, something that he usually doesn’t do. The girls were still in the bathroom. I think they were waiting for Joe to leave. Joe opened the smaller box and placed two breadstick ends in his mouth like walrus teeth before grabbing two slices of pizza and picking his case of beer back up with his one free hand. He walked back over to the steps, stopped dead in his tracks and looked down.

“Where the fuck did this rug come from?” he said in his breadstick muffled mouth.

Eddie and I didn’t answer him. Joe dismissively shook his head and trounced up the staircase.

The girls came back out of the bathroom wearing the very outfits that I suggested and wearily took a seat at the table.

“Is he always like that?” Ashley asked.

“Like what?” I said.

“Mad.”

“No, he’s actually a pretty decent guy. I think he’s just under a lot of pressure right now.” Eddie said.

The girls helped themselves to pizza and breadsticks. I grabbed four orange sodas from the upstairs fridge. It was a pretty quiet meal, each of us eating our fill. Olivia wasn’t keen to the sausage topping and carefully picked each piece off of her slices and ate each slice only to the crust. Ashley devoured each piece of pizza with quick veracity. She actually ate more slices than Eddie and me.

After we finished eating, I asked the girls if they wanted to play a board game. They didn’t respond, so I asked them if they wanted to watch a movie. They both nodded their heads. I figured that I might as well move my DVD player down there. It wasn’t doing me any good in my room—what with having no TV and all.

I went back upstairs and walked through the living room, paying no mind to Joe, who was sitting in his regular spot on the recliner watching TV and working on recapturing his beer buzz. I went upstairs and grabbed my DVD player that wasn’t hooked to anything. I then went back through the living room stopping at the bookshelf where we kept our movie collection, trying to find something that would be suitable for the girls. It was easier said than done. I soon came to realize that the majority of our movies were “R” rated. Movies that I had thought of as action packed, funny or really just harmless fun, I now noticed were not appropriate for little girls. Finally I found a movie, *The Princess Bride*. Not only one of my favorites growing up, but Joe and Eddie’s as well. I snagged it off the shelf and quickly left Joe to himself. He yelled as I walked away, asking if there was any pizza left.

“I don’t know, maybe a slice or two.” I didn’t look back at him.

I hooked up the DVD player to the old 19” television while I built up what a classic movie *The Princess Bride* was. They had never even heard of it. I angled the TV toward the girls’ bed so that they could sit on it and watch the movie. Eddie and I were fine in the wooden chairs.

A while after the movie started, Joe walked down the steps. The girls' heads immediately looked over wearily. Then they nervously trained their gaze back to the screen. Joe staggered over to the table with a drunken jaunt, and pulled open the pizza box and grabbed the last remaining slice. He stood next to Eddie and me. The movie was right at the part when Westley outsmarted Vizzini by poisoning both of their goblets. Eddie and I both laughed when Vizzini stopped mid-laughter and fell over like a tree. The girls still seemed put-off by Joe being there, but were soon more terrified by the *Rodents of Unusual Size* in the dangerous *Fire Swamp*.

I looked over to Joe and told him to pull up a chair.

Joe hesitated, but soon took a seat.

We all watched the movie together. The girls gasped as Princess Buttercup was about to bury a dagger into her chest. And sat up onto their knees when Inigo Montoya relentlessly advanced Count Rugen, repeatedly uttering his famous line, "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

After the movie had ended, Joe stood up and was about to leave. I suggested that he stick around a bit.

The girls seemed to really enjoy the movie. They couldn't stop talking about it. I'd say that they loved the movie more than I did growing up. But I recall gushing about *The Princess Bride* after the first time I saw it. I told them that we would have to watch the movie *Ghostbusters* some night. They hadn't heard of that one either. I explained to them that we used to play *Ghostbusters* growing up. I told them that I always played Egon Spengler when we played. I pointed over to Eddie, just about to say his name, before I caught myself. I stopped and said, "And he was always Venkman and you (pointing to Joe) were always Stanz." Joe looked at me with mild anger and exasperation. I'm used to that look. It's practically Joe's default expression. But this time I could tell that he really meant it.

"What *are* your names?" Ashley asked.

I was caught yet again. Leave it to me to get us into this situation.

Joe swooped in and said, "I'm Simon, he's Alvin, (pointing to Eddie) and that's Theodore (looking at me).

"Those aren't your names! That's the *Chipmunks*." Olivia said. "What are your *real* names?"

"You don't need to know our real names," Joe grunted.

"Why not?" asked Olivia. Ashley hushed Olivia.

"How come I'm Alvin?" Eddie asked.

"Because I'm the brains, he's the clumsy screw-up, and you're what's left," Joe said. "That's enough for one night, everyone to bed."

## CHAPTER 21

We were onto day twelve of our time with the hostages. It felt like much longer. Not that the situation was horrible. But it was one of those things where most every thought is dedicated to it. I was growing tired of worrying. On top of that, there was a



mysterious white truck that appeared two days before parked near a sinkhole on the far side of a neighbor's field. Eddie and I tried to get a good look at it from the edge of the lawn, but the truck was parked too far away.

The media was all over the case. The story blew up much larger than any of us had expected. I was freaked out. Joe thought that perhaps we could get more money because of it. I can't say that I could follow his logic, but I could see dollar signs in his eyes. That afternoon the local news, national television, everyone seemed to be following this story with great interest. At one point the greatest suspect in the girls' disappearance was an uncle of theirs. It was publicly speculated that he was behind it. Apparently, Jeremiah Cohen has a ne'er-do-well half-brother who was low on finances. That was enough of a motive for the FBI to ransack his house as well as his reputation.

The police sketches they showed on the news of the two suspects directly involved weren't even close. The one supposed to be Joe sort of looked like him, but at the same time it could have just as easily looked like anyone else. Neatly combed hair and large reflector shades—he looked like a dapper Unabomber. The one that was supposed to be Eddie was way off. I couldn't have identified my own brother from that picture. Apparently the person that gave his description wasn't very perceptive when the events took place.

Joe, Eddie and I stood in the living room and watched Jeremiah Cohen and his teary-eyed wife make a plea to the kidnappers to please return their daughters. I had to keep reminding myself that they were talking to us. It was surreal to see photos of Ashley and Olivia displayed on the television. While Mrs. Cohen spoke there were shots of the girls posed on the front steps of their home with their dog, individual school photos, shots of them at a water park, and silent footage from just a few weeks prior when they were being interviewed at the boat house ribbon cutting ceremony. It seemed that everyone was looking for these two little girls—these two little girls that were just below our feet.

Joe began speaking to us but then stopped mid sentence when he heard something. Eddie and I looked at each other wondering what was happening. In the distance we could hear a delayed echo of the broadcasted plea. The girls were watching it downstairs.

Joe jerked into action going right for the butchers block in the kitchen.

“Joe! Joe! What do you think you're doing?” I asked while following closely behind him.

Joe grabbed the largest knife, slid past me and went immediately through the basement door. I continued to follow him, down the staircase. I didn't much like the thought of having to wrestle a large knife away from him. But if I had to I was going to. I wasn't about to let him cut off a tiny toe on a whim. Joe placed the knife behind his back. The girls could sense trouble. They hopped up from the basement floor where they were watching their parent's plea for their safe return. Both girls raced into the tiny basement bathroom and slammed the door behind them. Joe took long steps to the television, grabbed the coax cable that was connected into the back of the TV and began to methodically saw it in half. The signal flashed to static, then switched to a calm blue screen.

Joe turned back to me and rolled his wrists, with one hand still holding the knife, and said *ta-da!*

Joe bumped past me and Eddie who was standing on the staircase. I knew that I should have consoled the girls. I should have told them that everything was alright. But I had a score to settle with Joe.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I said to Joe, standing in the kitchen. He ignored me. Still with the long knife in his hand he dug through the drawers in the kitchen.

“Where did we leave the shit smelling cell phone?”

“Joe! Answer me! What the hell do you think you’re doing racing down there with a butcher knife?”

“Did you touch the phone, Eddie?”

“Joe! Fucking answer me!” I grabbed his shoulder to turn him around. Joe took his bent forearm forced it against my chest, pushed me back a few steps before my back slammed against the fridge. Magnets, random photos, and months old birthday and Christmas cards fell to the kitchen floor. Joe, keeping his arm dug into my collar bone, lifted the blade up to my neck. My chin lifted and turned away. I couldn’t see the blade, but I could feel the cold steel pressed against the shivering muscles in my neck.

Joe spoke in a slow, calculated voice that sounded almost unrecognizable. It was guttural, as if he were speaking from the pit of his bowels.

“You are NOT in charge! Don’t you fucking forget who’s running the show! From here on out, whatever I say goes, not a fucking question! No more of this babying bullshit. No more second guessing. If you follow my lead we will come away from this rich men. But if you stand in my way in any way...”

He paused. He was going to say something threatening. But he didn’t. I guess he thought a knife to his little brother’s throat was threatening enough.

He pulled away from me and pitched the knife with a crashing clank into the kitchen sink.

“Where the fuck is that phone?” Joe said, seemingly to no one. Eddie reached into one of the kitchen drawers and grabbed it out. Joe snatched it from his hand and left the house. He got into his car and flung gravel from his spinning tires as he left.

I tenderly touched my neck to see little spots of crimson blood on my fingers. I walked to the bathroom and looked at my neck in the mirror. I saw the faint ghost of a pink line where the knife had rested, and a couple little points where the blade broke through the skin.

“You know... the stress of this whole thing... it’s not like Joe would ever hurt you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Are you apologizing for him?!”

“Well – “

“He held a fucking knife to my throat. Shit! He cut my throat!”

“It’s not that bad. It’s like you cut yourself shaving is all.”

I walked out of the bathroom in a huff, Eddie following in tow.

“He’s goddamn psycho.” I muttered under my breath. I paced around the kitchen.

Now the reporter was interviewing a local sheriff. While he was speaking, video of volunteers walking in a broad line through tall grass looking for remains was broadcasted. Followed by silent footage of men in scuba gear rolling backwards off the sides of boats to look for the girls at the bottom of the Des Moines river.

“I’ve got to get out of here. For Christ’s sake go talk to the girls, will ya?” I left the house and got into my car and drove off.

I had no idea where I was going. I later decided to stop into *Marv’s*. I needed a drink, and beyond that it would be wise to make an appearance. Joe and Eddie had concerns about us no longer stopping by *Marv’s* ritually like we had in the past. We didn’t want any suspicions raised about us three boys disappearing right when two little girls had disappeared.

I walked into the dark, depressing atmosphere. There wasn’t any patrons in there, just Vera sitting behind the bar reading the newspaper. I was there a little early. It would still be a little while before the regular factory crowd gathered for their after work drinks.

“Where have you been stranger?” Vera said while opening a bottle of beer for me. It was comforting walking into a place where they not only knew you, but knew your preference as well.

“Sorry I haven’t been in here a while.”

“Not just you. I hardly see your brother Joe either.”

“Yea, what with losing our jobs we can’t be spending our money like we used to.”

“I understand. Have you found any prospects?”

“Nothing so far,” I said, taking my first drink.

“Say what did you do to your neck?”

“Oh that? I cut myself shaving.”

“What were you shaving with weed-whacker?”

I shrugged and went back to my beer.

“Say, I can’t promise you anything. But I may be able to hire you for a couple of hours here and there to sweep the floor and re-stock the coolers.”

“I appreciate that, Vera.”

I really *did* appreciate it. I know that she didn’t actually need any help. Yet she was extending the offer out of the kindness of her heart to a guy that was down on his luck.

Soon after a stranger walked in and pulled up a stool directly next to me. It was odd to see a non-regular in there. I mean, occasionally an unfamiliar face would walk through the doors and order some complicated drink that wasn’t offered at *Marv’s*. The strangers would usually concede and order a draft beer or a screwdriver or something. They would stay for one then be promptly on their way. *Marv’s* had a friendly bar crowd, but it was a pretty cliquish place when it came right down to it. If the regulars didn’t know you they wouldn’t talk to you. Luckily the stranger seated next to me just ordered a light beer and quietly sipped it.

I looked up at the tiny television above the bar. On it was an episode of *GunsSmoke* with the sound off. I pretended like I was watching it to avoid conversation.

“You like this show?” the stranger asked me.

Keeping my eyes trained on the television I simply shrugged.

“This was my favorite shows when I was your age.”

We both finished our beers without another word spoken. This was the point when I expected the guy to be on his way.

“Say Miss? Could you get me another beer, and why don’t you grab whatever he’s having as well.”

Vera placed two fresh beers before us. Then Vera went back to reading the paper. Now I felt obligated to talk to the man. The only thing I mustered was turning my head to the left and muttering *thanks*.

“So what’s a guy like you doing in an empty bar in the middle of the day?” he asked.

“Nothing better to do I guess.

“You don’t have a job?”

“Presently no,” I said staring straight ahead.

“Well then how do you get the money to be drinking in a bar?”

“I get strangers to buy it for me.”

He could tell that I was growing aggravated by his questions. It was silence again before he felt compelled to speak.

“The job market can be pretty tough. I know. I was born during the great depression. I was too young to realize it, but once I looked back on it I realized that my family was shit-poor.”

“I didn’t need a depression to be shit-poor. My family was poor regardless.”

Me saying those two sentences prompted the man to turn toward me as if we were about to engage in a serious conversation.

“You grow up around here?” he asked.

“All my life.”

“It’s beautiful country up here. But I don’t have to tell you that.”

I didn’t say anything in response. I could see that the man sitting there looking at my profile, waiting for me to say something. I begrudgingly asked, “Where you from?”

“I’m from a few miles south, Carroll, Iowa. I spent most of my life in Lincoln, Nebraska though. That’s where I met the woman who would become my wife.”

He had this wistful look upon his face staring above my head as he spoke.

“I really miss Lincoln. It’s one of those perfect lives. Had a nice little ranch home, nothing fancy but it fit our needs, you know? Never had very much, but we had what we needed.”

“How come you’re not in Lincoln right now?” I said in a snide tone.

“Well sometimes life throws you curveballs, you know?”

I nodded in agreement, keeping my gaze directly forward. The stranger next to me had stopped talking. I looked over. He had this distant, plaintive look on his face. I looked directly at him. I felt I could since he looked like he had forgotten that I was sitting next to him. I glanced over to Vera. She was entrenched in a crossword puzzle paying no mind to us.

“You know...” the stranger began, focusing his attention back to me, “you’re right, son. Sometimes I wish I was back in Lincoln. Like I said, perfect little house, perfect wife, perfect neighbors. Sometimes I wish I’d never left, you know?”

“Why did you leave?”

“Barbra, my wife, and I always wanted kids of our own. But we couldn’t. It just wasn’t in the cards. We went to doctor after doctor trying to figure out what the problem was. But those quacks never had an answer. I think Barb and I had this resentment toward each other because we both secretly blamed the other as the reason we couldn’t conceive,

you know? There weren't the tests they can do now to find out what the problem is. No, not back then. We quit going to doctors and went to a priest instead. He was very understanding and even had a prayer group pray for us. Nothing changed though."

He took another pull off his beer. I felt that I had to give him my full attention. Besides that I was a little curious about him by that point.

"Then years passed and we eventually found out why we couldn't have children. It turned out that Barb had malignant tumors on her ovaries. By the time we discovered that it was too late. It's strange, you know? Leading up to it she was the picture of good health, then one day she had some... bleeding, you know? From there it seemed like a matter of months spent making trip after trip to the clinic... and my darling Barbra withered to a pale flesh covered skeleton."

