

The Giants- A New Species

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Dedicated to my daughter Julia

*“A grain in the balance will determine which individual shall live and which shall die—
which variety or species shall increase in number, and which shall decrease, or finally be extinct.”*

—Charles Darwin.



Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.

-Stephen Hawking

Hamburg, July 2017.

A demonstration under the "G20 Entern" banner had been planned for that evening. Already, on Thursday evening, there had been collisions between the police and demonstrators. At least one hundred and eleven officials were injured, as were numerous G20 opponents, who had to be treated by medical assistants.

He watched as the situation in Hamburg escalated on Saturday night after the violent protests against the G20 summit. He took a large breath as he took it all in. The atmosphere was astounding: plundered shops, burning barricades, floodlights, and tear gas.

The police, armed with a massive squad of Special Forces officers, faced hundreds of rioters. Barricades collapsed beneath armored vehicles, and water cannons were in use. Still, in the early hours of the morning, police cars and tanks patrolled the city.

The Hamburg police were shocked by the riots on the occasion of the G20 summit. "We have never before experienced hatred and violence to such a degree," said Bild Daily Special spokesman, Timo Zill.

Supporters of G20 opponents denied assaulting police at the Rote Flora Cultural Center. The Red Flora, which had been occupied for almost thirty years, was one of the most important centers of the German independent scene.

The summit began with an excess of riots. It began by welcoming the international guests in Hamburg where the less than competent world leaders gathered under the auspices of solving the world's problems when their true interest was filling their pockets. This was delayed due to the numerous protests and demonstrators in the city who, again and again, tried to disturb traffic on major street blocks. In the morning, the unknowns had already set numerous cars on fire. A police station was also attacked.

After the plundering and bombarding of barricades, the police moved in, en mass. It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that the situation calmed.

He'd watched the scene—which came as close to hell on earth as he'd ever seen—from the windows in a tall building. He felt the fire burn in his eyes. Humans were so easily manipulated. Sniping at people without anyone noticing in the lingering chaos was going to be easy.

France, the same day.

It was a hot day, and the train was packed. He ran a sweaty palm through his hair. His dark eyes hid behind sunglasses. He observed a young punk, sitting in the car eating junk food, who decided to roll up a joint for dessert. The punk took a puff, clearly bothering the other passengers.

A woman sitting behind the guy asked him to kindly stop smoking. Given the look of his expression, her plea had been met by mockery. Unfortunately, his French was too poor to grasp the gist of the conversation.

His eyes flared behind his glasses. He was all for marijuana. It had its advantages. It served a purpose. Hell, he'd even smoked the occasional joint. He simply couldn't let people think all pot-users were inconsiderate jackasses who did what they hell they wanted without regard for other people, and he decided to follow the punk to his destination.

The next morning, the punk was discovered duct taped to the back of a train. A joint had been glued to his hand, and a note had been attached to his t-shirt that read, "I wanted to smoke on the train. Look at me now."

1

Sal was woken abruptly by the loud knock on the door. He was sweaty and confused. Things in the room slowly morphed from outlines to having a perceived texture.

It was morning. Time for school.

His father banged the door for the second time. “Get up, Sal,” he said. “Okay!” Sal ran his fingers through his hair. He was a student at Strong Edge High School. He hated getting up early in the morning, especially on Mondays, but he welcomed the wake-up call on that day. Voices from downstairs drifted up from between the floorboards, further encouraging him to get out of bed.

He stared out the window. It was sunny outside and already hot. He felt compelled to open the window and breathe in the scent of sunshine, newly mowed lawns, and freshness as it filled the room.

Sal lived in Strong Edge on Swiss Avenue in a house with a solid brick front, wood trim, and arched windows. The house had a rear porch from which they'd enjoyed the outdoors.

A built-in grill under the overhang turned the rear terrace into a family hangout in good weather. There was a basketball court at the far end of the big backyard which had served as a sweet escape for Sal for as far back as he could remember. His thoughts seemed to naturally disappear when he played basketball, leaving him to exist only in the moment. The sense of ecstasy at being outside of everyday reality provided him with great inner-clarity.

Strong Edge was known for its wonderful hiking trails, wildflowers, fishing, mountain biking, and boating opportunities. A major gateway for millions of tourists visiting the nearby National Park each year, this beautiful little town was known for its soothing surroundings.

The city was also known for its Serenity Park, and Giantsfair, one of the oldest amusement parks in the country. Strong Edge had been tourist attraction for many years. There was much to see and do, and the town offered a tranquil respite from life's the fast-paced tempo.

Sal rubbed his eyes. He'd had most peculiar, scary, lifelike dream ever. There had been an old barn, blood spatter on the wall, and people were yelling and screaming. Something was burning, and he was suffocating. He could still feel and smell the smoke in his nostrils as his body had slowly awoken. Sal sneezed and watched the particles from his nose dive in the air and settle to the floor. He slowly made his way out of bed, feeling his body stiffen. Something about the dream made him freeze. There had been a man there, grinning and looking at Sal with big black eyes. The guy had freaked him out. He'd wanted to say something, but Sal would not let him speak a word. He was afraid of what he might say, knowing his words would have truth to them.

Sal slapped his palm against his face. Why was he scared of a dream? He shook the dream off on his way to the bathroom. It was an obstacle course. Sal had three siblings, and their toys were everywhere on the floor. Joanna and Anthony were twins and younger than him. Then there was Carl, his older brother.

Sal turned on the hot water and stepped into the shower to wash off the sweat from his nightly horror. He lowered the water's temperature and began to feel ready to face whatever challenges the day might offer. He hated to admit it, but there was something ominous about the dream.

Something was scraping outside of the bathroom door. Sal turned off the water, wrapped himself in a towel, and smiled. A beautiful blonde would be waiting for him on the other side of the door—his golden retriever, Angel. It was time for their usual morning walk during which they'd stroll through the neighborhood and get a sense of the day. Sal got dressed quickly and went outside with Angel. The sky was clear, shiny, and beautiful bright blue. Angel was eager that day, jumping up and down, which was unusual. Angel was usually lazy when the weather got like that.

The ground was warm, and the bugs were buzzing. The air was dry, the kind of dry to make his hair staticky.

The neighborhood had been established in the 1950s. It was family-oriented, dotted with ranch homes and new construction in a thriving, community center, with good schools, parks, a low crime rate, and access to pretty much anything. It was what had made it one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Strong Edge. Sal's parents were family-oriented people, so it wasn't hard to see why they'd chosen the place.

Sal and Angel walked down the street, passing the neighbors as they trotted along. Most of them were okay. They'd always accepted his strange appearance and his parent's explanation as to his origin, but down the street at number 26B, a strange man resided.

It was hard to tell how old he was, but he'd always stared at Sal's house as he walked by. He didn't even try to hide his curiosity. His hair was long, and his nose had a bump on it as if it once had been broken.

Word around town was he'd once had made a pass at someone's sixteen-year-old daughter, and the father had smacked him around.

Mr. Crooked Nose's curiosity was partly based on that creepy note that Sal's mom didn't think he knew anything about. The lecher had written his mother a letter saying he'd like to see her naked.

What the hell had he been thinking?

His mother had just sighed and torn the note to pieces. Sal's dad didn't know, because to Sal's knowledge, she'd never told him. Sal supposed she felt sorry for the guy.

Sal had only known of the incident because his mother had indirectly told him about it—he sort of read her mind. It was a skill he'd possessed for as far back as he could remember. The skill had saved him from a lot of trouble, but it had also gotten him into some. His teachers either loved him or hated him. One of them had even referred to him as “Mr. Know-It-All.”

He thought about Mr. Callaghan, that young teacher, and the guys who admired Sal's popularity with the girls, and the guys who had hated him for it.

You win some; you lose some.

Sal had told Carl about the note, and they'd pieced it back together. Carl had been furious, and something had snapped inside of Sal. The guy was beneath him; a simpleton.

In the heat of crazy, the two brothers had come up with a plan. When day had shifted into night, they would dress in suits just like the ones Jesse and Walter had worn in *Breaking Bad* when they were being bad. They would put on rubber gloves, grab some shovels and some paint, and sneak down to 26B.

When they reached the front porch with the blue stone floor tile and the black front door with sidelights and black planters, they realized the guy wasn't home.

So far, so good.

Carl smashed one of the small windows in the door to gain access to the house. They waited for an alarm to go off and prepared for their escape, but no such thing happened. They looked around to assure no one had heard the sound of breaking glass before Carl reached in, opened the front door, and they went inside, adrenaline pumping through their bodies.

The foyer was decorated all in white with a custom staircase, white oak hardwood floors, and white oak stair treads. The kitchen featured white cabinets, a white marble countertop, built-in glass-door wine cooler, with a light grey island, and brushed brass lighting.

The only things standing out were the blue chairs.

The living room had an open brick fireplace dividing it from the kitchen. The furniture there was white, and there was a built-in bookcase. A big screen TV was the only dark thing in the room. The house was neat, with expensive furniture. The guy had to be lousy with money.

They trashed the place, splattering paint on the furniture and walls.

They taped the note that had been sent to their mother on the wall.

Carl went into the garage to smash the windows on the Mercedes Benz and slash the tires while Sal took a quick look around the rest of the house. He noticed there was a wooden door under the staircase. Sal opened the door to see a staircase leading down to a basement.

He went down the squeaky steps, half-expecting a bat to fly into the face.

The basement was a pitch dark room without lights. Standing still, waiting while his eyes adjusted didn't seem to help. Spiders hung from the ceiling and corners, spinning their sticky, transparent webs. The place was the antithesis of neat upstairs quarters.

He found his way his way to a switch in the darkness and turned the light on, waiting once more for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he was met with a shocking sight.

The steps squeaked behind him. He looked around in amazement. It was Carl. "Yo, Sal!" he said. "We need to go. What—"

Carl laughed. "Who the hell does this guy think he is? Christian Grey?" Sal knew what he'd meant—the place looked like a swingers' club from hell. Whips, bondage equipment, and posters of naked people in all sorts of positions "graced" the walls.

Carl grabbed his cell phone from his pocket to snap a few pictures. When he was done, they went upstairs. In big letters, Carl wrote, "NICE BASEMENT, FREAK!" with a marker on the living room wall.

Afterward, they went to a secluded area and burned anything which might expose them as the culprits before sneaking back home. They never mentioned the experience to anyone. Their parents would vouch for them if questions came up. It was crazy how they were able to pull something like that off.

No questions were asked. No one had seen or heard anything, and the guy never reported the break-in. It turned out he didn't want to be exposed for the freakazoid he was.

From then on, the guy went straight by Sal's house without so much as a glance. That was the kind of stuff Sal was able to get away with.

Someone had once asked him what the hell had made him so special; Sal was about to find out.

2

Angel barked as a big cat crossed the street, shaking Sal from his line of thought just as a blue, BMW M3 appeared from out of nowhere.

A loud bump, sounding like an icepick on metal, rang out as the car made impact with the cat.

The car stopped, and the driver, a man in a suit, got out and did the unexpected: instead of checking the cat, he inspected the car. Having concluded the vehicle was unharmed, he got back into the car and drove on.

Sal was speechless. He tied Angel to a nearby tree and walked over to the cat. It was black, with white paws and a white tail.

Sal crouched beside the cat and began to pet it softly. It was clearly in pain, its poor body, twitching.

Sal's mind filled with rage—what the hell was wrong with the human race?