I looked down at my beer bottle. I had nothing to say. There was nothing I could possibly say.

"Sometimes I wish we never went to the hospital the day she found out she was sick. That was the day that changed everything. It was the chemo that they were putting in her. That's what changed her appearance so much. She would have been better ignoring it. I think she would have lived longer too. By the end she was hardly recognizable, you know? Her brother Tim flew up from Scottsdale to see her. I knew that she didn't look so good, but poor Tim nearly crumbled when he saw her. I watched her gradually get that way, Tim didn't. Last time Tim saw his sister was a couple years before when she looked like herself."

The stranger looked back at me. "But that was nearly ten years ago. I went through a pretty tough time in my life after that. After I retired I figured why am I living in a house that is full of memories? So I packed up and moved away to make a fresh start, you know?"

"You move around here?"

"No. It's a little ways away."

He was suddenly vague, which was strange since he poured his heart out to complete stranger only moments before. I ordered us a couple more beers even though he had hardly touched the beer before him.

"Say, how 'bout something a little harder?"

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"You drink whiskey?"

I told Vera two whiskies instead.

We sat there sipping from our tiny glasses trying to find something to say.

"You live by yourself?"

"No, I live with my two older brothers. They're usually here with me?"

"You leave 'em at home?"

"Yea."

"Sometimes you gotta do that. It's different, you know? Drinking by yourself. It changes the mood."

"So what brings you to these parts?"

"Oh, nothing much, business, you know?"

I've talked to plenty of people in plenty of bars, and one thing that I found out is people will tell you anything. But nothing you ask. If you keep quiet and let them talk they will tell you things that they wouldn't tell their own family. I think people feel a

natural inclination to divulge personal secrets. It's hard to keep the stuff that makes us ache inside to ourselves. We have to let it out at some point.

We finished our drinks and he ordered two more. I was feeling much better. I had almost forgotten that Joe had a knife to my throat only a short time ago. I nervously wiped my hand against the wound. I was afraid that my alcohol-thinned blood would cause it to bleed once again. I checked the back of my hand and saw that it was fine.

"Do you have any brothers of your own?" I asked.

"Me? No. I have a sister though. I haven't talked to her in years. We didn't grow up in the best home. My dad had a problem with booze. Just a nasty guy when he was drinking. It's a time in my life that I put behind me. My sister simply ran away from it. When she was sixteen she left home and never came back. I don't blame her one bit. I had a mean dad that would take out his anger on all three of us. My mom included. I figured once he died my sister would come back into the fold, but she never did. She moved out to the east coast and there she stayed."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"What can you do? Like I said, I can't blame her one bit. Do you have any sisters?"

"No, just the two brothers."

"You get along with them?"

I thought back to my neck. "Yea, as well as I can."

"It's important to get along with your brothers, you know? Brothers can be your best friend or your worst enemy because they know everything about you."

I nodded in agreement. I didn't quite know where he was going with that, but it was clear that the whiskey was adding a certain weight to every word he spoke. I think he felt like he was being downright poetic. That's something that many people don't understand. Whiskey doesn't make you a poet. It simply makes you feel like you are one.

The old man finished off his drink and proceeded to order another for each of us. It was obvious that he had a drinking problem. His dad was a drunk, and I imaging he drank quite a bit after his wife died. Hell, he might have been drinking too much while she was still alive.

By this time some of the regulars were making their way to their usual spots. The stranger's voice began to slur and his cheeks became ruddy.

"Thanks for the drink," I said lifting it slightly from the bar.

"Burt," he said finishing my sentence.

"Burt," I said back to him. "...my names Jacob."

He didn't seem interested in my name. He just reached his left arm across his wide chest and shook my hand. I looked down the bar at the familiar faces. Herman was sitting in his usual spot behind the glass full of rusty water. Herman stared at me with contempt in his eyes, not saying a word. I looked at him and asked how he was doing.

Herman didn't say anything in return. He looked back at his open beer. Ian took a seat on the empty barstool next to me. Ian was a nice man, but a hapless man. It always seemed like he came up short in life. You could never guess it by talking to him though. He was constantly optimistic. Well, optimistic may be taking it a bit far. But for his circumstances he was downright sunny. I liked Ian. But the one thing that I took from Ian's life is not to do what Ian did. He served as a reminder, a cautionary tale. It was

nothing exactly that he did. It was just how he ended up. He seemed lonely. He didn't have much going on in his life. *This* was his life.

"It's nice of you to grace us with your presence," Ian said with a mocking smile behind his apricot brandy.

"Enjoy it while you can. I can't stick around much longer."

"Where you hiding your brothers?"

"They stayed home."

I always hated it when people would ask me where my brothers were. They were essentially saying, *I'd much rather be talking to them, not you.*

My new friend, Burt, seeing that I was going to be talking to Ian, stood up tapped me on the shoulder and said through slurred lips, "I've gotta motor, Jacob. It's was nice talking to you."

"You alright to drive, Burt? I can give you a ride?"

"No... no... awful kind of you though. Take care," he said with a warm smile.

Just as Burt left, Vera walked up and asked me if I wanted another drink. My head was swimming from the last few. I told her that I had to take off.

"How do you know that guy?" Vera asked.

"Burt? I don't really. I just met him when he stepped in here."

"You don't know him?"

"Well... no. I mean, I do now." I was growing concerned.

"That guy was in here a couple days ago asking about you boys."

"What?!"

"I mean not outright. He acted like he knew you and your brothers. He was hoping to have a beer with you guys. I told him that you boys hadn't been around here as much lately and he took off after a couple drinks."

A flood of questions hit me, but I had no one to ask them to. I had to leave. I had to get back home. I didn't know if I was going to tell Eddie and Joe about that guy or not. If I told them I would also have to tell them how I met him, and how long I talked to him. I wondered if I told him anything that I shouldn't have. I rapidly replayed parts of our conversation in my head. I didn't say much about myself. It was Burt who was blathering on about his dead wife and his shitty dad. I *did* tell him that I had two brothers. I *did* tell him my name.

I had to get home. But first I had to take a leak.

I got up from my barstool; my legs were weak beneath me. Not out of fear, but because I hadn't stood up since I had gotten there. Usually I have to get up plenty of times drinking beer, but when I drink whisky I can spend an entire night in one spot. I walked into the bathroom, rounded the corner of the block partition wall and stood before the urinals just on the other side. As I stood there looking at the familiar "Say No to Drugs" rubber damn at the bottom of the pisser, I heard the bathroom door open. The figure took two steps on flat-soled cowboy boots on the tiled floor, and let the door shut behind him. There the figure stopped. I stood there waiting to see someone walk around to the other side of the wall, but there was nothing. Was Burt wearing cowboy boots? I stood there in silence unable to piss. I tucked myself away and silently buckled my belt. I walked with a steady soft heel-to-toe steps—the way Eddie showed me how to do when we used to go squirrel hunting. I walked away back from the block wall to step wide

around the partition. I didn't want to be poking my head around to the other side. Not when I don't know who the hell is there, and what their intentions are.

I quietly walked with my head leaning ahead of me. Standing next to the door was Herman. He stood there in his well worn cowboy boots, plaid shirt sleeve cuffs rolled up to his elbows and one arm resting against the closed door. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Herman, you scared the shit out of me."

"What 'ya have 'ta be 'fraid of, lad?" he said in his familiar slurred dialect.

"Well, nothing, but it's a little odd that someone would stop at the door in the bathroom is all."

"Haven't been seein' much 'a 'ya an' yer brothers round here."

"Yea, we can't go out the way we used to. Not until we find another job."

"Yea... gotta make money to spend."

"Yea, you got that right."

"It's kinda funny 'ya know... you an' yer brothers stopped comin' here 'bout a couple weeks now."

"Yea, I guess so."

"You hear 'bout them girls missin'?"

It felt as if someone dropped a dirty, dry brick into my stomach. "Missing girls?"

"Missin' girls. You hear 'bout 'em?"

"Yea, I think I heard something about it I guess."

"They went missin' couple weeks back too. Juss' when ya' boys stopped commin' here."

"What are you implying, Herman? Just because we stopped coming here all the sudden you think we took some little girls?"

"That an' I 'member ya' jokin' 'bout how it'd be funny to take 'em."

The brick had now ripped through my tender stomach tissue and now landed in the very pit of my body. I felt sick. I wanted to vomit. I maintained my composure.

"Herman, that's a fucking coincidence. We had nothing to do with it. Even implying that we did is illegal. If you tell anyone that you suspect us (oh, God has he told anyone that he suspects us) that's defamation! We can sue you for that!"

I didn't have any idea what I was talking about. I was only trying to put the same fear that he instilled into me, back into him.

"Ya' shut up, lad!" Herman growled, pointing his finger accusingly. "Now, I know ya' took 'em. And I wanna know what yer' gonna do 'bout it?"

"I... I don't know."

Herman looked down on me from his pious point. That is until he uttered, "They're offerin' twenty grand to turn 'em in. What'll ya' boys' gimme'?"

I hesitated, "Thirty."

"Fifteen."

"Deal."

Even though this was a dirty deal that we were making, Herman still felt gentlemanly enough to seal it with a hand shake.

"Wait, have you talked to anyone about this?"

"Never."

"No one at all?"

"Ya' think I'm stupid, lad? Ya' think I can't keep me to myself?"



“Alright, alright, just so long as you didn’t talk to anyone. You didn’t talk to a large man with gray hair by the name of, Burt?”

“What’re ya’ stupid?” What are ya’ deaf? I never told no one!”

The bathroom door swung open, striking Herman’s shoulder. It was Ian.

“What do you imagine I’m interrupting here?” Ian said from his perpetual grin.

The mood was tense, like an old west standoff. Thankfully, Ian had just enough apricot brandies not to notice. I looked at Herman, and with a strong nod I made my way past the both of them and exited the bathroom and bar.

On the drive home I decided not to tell Joe and Eddie about the deal I made with Herman. I would take the fifty grand out of my own share and not speak of word about my new acquaintance, Burt.

I had to get home, but I still wasn’t in very much of a rush. I didn’t want to walk in and see Joe. He would never apologize to me. He’s never apologized ever to me. I think he always saw himself as in the right, that there is no reason to apologize. Not that it would do any good. I mean, he held a knife to my throat.

I pulled up the driveway and saw his car parked in the garage. I cringed and made my way inside. The kitchen was empty and so was the living room. I walked over to Eddie’s room and saw his light was on. After a knock on the door he let me in.

“How ‘ya feeling?” Eddie asked.

“A little drunk to be honest.”

“Joe made the first call to Jeremiah Cohen.”

I sat at his desk chair with my arms crossed.

“You know Joe would never hurt you.”

I said nothing.

“Anyways, Joe drove an hour to Oelwein– “

“Did he say anything like being sorry about the incident to you?”

“Well, no. But you know Joe doesn’t do that.”

“I know.”

“So, Joe drove over to Oelwein to make the call so not to be anywhere near home, right? He talked directly to Cohen, but he didn’t tell him any of our demands.”

“Why not?”

“Joe said that he was looking to make contact with him, but didn’t want to deal yet. Joe said it’s like kicking the tires of a new car then walking away. This way we’re in the driver’s seat,” Eddie said with a reassuring grin. He thought it was genius, which only served to enflame me.

“Well, Joe always seems to know what’s best. So what did he talk to Cohen about, the weather, sports?”

“He told him that the girls are in good health and are well taken care of.”

“No thanks to him.”

“We each have our responsibilities, Jacob.”

Eddie, as always, was the mediator whenever Joe and I had our disagreements.

“How do they know the girls are in good health? Did they ask to speak to them?”

“No.”

“No, they didn’t ask to speak to the girls? Or no, Joe failed to mention that they wanted to speak to the girls?”

“Joe didn’t say anything about that.”

“Of course he didn’t, otherwise he would be admitting failure. They’re going to want to see proof that the girls are alright and Joe had nothing for them. Joe probably didn’t talk money with them because he didn’t get a chance to. Believe me; we are definitely not in the driver’s seat. And Joe just made us look like a pack of rookies who don’t know what they’re doing.”

“He was in a good mood when he came home. He sounded confident.”

“Of course he did! He had to mask his mistake. They asked for proof, and he just stood there stuttering because the girls were an hour away!”

I could see Eddie’s confidence in Joe erode right before my eyes. And yet that wasn’t enough, I had to twist the knife further.

“Did he remember to turn off the phone after he hung-up so they can’t track us?”

“I... I don’t know.”

We walked into the kitchen and searched for the phone, moving random junk on the counter, and looking in the same drawer that it was in earlier.

“It might still be on him,” Eddie said.

“I got it,” I said picking it up off the far end of the cluttered counter. I held it up level to my face.

“Is it off?”

“It’s off, hopefully because Joe turned it off, and not because the battery’s dead.”

“Can you turn it on for a second just to make sure?” Eddie asked.

“We can’t take that risk.”

I tossed the phone back onto the counter and sighed in frustration. I figured that Joe turned off the phone, but that didn’t stop me from starting a mud-slinging campaign against him. It was high time Eddie stopped placing Joe on a pedestal.

## CHAPTER 22

The next morning my mom called, she needed help moving an old dresser out of the house. I let out an inaudible sigh and kicked myself for answering the phone. I agreed to help and told her that I’d be over in an hour or so. It’s not that I don’t like helping my mother, it’s more the fact that she always seemed to depress me. She’s always been like that, but more recently since I had moved out. Over the past four years or so she really hasn’t seemed quite like herself. She seemed out of sorts. She never asks me how I was doing, or if anything was new. Really, I wouldn’t be telling her any news. I was doing fine, and there wasn’t ever anything new. Although in this case I wasn’t doing fine, I was not all together, and there was something really big and new. But I couldn’t tell her about what is going on. I couldn’t tell her that her sons were criminals. I guess that isn’t news to her, but in this case we have reached an all new level of reproach. I would like to tell Mom about this, certainly not to brag about our notoriety, but just to have someone to unburden myself to.

I think the reason why my mom had been so down was not only that fact that she was the only one left in the old farm house, but the fact that she probably will never get to be a grandmother. There weren't any prospects on the horizon. And if there were any mishaps where either my brothers' or my own demon seed impregnated some poor girl, the new mother most likely wouldn't want any of us fuck-ups in her child's life.

A father has a lot to do with a child's adult behavior. It would most likely be best if we weren't there to corrupt the innocent. On the other hand, not having a father like in our case seems to have bad consequences as well. My mom would probably be lucky to even find out that there was a grandchild running about, not even getting to the fact that she wouldn't get to assist in raising it at all.

I would introduce Ashley and Olivia to Mom under any other circumstance. They're great girls, and would be fantastic granddaughters to my mom. They would probably add years to her life, and would make the holidays fun once again. Christmas and Thanksgiving anymore are practically non-existent.

Eddie made his way into the kitchen. I hadn't seen Joe since the knife incident. It was clear that he was avoiding me.

"They didn't mention anything about a ransom call on the news this morning," he said.

"Do you think Joe even made the call?" My slander campaign against Joe continued. "By the way, Mom called this morning. Do you think you could help her move a dresser or something?"

"You talked to her on the phone?"

"Yea."

"Well then she's expecting you."

"Oh, come on. Could you at least tag along?"

"No can do. Someone has to stay home at all times, remember?"

"Where's Joe?"

"He took off early this morning."

"Where?"

Eddie shrugged his shoulders.

I made the girls a breakfast of eggs-over-easy, toast and orange juice. Their appetites continued to grow which I was happy to see. I'd love to return them back to their parents with a few extra pounds on them. It would definitely prove that they were well cared for.

Olivia still had thoughts of *The Secret Garden* running through her mind. I could tell that she and Ashley had been discussing the book after I left them each night. Ashley appeared to have grown tired of her sister's talk that morning, although it *did* seem that she was patronizing her. I think Ashley enjoyed seeing Olivia in a good mood as much as I did.

"If you heard Collin crying down a long hallway would you be scared?" Olivia asked, sitting in the wooden kitchen chair. Her pajama clad legs dangling far above the concrete floor, kicking.

"No," said Ashley.

Olivia then turned her question to me.

"Well, would I know that Collin was just a little bedridden boy?" I asked.

This seemed to make Olivia hesitate.

“Because,” I continued, “if I knew that Collin was just a little, lonely boy who needed a friend I wouldn’t be scared of him.”

“But you *don’t* know him!” Olivia revealed.

“I still wouldn’t be scared,” said Ashley.

“Yea you would! You get scared when the Thompson’s dog barks at you,” said Olivia.

“That’s different!”

“I wouldn’t be scared of Collin, Mary wasn’t scared of him. She could tell that he was friendly, even though he sounded scary. I would tell that he was good too.”

I nodded in agreement. Ashley rolled her eyes as she took a sip of orange juice.

“Listen girls, I’ve got to cut out for a little bit. I need to help my mom move a dresser.”

The girls looked at me with bewildered astonishment. It’s as if they didn’t consider that fact that I had a mother.

“How old is she?” Ashley asked.

“I don’t know, like forty-eight or so, I think.”

“What does she look like?” Olivia asked.

“Like a mom. What can I say? She has shoulder length hair that she colors blond, and she’s not very tall.”

“Is she as tall as Ashley?” Olivia asked.

“She’s much taller than Ashley. She just not very tall for an adult—she’s like ye high,” I said while hovering my hand around my collar bone.

“Does she know that we’re staying with you?” Ashley asked.

“No, no I don’t think she knows.”

“Is she nice?” Olivia asked.

“When she wants to be,” I said.

This perplexed the girls. They immediately glanced over to each other with brows furrowed.

“She’s very nice,” I corrected. “I really need to take off. She’s expecting me to be there any minute.”

“Does she live far away?” Ashley asked as I turned to ascend the staircase.

“No, not too far away, but regardless I still need to be going. I’ll be home before you know it.”

“Theodore?”

I was confused, almost completely forgetting that Theodore was now my name, “Yes, Olivia?”

“Are you going to be back soon?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“We get bored down here.”

“I won’t be gone for long. I’ll hurry back as soon as I can.”

I jogged up the staircase and gingerly closed the heavy basement door. I didn’t want to make it apparent each time I was locking the girls in the basement. They knew that I was locking them in, but there was still no need to crash the door shut and flip the loud metal locks when I did it.

On the drive over to Mom's I began to think about what would happen if a fire broke out in the house. The girls wouldn't be able to escape. The one exit is bolted shut and the windows are blocked. Would Eddie get them out? The toaster! I just used the toaster that morning. What if it caught fire? I could never forgive myself.

I pulled into my mother's driveway. I was immediately greeted by Fox, my Mom's red Border Collie. The dog must be at least a dozen years old. He's pretty slow to get to his feet and if he hadn't seen you drive in you could most likely walk right past him up to the front door. Fox is deaf as hell and had been for years. But on this occasion, Fox was fully awake and recognized me as soon as I stepped out of my familiar car. He hobbled over and I gave him an obligatory scratch behind the ears. His fur was wet and smelly yet from the previous night's rain. I dug my finger nails as far as I could through his thick outer coat. He always appreciated a deep scratch, his tail waived frantically. That is one of the only remaining traits that he kept from when he was a small stray puppy. Beyond that he was practically an unrecognizable dog from my youth. Fox was one of my best friends. I used to talk to him as if he were a person when no one else was around. Now he's only a lame, furry, bag of bones that made the tips of my fingers stink after I pet him. Although it seemed like he enjoyed a good scratching more than he ever did, he didn't know that in the back of my mind I want to find the nearest sink to wash my hands.

I pushed the old storm door that scraped against the porch rug open, the loose panels of thin glass vibrating as I did it. I saw that my mom was napping on the couch. The television was blaring at a volume so loud I was amazed that anyone could fall asleep. She always looked old beyond her years when she was sleeping, but young the few occasions she laughed. You'd think it would be the other way around. There are much more lines on ones face when you laugh rather than when you are resting. But there is much more life when a person is laughing beyond their control.

Before waking her I muted *The Real House Wives* of wherever, and gently tapped her on the shoulder. She awoke, not necessarily pleased to see me even though she asked me to come over.

She gave me a modest greeting and returned the recliner back into the upright position. I didn't ask how she was. Call me selfish, but I decided that I wasn't going to ask how she was doing until she asked how I was doing. And, at least when I respond, it's no news, as opposed to her bad news. No news really is better than bad news.

Without me initiating the small talk, there was an awkward silence as she rocked and stood up from the chair, much like how Fox gets up from the dug-out flowerbed that he has long since made his bed. It had been at least a couple of months since I'd talked to her. She never calls. It seems a bit silly to call since we only live a handful of miles from her. Then again, us boys didn't pick up the phone or stop by for a visit.

"So..." I began with hands in my pockets, "...how have you been?"

"Oh, my lumbar has been killing me the past couple of weeks. When that's not in the front of my mind it's Lucillia that I have to worry about. I swear she's out to get me. I can't realize why? I mean her boyfriend Jeremy *did* recently leave her. He was cheating on her you know..."

My Mom continued on like this as she put on her house slippers and did a mirror check, rubbing at the crows feet at the corners of her eyes and a quick teeth whiteness

check. She continually told me sob stories about her work politics, the back-stabbing, double-crossing and talking behind people's backs. All of this about people that I don't know. I vaguely remember names that she has spoken of before. They are only familiar because of her repeatedly stating them. If you were to ask me any of their names outright I don't think I could name one of them though honestly. She prattled on as I tried to steer to conversation to a more abstract field, saying things like, *yea, it sucks when a person does that, a person should be much more honest when it comes to something like that, it's best to fess up and get it over with.*

It didn't do any good, it never does. It's always about her work. Truth-be-told, there wasn't anything to talk about with my work. There wasn't any office politics. I worked with my brothers counting aluminum cans that are lined with smelly backwash. And I didn't even have that job anymore. I do wonder how her coworkers spoke of her. I am essentially only getting one side of the story. Not that I would care to really dig and find out. Some of the people that she spoke of were younger than me. They were high school girls that worked at the factory. It's odd to think of my mother convening, and dealing with anyone my age, let alone some girl that's five years younger than me that I've never heard of.

With my patience thinning, I finally asked her where the dresser she wanted moved was. I fitted in that question as soon as there was a lull in her unburdening. It was still like fitting a square peg into that round hole of a conversation. I didn't much care though. Soon enough I would be returning to my "regular", familiar routine and life.

She led me slowly upstairs of the old farm house. Up the staircase that I had spent countless time-outs on or carefully stepped up with soft bare feet on as I tried to sneak up the steps and past her bedroom in my teenage years when I would come home three sheets to the wind.

The dresser that she was referring to was a dresser that belonged to Joe. It was always his dresser growing up. She wanted it moved up into the hayloft and out of her way. The dresser was white and had rough brush grooves painted onto its surface and deep chips and gashes in that paint from our childhood exploits. There were numerous stickers randomly stuck all around it. A *Tony the Tiger* sticker that I'm almost positive must have come free in a box of cereal, a Chicago Cubs sticker which I knew was on there but never thought anything of it until now, none of us boys were really sports fans. There was a black sticker that said *D.A.R.E.* that Joe no doubt received in the sixth grade, and a sticker for the local rock station. When that was applied to the dresser, I remember thinking that it gave our room a much needed cool, rebellious feel. That was when we were much younger, before we truly began to rebel. I'm sure my mom wishes that a simple rock station sticker on the side of a dilapidated dresser was the extent of our youthful debauchery.

Joe was always secretive with his prized possessions. It wasn't until that day that I realize that the possessions that he prized were common junk. A cologne bottle that had only a smear of scent left in it, wallet sized photos of his own elementary school pictures, an assortment of cereal box tops that if he had had enough could mail in for a prize. He never did. There were multiple pairs of 3-D glasses that he collected from various comic books, and rubber bands—lots and lots of rubber bands. Really the only thing out of his accumulation that was worth any value was his collection John F. Kennedy fifty cent coins. And those were only worth their minted value. It would probably be enough to buy

only a case of beer, something that my brothers and I spend our hard earned dollars on often and thought nothing of it.

The top two narrow, shallow drawers that he kept all of that stuff had been empty for years, along with the rest of the dresser. I wonder if he threw it all out when he moved out of the house, or if I would find it in his room where we lived. I used to sneak a peek at his items when I was younger, rummaging through them, admiring each piece. Then carefully place them back exactly where I found them, in fear that he would know that I was snooping.

As I bear-hugged the dresser and lifted it out of the room, I suddenly thought of it as not the private safe that contained Joe's prized objects, but as junk. Just like the items that it used to contain.

I leaned back far and awkwardly made my way down the narrow staircase, around the tight bend at the bottom of the steps, and through the living room past the porch and out the front door. That is where I set down the old dresser that was surprisingly light when I first picked it up, but seemed to gain weight with every five steps.

"Why are you moving Joe's dresser out?" I asked.

"I'm going to make your boys old room into my computer room," she said while lighting a cigarette.

"You got a computer?"

"One step at a time."

"Have you ever run a computer?"

"I use one all the time at work."

I knew that if she got a computer that I would become her go to IT guy since Joe and Eddie don't usually answer the phone when she calls, and also because I'm the only one in the family who owns a computer.

"The sooner you finish your break the sooner you'll be done," she said.

It's not like I was taking up any of her time. I knew she didn't have a lot on her schedule that day, much like any other day. I dreaded the thought of having to not only carry that cumbersome dresser thirty more yards to the old barn, but I also had to balance it on my shoulder as I climbed up the ladder to place it in "storage" or what was once referred to many years ago as the hay loft.

The barn was never in use in my youth. My dad was never a farmer, I guess. I don't exactly know what he did for a living. But none the less, I grew up on a never used farm. Sure there were farm fields all around us, but it was never farmed by us. The neighbors that owned the land would rumble their huge tractors with large dual axle manure spreaders, wide winged corn planters, fiber glass barreled crop sprayers or gigantic combine harvesters right up our driveway and past our back gate, with my mother's permission. Years ago, Joe, Eddie and I would pretend that the mammoth green combine harvester was an enemy tank as it pulled through the yard. We would position ourselves on the roof of the chicken coop—which sounds far up but really wasn't. After climbing to the top of the shallow roof we would lay flat on our stomachs against the slanted rough surface and ready our wrist-rockets. Wrist-rockets are basically slingshots but with braces that countered the pull against your forearm. It wasn't a simple forked branch like you'd see in a *Dennis the Menace's* back pocket. No, these could actually do some real damage with the right ammo. Mom was wise to immediately pocket the dozen or so metallic ball-bearings that came with each wrist-rocket.

Once we were in place, we would duck behind the peak of the roof and wait for the harvester to approach and pass by. We would hear with great excitement the sound of gravel being ground into dust from the wide, weighted tires. We stayed still and listening to the vibration of the harvester as it approached, the dark smoke billowing out of the stack we could see dissipating above the roof peak. Our eyes would meet. In our hearts we were battle hardened soldiers in Vietnam ready to lay waste to an enemy tank, but in our minds we knew we were kids lying against a chicken coop roof preparing to shoot round pellets of dog food at a piece of farm equipment. But that didn't matter. The volume of the engine approaching, our anticipation rising, as soon as it turned the bend in our driveway which gave us a nice, close, broad shot, we each stood to our knees or balanced on the soles of our sneakers, took aim with our "ammo", and unleashed upon the steel, green side of the combine. We would take careful aim, but not take too long. We knew that there was a short window of time to strike any hits. We planted the rough, brown, dog food pellets into the leather chambers, pulled back to our earlobes, took aim between the uprights and fired.

The bits of dog food would either shatter or simply bounce off the side of the harvester. I don't know if the guy driving it knew what we were doing, or cared. He probably didn't even hear the pellets hit his machine's backside. They're pretty loud and tend to have a lot of vibrating parts. Nonetheless, we were victorious in our fight every time. We would brag to each other exactly where we hit it. Joe would always claim that he hit the glass cab. I never saw a piece of dog food hit it, but I never doubted him for one second.

You've heard people say, *after you grow up everything seems so much smaller*. It's true, what seemed like a coliseum-sized play area that was full of infinite possibilities is really just a small group of old farm sheds. Some of them ready to collapse to the ground.

With the dresser tightly gripped in my hug, I entered the old barn and ducked beneath the old steel tube piping that at one time transported the fresh milk from the milking units to the large bulk tank located in the adjoining room. I stepped heavily between the old trough mangers and to the chute that led to the hay loft. I leaned the dresser against the ladder and used my head and hands to slide it up against the ladder while I stepped up the rungs. Once my head was even with the floor of the hay loft I performed the tricky task of sliding it onto the floor of the loft without tipping it over—thus preserving the shoddy, piece of shit dresser.

With the dresser safely positioned on the loft's plank boards, I climbed the rest of the way up the ladder, picked up the dresser and piled it with the rest of the junk that was up there. There were garbage sacks and blue and gray totes that held old winter coats and work boots. Along the far wall were an old china hutch, a stationary bike, and cabinets that used to be in the kitchen before it was remodeled a decade ago.

Everything had a thick layer of fuzzy dust, hay chaff and raccoon and pigeon shit. There were various items that had no value and would never be used again. There was absolutely no reason to hold on to any of this shit. That is except for my old globe lamp. It used to sit on my night stand when I was growing up. The blue and green sphere shade had seen better days, but then again, so had I. It never looked new. You could always see the cracks in the surface when the light inside of it was on. There, through the crepe-



paper veneer, were lightning bolts tearing through distant countries and far away seas. It had shown bright, as if the sun was within the Earth. I used to pretend my finger was a small version of me, and place it in the mundane Midwest and slowly begin traveling in whatever direction I felt. My index finger would traverse tall mountains represented on the globe with simple contour lines and the name of the mountain range arched within it. My finger would press on, sailing across the cracked, blue ocean and eventually find land to settle. I wasn't familiar with geography back then. I would make any place that seemed tucked away from the rest of the world my new home. Or, a distant island in the middle of nowhere, and claim it all for me.

It was funny looking at the globe. Its age was not only apparent from the numerous cracks in it, but also from the countries that it featured—particularly the USSR.

I snagged the globe lamp and made my way out of the old, forgotten barn. I tossed the lamp onto the backseat of my car. I saw that Mom must have gone back into the house. I walked back into the room where the dresser once stood. Mom was sweeping up the dust on the floor that the dresser had covered for years on end. There was a picture in the pile of dust and debris. Mom was ready to sweep it into the dust pan to discard it. I picked it up, salvaging it. It was a picture of the entire family including my dad standing in front of my grandmother's house. I was only a baby in the photo, protectively held in my mother's arms. Eddie was sitting upright in my father's burley, sun tanned arms, and Joe stood next to Mom with his tiny left arm wrapped around her leg. We looked like a complete family. It was a photo that I had seen before, but now as an adult, I looked upon it with a different perspective. Dad couldn't have been too much older than I am. He definitely had the build of a working man. He seemed like a giant to me in my earliest memories. That's where my memories of him stop, before he died.