He sat for a few seconds, unaware as to how he might handle the situation, when a person stopped in front of him. Sal looked up. It was a tall man with dark eyes and black hair, gazing down at the scene. He tilted his head and looked at Sal.

Sal was trying to figure out if the man was amused by the situation, or if he believed what he was doing was helpful.

The man bent down and whispered to Sal, “Humans can be so cruel. Do they truly deserve to exist?” There was something in his eyes and his face which was so very familiar. Sal realized he had a strong resemblance to the man from his dream.

He picked the cat gently up and stroked its fur. Sal wondered if the man was about to sing it a lullaby. When the cat began to purr, the man smiled at Sal and walked away with it in his arms. Sal pinched himself to see if he was still dreaming.

The black-eyed man turned the corner, and a cat leaped down the street and into a garden—a black cat with white paws and a white tail. He heard a voice inside his head say, “*See ya, Sal.*”

Sal shook his head. He must be having a heat stroke or something. Angel barked again. Sal untied her, and they finished their walk, but he found it hard to reconcile his thoughts.

What just happened?

Why had the man looked familiar?

Had he just heard the man's voice inside his head?

The cat ran back down the street, looking a lot like the cat that had been hit by the car, but how could that be?

Sal was dripping with sweat by the time he and Angel had finally reached the house. Angel ran inside to cool off. Sal stood in the doorway, dumbstruck.

People were rattling about in the kitchen. Someone was laughing. There was the sound of Angel drinking from his bowl of water. "Sal," came a voice from the kitchen, "come and get your pancakes while they're hot."

Sal made his feet move. He bent his neck slightly so he wouldn't bump his head on the doorframe, and went to the kitchen.

The room was an L-shaped, open-concept kitchen with an undermount sink; white, recessed-panel cabinets; quartzite countertops; a white, subway-tile backsplash; paneled appliances; a light hardwood floor; and a center island. The breakfast bar provided expanded seating for quick meals or an oversized crowd. It was his mother's favorite place to be.

What a bunch of useless information. He sounded like a damn TV commercial. There were a lot of people who envied his retentive memory.

His family was seated around the big, wooden table. They all looked up as he entered. His chair was taller than everyone else's, as was his end of the table, needed to accommodate his long legs and slender body.

"Was it a nice walk, Sal? It sure is hot today."

Sal just nodded for answer.

He sat next to Carl who was busy texting. Carl grunted. He was texting Louise. He was crazy about Louise, the beautiful Louise with her milky skin, red hair, and blue eyes.

The twins were talking about YouTube. Jacksepticeye, an energetic video-game commentator on YouTube was one of their idols—they wanted to be YouTubers themselves.

There was an increased desire for fame among younger individuals. Many of them planned to stop their formal educations in pursuit of fame. Who could blame them? The shitty educational system had overcrowded schools and a lack of funding. School broke down most people's will to learn and did nothing to cultivate self-expression. Education was important; schooling was *not*.

YouTubing was fine as long as it didn't turn them into one of the people who humiliated their significant others for fame or one of the stupid girls who only received attention because they were hot. Or—God forbid—Milo Yiannopoulos, the world's greatest Internet troll. Sal's parents were talking about school almost being out and what to do about the twins. They were both doctors at the local hospital. "Sal, are you all right?" his mom said. "You're not eating. Are you worried about the test?"

Sal looked at his mom, and Carl looked up from his phone. "Why would Poindexter be worried about a test?" Carl asked.

He didn't say anything to defend himself. Carl was right: Sal was a straight-A student. The thing was he didn't really try hard. He just knew. It was a fact that irritated the hell out of his brother.

Sal cleared his throat. "It is just the heat, Mom. I'll drink some water." He always made a concerted effort to portray the role of the good, perfect son. It was another trait Carl hated.

His mother smiled and got up to clear the table while his dad tried to get the twins ready to leave for school.

"Consider changing your t-shirt, Sal," Carl commented as he walked by.

Sal sat quietly, watching life unfold around him. Everyone was busy doing something, and it felt so loud inside his head. His eyes found their way to the family portrait on the wall above the table.

Sal was the odd one out. He always had been. Sal was taller than everyone, and he had seductive eyes so black, it was hard to tell where the pupil ended and the iris began.

3

When Sal was younger, he'd once asked his parents why he didn't look like the rest of the family. His parents had given him a scientific answer about genes and how they sometimes skipped a generation. It turned out that his grandfather on his father's side had looked exactly like him. He, too, had been tall and with black eyes.

They showed Sal a photo of his great-grandfather, closing the case and changing the topic. Sal's father got a sad, distant look in his eyes whenever the topic of his father came up. It wasn't exactly sadness, but more worry or fear.

When Sal got older, he wanted to examine the case further and asked to see the photo again, but he was told that the photo was nowhere to be found. Apparently, Grandpa hadn't liked cameras, and only the one photo existed of him. Needless to say, Sal never knew his father's parents as they'd died before he was born.

His father had a sister, Vickie, who was dedicated to her career, so they never got to see her except at Christmas. She didn't care much for Sal. She'd never said so, but he could tell. Aunt Vickie cared for his other siblings, taking an interest in their school and such.

Sal knew she had to lie and pretend all the time, and she hated the fact that he knew.

Sal also knew about her abusive relationship and the facade she tried to keep and it hurt him deeply. He wondered how he had been the only one able to pick up on it.

One Christmas, when he was around ten years old, she broke into tears and screamed, "You little shit, Sal. Mind your own business. You're a freak. Stop looking at me."

His crime: taking pity on her.

She hadn't spoken a word to him since. His mother had defended him, but there was something else troubling her, something she wasn't telling him.

They'd never really discussed the incident, but there had been a large elephant lurking around the house ever since. It pointed to the unspoken, strange mystery begging to be unraveled.

Fucking lies; they ruined everything.

4

School was easy for Sal. He learned fast and got straight A's. The other high-schoolers respected him. Most were either frightened by him or fascinated with him. Sal didn't blame them. He was a peculiar being. Tall, with a muscular, athletic body and raven black hair, his dark, seductive eyes seemed to put a spell on anyone who came close. With his pale skin, people sometimes mistook him for a vampire.

He never heard a bad word from anyone except the time a new student had joked around, calling him Edward Cullen. He'd made a pass at the little bastard in the hallway, and they'd ended up making out in his car. He never saw the kid again after that.

Sal was a star on the basketball team at school. He was a popular kid which was odd because strange kids never had it easy.

He had experienced many romantic encounters up on Lover's Hill. It was nothing but a steep hill with a great view, but on a clear night, the stars danced in the sky. Sal was a charming sweet-talker, and it always helped to put his dates in a romantic mood.

Sal was bisexual. Some people might call him promiscuous behind his back, but he wasn't. Not according to him, anyway. He had a special someone, besides: Robin.

He'd been Robin's math tutor for six months, but he'd had no luck asking her out on a date, even though they had chemistry. According to Robin, Sal was too extroverted and outgoing. He wasn't the type to stay around for long. Sal wasn't marriage material.

Robin was more down-to-earth. She was beautiful, with curly hair and blue eyes. Robin was a top-of-the-class student who only stepped in all the right circles. Some would say she was an overachiever with a trust fund. Robin also didn't date jocks.

Sal's friends didn't understand his infatuation, but with Robin, Sal never had to pretend. He never knew what was up with Robin, and it was liberating. She was a challenge.

He remembered when he'd first met Robin. Sal had been in need of money and had posted an ad on the school board, searching for students to tutor. Robin had shown up by his locker to respond to his ad. Sal ended up doing the tutoring for free, he was that star-struck by Robin. She'd told him about not being able to pass math, but he hadn't listened. The magnificent creature was in trouble, and it was his duty to help.

They met up every Wednesday. Sal had done everything in his power to charm Robin, but nothing seemed to do the trick, and they'd become friends instead. Sal treasured those Wednesdays.

His parents didn't know much about his life outside the home. They knew he was a star on the basketball team, but they didn't know about his dating or sexuality. He'd assumed they didn't want to know.

Whenever the topic of homosexuality came up, or they watched a gay couple go by, Sal's dad would go pale and act flaky.

Sal's parents left him alone because he did well at school. It was worse for Carl, who earned frequent flyer miles when it came to detention. He'd get into fights and his grades were low, but Sal believed he liked his bad boy reputation. Carl thought of himself as a rebel, someone society couldn't mold into whatever they wanted. A mindless puppet, as he would put it.

He and Carl had a love-hate relationship. Carl hated Sal because he excelled at everything. He loathed Sal's popularity, and his ability to get away with everything. Carl loved Sal because they understood each other. They'd always been best friends and had always looked out for one another. Being the odd one growing up was hard, but Carl always had his back. If anything, Carl knew what it was like to be the black sheep.

One time, some of the neighbor kids accused Sal of being one of the Black-eyed Children, a frightening phenomenon of urban legend that had spread like wildfire among the kids in Strong Edge. The encounters always happened the same way: someone home alone in the middle of the night would hear a knock on the door. When they looked through the window, a pair of children were there, standing out in the cold. When the cautious inhabitant opened the door to see what might be wrong, a mundane feeling of fear washed over them. The strange children pleaded to be let inside, but something seemed "off" with them. They were said to have pale skin, dress strangely, have odd haircuts, and not make eye contact. As the lonely inhabitants looked closer, they saw the children's eyes were black as onyx, an unsettling detail that caused them to slam the door, denying their pleas for entrance. The moral of the story was to never, ever let the Black-eyed Children inside. They brought nothing but ill will and personal doom. They were also believed to possess the power of low-level mind control.

The kids had gone crazy, accusing Sal of being responsible for the death of Mrs. Carrington, an elderly woman in the neighborhood who had died from a heart attack a few weeks prior. They spat on him, hit him, and wanted him out of Strong Edge, only a few pitchforks short of being an angry mob.

Sal had been terribly frightened, but Carl had stepped in to defend him with all his power. He told them to stop picking on Sal or they'd pay dearly.

The kids—on a witch hunt—refused.

Carl went crazy, jumped the kid closest to him, and began to pummel him until his nose bled. He looked like Muhammad Ali beating the shit out of Sonny Liston. Foam even appeared around his mouth.

The other kids stood dumbstruck for a while, but then engaged in the war and started to punch Carl. It looked like a prison riot.

Sal started to pull the kids off Carl, screaming and kicking wildly as he went along. There were so many kids, so many hands, so many punches, and so many voices.

Then, a distinct voice blared, “Leave them alone, you sons of bitches.” It was Jack. He rode his bike right into the midst of the fight and commenced smacking the bullies around. The bullies knew when the battle was lost and evacuated.

It was over.

Three victorious kids emerged with the promise of retaliation. They had become brothers in arms.

The parents were upset, but the bullies had learned their lesson: don’t mess with the Williams brothers and their friends.

The neighborhood kids more or less coexisted peacefully after that, but the incident had left its mark on Sal. He wasn’t dumb—far from it. Sal knew he was different. For all he knew, he could be one of those Black-eyed Children with supernatural powers.

5

When Sal and Carl were kids, they used to watch horror flicks and pretend the world was ending, as they fought zombies and other creatures outside. The treehouse in the garden had served as a shelter from the world's horrors. Their heroic deeds were highly regarded and highly rewarded by the lost population—those who could not defend themselves—around them.

Lately, the air between them had cooled a bit. Carl had somehow changed, or maybe it had been him. Words unspoken had become a barrier between them, making Sal uneasy, because he didn't want to lose Carl.

Sal ran upstairs to change his t-shirt, grabbed his bag, and went out to the blue Volkswagen microbus in the driveway to head to school. It was the type of vehicle hippies had driven back in the sixties or seventies. Sal had gotten it for his sixteenth birthday. It had been cheap, a real bargain, in fact, since he'd done the former owner a huge favor. The freaky owner—who lived in 26B—was more than happy to see it go. He and his father had it restored, and now it was Sal's loyal companion, taking him wherever he needed to go.

Because he was so humongous, he had to have it modified so he could fit inside. It looked weird with the extra head space, but it worked. The bus also made his love life a hell of a lot easier.

Before the bus, he used to show his dates the locker rooms at school. It was a room furnished with lockers, perfumed by the mild smell of sweat. The showers had ugly, non-slip tiles and the buzzing from the fluorescent lights did nothing to help the mood. Candles and music made only a slight difference, but his dates usually found the atmosphere intriguing, especially when he whispered sweet nothings in their ears.

He'd "borrowed" the gym keys from Coach Heffernan and had a copy made. For some reason, the gym didn't have an alarm. Still, Carl was considered the "bad kid"—Sal always hid behind his charm.

After he and his dates had made out, he'd walk them home, never to see them again. He cared about them—he just didn't care enough. When Carl turned sixteen, he got a dirt bike. He was allowed to keep it, provided his grades changed for the better. When he failed to do so, their parents had confiscated the bike, thinking it would encourage him to improve; it did not. Instead, Carl disappeared for a day. "I didn't want you to know, Sal," was all he'd said when he'd come back. "You're like the fucking government—you notice everything." Sal got into the bus drove to school. He turned the radio on. A local band was singing something about a scary ice cream clown. He blew kisses to a bunch of people waving to him from the sidewalk, smirking. He parked the bus in the school parking lot. As he got out of the car, a football came flying in his direction. Someone called, "Yo, Sal, heads up!"

Sal caught the ball. He grinned, exposing his pearly white teeth. "Make us proud on Friday, Sal," captain of the football team, Jeremy Bell, shouted. Jeremy was tall, dark, and handsome. Like Sal, Jeremy had quite the knack for sweeping ladies off their feet. Sal threw the football back to him. "Always." He winked at Jeremy. It was a big game for the basketball team on Friday. They were playing for the champion trophy in the school's cup. The team had been practicing every day for the past few months. His parents hoped Sal would get a sports scholarship—they were so freaking results-oriented, they never did anything for the pleasure of it. Sal didn't really care about the scholarship. He just liked to play.

Sal shook a few hands as he walked up the stairs leading to the school's entrance. Strong Edge High was a historic school building. The H-shaped, two-story, brick, Art Deco building had been constructed in several stages between 1920 and 1940. The gymnasium had been the thing built. Green areas served as recreation spots for students between classes. The school was one of the few places where he didn't have to stoop over to fit under ceilings and go through doorways.

Sal entered the school, and the heat hit him like a ton of bricks. The hall was buzzing with people sizzling and roasting in their own juices. He spotted Robin in the distance, talking to some people from the chess club, and his heart melted in the split second before he decided to head to his locker.

When he neared the locker, a dry voice sounded behind him: “Hey, emo.” Rosie.

He turned around to see a female with pale skin, hair dyed red, wearing dark eyeliner, fingernails painted black, and wearing black clothes standing before him. Her t-shirt read, “The Cure”—she was into art and gothic architecture. “Hey, Rosie.”

Rosie, the school Goth, had been Sal’s friend since kindergarten. They had been two peculiar children who had found each other. Rosie, too, had been accused of being in league with the paranormal, a devil worshipper who had unleashed demons from Hell.

She nodded in Robin’s direction. “You do know that love's just a fantasy for Justin and Britney wannabes, right?”

“Going down that path would be *so* conformist, right?” Sal replied.

“Fifth circle of Hell.” She looked him directly in the eye. “You look tired.” Rosie had never doubted that he was different—she'd always encouraged him to pursue it—but Sal never had the courage to discuss the unspoken with her. He was afraid of what he might find.

“I am. I just had an eerie dream.”

Before she had the chance to answer, a scruffy-looking guy with long, blond hair dressed in ripped jeans and a flannel shirt showed up. “Sal and Wednesday, good morning to ya.”

“Maybe if we don’t make eye contact it’ll go away,” Rosie retorted. She hated the nickname Wednesday.

“Mornin’ Jack.” Sal and Jack had been inseparable since the episode with the Black-eyed Kids. Jack always seemed to have his back up when Carl was around. He played in a grunge band. They were called “Appropriately Wicked,” and they were pretty decent.

“Sal, I have a problem.” Jack grabbed his shoulder.

“You could probably get an ointment for that, sweetheart.” Rosie gave Jack a toxic smile.

Jack turned his head toward Rosie. “How *is* Uncle Fester?” He turned back to Sal. “I need you to take me to the music store. I broke my guitar.”

“Yeah. Sure. Text me later.”

Rosie lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sure that’s all you broke?”

The school bell sounded.

“It is time to get in line and walk amongst the dead.” Rosie pointed two fingers to her temple and walked off.

“Later, Sal. I gotta go flunk Spanish.”

He smiled. Sal had a lot of acquaintances, but only a few close friends.

6

Sal sighed and headed down the hallway to his history test. A couple of students gazed at him awkwardly as he walked by. The new kids always did that. To them, he was a strangely-shaped tower, a mysterious, exotic creature.

He winked at them as he passed. The eyes. They loved the eyes. One of the newbies smiled eagerly at him. He returned the smile, laughing mildly inside, wondering if it could be the start of the next adventure up on Lover's Hill.

He usually didn't date people from his school. It was too complicated. He did, however, make exceptions on rare occasions. Sal preferred to find his dates from among the many tourists flooding the area every year. He looked over his shoulder one last time before turning the corner, running a hand through his hair, looking at the floor, and then back up at the newbie.

When, at last, he'd turned the corner, a sigh made its way to his ears. It worked every time. Some were under the impression Sal was bad news, that he could take whatever he wanted without thinking of the consequences, but he'd never dated anyone who didn't want to go with him or who already had a partner. On occasion, Sal found he'd wandered between partners and the disgruntled half had shown up on his turf, but it never turned ugly. He'd always been able to tell them what they wanted to hear, soothing their minds by saying how sorry he was. He'd even ended up shooting hoops with one of them.

Sal may have broken a few hearts, but he'd never encountered any hard feelings or ill will. Not as far as he knew, anyway.

People sometimes wondered what it might be like to be with a freak like him, and that was part of the package.

Sometimes it hurt that people still perceived him as a freak, but he always used it to his advantage. He was frequently surrounded with gossip and wonder, but it never amounted to anything serious.

He was tall and handsome, and he spent a lot of time playing basketball. It was his passion, but it never amounted to anything serious.

His parents had been somewhat absent from his life because he was considered "the good kid." He received good grades and mostly stayed out of trouble. They devoted their time to work, Carl, and the twins. Sal made it to class just before Mr. Mayer, the school's history teacher, who was a fixture at the school. He looked like an Oxford professor, with his tweed jacket, tie, and white beard. He'd never married. His old Saab in the school parking lot spoke a silent tale of happier times in a past long forgotten. Mr. Mayer was forever disappointed in his students, believing all sports were a waste of time.

He wasn't fond of Sal. Mr. Mayer approved neither of Sal's attitude nor the energy Sal radiated, whatever that meant.

Once, he'd accused Sal of cheating—Sal was simply too clever, no one in Sal's generation was able to do anything great...if they did, something had to be wrong. Mr. Mayer went to great lengths to prove his allegations, secretly planting a video camera in the classroom hoping to find evidence to support his suspicions.

After class, Jeremy Richardson spilled cold water all over Kathy Simmons' white blouse and left her crying and running for the restrooms. In her retreat, she knocked over the books on Mr. Mayer's bookshelf, revealing the camera. Later, someone spilled their guts to Principal Johnson, and the camera was confiscated.

Mr. Mayer couldn't prove anything regarding Sal. He'd also used the video camera without permission. He went ballistic when Principal Johnson told him to apologize, but Sal just shrugged his shoulders and went on with his life. Mr. Mayer was let off the hook with a warning and an earful from Sal's parents.

From then on, Mr. Mayer was patient as a cat stalking its prey, waiting for Sal to make a mistake. One slip-up and he'd shred him to pieces. Sal deserved no better. He was a troublemaker like his no-good brother, a freak of nature.

Sal found a seat at the back of the room. He moistened his lips and looked around. He felt like an idiot sitting at the small table in a small chair. It was a part of Mr. Mayer's revenge on him. Usually, Sal's chairs and tables were adjusted or brought especially in, but not in Mr. Mayer's class. Mr. Mayer claimed there wasn't enough room for such furniture. He'd also chosen the smallest room in all of Strong Edge High to teach history. Sal just had to make do with the regular chairs and tables.

He let it slide. Getting him fired was too easy a punishment—life had to be hard enough for a bitter, tweedy man like him.

Sal's mind slipped back to the incident with the cat. That guy...there had been something about him, something Sal wanted to know more about.

Mr. Mayer slammed a paper on the desk in front of him. "Pay attention, Williams." Mr. Mayer always referred to him by his last name.

He made his way through the test with ease—the answers just seemed to flow to him from out of nowhere. Finally, the bell sounded, rescuing him from Mr. Mayer's watchful eyes. He got up from the miniature furniture, stretched his back, walked up to Mr. Mayer's desk, and put the test in front of the teacher with a grin. Sal felt Mr. Mayer's eyes burn a hole in his back as he left the room.

For as far back as he could remember, Sal had been able to charm his teachers. He put everyone at ease, which drew them into liking him. Sal was a fast learner, got good grades, and accelerated at sports.

Sometimes, he'd fail to do his homework, but he usually slipped under the radar with the promise of making it up the following week. It was different with Mr. Mayer who liked their little game, and Sal liked yanking Mr. Mayer's chain and his determined attempt to overthrow him. One had to appreciate the effort he put into it.

"You've got about as much charm as a dead slug, Williams." Mr. Mayer was a welcome challenge.

Sal was at the drinking fountain when he felt a hand on his back as he slurped the water. He turned to face Robin and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Robin. Hi.” He felt a sudden electricity running through his body.

“Hey, listen, Sal, there's something I need to say: I've found another tutor, so I won't need you anymore. I hope that's okay. You're cool and all that, it's just that Eugene lives closer to me and you're always so busy.”

“Eugene?” was all he could muster.

“Yeah, from the chess club. Are we all right, Sal? It would mean more free time for you.” Robin's smile was crooked, like she couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

“Whatever, Robin. Do what you want.” Sal looked past her. He turned his attention back to the drinking fountain. When he finished drinking water, Robin was gone.

Rosie was leaning against the wall across from him. “That was painful to watch.

“Look at it this way, Sal. The only thing you and Robin have in common is breathing.”

“I knew I could count on your support, Rosie.”

“I suppose I am a cheerleader—a cheerleader from Hell. Now, come on: we don't want to be late for computer science. Mrs. Schreyer might be disguised as a cat.”

He couldn't concentrate in class. Robin was on his mind the whole time. Why did he care? Why did it bother him that Robin had found another tutor? There would be no more Wednesdays to look forward to.

Suddenly, his computer started to blink, and then the screen turned all stacky. What the hell? Did someone hack his computer?