"That's a photo from the day you were baptized." Mom said, peering over my shoulder as I knelt on the floor.

"And you were just going to throw it out?"

"We have a bunch of copies. We included that photo with our Christmas letter that year."

Regardless, I decided I would salvage it from the garbage and keep it for myself. It's strange, really, to think about the past. Not my past, but *the* past—the past before my time, before I was born. It seems much more special and exciting than my own. Whenever I think of the past it has specific scents. It smells like old yearbook pages, a shoebox interior that is filled to the brim with photographs, a vinyl record sleeve, the inside of a steamer trunk, or the out of fashion garments that are kept in the back of a closet. I attribute those scents to that time. As if that's how everything smelled back then. A scent can often act as a key to unlocking memories, memories that I have from someone else's past, memories that I lay side by side with my own memories. I need to remind myself that things from the past used to be new. That kids didn't read comic books with washed out illustrations on yellow pages. And that real life wasn't in black and white fifty years ago. It sounds silly to have to remind myself that, but I wasn't there. I wasn't even a thought. The only thing that I can do is wonder what it was like back then. If it really was as special and exciting as I imagine in my mind. I imagine how it looked, how it sounded, how it felt, but never how it smelled. I'm content with the way I remember how it smelled, in my memories before I was born.

My dad died as a young adult. Kids don't make that distinction growing up, especially really young kids. In a young child's mind you're either a kid, an adult, or an old person. It doesn't matter if you were in your early twenties; you were an adult in a young child's mind. Just like it didn't matter if you were only fifty-five, in a child's perspective if you had gray hair you were an old person. I wanted to ask my mom just how it was Dad died. It was always a taboo subject in our house growing up. I always felt like if I asked it was treated as if I had some morbid curiosity just because I wanted to know what happened to my dad.

I don't remember the day it happened, I was far too young. But I have been able to piece together bits of what happened over the years. I recall asking my mom out of the blue what happened to Dad one day. I was probably five or so at the time. I don't know what brought it up, or if I was thinking about it before hand. Just like any other five year old, I asked a lot of questions. Mom said that Dad died in a car accident and went up to heaven. I don't remember a lot of specifics from when I was five, but I remember that word for word, probably because I've thought about that answer in my head over and over. Whenever a friend asked me where my Dad was, what my dad did for a job or how he died, I would tell them what my mom told me that day, *he died in a car accident*. I would leave out the *went up to heaven part*.

I was never satisfied with that answer, but I didn't pry any further that day. And, as I grew, it was harder for me to bring it up. She never brought it up herself. She never regaled us with any stories about Dad. No relative experiences from the past that were germane to any situation at the time. I'm a bit of the nostalgic sorts. I like to look back fondly on memories, good or bad. But in my mom's case, the past was truly left in the past. She constantly had her eyes set to the horizon, forging ahead to the future. To what future, I don't know. To a new computer, I guess.

Mom finished up the much needed sweeping and offered me something to eat. I followed her downstairs. There wasn't much to talk about. It's kind of sad in a way. I hadn't talked to her in a few weeks. You'd think we'd have something to say to each other. She made a cold chicken sandwich for herself and me, with potato chips on the side and a sheet of *No Bake* cookies for desert. She asked me if I wanted to split a *Fuzzy Navel* wine cooler with her. She was never really a drinker, but would have the occasional wine cooler. She didn't even like drinking an entire one. I guess us boys must have gotten our insatiable taste for alcohol from our dad.

"Did you like being a mom?"

She looked at me perplexed for a moment, then said, "Did you like being a son?"

"I never had a choice in the matter, you did."

"Are you asking me if I regretted being a mother?"

"Well, yea. You raised us when you were just out of high school."

"And what else should I've been doing?"

"I don't know, partying, having fun... being a kid."

"I was never really a kid. Mom and Dad—your grandparents—were constantly working to provide for eight kids. I had to act as mother at a very young age. It was a relief when I had only you three to take care of."

"After you met Dad?"

"Of course."

“But that’s my point. You never had any wild years when you could just go out and do whatever you want?”

It felt weird saying that to my mom. I never spoke to her in that way, provoking genuine candor. I swear I spent my entire teenage years without having a “real” conversation with her.

“You can’t always schedule your life the way you want it. It happens the way it does, and you just deal with it,” she said.

What she last said made me think of the quote; *If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.*

“I remember many year ago when you boys were still little. I stopped by the Sinclair Station and saw four of my classmates on a beautiful Saturday afternoon picking up beer and hopping back into their truck that was pulling a speed boat. I was only in my early-twenties, and I saw how carefree they were, laughing and teasing as they as they took off, setting off for the river I’d imagine.”

“Did you say *hi* to them?”

“No, they were far too busy having fun to notice me. I was just standing next to the car gassing it up, still carrying the birth-weight from you. You were just a newborn at the time.”

“Did you wish that you could just get in the truck and take off with them to the river?”

“Oh no, well to be honest, I did admire the freedom they had. But I looked in the car to see you three boys and reminded myself that I have something far greater than freedom.”

I think she meant that as a compliment, although she could have worded it better. It made me envision young Joe, Eddie and me as three anvils tethered to her ankles.

“So, no regrets?”

“No regrets. There were times when I wished that it was easier.”

There was silence after she said that. I was a little ashamed. I knew that we boys didn’t make it easy for her. We were all constantly in trouble growing up. Back when I was in school, teachers knew me because of Joe and Eddie. Those two paved a road of hijinks for me.

I wasn’t a bad kid at heart. I was a bright kid. I always got fantastic grades, even though I spent much of my time in the principal’s office, detention or suspension. I felt almost obligated to give the teachers a hard time. It was expected of me. I was Joe and Eddie’s little brother. Smart-ass comments, spitballs, writing on my desk, letting the classroom gerbil out of his cage—where he eventually crawled up into the wall furnace and died—it was what was expected of me. I only antagonized the teachers, not my fellow students like Joe did. However you sliced it, Joe was a bully. There are still old classmates of his that absolutely despise him, and refuse to talk to him when we are at the bars. Joe has since grown up from then. He no longer acts that way. But even after so many years people don’t forget.

As I grew older so did my minor crimes against the establishment. There was the school vandalism, when I spray painted “Summerfield Knights Rule” on a wall of folded bleachers. The Summerfield Knights were a rival school, and I was trying to raise school spirit—make a genuine enemy. But, I made the mistake of bragging to my friends that I did it, and word got out. I was suspended for that one.

Another time I switched out the pre-taped *Channel 1 News* (a national news show for kids and young adults) with a porno that I stole from the local video store. I fast forwarded it to the most graphic part at home and had my good friend, and often coconspirator, Larry Devin, distract the school librarian. Larry asked Mrs. Valley to help him find a certain book. As soon as she left her post I snuck into the little room that had the huge metal VCR with the *Channel One News* episode already queued up for the next class period. The broadcast played on every television in every classroom simultaneously. When the next period began, *Homerom*, as it was referred to, I sat with great anticipation waiting to the broadcast to begin. I assumed Larry was doing the same. We didn't have Homerom class together.

I figured we had a fifty-fifty chance at pulling this off. Mrs. Valley would either check the tape to ensure it was the correct one (somewhat unlikely), or she would swap out what was actually yesterday's tape with a different tape that had the most recent episode (very much possible).

Everyone was sitting in their seats, passively paying attention to the blank screen while talking to one another, waiting for the news to begin. It seemed like it was taking forever. I began to suspect that Mrs. Valley noticed that it was a different tape inside the machine and caught the mistake. By that time I had convinced myself that this wouldn't work. At that point the television signal changed and was no longer blank. A bright screen and video images appeared. Instead of being greeted by an attractive twenty-something with professional news anchor aspirations, we saw two male porn actors simultaneously drilling an attractive twenty-something with professional actress aspirations. I knew that the broadcast would be short, if indeed it worked at all, and I was right. It felt like it was broadcasting for five minutes, but I bet it only ran for twenty seconds at best. It was enough to show two hairless gym rats double-penetrating the young starlet in their respective orifices while she conjured sycophantic moans of ecstasy.

I was the only one laughing in that classroom. It was all gasps and eye covering from the girls. And mouths and eyes wide open from the boys as they mentally recorded the images, burning them into their memories.

I thought it was the perfect crime. I wasn't near the VCR when it aired. And I'd be goddamned if they were going to dust the VHS tape for prints. I leaned back satisfied as the intended broadcast began. But it was far from the perfect crime. Someone squealed on me and told the right people that I was messing around in the room that housed the VCR the hour before the infamous broadcast. I got three weeks detention for that one. They actually threatened me with sexual harassment charges. Larry got off scot-free. It's not like I was going to rat him out.

I loved detention. I was never really what you would call a "social butterfly". I kept to myself mainly, making a few friends, but despising the majority of my classmates. They all seemed phony. Standing in the hallways, I could often overhear many conversations. I could hear both sides being an eavesdropper. I could hear people talking about other people behind their back, then moments later be happy to see them.

I tried not to think of myself too often as an outsider, it reeked of *Holden Caulfield*, particularly when I referred to someone as a phony in my head. But that's why detention was so great. Yellow epoxy painted walls surrounded you, and no windows anywhere. You sat on your hard plastic chair at your personal desk that was boxed out so you couldn't even look at the kid next to you. It was pure silence. It was so quiet you

could tell when Adam Leathson was in detention without even seeing him. He was a heavy mouth-breather. I didn't like him.

At first, detention was torture. The seven hour school day felt, at the very least, twice as long. After your school work was completed there was nothing to do. No talking and no getting up from your desk unless you had to take a piss. And even sometimes you couldn't do that if they felt it had been too recent since your last bathroom visit. At first I would immediately finish my school work, which was never difficult, and then I was allowed to select a book or magazine from the adjoining library. I would select a *People* magazine and mindlessly read about Lindsey Lohan and Paris Hilton's exploits. I hated it.

I eventually received a hand-written syllabus for the day from my Lit teacher that contained the assignments to complete—just as I received from every other teacher. But on this occasion there included with the note was the book *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. We had to read it for a class assignment. I was enthralled from the first page and read the entire book straight through that very same day. I loved it! I received special remarks on my test grade because when it came to the essay questions, I not only filled up the allotted space, but a full notebook page beyond that. I couldn't get enough of Bradbury's dystopian future where free thought was prohibited and firefighters didn't put out fires, but instead started them to burn literature. *Fahrenheit 451—the temperature at which book paper catches fire, and burns...*

After that the flood gates were opened. I consumed books in my school imposed exile. Books like Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. I couldn't get enough of the bleak, depressing futures.

I intentionally got into trouble merely so that I could be placed into detention. I could finish my class work by mid morning without having to listen to long, drawn out lectures. Then the rest of the day could be spent reading in my quite, vacuum space. My lunches were brought directly to me. I would keep my left hand free to hold the book I was reading, while I shoveled that day's gruel into my mouth.

I graduated with high marks, but the guidance counselor never tapped me to search for any schools for further learning beyond senior year. He knew I wasn't going anywhere after school. They were just glad to get rid of me.

My crimes progressed in nature after I finished high school. Vandalism, shoplifting, public drunkenness, DUI, assault, public urination, grand theft auto, breaking and entering... the list goes on and on. Eventually, Joe, Eddie and I couldn't get a job anywhere. Our reputations preceded us always. In a small town everyone is familiar with your wrong-doings, hence, why we counted spit-lined aluminum cans and bottles for a living. We were always under the protective eye of the owner or his son. And we were never allowed to run, or even step behind, the cash register. It was unbelievable that I managed to get fired from that god-awful, dead-end job. I guess I'm receiving the ultimate punishment for my misdeeds by having to live my life.

Karmic retribution you might say.

I took the long way home the afternoon after I visited my mom. I needed time to think, time to reflect. I was never content with the way my life was going and where I was. I preferred not to think about it, but that day I couldn't avoid it. There I was, taking the winding, gravel roads back to the rental property that I stayed at with my brothers and two innocent, little girls imprisoned in the basement.

I was wondering how I got to that point in my life. It was then that I had a flash of altruism. I thought that I could put the girls in my car right then and there, drive them back home and return them to their worried parents and end this whole thing. I considered taking the heat. It would be payment, not only for this crime, but the multiple crimes of my past that I was never punished for.

I'm Catholic, but I never believed in the whole confession thing. It seems like a concept that was created by a priest that wanted to hear all of the dirty little secrets in his village, or whatever. And, at the end he would say some bullshit like, *you are absolved of all of your sins once you recite, I don't know...thirteen Hail Mary's*. Returning the girls back to their parents would be true absolution. I think Joe, Eddie and I were in way over our heads. I could wipe it all away. But then again, they would be linked with the kidnappings. We all lived in the same house.

I realized how ridiculous my half-baked idea was, and returned home to my hostage-houseguests. I felt like shit. I was brimming with guilt for my wasted life, my misspent youth—the youth that I'm still in the midst of. I could end up spending the remainder of it locked up in prison with murderers and rapists. It's terrifying to think.

I was in that situation and there was nothing I could do about it. I'd been pushed off a cliff by Joe and Eddie and I had to construct a set of wings as I fell in my rapid descent, before smashing against the rocky ground below.

## CHAPTER 23

The following Monday is the day to forget. Time has passed, but each night I go to sleep thinking about it. The events of that bright fall afternoon come flooding to the front of my mind, as if welling up against the back of my eyes, and I can see it all unfold before me with absolute clarity. As if I'm condemned to relive it always and forever.

I did the right thing.

I'm a good person.

I look out for my brothers.

It all began when I was mowing our lawn for the last time that year. With each pass, my eyes focused on the white truck that was across a long, expansive, dry field—the very same truck that we had seen before. I wondered if it was a deer hunter, but why would the truck be out there for at least three days straight, never moving? The days were much shorter this time of year, and I thought that perhaps it was leaving in the evening. But, with every pass of the lawn mower, I was reaffirmed that the truck was parked in the very same spot as it had been for days, between the very same bare trees amongst a small wooded area.

After finishing up the lawn, I went inside the house and grabbed Eddie's binoculars. I stood at the edge of the freshly cut grass and gazed through them, hoping to get a better view. I couldn't see much. My arms were shaking in the fall breeze. I climbed to the top of the old, rusted windmill with the binoculars draped around my neck, swaying as I climbed the cold, cast-iron ladder. Once at the top, I straddled the rotting wooden platform, leaned against the remaining blades to brace myself, and looked

through the binoculars once again. I could see the very same white pick-up truck unmoved and a dark figure seated in the driver's seat.

I thought the worst. I knew who was down there. I just didn't want to believe it.

I climbed back down and began to walk through the field of harvested cornstalks. I kept my eyes trained on the truck as I approached, while being careful not to trip over the uneven ground that lay before me.

I was twenty feet away and the body wasn't moving. I could see a mop of grey hair and a camouflaged cap looking forward as I walked up to the driver's side door. Even closer, I could see that it was a heavysset man with a white mustache and a billowy brown coat that was zipped up just below his chin. I stopped when I was twenty feet away. I didn't want to go any farther. I considered turning around, walking back home and forgetting that I ever saw him.

I wish I had.

Wait... no.

You don't want to hear this.

I'm a good person. Inside, I'm a good person.

Cynthia could see it.

Ashley and Olivia think I'm a good person.

...