A message appeared on the screen.

Hello Sal.

I have been following you for a long time, and I must say that I am impressed. You have used your talents well.

Who is this? Sal typed.

Humans are such losers, are they not? So ill-mannered and weak, but this is not news to you. You exploit these weaknesses so well.

Oh, well. Mrs. Schreyer is growing suspicious.

The computer stopped its blinking and went back to normal. Sal looked around the room, but everyone was busy. No one seemed to have noticed anything. Was he going crazy?

His clothes felt sticky on his skin, and his black hair felt glued to his face.

The newbie from the hallway smiled at him from across the room. Her mouth turned into a wide Cheshire grin, as if she'd intended to eat him up rather than say, hello. He hadn't noticed her until then, and he forgot about the message on the computer for a moment.

The bell sounded, and the blushing newbie handed Sal a piece of paper. Sal ran his fingers over her hers as he took the note "Call me!" she said, giggling as she rushed out of the room.

"Let's go, Romeo. I'm hungry." Rosie pulled him by his arm. "What's up with you, anyway? I thought you had a policy of never dating anyone from your own backyard."

"I did. I mean, I do." He felt a little foggy as they made their way to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria, also known as Chow Hall, was run by a group of ex-convicts, strictly supervised by Manfred Stone, an ex-marine; it was part of some government program. It involved prisoners who'd committed fraud, petty theft, and other sorts of similar crimes. There weren't any Ted Bundys, Charles Mansons, or Al Capones—they served as a warning for students to stay on the right path in life, but they also showed them it was never too late to change.

Manfred was one hundred and ninety centimeters tall and buff to the point of breaking through his t-shirt. He was also the undisputed king of lunchroom monitoring. Manfred was responsible for monitoring student behavior during meal service. He managed the cleanliness of the cafeteria with perfection and assisted with the flow of meal service. Manfred took his work dead seriously, and any abnormalities were immediately reported to Principal Johnson. Law and order prevailed in the school cafeteria; Manfred was not a man to be trifled with.

The fact that he was also a former mixed martial arts fighter and had shown himself more than capable of breaking up any fight, killed any shred of doubt that peace must be maintained in the cafeteria.

The food was excellent, and the kitchen and cafeteria were cleaner than a priest on a Sunday. The aroma was strangely pleasant, with a hint of lavender mixed with whatever was cooking that day, be it breakfast or lunch.

A huge sign on the wall welcomed students as they entered the cafeteria:

IT IS A GREAT DAY TO BE A FALCON

FOCUSED

ACADEMIC

LOYAL

CLEVER

OPEN-MINDED

NEIGHBORLY

The cafeteria had been designed with healthy eating habits in mind and with the goal of creating an atmosphere where students would want to eat. Menu boards were scattered about on the tables and posted on the walls. Health-inspired banners depicting nutritional food items and food art sent a clear message: you are what you eat.

When the students entered, their chatter and excited laughter filled the building as they sat at their tables for lunch. Sal sat at his custom-made table and chair and Rosie sat at the table next to him. Within minutes, Jack joined them.

“Are you stalking us?” Rosie uttered as he sat down.

“I’m not a stalker—I’m an unpaid investigator. You’re always so negative, Rosie.”

“Before you judge me, be sure you Google yourself, nerd.”

“Oh Rosie, you do know we prefer the term intellectual badass?”

“Are you on drugs? Because your self-image is way out of proportion.”

“Those who don’t know me think I’m on drugs. Those who know me think I should be.”

They stopped bickering long enough to watch Sal scout the cafeteria, looking at each other and shaking their heads. Jack and Rosie had always quarreled with one another, but they always seemed to know what the other was thinking.

Jack grabbed the menu from the table. “Come on—let’s get in line for pasta.”

“Or, God forbid, some salad.” Rosie added.

While Sal stood in the queue for his plate of pasta Bolognese, he heard a commotion at the back of the cafeteria. He recognized Carl’s voice.

“I’m not a proctologist, but I sure know an asshole when I see one.”

He was standing face-to-face with Alan Hanson, quarterback on the football team. Alan was known for his powerful build and hard-played defense.

Carl pushed Alan—hard.

Sal sprinted toward his brother with Manfred racing right behind him. “Williams, stop that, right now,” Manfred commanded. The cafeteria went still, and everyone followed the scene playing out before them with great anticipation.

These kinds of outbursts were rare. Sal could practically sense people betting on the outcome.

Sal and Manfred reached the brawlers before anything more violent could break out.

“You should keep him on a leash, Sal. Your brother's crazy.” Alan sat back down at the table, and Carl retreated to the cafeteria door before Manfred got to him.

Sal followed Carl out into the hall. “Carl, wait!”

“Leave me alone, Sal.” He reached the end of the hall, angrily pushed the door open, and disappeared through it.

Sal reentered the cafeteria, staring into the faces of a lot of curious people, trying to connect the dots, looking every bit like a pop-eyed toy in a claw machine. He raised his hand and said, “Show’s over, folks.” Manfred’s eyes fixed on him like they’d rusted into place. His glare seemed to suck something out of Sal, and it was the only message he needed.

Sal emptied his tray and walked outside. It wasn’t the time to settle the score with Manfred. Ever since Manfred had caught him in the cafeteria with the pizza delivery guy, he’d disliked him. Sal had crossed the line, and Manfred wasn’t one to forget it.

He crashed on a bench outside, his mind slipping back in time.

Sal had been excused from Mr. Mayer’s class after he’d forgotten to switch his phone off during class. Mr. Mayer's judgment had fallen promptly: go see the guidance counselor. Failing yet again to do what he'd been told, he headed to the cafeteria to see if he could get some free food.

The cafeteria should've been empty, but it wasn't. An insecure pizza delivery guy was trotting around the room, waiting to get paid for his delivery of ten pizzas. He looked at Sal with eyes expressing relief.

"I'm looking for a Manfred Stone. I have a delivery for him." The guy pointed to the stack of pizzas on the counter.

There was purity about him. A naivety.

Sal smiled and walked closer. "I think you've been pranked. Manfred Stone would never order ten pizzas. In his world, carbs and fat are pure evil."

The guy's eyes darted back to the pizzas. "What am I going to do?"

"Don't look so sad," Sal said with a smile. "I'll get your money."

"Really? Thank you. My boss will be really pissed if I come back without money."

"Don't I know you?" Sal asked with friendly interest. "Didn't you graduate from Strong Edge High last year?"

"I did." The pizza guy looked at his shoes. "I remember you, too."

Sal stepped closer. Something inside him couldn't resist. It was as if a part of him was playing a game. He touched the guy's hand lightly and leaned in close. The guy didn't move, but he closed his eyes as Sal leaned in for the kiss.

In the same moment, in came Manfred. He barged through the door like some warhorse and started to yell about deviant behavior and school rules. The incident turned into a greater ruckus when Manfred, feeling horribly violated, called Principal Johnson to the "scene of the crime."

Sal played it cool and claimed that he'd merely tried to help a fellow man in need.

The pizza guy got paid, and Sal managed to charm his way out of the situation, claiming he'd taken a shortcut through the cafeteria. Principal Johnson turned on his heel with Manfred on his tail like a lapdog, determined to resolve the mystery of the prank pizzas.

"I'll see you later, okay?" Sal said when the pizza guy started to leave. His mouth broke into a flirtatious smile.

The pizza guy barely nodded, but then he looked at Sal with passion in his eyes. He seemed to ponder the situation for a second; his breath shook when he moved back to Sal. The kiss was short but intense.

The pizza guy hurried out the door, and Sal licked his lips.

When the school bell woke him from his daydream, he wasn't sure how long he'd been lost in thought. The poor guy had been easy to tease. He'd seen him lurking by the school one time, but never again. Perhaps the situation should have filled him with guilt, but it didn't. Did that make him a selfish dick?

Basketball practice was going to be hard that day, not because of the heat, but because his head was especially infected with thoughts and voices, and he feared he wouldn't be able to concentrate. Then, of course, he thought of Carl. What the hell was going on? What had caused him to go through the roof like that? Hadn't he realized that when you took on Alan, you took on the entire football team?

Sal went over to the gymnasium and into the locker room. It smelled like feet. He sat for a moment on the bench. His teammates would be joining him soon, and his quiet break would soon be over.

Go Falcons.

Sal was respected by teammates as well as his opponents. He worked hard and always played fair. Sal always cheered his teammates on and thanked his opponents for a good game—he felt his opponents helped him train harder to become a better athlete.

Practice turned out to be as tough as he'd feared. The ball hit him several times in the face, and he got a nosebleed. He wasn't able to put the ball in the net. Not once.

It felt like he couldn't breathe. Coach Heffernan patted him on the shoulder. He, like everyone at the school, had known about the incident with Carl in the cafeteria. "Get it out of your system, Sal," he said. "We need you on Friday."

As his teammates showered, Sal sat in the spectators' seating and wiped the blood from his face. He calmed himself down and felt his heart doing the same. Sal picked up a basketball and shot a few hoops. The ball went straight through the net, and he felt his body relax like it usually did when he played basketball.

He danced around with the ball and did every trick he knew, totally in control. He was in a state of flow, a state of happiness, his worries and concerns drifted away, and he lost track of time. He was so completely absorbed that he didn't notice when the person silently entered the gymnasium.

Sal played until his body craved water, so he heeded the call. He didn't want to pull a Marshall Hazlitt—Marshall Hazlitt was the school mascot. Once, at a game, he over-exerted himself as he used his body language to perform, entertain, and connect with the spectators, overheated in his costume, and had to be taken to the hospital.

He wiped his forehead and walked to the drinking fountain next to the spectators' seats. The cold water felt nice against his warm lips, and he felt better, so he went into the locker room, got undressed, and took a shower. The water was a blessing on his overheated body. The cold tiles felt cool against his heated soles. He put his hands against the wall for a moment and closed his eyes. Sal couldn't cope with the thought of getting dressed again, so he stayed like that for a while.

The buzz of the fluorescents stopped. Limited light from the small windows in the locker room peeked inside. Sal turned the water off, wrapped a towel around his waist, walked out of the shower room, and into the locker room.

He flipped the switch a few times, assuming the power was out because the light refused to come on.

Sal opened his locker and was pulling out his clothes when he heard a sound. He froze.

Were the guys playing a prank on him?

He walked toward the door leading out to the hall. "Come on, guys. Turn the power back on," Sal yelled. He stopped when he saw the tall figure watching him in the mirror.

The face watching him was all dark, hidden away in a green hooded sweatshirt.

Sal turned around slowly. "What do you want?" he said, try to remain calm. As he observed his opponent, he tried to understand his aggression and where it might have come from.

"To see if you really are a wizard, Harry," a deep voice replied.

"Do I know you? Did I somehow offend you? If I did, I apologize!"

Sal said, trying to talk the fight down. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong, but he wasn't sure, and he preferred to avoid a physical altercation.

The intruder laughed out loud. “You are smooth, Sal. I just want to see what you got.”

“You know my name!” Sal said, alarmed.

The intruder shrugged his shoulders.

Sal automatically put himself in a defensive position, putting his non-dominant leg forward and pointing outward. He crouched so that his center of gravity would be lower. He closed his front fist and blocked his face, keeping his balance.