## CHAPTER 24

It was the third week of November, the eighteenth to be exact, and the thirteenth day of our houseguests stay. I had brought down breakfast to the girls—toaster waffles and orange juice. The girls were looking healthy, but Olivia's spirits were low. I assumed that it was because they were going on nearly two weeks in our captivity. Not knowing how to broach the situation, I merely asked if everything was alright. Olivia simply nodded her head while Ashley was far too preoccupied with satisfying her ravaged appetite to respond. I hoped that this whole situation would resolve itself quickly. I couldn't imagine keeping those girls locked up in the basement during Christmas. It was already bad enough what my brothers and I were doing to them, I didn't want the girls to be grown adults and every year Christmas rolls around they would be reminded of their Christmas in a cinder block basement.

"Are you sure everything is alright?" I asked.

Olivia didn't look up. She was pushing her syrup soaked waffle around her paper plate. I was afraid I was losing her. That she was reverting back the way she was when we first stole her.

Ashley casually looked up and said in a dull, irritated tone, "Olivia's mad because it's her birthday today."

"It's your birthday today, Olivia?!" I looked to Olivia who was still sulking. Then glanced over to Ashley who was back to eating her breakfast.

"Why didn't you say something?"

Olivia just shrugged her shoulders, never looking up at me once.

"How old are you?"

“She turned seven,” Ashley said, speaking for her.

“Seven? That’s a very special year. I remember my seventh birthday.” I was positive that she wouldn’t soon forget hers, not for the right reasons though.

I left the girls and trudged upstairs. Joe and Eddie were in their usual spots planted in front of the television. It was a Saturday morning and they were watching an old broadcast of *Cooking with Julia Child*. I always found it odd that Joe watched that show every Saturday morning. He hardly ever cooked a large meal. I used to think that it was incidental when I would catch Joe watching it. I had assumed that he was watching whatever was on previous to it and was too lazy to change the channel, or that there was nothing else on TV. But each and every Saturday that damn show with the late Julia Child’s shrewish voice would be on. I was certain that he liked that show, though he would never admit it.

“It’s Olivia’s birthday today,” I said.

There was no response from either of them.

“She’s pretty bummed about it. She turns seven today.”

“Huh,” Joe began, “be sure to send her a card from me.”

“You know, I was thinking perhaps we could get her a cake or something.” Just as Joe butted in, I raised my voice and maintained the floor. “And I know we’re not a “fucking Chucky Cheese”,” speaking in my best Joe impression while making air-quotes, “but I figured that we could do this simplest act of kindness so she doesn’t have the worst birthday of her life.”

“She *should* have the worst birthday of her life. We would be doing her a favor. Life is full of bad birthdays. Take my last birthday for instance, fucking horrible. I wish I had a God-awful birthday at her age. That way whenever I had a shitty birthday as an adult I would be able to think back and consider that this birthday isn’t nearly as bad as the one that I had to spend in captivity with a faggy jack-ass that reads bedtime stories and wants to get a birthday cake to throw a party because he doesn’t have any fucking friends of his own,” Joe said, completing his diatribe before turning his attention back to the hunchback on TV.

Eddie looked over at me with a look of concern. He knew that Joe cut pretty deep with that remark. But Eddie didn’t rush to my defense. He remained by Joe’s side on that couch and went back to watching the program.

I couldn’t stay in that environment. I immediately left. I didn’t storm out, I didn’t slam the door. I just grabbed my keys off the kitchen counter and stepped through the front door and out to my car and drove away. Even though it was a quarter to ten on a Saturday morning, I drove to the nearest gas station and picked up a six-pack of beer. I spent the following hours driving on the picturesque gravel roads downing beer after beer. I hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast yet that morning. That was no matter to me though. Waffles would only serve to hamper my buzz. I considered my time drinking by myself as a therapy session of sorts. Only this one costs me five bucks, not eighty bucks an hour.

I drove around the neighborhood farms watching productive people that weren’t catching a morning drunk, carrying on with their day—feeding cattle, spreading manure—doing things that productive people that have to earn a living do. I finished my beer, rolled down the window and pitched the empty into the ditch. With the skill of an



experienced drunk, I reached with my right arm far behind the passenger seat to grab a fresh one. I kept waiting for an appropriate song to come on the radio. One that could capture the feelings I had.

It didn't show up.

Reaching the top of a hill where I could have a fine vantage point to see oncoming vehicles, I pulled over my old, rusted car to take a leak. I stood at the top of the hill watering a portion of gravel and admired my surroundings. All it takes is a few beers on an empty stomach to gain a certain calmness, an equanimity of sorts. I was fine standing up there on that hill. My problems were miles down the road. It was just me out there.

I finished off the last of the six-pack and headed for the direction of home. I didn't want to go there. I considered picking up more beer and staying out on the open road. I didn't want to go back to my problems. I wanted to go home to a regular house.

I *did* want to go home to Ashley and Olivia, but not as my captives. I wanted to go home to a different existence. I wanted drive to a place that I called home that had Ashley and Olivia as my daughters. I would be their hard-working father that put in a long day and was coming home to find dinner on the table. My two perfect daughters—not trapped in the basement—but rather playing outside in the yard, awaiting my return. My wife, the girl from the night I'll never forget, Cynthia, would be standing in front of the stove preparing a nice meal for all of us. It would be a house filled with love. Not one filled with passive greetings.

I wanted to come home to that house, but it didn't exist. It never would.

My eyes were getting tired. The beers were letting themselves be known and I decided that I needed to sleep off my buzz. I made it home and seemed to have the place to myself. Eddie was stowed away in his room, while Joe was nowhere to be found. I plopped down onto the couch/bed, and quickly fell asleep.

Later, I awoke abruptly. It felt like I had been sleeping hours. But, it could have been minutes though for all I knew. Joe was showing me vigorously telling me to wake up. He was standing next to the couch with his eyes glued to the television screen. It was a local channel delivering breaking news. Joe was yelling for Eddie.

Through my tired gaze I saw a reporter standing in front of Sam's house. There was yellow tape strewn in front of the overgrown lawn. The reporter said something how the police ran into a dead end in the search for the missing Cohen girls. She said how the suspect's body was found inside the house. No word yet on the cause of death, but it appeared that drugs played a roll. The house was searched and there was no sign of the Cohen daughters.

The news anchor back in the studio reminded the viewers that if they had any information leading to the discovery of the Cohen daughters to please contact the tip-line number listed below, and that there was a \$20,000 reward for any tips leading to the discovery of the Cohen daughters.

"Why the fuck are they knocking down Sam's door in search for the girls?" Joe asked. But he really wasn't asking. He knew why.

"They must have traced the cell phone back to Sam," I said in a sleepy, shamed tone.

"They traced the fucking cell phone that you bought from your dumb-shit stoner buddy, and now the trail has gone cold right in our back yard!"

Eddie walked into the living room to see what the matter was. He asked what was wrong. I stared at my feet, while Joe stared at me. Waiting for me to admit that I fucked us.

“We’re going to have to pull the trigger on this plan sooner rather than later,” Joe said to Eddie.

“Holy shit, Sam’s dead,” I said under my breath. Joe walked up to me, shot me a stare that melted my soul before he grabbed a cigarette and stormed outside.

“What happened, Jacob?”

“The cops are close to finding us.”

That night I should have been thinking about how I could fix this dilemma that I caused. Instead I thought about Sam. I thought about what his last living moments must have been like, sitting in his recliner, all by himself, surrounded by clutter—no daylight within sight. What bothered me most was not that he was dead, but how he died, all alone. I didn’t know if it was a good thing or not. They say that dogs prefer to die alone. That when a dog knows it’s going to die it will leave the other animals and people that love them so they can die all by their lonesome. Sam essentially did just that. He knew that he was going to die. He pushed away everyone that came to help. He hid himself in his disgusting surrounding to die by himself.

Just like a dog that hides under a porch to die.

## CHAPTER 25

Joe had decided that he needed to call Mr. Cohen as soon as possible. He handed the cell phone to Eddie and told him to break it into a million pieces and bury the remains. He said to bury it some place near the old barn where it was overgrown with weeds, not in the farm field. We didn’t need cell phone remains being tilled up next spring.

Joe didn’t even look at me. I guess he figured that I would screw up the monumental task of taking a hammer to a plastic phone and digging a foot deep hole. Joe left soon after to travel an hour away to make the phone call from a public phone booth. He wanted to be far away from home, and to speed-off far away once the call was placed.

Eddie completed his task, destroying the phone and giving it a proper burial. I could tell that he was pretty pissed at me as well. I not only possibly cost us two million dollars, but also jeopardized our freedom as well. Eddie was standing outside of the front door having a smoke.

“Did you get it done?”

Eddie paused staring out into the baron field, making me await his response.

“It’s done.” He drew in another breath of smoke, while I searched for something else to say. I began to speak when he abruptly cut me off as if I wasn’t speaking at all.

“At least that white truck is gone.”

That evening I figured that I should stay out of the basement. I'd caused enough damage. But feeling bad that the girls had been left all by their lonesome, I figured that I should go down there. As I descended the basement steps I could hear Olivia excitedly yell *Theodore!*

The girls were completely oblivious to what was happening. They were thankful to have some company. I sat slouched in a chair as they unleashed lightning fast sentences of random little girl thoughts that they had been keeping bottled up all day. I wasn't paying attention to them. I *was* looking at them nodding, but I wasn't listening. I was too busy wondering if I should be packing a bag for a quick getaway. How everything was hinged on Joe's call to the Jeremiah Cohen. Olivia seemed to have gotten past the fact that it was her birthday. I could hear Eddie moving around upstairs. I was wondering if he was packing *his* bag. Also, I considered the thought of Joe not coming back. That he would either get busted or simply say *screw it*, and kept driving—leaving Eddie and me to fend for ourselves. I wouldn't think Joe would do that, but then again the situation was making all of us act out of the ordinary.

It was getting late in the afternoon. I didn't know what time it was. I didn't have a watch on me. I couldn't tell if it was dark out since there weren't any windows in the basement. But it felt like it was dark outside.

I could hear the front door open. Joe was home. He didn't abandon us. I trotted upstairs, pausing with apprehension once I got to the top. I stepped into the kitchen just as Joe was setting two armfuls of things onto the kitchen counter. He was happy, happier than I had ever seen him before. He was grinning and had this fake sounding laugh as he was talking to Eddie. Joe had picked up a couple of pizzas and a white frosted cake. I couldn't believe it.

He asked if the girls had eaten yet, and was pleased to hear that they hadn't. "The call went well?" I asked.

Joe had his head buried in the fridge searching for something. He retrieved a bottle of chocolate syrup out of the back. Joe didn't answer my question. He pried the plastic lid off the cake and began to write in sloppy cursive, *Happy Birthday Olivia*. Eddie and I looked at each other in disbelief. This wasn't our Joe.

Eddie asked Joe how the phone call went.

"I wanted to pick up a cake that said *Happy Birthday*, but it was mentioned on the news that it was Olivia's birthday today. I didn't want to risk it even though I was all the way over in Brighton."

Joe assessed his chocolate written birthday wish and nodded his head, seemingly impressed by his own work. He picked up the cake and pointed over to the pizzas telling one of us to grab them.

Eddie stepped in front of Joe and said, "The call! How did the call go?"

"The call went great! This whole thing will be over in a couple of days. I'll give you the details after we eat, the pizza's getting cold."

Joe walked down the creaky wooden steps with the birthday cake in his hands. He asked where the birthday girl was as he stepped off the bottom step. Eddie and I drew a sigh of relief, seeing Joe in such great spirits. I couldn't imagine the phone call going that great. Unless they said something like, *hand over the girls and we'll forget this whole thing happened*, I doubted it though. A teacher will forgive you if you return the stapler back to her desk. This was much bigger than a stapler.

Olivia was excited. She wasn't put off by Joe's sunny attitude the way Eddie and I were. Perhaps because she thought that Joe was ordinarily a pleasant guy. We sat down together as a family. It felt as if the girls were staying with their three cool uncles that let them drink as much soda as they wanted and stay up as late as they felt.

The birthday girl had the privilege of choosing the first slice of pizza. She looked closely at both pizzas and decided to not go for the largest slice, but rather the one that had the most Canadian bacon on it. After the pizza, Joe slid the cake in front of Olivia.

"Where are the birthday candles?" Olivia innocently asked.  
"Oh..." Joe said, standing up and searching his pocket. He pulled out a little, black lighter. "You guys got a lighter?" he asked.

Eddie knew where he was going with this. We both pulled cigarette lighters from our pockets. Joe lit his and hovered his hand above the cake. Eddie and I followed suit. Olivia stood up from her chair so she could lean across the table. Then with a mighty huff that was three quarters breath and the remaining part spit, she successfully blew out all three lighters.

"Alright, one more time to make six."

"Can I help?" Ashley asked.

I handed her my blue lighter. Ashley was having difficulty lighting it, so Joe carefully handed his lit lighter to Ashley, telling her to keep the little tab pushed down. Ashley held the lighter over the cake, looking proud to be trusted with a cigarette lighter.

After a couple of flicks of the blue lighter, Joe was able to successfully achieve a flame and held it next to Eddie and Ashley's lighters. After another birthday-blow all three flames were extinguished once again.

Ashley continued to play with the lighters, quickly figuring out the technique to bypass the child safety deterrents to light it all by herself. We sat around the table enjoying the birthday cake. Joe, with his new found happiness, did most of the conversing with Ashley and Olivia.

"So what are you girls going to do once you get back home?" Joe asked.

"I know what Ashley's going to do! She's going to find Dylan!" Olivia said with a sly grin.

"I am not!" said Ashley, surprised and embarrassed.

"Yes, you are! She's in *loooove* with Dylan!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Is Dylan your boyfriend?" Joe asked.

"Dylan's *not* my boyfriend!"

"Would you like him to be?"

"No!" Ashley said immediately.

"Yes, you do! You talk about Dylan all the time! You talk about his green eyes and his curly hair!" Olivia said while coquettishly twirling her finger in her hair and batting her eyelashes.

"I do not!"

"Has Dylan asked you out?" Eddie asked.

There was a pause before Ashley said, *no*.

"It's the twenty-first century, Ashley. You don't have to wait for the guy to ask you out. You should ask *him* out," Eddie said.

“You shouldn’t wait for Dylan to ask you. He’s probably too nervous.” I said.

“Here, let’s do a little role-playing. I’ll be Dylan and you ask me out,” Eddie suggested. Ashley looked at her feet, red-faced, not wanting to participate.

“Is Dylan in your class?”

“Yea!” said Olivia, answering for Ashley.

“Why don’t you ask him out at the end of the day when you see him in the hallway or something? Do it on a Thursday or Friday,” Eddie said.

Ashley nodded, still mortified that her crush had been revealed.

Eddie pulled his chair around and positioned it right in front of Ashley. I set up the situation.

“Alright Ashley, it’s the end of the day Friday so everyone is in a good mood, thinking about the weekend. The bell rings and everyone funnels out into the hallway. You walk up behind Dylan who is talking with his friends. You tap him on the shoulder and you tell him if he has a minute to talk. If his friends don’t take the hint, you take a few steps away from the group. I guarantee you he will follow. You look into Dylan’s dreamy green eyes and say...”

I opened my palms to Eddie and Ashley, passing the baton to them.

“Dylan will you go out with me?” Ashley said, looking down while poking her fork repeatedly into the excess frosting on the side of her plate.

“No, no, no, you can’t ask him like that! First of all you have to look at him; otherwise he’s not going to know if you’re serious. And, you can’t just dive headfirst into it. Make a little small talk before you ask him. Does he play any sports?” Eddie asked.

“He plays basketball with Corey, Cody, Nate and David at recess,” Ashley said.

“Perfect!” Eddie said. “Tell him that you think he’s really good at basketball. You’ve got to butter the bread first. Then he’ll be more likely to listen to what you’re saying. Alright, start again.”