The intruder began to charge. Sal brought his back leg and shoulder forward and turned his body one hundred and eighty degrees. With the momentum his body created, he lifted his back leg up and straightened his knee, ready to deliver the blow. Sal hit his opponent hard in the gut. The guy staggered for a minute—he clearly hadn’t expected the blow. He looked puzzled, but not defeated. He snorted, aggravated, and prepared himself for another attack.

Sal jumped to the side and ran between the lockers to the other end of the locker room in an effort to create some space between them.

Was the guy there to kill him?

His foot stumbled upon something hard. Sal glanced down and saw a basketball. He quickly picked it up.

When his attacker appeared before him, Sal threw the ball as hard as he could against his face.

BAM!

The guy put a hand to his face, trembling before he turned to make his way to the exit.

Sal jumped the guy from behind, and the guy fell over. They struggled for a minute as Sal tried to reveal his opponent's face until the guy made a gesture with his right hand. A powerful energy made Sal fly backward, slamming into one of the lockers, hard.

Everything went black, and his opponent fled.

10

He woke up to someone pouring cold water on his face.

“What the hell happened, dude? I've called and texted you a trillion times.

“Are you okay?” Jack helped Sal to a seated position.

“Did you and the locker have a disagreement?” The dent in the blue metal could not be denied.

“I slipped,” Sal lied. “The floor was wet.” He'd never lied to Jack before.

“Hmm...” Jack wasn't convinced.

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“The music store. I broke my guitar, remember? I couldn't find you, so I figured you'd be here.”

“Right. Sorry. It's been a strange day.”

“Yeah, sorry, dude. Rosie told me about Robin, but I think you dodged a bullet.”

Sal was dizzy. “I need something to drink.”

“I'll get you something to drink if you promise to cover up.” Jack got up, found a water bottle, and went to a sink.

Sal gazed upon himself and realized what Jack had meant. In the heat of the fight, he'd dropped his towel, leaving him completely naked on the floor.

“I haven't seen you naked in like ten years. Not since the kiddie pool in my backyard.

“You've grown, dude.”

Sal put the water to his lips and drank with greed, as if he hadn't had a sip of water for days.

“Come on. Get up,” Jack said. “If someone walks in and finds us like this, they'll think I've finally succumbed to your charm and good looks.”

Sal got to his feet and started to get dressed. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“No worries. It's what friends are for,” Jack replied. “But maybe, sometime, you'll tell me what the hell really happened in here?”

Sal bowed his head in shame.

Jack wanted Sal to see a doctor. His face was swollen from the many encounters with the basketball, his nose looked bloody, and his swan dive into the locker couldn't have felt good. Sal refused. The doctor would only call his parents, and his mother would get in her car and risk her fellow citizens' lives to get to him. She'd cry and get worried. Besides, she was herself a doctor. At home, it was easier to avoid the panic.

They walked to the minibus, got in, and drove toward Main Street, with all its cafes, trendy restaurants, shops, and welcoming neighborhood vibe. None of them said anything for a while, so Sal decided to break the silence.

“I was attacked!”

“By whom?”

“I don't know. I couldn't see his face.”

“Why would anyone want to attack you? You're tall, muscular, and you could charm anyone to death with those eyes.” Jack batted his eyelids.

“Could it be the angry spouse of one of your dates, perhaps?”

“I don't think so. There was something strange about this person. He was wearing a green hoodie—at least, I assumed it was a dude. It sounded like a dude. He was just as tall as me, and it was something he said or did that freaked me out.”

“What did he say?”

“He wanted to know if I really was a wizard, and he called me Harry.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you a wizard?” Jack grinned. “I've often wondered if Slytherin wouldn't be the right place you. You are murderously delightful.”

“He was strong, Jack. Really strong. I need to know who he is.”

“I'm here for you,” Jack said without grinning.

They parked in front of the music shop. Neither Sal nor Jack noticed the stranger in the green hoodie watching them, inspecting their every move. They also didn't notice the blue BMW M3 passing behind them on the street, causing the stranger to leave his position in front of the music shop.

When Sal entered his house, he was met by the pleasant aroma of food. Angel greeted him with great anticipation and a lot of love. Sal took a doggie treat from a bowl on a small table in the hall. The dog sat immediately down and stretched out her paw. “Not only are you clever, but you're also beautiful,” Sal said with a loving voice, gently petted the dog.

The smell of mashed potatoes, steak, corn, and garlic led him to the kitchen where he greeted his mother—he might as well get it over with. Angel followed him.

His mom looked up. “What happened to you, sweetie? Please don't say you've gotten into a fight like your brother.” Sal's heart sank.

So, Principal Johnson had informed them about the incident, just as he'd expected.

“Carl didn't get into any fight. I don't know what they told you. What did *Carl* tell you?”

“He didn't tell me a damn thing. He's hiding in the basement.” She sighed.

His dad and the twins came into the kitchen. “What happened to you?”

His father surveyed him closely.

“Just basketball practice. The heat made it impossible for me to concentrate.”

“Let me look at you,” his father insisted.

“Really, I'm fine, Dad. I just got the wind knocked out of me.”

“You look like someone who's taken quite a beating. Getting a concussion is no joke.”

Sal was in for it, now. He followed his father to his office.

“What's your name? What's the date? How old are you?”

Sal answered all of his questions correctly.

“Do you have a headache? Do you feel lightheaded?”

Sal answered everything with a no.

His father cleaned his wounds, found a stethoscope, and examined his heartbeat.

“Okay, then. You seem fine.” His father put the stethoscope down.

“But take it easy with basketball. Maybe you should skip tomorrow's practice.”

Sal nodded.

Both of his parents were good doctors. They'd always been respected and revered by their patients and colleagues, treating people with humor and love as well as medicine, and they never judged any of their patients. His mother had taken on alternative medicine as well, treating people with things like acupuncture, beneficial healing from plants, and reflexology.

Sal rose from his chair. “Thank you, doctor.”

“Let's eat.”

Carl was absent from the dinner table. The rest of the family ate more or less in silence. Sal knew what was up. His mother's voice was so clear inside his head.

What had she done wrong?

Had she not given the boy enough love and attention?

Had she devoted too much of her time to her work?

She was in a terrible state of mind.

“It's not your fault, Mom.” Sal looked directly at his mother. “You've always been there for us with love and support.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“He's just going through a rough time right now, graduating from high school and all that.”

A dark shadow crept over her face, and she tried to bury something deep at the back of her mind.

Sal was puzzled. He'd never experienced something like that before. It directed his attention to the unspoken.

He finished his meal, helped clear the dishes, and went up to his room where he sat in silence, watching the *X-Files* poster on his wall. The truth was out there. The truth was all that mattered, right? If that was the case, why did it feel like his mother was trying to bury it?

His phone made a noise, telling him he'd received an SMS. He unlocked it to find a message from an unknown number:

You might be a wizard, after all. I hope I didn't scare you too much, but we had to know.

Who the hell were "we"?

Who was after him?

Mondays had never been so exciting. It only made his thirst for knowledge stronger.

When the house became somewhat quiet, Sal sneaked downstairs and into the kitchen. He grabbed a plate, piled on whatever had been left over from dinner, opened the door to the basement, and walked down the wooden stairs.

Carl resided in the basement. He appreciated the comfort and privacy such a place provided. He'd lived there since the age of ten, when he'd had enough of the noisy twins and his parents' watchful eyes.

At first, he'd slept on an old sofa with only a worn blanket as a cover. His parents had tried to keep out by locking the door, but Carl moved into the treehouse instead.

Carl had, on his own, cleaned out the basement and stuffed what had been worth keeping into the attic. It took him all of a weekend.

Later on, Carl and Sal had found furniture in a second-hand shop on Main Street, and the basement began to look almost habitable.

To Carl, the basement was his haven away from the family. He loved Sal immensely, but there was something about him that made Carl push him away. Maybe it was his popularity? Or maybe it was his strange capacity to make the world bend to his every command? Either way, there was something unearthly about Sal that could not be denied. "Hey," Sal said, choosing his words carefully "I brought you food. I missed you at the dinner table."

Carl was on the sofa watching *The Walking Dead*. He turned his head slightly to look at his brother. "Thank you. Just leave it on the table." He sounded cold. Sal chalked it up to not wanting to endure another interrogation about the event in the cafeteria.

Sal looked at the screen to see Daryl Dixon fire an arrow into a zombie's skull. His brother Carl showed a resemblance to the Carl on the show, Carl Grimes, Rick Grimes' son. They had the same shoulder-length brown hair and blue eyes. Like Carl Grimes, Sal had always felt that his brother had seen too much. He didn't know how to explain it better than that.

"Have they reached Terminus yet?" Sal asked, not wanting to leave his brother's side. They used to watch *The Walking Dead* together. It seemed so long ago now.

"Not yet," Carl replied without taking his eyes from the screen.

"Remember when we used to pretend to hunt those bastards together?" Sal pushed on.

"What do you want, Sal? Did Mom send you?"

"No. I just wanted to talk, but I guess you're too busy." Sal turned toward the stairs.

"Come and watch this episode with me." Carl's voice softened.

Sal planted himself in the ugly, green armchair.

"Remember when we brought it home?" Carl pointed to the chair.

"Mom looked like she was going to have a heart attack." They both laughed, then Carl went silent. "What happened to your face?"

"Basketball practice." Sal looked at the floor.

"What are you not telling me? You've never injured yourself this badly during basketball practice."

"I simply couldn't focus today. It must've been the heat."

"Get up, Sal." Carl's voice sounded intimidating.

"What?"

Carl scrutinized his brother. He pulled on his t-shirt with such a rage, he ripped a hole in it, revealing Sal's bruised back. "Who did this to you? Was it Alan?"

Sal shook his head and told Carl about Robin exchanging him for Eugene, the computer message, the SMS, and the attack in the locker room.

"There's something about you, Sal, something that frightens me. Maybe it's time we started to dig deeper."

“I frighten you? But I’m still me.” Sal felt his heart breaking.

“I love you, Sal, but you know things. How do you do that? The truth is out there, remember?”

Sal sighed and smiled. “So, you think I’m a freak, too? That’s okay, I guess.”

“That’s not what I meant, Sal, and you know it.” Carl switched *The Walking Dead* off.

“I’m going to turn eighteen soon, and—God willing—I’m going to graduate from high school. I don’t know where I’m going with my life. Mom and Dad have given up on me, and I feel lost. Do you think any college will accept me?”

“And you, Sal, you see right through me—you always have. Once, that was liberating, but now it’s a burden. I don’t want you to see inside of me and discover what a terrible human being I am.”

Sal clenched his hands around the armrests. “And still, I knew nothing of this. I didn’t even know that you were a terrible person.

“I don’t want to lose you, Carl, but if I risk losing you by staying, I’ll walk away.”

“Don’t go all Shakespeare on me, please, Sal.” Carl laughed, softening the mood. He switched *The Walking Dead* back on.

“Who am I, again?” Sal pointed at the screen.

“I’m Daryl Dixon, and you’re Rick Grimes,” Carl replied.

“Why do you get to be Daryl?”

“Because I’m into nature and stuff.”

Sal laughed. “Yeah, I remember you trying to put up a tent—it looked like a cat chasing its own tail.”

Carl leaned back on the sofa. “Louise is pregnant.” The words had come out of the blue.

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not the father, Sal. I haven’t slept with her.”

Sal was totally caught off guard.

“I went out with her last night, and she insisted I take her to Lover’s Hill. She was really aggressive with me, you know, trying to open my pants and kissing me all over.