Ashley took a deep breath in and began again. “Hey Dylan, I think you’re really good at basketball.”

“You have to look at Dylan. And, don’t just say that he’s good at basketball. Say that you saw him playing basketball, and you think that he’s really good,” Joe said.

Ashley looked right into Eddie’s eyes. Eddie nodded approvingly before she began again. “Hi Dylan, how are you?”

“Sup Ashley, I’m solid,” Eddie said with an aloof, laidback demeanor. I looked at Eddie skeptically. He looked over to me and said in a confident voice, “That’s how the boys that age talk.”

“I saw you playing basketball and I think that you’re really good.”

“Yea?” Eddie responded, having far too much fun playing an eight-year-old boy.

“Yea, you’re really good. I was wondering if you wanted to go out with me.”

“Go out where?”

Ashley didn’t know what to say. She looked at me as if I was going to feed her some lines as if she were an actress on a stage.

“You should have some specific place in mind. Why don’t you ask him if he wants to go to *Pizza Hut*,” I suggested.

“I can’t take him to *Pizza Hut*,” Ashley said.

“Sure you can. Ask your mom in advance and I’m sure she’d be happy to chaperon you and Dylan. And, I’m sure if you asked her nicely she’ll sit in a different booth even.”

Ashley nodded, recomposed herself, and turned back towards her twenty-six year old stand-in suitor.

“So, where do you want to go?” Eddie asked.

“If you want to go to *Pizza Hut* my mom will take us there,” Ashley said.

“Don’t give him a choice, he may get nervous and back out. Just float the idea past him. Say, how about my mom takes you and me out to *Pizza Hut*. Now start from the beginning,” I said.

Another deep breath and the flailing of hands and fingers to shake off the nerves, before using her fingers as a hairbrush, Ashley, better defined the part in her hair, and pulled a few strokes through her long locks before beginning. She looked much more confident already. She looked like she knew what she was doing.

“Dylan, how are you?”

“What’s crackalackin’ Ash?” Eddie said. Olivia was now giggling.

“I saw you playing basketball at recess. I think you’re really good.”

“You think so?”

“Yea! How about my mom drives us out to *Pizza Hut*?”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“Busy tonight,” Eddie quickly said in his *to cool for school* voice.

“Tomorrow night then?”

Eddie leaned back even further and began to scratch his chin and look up as if he were thinking. “I don’t know. I need to check my day planner before I commit to anything.”

I gently knocked Eddie on the back of the head. I could see that poor Ashley was hitting her saturation point for embarrassment.

“Tomorrow night? I could do that,” Eddie said, while sitting up straight.

“Great, talk to you later,” Ashley said with a genuinely relived and ecstatic expression, as if she actually just successfully asked out little Dylan.

“I’d say that’s perfect.” I said.

“What if Dylan says no?” Ashley asked.

“He won’t, if you do it exactly as you just did. He couldn’t possibly turn you down.”

“And if he does just tell us and we’ll kick his ass.” Joe added.

Ashley was strangely comforted by the thought of us roughing up an eight year old boy if he turned her down.

“I think it’s time for the birthday girl to open up her present,” Joe said.

Eddie and I, still in disbelief with the new Joe, watched as he jogged up the steps and soon returned with a little flat rectangle in his hand, neatly wrapped in plain brown paper. Olivia tore it open revealing a DVD of *The Princess Bride*.

“It’s from all of us. Now you have your own,” Joe said.

Olivia excitedly began pressing her stubby, little fingers into the durable cellophane wrapping, while saying that she wanted to watch it right now. Prying at the

wrapping unsuccessfully, Ashley offered to melt it with her lighter. Joe snatched the little blue lighter from Ashley and said that it would be best if he were to hold onto it so she doesn't burn down the house. I pulled out my pocket knife and unwrapped it for Olivia. The girls began setting up their seating arrangement on the bed to watch the movie. Joe told the girls that we had to discuss some stuff with us upstairs, that we would be down later, and to go ahead and start the movie without us.

Joe signaled to Eddie and me to follow him. We walked through the kitchen and living room. Joe told us that we should discuss this upstairs so the girls won't hear. Eddie and I followed Joe into his bedroom. Joe shut the door behind me.

"So?" I asked.

"I called Jeremiah Cohen from a payphone, but it was answered by an FBI agent. He said that they were ready to deal before I even got a word out. They're desperate to get this over with!"

"So what are we doing?" Eddie asked.

"It's all going down Friday. Jacob and I will be going to a Bank in Clermont at 2:00 in the afternoon after it closes to pick up the money."

"We're just going to waltz into a bank and pick up the cash?" I said.

"Let me finish. You and I will be going to the bank disguised to pick up the cash. They said that there will be two FBI agents inside the bank to hand over the money and no one else."

"I don't like this," I said.

"Let me finish. Save your comments for the end. Jacob, you won't leave the car. You stay behind the wheel while I go inside. Eddie will be staying back here with the girls. The FBI knows that if they mess with us, or try to follow us, or pull any shit, we have a man with the girls who'll pull the trigger."

Joe said that looking at Eddie. Eddie didn't bat an eye. He just nodded his head curtly in agreement.

"Why doesn't Eddie drive you and I stay back with the girls."

"Sorry Jacob, I can't trust you on that one. Eddie's staying with the girls."

"So they're just going to let us pick up the money and not exchange the girls?"

"Yea, he said that that's how it's done now. They don't do the *handoff* anymore. It's too dangerous. The FBI guy laid down a few rules. We can't be armed when we pick-up the money, or when we drop off the girls. And, we have to drop off the girls in front of the city hall in Clermont before 7:00 that night."

"What if we don't?" Eddie asked.

"Then there will be a manhunt for us, and he said they will shoot to kill," Joe said in a sober tone.

There was a moment of silence after Joe spoke. We had to wrap our minds around the thought of us being walking targets if we didn't deliver.

"So what's to prevent them from apprehending us when we drop off the girls?" I asked.

"I already considered that. We may be deviating from their plan slightly. We're not going to drop the girls off at the city hall in Clermont. We're dropping them off on a random street in Oelwein."

Before I butted in with another question, Joe cut me off.

“We’ll tell the girls to walk a few blocks then knock at a random door and tell the whoever inside who they are. And, that person will call the police. The Cohen’s get their daughters back and we’ll be on our way out of the country in a *different* car than we used to pick up the money.”

Joe opened his palms face up and implied with a grin that that was it. It’s as if he were expecting a high-five from Eddie and me.

“So where do you guys want to begin our new lives?” Joe said.

“How much money are we walking away with?” Eddie asked.

“They couldn’t swing the 2 mil, but we’re walking away with 1.5. They wanted to give us only one, but I didn’t stand for it.”

Eddie jolted, flexed, and bounced around in place, unable to contain his excitement. Not knowing what else to do he grabbed my shoulder in a tight grip and repeatedly smacked Joe on the back. Joe basked in his seeming triumph.

“This is too easy,” I said with skepticism.

“What?!” Joe said back to me.

“Why are they making it so easy for us? Why are they giving us the upper hand?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re letting us walk away with the money and the girls?”

“Because that’s the way it’s done now! It’s safer!” Eddie said.

“We can’t do it like this. It’s a trap.”

“No it’s not! And if you fuck this up your losing your cut!” Joe said.

“They’re not going to just let us walk away with the money and the girls!”

“Jacob, you’ve got to trust me on this one... just stop thinking for a couple of days and leave it all to me. Trust me on this one. You can thank me when we’re drinking beers on a Mexican beach.”

I had a look of doubt on my face. Eddie, being his usual diplomatic self asked, “How would you do it then?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“That’s right!” Joe shouted. “You don’t know! So leave it up to the guy that does!”

“Why are they waiting until Friday to do the exchange?” I asked.

“It takes time to get one and a half million together,” Joe said. “It works out well this way anyways. Tomorrow we’ll pack just our essentials, leave the rest, and get ready for Friday.”

“Tomorrow’s Thanksgiving.” I said.

“So?”

“So, we aren’t going to do anything for it?”

“No.”

“We don’t have to wreck the holiday for the girls. We could make them up a little something.”

“Fine... fuck it. I’ll pick up a turkey and we’ll have a nice Thanksgiving dinner/send-off party for the girls tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night we have Thanksgiving at Mom’s.”

“Tell her we got the flu or something,” Joe said.

“Joe, this could be the last time we see Mom. I think we owe it to her to spend Thanksgiving with her. Even if we can’t say goodbye, we at least have to see her.”



“Joe drew a large exhale as if I tossed a wrench in his best laid plan. Fine, I’ll pick up the turkey and fixings early tomorrow so that it’ll be ready by noon. Then we’ll eat the usual Thanksgiving dinner with Mom that night. There! That wasn’t so tough,” Joe said.

“You’re not going to get a cooked turkey,” I asked.

“I can handle it. Julia Child covered it last Saturday.

“One and a half million!” Eddie said in a hushed, but excited tone.

Joe smiled in agreement and said, “Black Friday, that’s our D-Day. That’s the day we shake off this shit-town and start living the life that we deserve.”

I went back down to the basement. Eddie stayed in Joe’s room to discuss the plans further. The girls weren’t able to figure out the input options on the remote. So, instead of watching the movie, they could only sit amongst the calm, blue glow of the empty television channel. I suggested that instead of watching the movie I read to them.

It was the last time I would read to them.

I picked up where I left off in *The Secret Garden. Chapter 20: I Shall Live Forever—And Ever—And Ever!* The girls rested comfortably in their pajamas with the covers pulled up just below their chins. I sat next to my familiar globe lamp and looked at their content faces every chance I got.

I imagine miles away a SWAT officer reading to his children. He kisses them good night on their tiny foreheads. Another officer makes love to his wife. While providing his young wife with his tender touch, he thinks that it could be the last time. He has reminded himself timeless times before.

I picture a sheriff who lies awake, tracing the steps in his mind, *Crash through the front with the battering ram. Secure the ground floor. Combat and apprehend any suspects. Send a team to secure the second level, and a third to secure the lower level. Retrieve Ashley age 8 and Olivia age 7. Remove them from the premises and escort them to the awaiting ambulance.* Over and over he repeats the steps in his head, adding and fine tuning minor details each recitation.

But for now we have time.

*“Not till then did he take them away and look round and round and round as Dickon and Mary had done. And over walls and earth and trees and swinging sprays and tendrils the fair green veil of tender little leaves had crept, and in the grass under the trees and the gray urns in the alcoves and here and there everywhere were touches or splashes of gold and purple and white and the trees were showing pink and snow above his head and there were fluttering of wings and faint sweet pipes and humming and scents and scents. And the sun fell warm upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch. And in wonder Mary and Dickon stood and stared at him. He looked so strange and different because a pink glow of color had actually crept all over him—ivory face and neck and hands and all.”*

After fighting sleep, Olivia had finally succumbed to the sandman and drifted off. I closed the book. Ashley wanted me to keep reading. I said that it was late and they needed to get some sleep.

“I’m not sleepy.”

“But Olivia’s asleep.”

“Will you read to us tomorrow night?”

“Yes.”

“And the next night?”

I hesitated before I answered. “Not the next night, no.”

“Why not?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

Ashley nodded her head.

“Don’t let your sister or... Alvin and Simon know I told you, but you two will be going home this Friday.”

Ashley faintly smiled. It was hardly the response that I expected.

“Will you have finished reading us the book by then?”

“Well, no. There’s quite a bit left. But you can keep the book and your mom or dad can pick up where I left off.”

“They don’t read to us at night.”

“Well, I’m sure if you ask them they will.”

Ashley simply shrugged at my suggestion.

“They never play games with us either. They’re always busy. Dad is always doing stuff on his phone and Mom is always with her friends or working out.”

“Well, believe me. I’m sure things are going to change once you two are back home. They’ll make the time for you. You can go home, see your dog. You’ll have plenty to talk to Dylan about.”

Ashley sleepily smiled.

“If you two get ready for bed early tomorrow night I’ll see if I can read the rest of it to you, alright?”

I ran my hand across the tops of each of their heads, shut off the cracked globe lamp, and wished them pleasant dreams.

## CHAPTER 26

The next day was Thanksgiving. A day devoted to being thankful. Thankful for what you have in your life, thankful for your friends and family. I considered Ashley and Olivia family. It’s odd say, and I realize that, but I consider Ashley and Olivia, seven and eight year old girls that have no blood relation to me, the best part of my family. It’s a matter of perspective really. Through this turmoil blossomed a genuine affection for them—a level of connection and understanding that I’ve never felt before. They were forced into my life when I needed them the most. And I’m thankful for that.

I awoke early that morning to the phone ringing. I rolled over on the couch and looked around, waiting for Joe or Eddie to get it. After hearing no movement, I reluctantly got up and walked into kitchen to answer the phone. It was just after six in the morning, still dark outside.

I said *hello* into the hollow, blank air. There was silence. I was about to repeat myself when an indistinguishable voice from the other end began talking rapidly. I plugged one ear trying my damndest to hear what the voice was saying. More stuttered speak, I was becoming aggravated. I was just about to hang up the phone and go back to sleep.

“GET OUTA’ THE HOUSE!” the voice shouted on the other end of the line.

“Get out of the house? Who is this?”

“It’s Herman! I- I- I—get outa’ the house! Leave!”

“Herman, what the hell’s going on?!”

“Get outa’ the house! You an’ yer brothers!”

“Herman, what... what are you talking about? Is something wrong?”

“What?! Are ya’ stupid or somethin’?! I told ya’ to get outa’ the house! You boys get outa’ the house! Get outa’ there and don’ you come back neither!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. Startled, I gazed around the kitchen.

“Herman? What did you do?”

“What’re ya’ doin’? You don’ be talkin’ ta’ me! Ya’ should go! You an’ yer’ brothers should be gone!”

“HERMAN! WHAT DID YOU DO?” I looked down at my bare feet, ready to run as fast as they would carry me.

“I... I called ya’ boys in,” he said in a shamed tone.

“FUCK! Herman, you goddamn rat! How could you do that to us? We had a deal you piece of shit! We had a deal and you sold us out you asshole!”

“I-I-I-I’m... I’m sorry... I callin’ to give ya’ heads up. I wan’ ta’ give ya’ boys time to leave... so ya’ don’t get caught... that’s why ya’ should go... hang up the phone an’ go! I would’ve told ya’ sooner but they held me for the last two days so I wouldn’t talk to ya’. They’re on their way now. I’m sorry... I sorry, lad.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE...” I stopped. Without a second thought I dropped the phone. Without time to even catch my breath, I ran into Eddie’s room. I grabbed the pile of blankets on his bed and pulled them off while shouting to get up. Eddie wasn’t there.

I ran up the steps and into Joe’s room. He wasn’t there either. I looked out his window. It was still dark outside. We’d received a dusting of snow over the night. Beneath the glow of the yard light I saw amongst the pristine snow and frost marks from car tires that left to pick up a turkey at the grocery store. I kicked Joe’s door repeatedly—screaming.

I had no way to reach them.

I raced into my room and reached into my ceramic bean pot, grabbed my wallet and every last bit of pocket change that I had sitting in the bottom. I looked around for something to pack clothes into. A sudden shock of panic jolted through my body. My heart pounded in my chest. My breath ran short. I circled twice in my room as if I were lost. I had to make the decision what I wanted to take with me. Anything? What can’t I live without? I couldn’t think of anything in particular. I slept in my jeans so I tossed on a pair of shoes, and grabbed a jacket. I left with only the clothes on my back, wallet and change in my pockets.