“I didn't recognize her—the behavior was so unlike her—and I begged her stop. She started to cry and said she was sorry for trying to trick me. I had no idea what she was talking about, and she told me how she'd been out with Alan Hanson, and how he'd forced himself on her, and now she was pregnant. She wanted me to be the father of her child. Said it would be easier to cope that way. Strangely enough, she'd never really looked in my direction before.

"At least I learned what all the flirty texts were about." Carl bit his finger.

“You know the rest. I went to confront Alan, and it all went to hell. I didn't help Louise, and I sure as hell didn't do any good for myself.”

“I'm sorry, Carl. How *is* Louise?”

“I don't know. She won't return my texts or calls.”

“I guess we both had a shitty day,” Sal said, sounding tired.

“Not as shitty as *that* guy!” Carl nodded at the TV. Sal thought he'd meant some poor human being shredded to pieces by zombies. He hadn't noticed Carl had switched the channel to the news. Apparently, a businessman had been found knifed to death in Serenity Park just an hour ago. Someone had anonymously reported the murder.

Serenity Park was an old, fifty-four-acre park with benches, ornamental trees, flowers year-round, and water fountains. It had roller-blading tracks, basketball courts, jogging tracks, and skateboard basins, and vendors were selling hot dogs, burgers, and ice cream.

Among the slightly green statues, clumps of tall rhododendrons, and old swings, dogs exercised with balls and Frisbees. Next to the playground, where moms watched their young ones at play, enthusiastic Barcelona fans were carrying out a soccer tournament. The park was a happy place. It had served as a venue to many happy times and probably many more to come if bad things didn't become commonplace.

The police were on the lookout for the victim's vehicle, a stolen, blue, BMW M3.

Sal's throat tightened.

Could it be the cat killer's car?

Would he be the next victim?

Sal did not know, but he was sure he would find out.

He spent the rest of the night on the sofa, in the basement with Carl, staring up at the ceiling.

12

Daniel Masterson was the definition of a success story, continually setting the standards of excellence in business and real estate. He was a funny, engaging, insulting, cocky, and vulgar man who used people, especially women, any way he pleased. After growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, he'd managed to graduate from Business College with excellence. After college, he'd worked with a friend, Sam Wallace, on apartment complexes.

Daniel bulldozed his way past every rival. Greed and a lack of moral direction led Daniel and Sam to partner with a large corporation.

They bought a large, dilapidated building and turned it into a hotel.

The project had served to kick-start Masterson's career as a developer around the country. As the leader of a large business, Masterson committed acts that the public might consider evil, he gained the notorious reputation his crimes deserved, but he was never convicted. He'd never directly taken a life, but his evil practices often led to the loss of life. He'd deceived employees and the public while defrauding companies of millions of dollars. His crimes included authorizing the termination of whistleblowers, bribery, fraudulent accounting practices, extortion, and money laundering.

When his friend and partner, Sam Wallace, disappeared without a trace, he had to lie low for a while, but he was eventually able to get back to business.

Daniel Masterson was slick. When shit hit the fan, he simply moved on. His new goal was to build a casino, which had led him to the path of Strong Edge. The project required a significant investment, accurate planning, and good business management. It seemed like a great place to start a new business. The area attracted a lot of tourists every year, and it was very beautiful. It was also a great place to settle down.

He had to check with the city council if the operation of a commercial casino was legal in the area. Daniel needed to raise the capital to start a casino by presenting his business plan to investors. He'd try to convince the local bank, but he preferred private investors.

Daniel would provide them with free stuff. He often provided free gifts, drinks, and free stays at his hotels. The townspeople there seemed dumb, and he believed that after a few years, he'd run everything in that town. All he needed was to tell them what they wanted to hear and manipulate them. It wasn't hard—he'd done it before.

One evening, Masterson found his way to a small watering hole. It was a bar with an old country bar interior, including beer pumps and oak beams. There, he stumbled upon the locals. They didn't seem to care for his grand way of speaking, and they turned their backs on him and laughed—they lacked vision.

He met a pretty woman, named Loretta. She was simple-minded, as were most women, he believed. He bought her drinks and flaunted his money. Women were such gold-diggers.

She took him back to her apartment where he had his way with her. Loretta had struggled at first, but she'd been too intoxicated to fight him for long. He'd left her whimpering on the bed.

Maybe it had been stupid for him to expose himself like that—she might start talking—but he could always rid himself of her later.

He went back to his car to drive back to his hotel room to get a shower and some sleep. The next day, he'd go and put his case before the city council. What Daniel Masterson hadn't realized was that someone was watching him. Someone had followed him and had been watching him ever since he'd passed the music shop on Main Street.

Someone had tracked his devious behavior from the watering hole to his loveless encounter with the woman.

Daniel Masterson went to his blue BMW. Earlier that day, some animal had crossed the road when he was driving. He'd hit the beast and had feared the car paint had suffered damage, but luckily, it hadn't.

He opened the door, and someone grabbed him from behind. A strong arm tightened around his throat. The stranger's breath felt cold upon his skin, and he couldn't move or scream—God knows he tried. The fabric on his attacker's arm was green, and it smelled like honey. It was funny how he noticed something like that, considering his current situation.

His only hope was that someone would show up to rescue him, but the parking lot was, unfortunately, empty. He hoped with all his heart that someone would look through the window and see his misfortune.

“How does it feel to be helpless and begging for mercy?” said a deep, icy whisper. “I know what you are. You are not worthy!”

Daniel felt his eyes fill with tears. If he could only utter a word, he could offer his attacker something, try to reason with him, anything that might get him to loosen his tight grip.

As if his attacker had read his mind, he let go and pushed Daniel up against his car. Daniel couldn't see his face, but it was a tall, strong man, that he was sure of.

The attacker took a step back and gesticulated his hands out at his sides. “Run,” he said.

Daniel's heart was beating so hard, he thought he might suffer a heart attack. The stranger was not joking. He got a hold on himself and began to run as the stranger laughed; the game was on.

He ran like a hunted animal. The black asphalt beneath his feet felt like mud, sucking him into the ground. He was perplexed at his situation, and his panic got the better of him.

Was everyone in the damned town asleep?

He tried to scream, but something hit him hard from behind, and he fell. Daniel felt blood running down his face as a tall creature stepped in front of him, wagging its finger as if reprimanding him. “Tsk, tsk, tsk,” it said.

Daniel scrambled to his feet, and he continued down the street, dizzy from the blow to his head. In the distance, he saw a sign that read Serenity Park. Perhaps he could hide there, in the bushes.

He ran as fast as he could, stumbling as he went along. It was as if his body had refused to obey him. His hope rose when he reached Serenity Park. The park, as it was on most nights, was completely empty. Lamp posts provided minimal light. He found a shrubbery and hid.

Daniel looked around. There, next to some old swings, a large, flowering rhododendron bush seemed like it might serve as sanctuary, so he crept under it and sat totally still. His lungs begged for air, and he tried to fill them. Daniel's body was in survival mode. He was dripping with sweat, and he was scared shitless. He had no idea who his opponent was. He only knew he wasn't kidding around. He wasn't a street punk.

After a while, Daniel's body began to relax. There were no sounds, no talk, and no footsteps to fill the silence. As he listened, a car drove by, but he dared not scream for help.

Someone must have watered the plants earlier because his pants felt wet. Regardless, he decided to sit for a while, and when it was safe, he'd sneak out of the park and leave town.

Little did he know, the bloodhounds had gathered around his hideout. They came closer, snarling with irritation. He suspected they'd hoped for a livelier hunt.

Daniel Masterson never knew what hit him. He was pulled out of his hideout with great force and tossed to the ground. Daniel opened his mouth to say something, but he was silenced by a deep stab with a knife to the chest. Stab came after stab until he lay there, his lifeblood leaking out of him. He'd finally suffered the consequences of his vile actions and in the most ferocious way.

13

Strong Edge was in an uproar the following day. It was a city in fear. Bad things hardly ever occurred there and never murder—there had been that case with Dr. Omar some years back, but he'd been crazy, and everyone had known that.

Now, there had been a murder and in Serenity Park, a place of innocence. Who had been the victim and what could he possibly be guilty of that was worth killing for? And who had reported the murder? Did someone in the town have a guilty conscience?

It had to have been the work of a madman.

A special bureau of investigators was called upon to help with the investigation. Serenity Park was sealed off, and police officers guarded who entered and left. A CSI unit was present to document the crime scene in detail and collect physical evidence. District Attorney Howard Clayton was present, trying to make sense of the mess while talking to Dr. Wedlock, the medical examiner. His cell phone wouldn't stop ringing—the mayor of Strong Edge was on his back.

The people of Strong Edge demanded answers, and a town hall meeting was scheduled.

Sal and Carl both had their reasons for their lack of sleep, and they looked like a couple of wasted zombies. They were both exhausted, but they'd somehow found each other again.

Remarkably enough, Sal wasn't sore from the previous day's events.

Sal followed Carl up the stairs and out into the kitchen. They sat down and gazed at the pancakes in front of them as if they didn't know what to do with them.

Their mom was chatting eagerly on her cell phone. It was about the guy in the park, that much Sal was able to tell. Apparently, the forensic pathologist on the case had called the hospital for assistance, and it was certain one of his parents would be assigned to the case.

“Someone's been watching *The Walking Dead* all night again!” Sal's father gave them a strict look.

“Yeah, and then we got tired of it and called for a couple of escorts,” Carl said without looking up. Sal bit his lip.

“Where did you go, since you needed to be escorted?” one of the twins asked.

“They didn’t go anywhere, and they aren't going anywhere anytime soon.” Sal’s father sounded annoyed.

“You're not out past seven until we've resolved some of this mess.” Sal knew his father wasn't only referring to the murder in the park, but also to Carl’s attitude along with other issues that gave his parents headaches.

“I’ll ride with Sal to school and back today. We’ll stay together, Scout's honor.” Carl made a peace sign with his fingers.

“And you're staying away from Alan Hanson. You're on thin ice.” His father kept at it. Sal sensed Carl’s muscles tighten with anger, and he began to dread the dangerous turn breakfast was taking. To his relief, Carl just sighed.

Sal excused himself and ran upstairs for a quick shower before taking Angel for a quick stroll before school. When he returned to the house, Carl was waiting for him by the minibus, smoking a cigarette.

Oh, yeah—Carl was pissed-off.

Sal let Angel inside the house and returned to Carl and the bus.

“Let’s go hunt some zombies, shall we.” Sal patted his brother on the shoulder.

Carl smiled and put out his cigarette. “Only if I get to be Daryl Dixon!” The traffic was mad as a hatter on their way to Strong Edge High.

“What the hell's going on?” Sal was stressed-out after a Volkswagen nearly hit them at a traffic junction when it ran a red light.

“The murder in the park's making people paranoid,” Carl answered.

“Everyone's driving their kids to school.”

Carl and Sal arrived at the Strong Edge High parking lot thirty minutes after the bell. Despite their being late, there seemed to be people everywhere around the school's perimeter. No one seemed to be in class.

The atmosphere wasn't its usual welcoming one, having been replaced by dark clouds of trembling concern. As Carl and Sal entered the main entrance, the hall, white ceiling, red brick wall, and grey and white checkered floor seemed out of harmony. There were a lot of students talking loudly about the murder in the park. It was a complicated, harrowing, frustrating matter, and it sparked a lot of speculation.

"It's the work of a demon," someone said. "This is the outcome of demonic worship and sacrifices."

"It must have been some sort of wild animal," another person said. "A bear or snake or something."

"Maybe he insulted Manfred Stone," a third one giggled.

"Maybe the dead guy who assassinated JFK and Lee Harvey Oswald came back from the dead to take revenge upon him for being framed for murder," Carl said sarcastically.

Sal was trying to think of something clever to say as Carl sprinted down the hall. He spotted Louise in the distance and couldn't decide if he should follow Carl. In the middle of his indecision, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He hoped it would be Robin, telling him what a big mistake it was to let him go as a tutor. Sal was disappointed when he turned and saw Alan Hanson's ruddy face.

"Hey, Sal, you and me, we're cool and all, but what the hell's up with your brother? Why was he attacking me like that yesterday?" Alan kept talking, but Sal didn't hear a word leaving his rosy lips.

Sal's head filled with images and sounds as if he were watching a movie. It felt like he was in another reality. It was just like the time he and Carl had been playing Think of a Number Between One and One Hundred. They had to take turns thinking of a number, and the other would have to guess it. They'd been in the treehouse, taking a break from hunting zombies. Every time Carl thought of a number, it entered Sal's mind, like a movie rolling over a screen. After guessing the correct number three times in a row, Sal could tell Carl had started to get freaked out.

Sal stopped guessing after that.

"You never slept with her!" Sal said, looking Alan straight in the eyes.

“Uh, what?” Who?” Alan replied, thrown off balance.

“I’m still a virgin.” This, Alan did not say out loud.

“Why would she lie, then?” Sal asked himself.

“Sal, you’re scaring me. What are you talking about? Are you having a stroke or something?”

Sal placed his hands on Alan’s shoulders and gazed at him. “Alan, thank you. I’ll get Carl to apologize to you, but now, I really have to go. You’ve been a really big help.” Sal dashed down the hall, leaving Alan behind.

He found Carl standing in front of the girls’ restroom with a determined look on his face. Some girls were trying to explain to him that Louise wasn’t interested in talking to him, that she wasn’t feeling good. Carl didn’t care. He was patient. Louise had to come out of there sooner or later. Either that, or he’d simply barge in there.

“Carl!” Sal yelled from afar. “It wasn’t him!”

Carl squinted at him, looking dismayed.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Sal? Are you liquored up?” He held up his hand. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

Sal lowered his voice when he noticed the attention they were attracting. “Carl, something’s off. We seriously need to talk. Let’s head to The Diner.”

“Are you breaking up with me, Sal?” Carl looked at Sal in amazement.

“Okay, Sal,” Carl said mildly, probably having clued into the fact that Sal wasn’t joking around.

Principal Johnson’s voice echoes from the hallway speaker as they started to walk to the main entrance: “All students must find their way to the school assembly...I repeat: all students must find their way to the school assembly, and *now*, please.”

As if by a magic touch, the hallway began to empty. They looked like zombies staggering toward fresh meat as the hall took the form of a one way street with Sal and Carl going in the wrong direction.

When they made it to the main entrance, a herculean individual stepped out in front of them. “Perhaps you two are hard of hearing, but the principal told all of the students to go to the school assembly.”

Manfred looked at them disapprovingly.

“If you’re here, then who’s guarding the prisoners?” Carl asked in a neutral tone of voice.

Manfred looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon. Even Carl knew not to push his luck with him, so Sal and he marched down to the school assembly with Manfred behind them, looking like a cartoon rooster standing over his chickens.

The thousand-seat assembly room was situated at the heart of the school and had set the stage for countless events from plays and talent shows to orchestral performances. It was large and bright with a stage at one end.

As they entered, Manfred started to round up students like a border collie would round up sheep.

Principal Johnson stood on stage, waiting patiently for everyone to be seated. The rest of the faculty were scattered around the room, rubbing their hands nervously together. It was hot as hell in the school assembly, and students waved school books in front of their faces with the hope of generating a cold breeze. The atmosphere was thick with excitement and confusion. Some students were laughing while others sat still, staring out into nothingness as if Hell were a destination finally tangible.

Jack signaled from across the room for Sal to join him, looking like a bird trying to take off from the ground. “The Williams brothers!” He smiled and hugged them when they went over to him.

“It’s like a *Scream* movie with all the mayhem,” Jack continued.

It wasn’t long before Rosie sat down next to them. “Oh, God, we’re not here for some talent show, are we? I still have sleepless nights from the one last year. I can still hear Nancy Freeman yodel ‘Let it go’ from *Frozen*. That song haunts my dreams.”

“It wasn’t pretty, that’s for sure. There are more pleasant ways to damage one’s hearing,” Jack responded.

Principal Johnson tapped the microphone, and the school's guidance counselors showed up behind him like a couple of vultures creeping up a dead carcass, awaiting their turn to feed. Mr. Markham and Mrs. Jackson were their names. Their aliases were Mr. and Mrs. Mackey, even though they bore no resemblance to the guy from *South Park*. Mr. Markham was a tall, slender guy in his forties, with reading glasses and a penchant for football. He always wore a suit to work. Mrs. Jackson was an Afro-American woman in her thirties with a penchant for yoga and green smoothies. She wore all sorts of colorful clothes.

Mr. and Mrs. Mackey helped students assess their skills and interests, in addition to helping them develop academic and career goals. They typically evaluated students through counseling sessions, interviews, and aptitude tests. They also helped students with social and behavioral problems. For Mr. and Mrs. Mackey, it was reward enough when they observed students' accomplishments.

They loved their jobs.

Carl and Sal had sat across from them several times. Carl had to because it was believed he had social and behavioral problems. Sal had to because he was intelligent and seemed to have a *Fuck Boy's* attitude when it came to the people around him. The bottom line was that both he and Carl needed tabs kept on them. How the hell they came up with that crap was oblivious to Sal, but their behavior was not healthy, according to the Mackeys.

A typical counseling session consisted of a thirty-minute monologue about responsibility in life and why Alex DeLarge, from *A Clockwork Orange*, was a lousy, unacceptable fella, and how important it was to make healthy decisions in life. This was followed by an aptitude and personality test to get a clear picture of them as individuals.

Carl was diagnosed with a Commander personality. Commanders were natural-born leaders. If there's anything Commanders love, it's a good challenge, big or small. Emotional expression isn't the strong suit of this personality.

Sal turned out to have a Campaigner personality. Campaigners were true free spirits. They're often the lives of the party. Campaigners are fiercely independent. Much more than stability and security, they crave creativity and freedom.

The brothers weren't sure about their diagnoses, but whatever made the Mackeys happy.

It wasn't until a more urgent matter—like Hank Robson's obesity or Selma Wilkins' anger toward men—surfaced that the Mackeys released their iron lock on Sal and Carl. Those counselor clowns wouldn't survive a zombie apocalypse, that was for sure. Or, as Jack had pointed out; they could put an end to the apocalypse by analyzing everyone to death.

Principal Johnson got straight to the point: the murder in Serenity Park. "This is not some teen-slasher movie," he said with great authority in his voice, "but we do need to take some precautions.

"I am sure this is a one-time happening, and that the police will apprehend whoever is responsible and things will get back to normal. "Always stay together after dark and never walk home alone. "Always tell someone where you are going.

"Report anything out of the ordinary to the school, your parents or the police.

"Strong Edge is a great town, and we will do whatever we can to keep it safe. If you see something, say something."

The Mackeys nodded as he went along.

"If any of you should need help in processing the matter, the school guidance counselors are available. Extra staff will be provided, if necessary.

"You can take the rest of the day off to do what's necessary to get control of your thoughts and emotions."

"What about the basketball game on Friday?" someone yelled.

"The faculty and I will discuss the matter later today," Principal Johnson said with a tone indicating he'd have a stressful day ahead of him.

“Wow, this was a waste of time,” Rosie said as they prepared to leave the school assembly.

“High school is a failed experiment when it comes to preparing young people for the adult world,” Jack responded.

“Carl and I are headed for The Diner—come with us,” Sal told Rosie and Jack.

“I thought you'd never ask,” Jack said happily.

“Well, I was planning on robbing the gas station with a chainsaw and only a flowerpot to conceal my identity, but okay,” Rosie said, studying her nails.

They hurried out to the minibus before they could fall prey to the Mackeys.

The Diner was a nice fit with the all-night, deep-fried, coffee-loving food culture the small posse embodied. Be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner, The Diner was always serving it up fresh and hot! Whether you preferred a table or a booth, there was always room for you.

It was a classic fifties diner atmosphere, serving delicious home-style meals, ice cream sodas, floats, and shakes, with a super-friendly staff always ready to greet you whether you preferred dine-in or takeout.

The aroma of gravy over creamy mashed potatoes lingered in the air, and the jukebox was humming in the back as the foursome entered.

They placed themselves in a booth and studied the menus for a while before Carl remembered: “Sal, what was it that you were rambling about at school? It wasn't him?”

Sal leaned forward and checked out The Diner to see if anyone was watching them.

“I said, it wasn't Alan. He's never been with a girl like that.”

Rosie and Jack looked at each other, and a smirk materialized on Carl's face.

The party was speechless. It was almost like that time in English class when Marie Lays proudly proclaimed that she could almost tell if a movie didn't use real dinosaurs.

Carl cleared his throat. “And how do you know this, Sal?”

“He told me.”

“He just flat out told you?”

They were interrupted by the waitress, who had come to take their order. When she left, Jack and Rosie were all ears.

“It's like that time with Aunt Vickie, okay? I just know stuff. They just tell me.” Sal turned and glanced out the window. He felt like he was one of the Black-eyed Children—unwanted.

Sal took a deep breath. “I've always been the odd one out. I'm not like you, and I'm beginning to think I'm not who my parents claim I am.”

“Sal, you’re my brother, and that will never change, but ever since the episode with Aunt Vickie, I knew something was off.” Carl leaned back. “The question is, Sal, do you want to know?”

“I think someone's already trying to tell me. I want to know. I have to.”

“The truth is out there, man,” Jack joined in. “We’ll help you.” Rosie and Carl nodded.

The waitress brought the flabbergasted party its food.

“But if it wasn’t Alan who impregnated Louise, then who? What the hell is going on?”

Rosie and Jack’s eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of their sockets.

“I don’t know, Carl. I guess that’s another mystery to be solved.” Sal took a big bite out of his burger.

“Wow, who would have guessed that Alan Hanson was still a virgin?”

Jack said surprised. “He's always seemed so macho.”

“Well,” Rosie said, “didn’t he utter the sentence, and I quote: 'If a buffalo's a kind of bull, how can you get wings from it?'”

“Or how about: 'It just hit me that Oreo spelled backward is Oreo,’” Jack added.

The party laughed and the tense air dissolved a little.

“But seriously, what do we do about Louise?” Rosie added. “She may be in trouble,”

“I think I'm the last person, she wants to see,” Carl said.

“Maybe we should drive up to her house,” Jack said.

“Great idea. Let’s roll up to her house like the guys from that Queer Eye show, come to the rescue of the poor helpless redhead and give her a make-over. There you go—all done. Now no one will be able to tell you’re with child. That won't leave her scarred for life,” Rosie said resigned.

“Yeah and maybe we could give each other exotic names and call ourselves 'The Fab Four!'” Jack winked at Rosie.

“Rosie's right,” Carl said, jumping in. “We can’t just drive up to her house and demand answers.”