I raced down the staircase from the upper level, nearly falling on the way down with my frantic forward momentum. I stomped through the living room and into the kitchen. I stopped in my tracks and looked at the basement door. There wasn’t a sound

coming from it. The house was as quiet as I could ever recall. It was as quiet as a graveyard.

I wanted to say goodbye, but there was no time. I took two steps to the open basement door and froze in my tracks once again. It was then I could hear Olivia's distant voice say *Theodore?*

I opened the front door and pushed the screen door open without pressing the handle. I pushed straight through it. It provided little resistance. Fleet footed, I made my way to my unreliable, blue Sunbird. I opened the door and turned the keys that were trustily left inserted in the ignition. Before I knew it I was rocketing through all five gears steadily making my way to the road of freedom. I had the thought in my mind the entire time about Eddie and Joe. *What about Eddie and Joe?* I had no way of reaching them. I could drive to Ellsworth to get them. I could meet them halfway, and we could all get out of there. But the cops were coming from the very same direction. The same roads that Eddie and Joe were traveling back on from the supermarket. They were coming back home completely unaware of the chaos that awaited them.

I tore down the loose gravel road on the long dead-end driveway. Every time I switch gears snow-covered gravel slipped beneath the bald, rubber tires. My hands were shaking, even while they tightly gripped the steering wheel. Once on the road I took the first right—the direction away from the panic. I passed down a steep gully with my concisions bearing heavy on my head.

I stopped at the top of the hill. I yanked the parking brake, and with the car running, I stepped onto the gravel road. I looked past the blanket of white that was between me and the rat-trap that was formerly our home. There weren't any lights on. The old house looked peaceful nestled amongst the snow, like a quaint Christmas card. The early morning sky still displayed a fantastic amount of glimmering stars. I looked far to my left, deep down the hill, and spotted the white pick-up partially covered in the sinkhole below.

On the hillside just before our driveway turn I spotted the headlights of the old Lincoln cresting the hill.

I still had time.

I could still go back.

I wanted to move.

I wanted to go back to the house.

But my brown shoes were planted deeply into the rocky surface. I couldn't bring them to move an inch. Eddie's Lincoln turned down our long driveway. There was still time. I couldn't have been more than a half mile away. We could all leave together. I stood there, my legs as stiff as oak as the Lincoln turned the bend at the end of the driveway and disappeared from my sight.

Long in the distance past the rolling hills I saw a train of headlights. It was the law, the "good guys" that would put an end to our stupid, fucking, failed endeavor.

Legs still solidly grounded to the rocky, maintained earth, I stood there as a spectator and watched. Twin headlights, one quickly followed by the other, crested the same hill that Joe and Eddie did. The caravan of cars fishtailed around the sharp corner at the bottom of the hill and drove up the driveway followed by two large, black vans and an ambulance far behind them.

It was too late to do anything.

My hands were oddly calm while watching the events transpire. The decision had been made for me. I climbed back behind the wheel and drove the little Sunbird as fast as it would go around the harrowing curves of the gravel roads.

I approached a stop sign at the edge of the highway. I didn't slow a bite. I screamed the little, blue car onto the pavement, barely maintaining control. My hands gripped and tugged at the vinyl covered steering wheel. I clenched my fists and beat the top of it. I beat the top of the steering wheel so severely that I snapped the wooden interior ring. I didn't stop there. Once the top of the steering wheel was demolished I moved onto the dashboard radio. I clenched my right fist and punched it—the resonating aggression pushing my arm, burying my fist in the plastic dials and buttons. Slam after slam, destroying the tiny square screen. Hit after hit, shattering the larger dials, the little plastic pieces shatter and fell to the floor of my car. With each strike my blood meshed with the radio, the tiny pieces burrowing into the cuts, meshing with my fist.

I peered through my watery, tear-laden eyes—distorting my vision—making the road ahead of me obscured in the shimmers, as if the world was submerged in a lake. I blinked hard to correct my vision. I blinked so hard that it felt as if my eyelids were crushing my eyeballs within their sockets. My eyes, seemingly strangulated and shivering with discomfort, ached within their sockets. My ear's vibrating with a wall of sound that played like a crashing tidal wave. I open my eyes. The tears mixed with sweat, burning my eyes. I was crying.

I felt something. I felt hatred for myself.

I realized my car was driving directly on the center line. I pull it back into my lane. The muffled sounds of my anguish filled the vacant space, overlaying the rhythmic sounds of the pavement beneath the tires.

I drove and I kept on driving 'till my car ran low on fuel. By this time I had collected myself. I stopped at the nearest convenience store, fueled up and grabbed as much money as I could from the ATM machine inside. I only had \$78 dollars to my name. I painfully paid the \$2 fee and dropped my debit card along with my driver's license and any other personal identification into the short wastebasket beside the machine that contained discarded receipts.

Back in my car I had the very same thought that I had before that day of work when I was confined in my rat cage of employment. I stood next to my car and looked at the stretches of road that lay in front of me. Any direction... what will it be? It suddenly felt less like an act of freeing myself, and more like the act of fleeing myself.

I kept my car at the speed limit and between the lines. I drove north. Don't ask me why. I wouldn't be able to tell you. It seemed like the road less traveled. Every evader steers south. I would do the opposite.

I wondered about the events that transpired at the house. If Ashley and Olivia were happy to be free? If Joe and Eddie put up a fight? If they cursed my name knowing that I left them in the lurch.

Blood is thicker than water, but freedom outweighs that. And yet the crushing weight of guilt outweighs all of those. I'm not an adult, just a scared little boy that can't scamper away from his problems fast enough. I can no longer run to the comfort and safety of my mother's embrace. It was purely on my own shoulders, my own life's folly to figure out.

Each mile I put between me and that house seemed to be one less jolt in my hands. I fucked up. I know that for a fact. I'm lower than low. I'm the dog shit that sticks to the treads of your sneakers. I abandoned them. And I can't even say that they would do the same. We got into this together and together we didn't stay.

I kept on the road, occasionally stopping at parks or parking lots to rest. I was tired, but I couldn't seem to sleep. I would lie there in the driver's seat, or crawl into the back and close my eyes, but never fell asleep. It had been two days since I fled. I waited to get caught. I expect it to happen. Every time I closed my eyes I anticipate the sound of a police officer knocking his flashlight against my window glass, and shinning the beam of light into my face.

While driving at night, I saw snowflakes falling from the inky blue and black blotted sky. Driving through the falling flakes I felt like I was traveling through galaxies at the speed of light. Great gaseous stars were only white specks as I bolted past them, leaving them in my past.

I stopped at a diner near the Canadian border to not only get something to eat, but to wait until night fall, when I would attempt to make my move. I planned to find a wooded area to park my car, and then walk through the Canadian border, avoiding the main roads and the border guards. I knew I wouldn't be home free once I made it across. I'd never be home free, but I will be further away from capture.

A young waitress, who looked hung-over, served my hot breakfast. I didn't have much of an appetite, but forced the food down, knowing that I needed it. I felt queasy. I looked around for the restroom as I pecked at my food. Just in case I needed to make a run for the nearest toilet stall. I maintained a rhythmic breath in hopes of settling my stomach. I sat up straight to take the pressure off of my thin-walled belly. I nibbled at the edge of my wheat toast as the young waitress refilled my coffee. The scowl on her face seemed to suppress the discomfort of her alcohol induced headache.

I felt her pain.

I slowly continued my meal. The sounds of two men loudly chewing their food on either side of me didn't help me keep my food down. My eyes avoided the biscuits and gravy that lay on the plate of the man sitting next to me. I was surrounded by strangers. No one there knew me, and if they did it's for the wrong reason. Wherever I go people know me. Or, if I'm around people that don't know me, I'm at least with Eddie or Joe. But there I was alone, sitting anonymously amongst unfamiliar faces. A person never feels more alone than when they're surrounded by strangers.

With my meal complete I paid my tab, leaving a nice tip for the waitress who was suffering in silence just like me.

I called my mother from the payphone in the front of the diner. After a couple of rings she answered.

"Hey Mom... it's me."

She didn't respond. It was dead silence on the other end of the receiver. I thought perhaps I had a bad connection. I repeatedly said *hello* into the dead air. It was when I paused to hear her response, or rather lack of, that I heard her breathing on the other end of the line. She was just listening, not saying a word. I told her that I had called to say goodbye, and that I was sorry. I explained to her that I probably wouldn't ever be able to see her again. I said that I was sorry for being such a disappointment of a son.

There was still no response. Although, what was I to expect? She had the reaction of a woman who just lost her three sons—her entire family. All of the expectations of us boys getting our lives in order, each of us finding the right woman, and providing her with grandkids—all that had been taken away from her in one fell swoop—all because her sons were irresponsible, selfish and reckless.

I didn't know what else to say, there really wasn't anything *to say*. I couldn't tell her where I was going. I didn't know if there was an officer listening to our conversation. Also, I didn't want to hang on the line too long in case they were able to trace the call and locate where I was at, like in the movies. I told her once again that this was probably the last time I'd be able to talk to her. She still was silent. I asked her to please say something. I wanted to hear her speak one last time, just something, anything. Silence still. I told her that I loved her. I hadn't told her that in years. Somewhere along the line a few years ago she stopped saying it to me, so I stopped saying it to her. But I wanted her to know it.

I was just about to hang up the phone when she finally spoke. Her voice was quivering, breathy and strained.

“When the cops find you and lock you up for what you done, you be sure to say hello to your father. You're nothing but a piece of shit, murdering crook just like him!”

Then she hung up. She dropped that bomb and left. My dad was alive. He was not only alive, but was no better than me. I wondered why this was kept a secret from me, if Joe and Eddie knew. I reminded myself that that was my past. I had to leave it behind. I was through thinking about it. I was through telling old stories. Because when it comes right down to it, the past isn't all that great, you only remember it as that. I wouldn't want to go back to it. I wanted to move ahead.

She was right, you know?

She was right about what I did.

I spend all this time telling you old stories—well I left out the defining one.

I stepped though the long grass of the old farm lane and reached for the door handle of the white pickup. I hesitated and instead knocked on the window. The figure jolted in his seat and looked at me with the fear of God in his eyes. I was shocked as well and took a step back. The man looked at me and quickly looked down to find the handle to the truck door. He flung it open and stepped out.

“You scared the shit out of me, son!” he said with an embarrassed, mucus croak.

“I'm sorry, I noticed this truck has been parked here for a few days now and I wanted to make sure that everything was alright.”

It was exactly who I thought it was.

“Everything's fine,” he said with another phlegm-laden response. He lifted his hand and coughed into his thick insulated glove, clearing his throat. I looked past him to see a nine millimeter pistol on the passenger seat. It's not out of the ordinary for someone to have a gun on their truck—at least not around here.

“Hey, I recognize you,” I began. “We talked at *Marv's* last week?” He had a confused look on his face. “It was only like five or six days ago, your name's Burt, right?”

“Yes... Jacob. I remember now. You'll have to forgive me. You get to be an old fart like me you tend to forget stuff.”

“So what brings you out here?” I asked.

“I’m just trying to bag me a buck, you know?”

“Any luck yet?”

“I haven’t seen a thing,” he said with a guttural snort, as he spit an oyster of mucus onto the dried grass.

“Well, you’re going to want to be careful.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, you’re in a pretty remote area, but the DNR still makes it out here every once in a while.”

“Why do you say that?” He said with a nervous twitch in his eye.

“You’re hunting for bucks. Buck season doesn’t start for another two weeks. It’s doe season right now.”

He had a look of shame on his face, and gazed across that baron field and chimed *yes* repeatedly in agreement.

“Listen, I’m not the DNR. I don’t care. If something good comes across your sights, I’d take the shot.” I was bullshitting the man. I’d never shot a deer in my life. I knew what I was talking about though. Eddie hunted squirrel, turkey, pheasant and deer. I knew what season it was. And, Eddie wasn’t remiss to remind me that he couldn’t go out doe hunting this year because of our “project”.

“Yea, I hear ya. I’m out here for doe, but you know if the perfect buck come across my scope then I have to take the shot, right?” he said with a slight chuckle.

He was lying to me. It was obvious that the man didn’t know what he was talking about and was lying to my face. I knew exactly the reason why he had been parked at this field bottom for the past few days.

“You’re not from around here are you, Burt?” He looked up without saying a word. “I remember you saying that to me.”

He took in a deep breath of air, pushing out the billowy winter coat. “No... Jacob. No, I’m from Carroll. I’m just up here for the scenery and hunting.”

“How do you know me?”

“We spoke—“

“No, not that. Vera said that you were asking about me and my brothers before I met you.”

“Some of the other people down there mentioned boys and they made it sound like you guys were a fun time. I asked the bartender-lady if you came around much, to see what everyone was talking about.”

I stood there trying to read him. He was fidgety, and it was obvious that he didn’t want to be talking to me. Surrounding the nine millimeter pistol was an assortment of garbage. A couple of bags of chips that were opened, a few of cans of soda sitting on the dash, and bite-sized candy bar wrappers. He was living out of his truck.

“Listen, I hope I didn’t cause a disturbance here.”

“You didn’t.”

“Well, Jacob I certainly appreciate your concern, coming down here to check on me, but I guess I should be taking off and trying a different spot. The deer just don’t seem to be moving today.”

“No you don’t.”

“What’s that now?”



“You’re not here to hunt, Burt.”

He looked at me with terror. He pinched to top of his jeans and shifted them up slightly. “I guess you couldn’t call what I’m doing hunting. You know? You gotta see some Goddamn deer to call it hunting,” he said with a chuckle.

“Don’t jerk me around. You’re spying on my house.” I said—my voice raising. I tried to remain calm. I have the tendency of my voice breaking when I get excited. It makes it sound like I’m on the verge of crying whenever that happens. I was collected that November afternoon. I made sure that I breathed. I had my arms crossed. Burt couldn’t see my hands tremor.

“Listen son, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I’ll get out of your hair. I’m sorry if I offended you in any way.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You tell me what the fuck you’re doing parked down here!” My voice hadn’t failed me. I sounded powerful, authoritative. Burt was scared, scared of me. His fright was feeding me. I grew stronger, while he was shrinking into himself. That is until he bolted for the pistol on his passenger seat. He lunged the five feet back to the open driver’s side door. Without a moment to lose, I shoved my bent arms into his upper back, pushing him with all of my might. Burt’s massive size, and wrecking-ball-like momentum, sent him forward and down to the ground. The upper half of his body slammed onto the running board. His face crashed against the little metal levers on the side of his driver’s seat. I didn’t break in my movements. I dashed into the truck using his collapsed body as a ramp. I dove onto the passenger seat, my body crouched in half. I tore away at the trash beneath my shoes and fumbled for the gun. Burt was slowly getting up. His nose was pouring blood. The first sight he saw as he lifted his head was his own pistol pointed at his face, held by hands that were as solid as stone.

Burt pressed his hands against the side of the truck and brought his hefty mass back onto his feet. The terrified look in his eyes hadn’t changed. He lifted his hands above his head. The blood from his nose was draining like a downspout, leaving him with a crimson mustache, lips and chin. Burt stood facing me, chocking on the blood that ran down his throat from his freshly broken nose.

Things changed so quickly, so fast, but I wasn’t thinking about that though. I was thinking about what I was going to do next.

Burt coughed and lowered his head. A large spew of dark, red blood spilled onto his bulbous stomach, covering the front of his thick winter coat. He lifted his head, then sneezed. A spray of blood misted the side of his truck. Burt moaned in agony. It was the first time he showed that he was in severe pain, not just messy discomfort. His bloody, raised hands squeezed into a fist. I could tell that he wanted nothing more than to cover his nose and to roll on the ground in agony. Well, that and to not have a pistol pointed at his face.

“Take five steps back,” I said in a calm voice, my arm extended. I had one eye closed. I had the sights pointed at the very center of his bloody face. Burt stepped back a few paces away from the bloody grass that was at his feet. I grabbed the steering wheel, pulled myself out of the cab, and stood on the running board with the gun steadily trained on my target.

For the first time since the drastic turn of events, Burt spoke.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I did to you. Please just let me go. I won’t speak of word of this to nobody... do you hear me? Just let me go.”

I didn't know what to do next.

*\*Cough\** "I'm just going to walk away. You keep the truck."

"DON'T MOVE!" I shouted. "GET ON YOUR KNEES!"

"You don't have to do this. I won't say anything to nobody. Take my wallet."

He reached for his back pocket.

"KEEP YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD AND GET ON YOUR KNEES!"

Burt dropped to one knee and began to tip over. He lowered one hand to catch himself, then immediately brought it back above his head. He then folded the other knee beneath his body. Burt began to cry.

"What are you doing here watching my house?"

"I wasn't doing anyth—"

"Don't fucking lie to me! If you lie to me once more I'll pull the trigger, ALRIGHT?" Burt nodded his head and swallowed a mouthful of blood. "Now tell me what you were doing out here!"

"I... I... I had reason to believe that you and your brothers abducted the Cohen daughters."

My hand began to quake.

"Are you a cop?"

"No."

"Well?! Who are you then?!"

"Lieutenant Burt McCaffry, retired CIA."

"The CIA is spying on us?"

"No, I'm retired."

"Well, why the hell are you sitting in this fucking field?"

"I'm a neighbor to Jerry."

"Who?"

"Jeremiah Cohen. His daughters were abducted and I went in search of them. I obviously made a mistake. Just let me leave and that'll be the end of it. I shouldn't have been trespassing on your property. I know you didn't take those girls. Just let me go and you will never hear from me again."

"I'm not stupid!"

"I didn't... I didn't say—"

"You spent three days sitting out here, and now that you realized that you have the wrong place, and you'll be leaving? What... are you going to go continue your search for those girls?"

"Yes! I swear to God! Please just let me go!"

"Does anyone know that you've been watching us?"

"No! They don't know! And if you let me go, I won't say a word!"

His racing heart only pumped the blood out of his nose even faster. He coughed in fits drawing his elbows and forearms to his face while keeping his quivering bloody palms to the sky.

"You know that we have the girls."

There was a pause before he spoke.

"I don't have to know—"

“SHUT UP! Don’t say a word unless I’m asking you a question!” I tightened my grip on the pistol. “How come you sat out here for three days? Why didn’t you call the cops?”

“I was waiting for all of you guys to leave, then I was planning on retrieving the girls.”

“So you wanted all of the glory?”

“I just wanted to save the girls. You don’t have to do this.”

“You’re not supposed to talk unless I ask you a question!”

“You don’t understand! I... you can’t...”

“Turn around!”

I was getting sick of looking at his stupid bloody face. It made me want to vomit. He rocked back and forth shifting on his knees and slowly angled his body only a few degrees. I was growing impatient. Instead of waiting, I walked around to his backside and looked at the back of his sweaty head. It was then that I could see the situation that lay before me. I was someone else. I was the bad guy in the movies. This is the scene in midst of the movie’s climax when things look the worst for the “good guy”; the poor sap that’s kneeling before me, with ropes of snotty, blood hanging from his chin.

This is the part when the good guy’s friend that was first introduced at the beginning of the movie returns during the pivotal third act to shoot me just in the nick of time, saving the hero.

I was outside of myself, watching the whole thing. I watched as I took two steps forward and pressed the cold, lifeless barrel of the gun against the back of his head. A voice in my head screamed *SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT*. The voice in my head told me what to do, demanding that I pull that trigger. It shrieked that I do it now, not a second from now, **NOW!**

There was no better time to take this shot. A crimson sun was setting behind a stretching eternity of yellow and magenta clouds. It was beautiful.

A shot will ring out. I will fall to my knees, and live just long enough to see the hero’s friend standing behind him with wisps of smoke rolling out of his gun barrel, and a look of concern that will melt into self-satisfaction...

***\*BANG!\****

...if this were a movie.

The voices died where the body fell. I was alone. The crescendo of cries that echoed in my head was silenced by the deafening sound of the pistol firing.

The old man fell forward like a marionette doll that had its strings clipped. Before I knew it had started, it was already over. And there wasn’t a thing that I could do about it. If I could go back to that moment, when I had the pistol pressed against the back of his head, I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger... I don’t think.

I looked at the lifeless waste that was before me. Then I looked at the mess that was painted on the side of his pick-up. I looked at all of this and felt nothing. I lifted my hand to my heart, not as a sign of respect, but to check my heart rate. It was steady, if not slow. It’s as if I were watching a movie, not acting one out. No pain, no remorse, no regret—at least not for taking his life, not at that point. Standing there in the windblown,

baron field, I only thought about myself, and what I was going to do about the mess I created.

I put the gun down and grabbed what used to be Burt by his hands and gave it a tug. I couldn't move him an inch. There is a distinct smell in the air when you are in the midst of a great amount of blood. It has a disconcerting scent. It reminded me of when Eddie was gutting a deer. It's a smell that is unmistakable. I lifted his legs and placed his feet under my arms and pulled with all of my might. My feet slipped, failing to get traction on the greasy, blood soaked grass. He was face down. I didn't turn him over. I especially didn't want to see the damage that the bullet's exit wound had caused. Just when I was beginning to make some headway, his shoes slipped off and sent me tumbling forward onto the ground. You don't realize how heavy a grown man is until you're forced to move him.

I didn't know where I was moving him. I knew for a fact that there was no chance that I would be able to lift him into the bed of his truck. Also, I didn't want to touch the dead body anymore than I had to. The field I was standing in was owned by a farmer by the name of Quinn. His family runs a big-time operation. They farm a lot of acres. I knew that he wouldn't be back in that field until spring. Still, if he or anyone of his crew saw a strange pickup at the bottom of their cornfield they may check it out.

I attempted to drag him once again. His socks slowly climbed up his feet and toward his toes. I was getting nowhere. I lowered the tailgate on the back of his truck and took a seat. I looked around for anything that could make my job easier. Black crows observed my situation from tall branches. With twin syllables, they mockingly cawed my name, *Jac-ob, Jac-ob*.

Within the group of trees was a sinkhole. I needed to figure out a way to get him and the truck into it. I folded the driver's seat of the cab forward and found exactly what I needed; a nylon towing strap. I kicked the man's feet together, looped the strap around his ankles before attaching it to the ball-hitch of his truck.

There were tiny splatters of blood covering the dash and seat. I wiped my hand across the seat. The specs of blood left streaks across my fingers and palm. I slowly pulled the truck ahead keeping an eye on the corpse as the tow pulled tight. His body rotated 180 degrees until it was aligned with the truck. I steered the truck in a wide circle around to the south edge of the wooded area, the dead heap behind me flattening the grass along the way. Now aligned with the sinkhole, I stopped to buckle my seat belt, then gassed the truck to the floorboard, sending it through a flurry of tree limbs and leaves.

After a dizzying array of ragweed and branches crossing my vision, I came to an abrupt stop. The truck came to rest half way down the steep hole. Something underneath it had wedged under the frame. I looked for a four wheel drive option, but found nothing. Good enough.

I used the hill to my advantage, rolling the body toward the truck. With the tow strap still bound around the ankles that wrapped like a strip of gauze around his legs, the body was laid to rest at the rear of the truck tires. It seemed like a fitting burial at the time. I covered the top of the truck with nearby branches to camouflage it amongst its surroundings. I kept the gun, shoving it down the back of my jeans. There was no one there to conceal it from. It simply seemed like the thing to do.

Then that was it. That was the end of it.

I went up the same path I had taken when I walked down. Every few steps I turned around and walked backwards and observed the impromptu burial site—looking to see if the truck was obscured enough. I could still see the top of the cab and hood. But I didn't care. I didn't want to walk back down there, not ever again. It was a short-sighted plan, I know, but I simply didn't want to concern myself with it at that moment.

I made my way back up to the house and I went immediately down to the basement and played the board game *Sorry* with the girls. I know it sounds odd. But what else was I to do? Even though I was laughing and playing with the girls, it's not like I wasn't thinking about it the entire time. I'm not a sociopath. I killed a man in cold blood. I knew what I did was wrong. And, I wish I didn't have to do it. But what were my options? It's not about the money. For me it was never about the money. It's about protecting me and my brothers. I wished that I'd asked him how he had found us before I pulled the trigger. I wondered if he was the only one that was trying to be a hero. If there would be more people to follow. I wondered if Ashley and Olivia knew him... liked him.

I didn't cry about it. I've never been a crier. I cried when I was young. I used to cry whenever I was injured from a fall or when I stepped on a rusted nail that stuck out of an old board. But I soon realized that the pain was exactly the same if I cried or not. It really didn't matter.

My grandfather died when I was twelve years old. He was the closest thing to a father that I ever had. Still I didn't cry when he passed. I tried to. I remember sitting up in my room thinking about my Grandfather just after he died. I thought about when he took me to the park, just me and not my brothers. I felt so special doing something that Joe and Eddie were excluded from. I remember sitting at the edge of my bed and concentrating on that happy memory and others like it to provoke some response. Nothing happened. I then thought about my grandfather's dead body rotting. I imagined his skin turning purple and deteriorating, his eyes melting into his skull, his organs becoming a slump of putrid liquid—still nothing. I wanted to cry because I assumed that that is what normal people do when a loved one has died. I came close. A lump grew in my throat, my breathing became shallow and labored, but then I pictured how I looked and thought about how ridiculous I looked. So I gave up.

Feelings are fickle. We give feelings far more weight than we should. Love and hate are both just chemical reactions in our body. One is to protect the existence of those close to us so they have the chance to survive and reproduce. The other only serves us to keep unsavory people at a distance from us and those we care about. That's all feelings are. It's basic biology to ensure we thrive and eventually produce more of us. It's for the survival of our species. If we were indifferent to others the human race wouldn't be around today.

I have what you would call an even temperament. It's both good and bad. I never feel great highs of elation, but in turn I never feel any great depths of despair. My emotions seem to exist in the cold space in between. I realize that it isn't normal. It's not like I'm going to feel down about it.

Not that I could anyways.

## CHAPTER 27

It's cold, bitter cold. It feels like the coldest night of my life. I know that it isn't, but I usually don't have to walk for hours on end underdressed. I make my way into a thick, black forest and out into another clearing. The frozen grass crumbles beneath my feet, leaving pristine indelible tracks, like walking on the surface of the moon. That's the only sound there is, the crushing of frozen grass. It feels like if I yell not a sound will be made.

It feels vacant. I can't see a single animal. They are wisely hidden away from the cold, nestled in holes, pressing their fur covered bodies against their loved ones in a symbiosis—sustaining each other's health by being with the ones they love.

On the nights I spent on the couch sleeping while the girls had taken my bed, I thought about how my future was going to be. How it was going to be different. I pictured Joe, Eddie and me sitting on sandy beaches in the sun, watching the tides ebb and flow. But I never should have done that. The scenarios that you imagine, the conversations you think you will have will never actually happen. Because life, real life, is unpredictable, erratic and can never be planned.

Keep focused, keep moving! Legs pumping, blood flowing. Look forward, never look back! No more futilely reaching for bygone days that weren't great to begin with. I will not be sitting alcohol-laden in the future, pinning for this past. Keep moving, follow my feet.

Breathe deep.

God the air's cold!

This continuous practice of self-indulgence must end. I will not sit pathetically in the past, but forge ahead to the future to create a destiny that is all my own, not co-opt someone else's and call it mine. Fucking live deliberately!

I will look back and realize that this is the seminal moment that I took the reins. This is the moment that I began living for myself. This is the moment that I shook off the shackles that is Jacob, and harnesses the new me.

God my lungs hurt. Each breath is like needles poking my insides. And it feels like I'm walking on shattered glass.

But at least I can feel them. It is the past pains and tribulations during your formative years that make you who you are and what you will become. Out of these sodden ashes will raise a newly formed phoenix!

After this is done, after this is all through, I will have a chance to start over. I'll make my way east to the ocean and find a way across. A cargo ship? Who knows? I will make it across. I'll retreat to some place like Oslo, or Amsterdam. The trip over the Atlantic will wash away and forgive me of all my past sins and misdeeds. Everything, from the man I murdered, to the family I abandoned, to the girls I stole from their parents.

Every great sin, to all those tiny little murders... the ones that each of us commit—they will be washed away, absolved with my baptism of salt water. I will be a different person. I'll be a better person. They say that you can never escape yourself, that wherever you go you take yourself with you. It doesn't have to be like that. I'm not bringing me. I will be someone else entirely. I'll reinvent myself. I'll eat at sidewalk bistros, go to museums, drink red wine while wearing blazer jackets. *Jacob the can counter* will be no more, he'll be a ghost, a fleeting memory of the people that once knew him. The new me will be thousands of miles away, beginning his life.

I can't feel my feet! I can't feel my feet!

Move them closer to the fire in my mind. Rocks! There are rocks next to the fire that I rest my feet on. The rocks are hot. I press my feet on these rocks and they sizzle like sausage patties on a griddle.

It's not working! I still can't feel my feet!

Am I still wearing shoes? It's like I'm not wearing shoes! Keep my mind off of the cold. Don't think about the cold. Tell yourself to stop thinking about the cold. Pump yourself up. Keep yourself going.

From the young lad that lied amongst the wind that funneled through granite headstones, to the boy who is trying with all his might to not be mired in this infinite rut... climbing out of this will be a man who will have surmounted the precarious?... precipitous?...preparedness?...puh—

Fuck... I can't breathe!

Feet in the fire, I'm standing in the fire. The flames surround me. I'm warm. I look at the ash covered snow.

I'm warm.

I'm not moving.

Don't give up!

## EPILOGUE

Thousands of miles away, two little girls are reunited with their loving parents. They are greeted with an embrace that is seemingly endless. They press their tear strewn faces against their parent's formidable bulk. They are reminded of their parent's familiar scent when they're held. This scent replaces the smell of basement. Before the parents

can ask how they are doing, the little girls are asking how their dog is. The parents and police officers all laugh.

Elsewhere, two brothers are charged with false imprisonment, child endangerment, extortion, and are accused of killing a man they never even knew. They will be vilified in the media. They will be asked if they sexually assaulted the little girls. They will both take offence to the accusation. They are separately offered a plea bargain if they say where the third brother is hiding. They refuse. Even if they knew where he was they still would never say it.

There is a boy that convinces himself that he is a man, and moves forward with his life. He awakes from a dream in his small apartment. The dream was about his old life. He loves most of it, tries to forget parts of it, and hates the rest. Miles and miles of roads had led him to where he is today. He gets out of bed to begin his regular life, by getting ready to go to his regular job that doesn't pay a lot of money, but it's enough to get by.

It's early in the morning. The sun hasn't risen yet. He kisses his sleeping wife on the forehead. He creeps down a hallway, careful not to make a sound, and pokes his head into his daughter's room, and sees her fast asleep. He sweeps the hair out of her eyes and kisses the top of her head. He dresses for work in silence, trying not to disturb his sleeping family.

Just as he is about to walk out of the bedroom he hears over his shoulder, *Vaarwell, Theo.*