Sal wasn't paying attention to the conversation going on around him. The voices seemed far away. He'd discovered a stranger lurking in The Diner. He didn't mean to stare, but he couldn't help it. The guy in the corner was so handsome, so magnetizing. The stranger's seductive stare and the toothpick in his mouth were perfect. His slouchiness was sexy. His raven black hair was long, wavy, messy and casual. His face was shaped like a diamond, pointy at the top and chin. His eyes were white, almost silver, around the black pupil, and they were fixed on Sal. He was wearing a black suit that nicely complimented his athletic body. The guy smiled a disarming smile at him. If the stranger had asked him to square dance to the tune of *Achy Breaky Heart* right there in the diner, he would have.

Was the guy for real or was he dreaming? He'd been on a lot of dates and flirted with a lot of people, but he'd never experienced anything like that guy before.

Sal felt like he might die if he didn't get to touch him. His attraction to Robin hadn't even been that strong. In fact, it didn't come close.

He was about to get up and leave the table when Carl stopped him.

"Yo, Sal! Is anybody home?" Carl waved a hand in front of his face.

"Are you going with Rosie to Louise's house tomorrow?"

"What?" Sal answered a bit baffled. "I mean, yes. When?"

"Tomorrow after school? What the hell's up with you? Weren't you listening?" Sal detected a bit of tension in Carl's voice.

"I think I know what's up," Rosie said, following the stranger with her eyes as he paid for his meal and walked past them, leaving The Diner.

"Right," Carl said a bit bewildered. "Mom's texted me like a million times, so we should probably go."

The party paid for the food and headed for the minibus. The three others were chatting lively, but Sal didn't participate in the conversation.

Robin had been like a sunbeam inside of him, but now she slowly vanished, receding into the shadows in the back of his mind.

Rosie and Jack went with Sal and Carl back to their house. They had much to discuss. There was the matter of Louise and how to proceed. There was also the story of Sal, and how something was off about him. It was a matter of unspoken truth and the elephant in the room that was now necessary to confront.

When they arrived at their Swiss Avenue home, the foursome greeted Sal and Carl's mother in the kitchen and cuddled with Angel before heading straight into the basement. Sal's mother yelled something about their not mentioning having gone to The Diner after school, but she faded out, sounding like someone had reduced the volume on a radio.

They gathered around the small coffee table and looked at each other like they were bank robbers planning their next move. "Okay— Louise," Carl said firmly. "How the hell do we approach Louise without making her run away screaming?"

"Send Sal in and let him perform his voodoo on her," Jack answered. "What is it that you do, Sal?" Jack asked.

Rosie spoke before he could answer. "What you lack in intelligence, you make up for in stupidity, Jack!"

"Are you hitting on me, girl? You know you catch more flies with honey," Jack pointed a finger at Rosie and winked.

"Guys: stop it! We need to—" Carl cut himself short and went back to Sal. "What is it that you do, Sal?" The rest of the party turned to Sal. A sweat broke out on his forehead.

"I'm not really sure. Information just kind of...floats to me. I just know what people need and want. It's weird, right?" Sal looked at the others in a desperate plea for them to tell them he wasn't crazy.

"Wow! It's like that movie with Mel Gibson, the one where he gains the ability to hear what women are really thinking after an accident," Jack blurted. "Have you guys seen it?"

"I think you're right, Jack," Carl said.

“About what?”

Rosie rolled her eyes.

Carl chuckled and spoke softly. “Sal has the same abilities as Mel only Sal isn’t restricted to only women.”

All of their eyes were locked on Sal.

“Sal—” Carl said, not sure how to continue.

“You want to know about Aunt Vickie,” Sal asked calmly. “It’s like I said: information just floats to me. I don’t know how I do it, and I don’t know how to turn it on or off. I just know what people want to hear, so I say it. I don’t mean to read people, it just happens.

“When Aunt Vickie visited us during Christmas, I could feel her pain. I could feel the chaos inside her head. Our parents have asked her to lie for some reason, and she doesn’t like it. And....” Sal paused for a minute. “He beats her, Carl. The son of a bitch has been using her as a punching bag ever since they were married.”

The party sat spellbound as Sal spoke. They weren’t skeptical, nor did they doubt his words; they all knew better. It was only at that moment the truth finally made its way out.

“Who beats her?” Rosie asked in a quiet voice.

“Ted, her husband. He’s a sick son of a bitch.”

“Why don’t your parents do something?” Jack asked.

“I think my dad gave up on Vickie years ago. They aren’t really close. I think they just don’t know how to go about the issue,” Sal answered.

“I think they had a fucked-up childhood or something.”

“That’s pretty fucked-up right there,” Jack said, slamming his hand down on the coffee table.

“We have to go see her!” Carl said. “Mom and Dad sure as hell aren’t going to spill the beans, but there’s a chance she might. You said it yourself, Sal: she’s tired of lying.”

“She doesn’t like me, Carl,” Sal said with deference.

“I agree with Carl,” Rosie said. “She’s your father’s sister. Your parents claim you get your looks from your dad and Vickie’s father—she’s got to know something.”

“You have to admit that weird shit's started to happen around you, Sal,” Jack said worryingly. “We have to do something.”

“Besides, our parents haven't told the truth so far, why would they begin now?” Carl said bitterly.

Sal sat quietly for a while, completely absorbed in deep thought. He could feel his mother's anxiety in the back of his mind. There was a deep sea of secrets she wasn't yet ready to reveal. Again, with the lies. She probably had reasons, but there was just too much shit unaccounted for.

“Let's do it!” Sal said eagerly.

Carl and Jack bumped their fists together.

“When are we going?” Rosie asked.

“How about this weekend?” Carl replied.

None of them had any objections.

“That settles it,” Carl said. “We'll fire up Sal's minibus. It'll take a couple of hours to drive up there.”

“Yeah, it'll be like a road trip, man,” Jack said.

Rosie sighed. “Oh, God—a couple of hours in the bus with Jack will be like sitting in a locked cage with a drunken buffoon.”

“Don't judge me,” Jack retorted. “I was born to be awesome, not perfect.”

“But first,” Carl said, looking uneasy, “Rosie and Sal will go talk to Louise.”

Rosie and Sal nodded.

“Whatever we can do to help,” Rosie said, looking at Carl.

Sal, too, had an uneasy feeling about Louise. He'd felt it in glimpses before, but he'd always pushed it aside. It wasn't her fault—it was something around her, like a dark shadow.

Rosie rose from the table and got a deck of cards from one of the many cardboard boxes on the basement floor. She picked a card and approached Sal. “What card am I holding up?”

“Queen of spades,” Sal said, tired but without hesitation.

“Shut up!” Rosie put the card down on the table, face-up, revealing the queen of spades.

Jack snatched the deck of cards from Rosie, shuffled them, carefully picked a card, and looked firmly at Sal.

Sal sighed. "Two of hearts."

Jack sent the card sliding across the table; it was the two of hearts. "I got nothing!" Jack said, amazed.

Carl picked a card, gazed at it, and turned to Sal. "Do it again!"

"Jack of hearts," Sal said without excitement.

"Jack of fucking hearts, Sal." Carl took his brother's hand. "You can read minds!" he said in a softer tone. "That's unbelievable! I should have known. It's like that time we played Guess A Number."

"I don't want you to think that I go about reading you all the time," Sal said, trying to defend himself. "Remember how frightened you got when I got all of the numbers right?"

"We don't think any less of you, Sal. We think you're amazing. Look at what you can do," Rosie said, putting her hand on top of his.

"Wow Sal, you're a psychic," Jack said fascinated. "We should put up a hotline and have you answer people's questions. We'd make a fortune."

"Did your mother drop you on your head when you were a baby?"

Rosie said, irritated.

"No, I think it was my father," Jack replied.

"No matter what, we need to find out how you've obtained your skills, Sal. Was it really grandpa, or was it something else?" Carl closed his hand around Sal's shoulder.

Sal could see the goodwill in his brother's face and the compassion beaming from it. The unspoken had become the spoken, but he was still worried, mostly about what his parents might be running from.

Sal awoke the next morning, completely drained of energy and with Jack's feet in his face. They'd ordered pizza and talked all evening. After Rosie had left, the rest of the party switched on the PlayStation. They experienced intense gun battles, dramatic train robberies, bounty hunting, and duels during a time of violent change as John Marston struggled to bury his blood-stained past, one man at a time.

Carl had been fortunate enough to crash on his bed, while Sal had fallen asleep on the couch with Jack.

Sal pushed Jack's feet aside and sat up on the couch. He was exhausted, and he blinked a few times to get fully awake. Sal took his cell phone from the table to look at the time—it was seven am.

He thought for a moment about the night before. It had been strange but wonderful. What was it that Carl had said? Something about being a mind-reader. Was it really mind reading? Maybe he was just very intuitive.

How had he obtained this skill? Who was he? His pounded with all of the questions.

Someone grabbed his hand, pulling him out of his state of mind.

"Dude, I never thought we'd sleep together like this. Half of the population's going to be so jealous of me." Jack smiled at him roguishly.

"I knew we had something special when you appeared before me in your birthday suit at the gym."

"Jack, you'll always be my first," Sal replied without looking at him.

Carl snickered from under the covers of his bed. "Just keep your hands where I can see them."

Feet were stomping overhead, calling out the morning like a rooster to the rising sun.

"Man, I am so not ready for morning yet," Jack said, rubbing his eyes.

"And I need a shower."

“I think we all do. It is the damn heat,” Sal said. “Come on, Jack, I’ll get you a towel.”

“Use bathrooms and shower *after* one or another, please,” Carl yelled after them as they went up the stairs.

Thirty minutes later, the three musketeers—Sal, Carl, and Jack—were sitting at the kitchen table, devouring pancakes. “Did you have a nice night?” Sal’s mother asked.

The threesome looked at each other, not sure how to answer. “Yes, thank you, Mrs. Williams,” Jack finally replied. “Nothing beats video games and pizza.”

Sal felt conflicted inside. He couldn’t tell his parents anything as they probably had their reasons for not telling him anything, but why did there have to be that gap between them? They’d always been a happy family, always sticking together. His parents had never treated him any differently than their other kids—they’d just expand the surrounding space as necessary.

They’d never felt the need to explain or hide his appearance to anyone. He was a Williams—it was that simple.

Angel nuzzled his hand, breaking his line of thought. Sal smiled at the dog and went out into the yard where he tossed a ball around. Angel always made him feel better. Angel wasn’t impressed when Sal tried to fool her by pretending to throw the ball. She started to bark like crazy and galloped to the far end of the yard. Sal stared in the dog’s direction—perhaps a squirrel or hedgehog had taken her attention—but then, out of the corner of his eye, Sal seemed to recognize something.

Sal got up and leaned against the fence door. Angel went over to him and calmed down when she felt Sal’s warm, soothing hand on her head. Sal was almost sure someone in a green sweatshirt had been watching him from afar.

He climbed up onto the fence as his brother’s voice reverberated somewhere from inside the house and down through the yard. “Yo, Sal: we need to go. I don’t want to be late. They’ll make me go see the Mackeys again.”

Sal climbed back down from the fence and gazed one last time out between the bushes and trees where he was sure someone had been watching him. He trotted back through the yard up to the house where Carl was waiting impatiently. Sal made sure Angel had enough to drink, and he followed Carl out to the minibus where Jack was waiting for them.

The heat was turned up pretty high, and it felt as if the minibus was sticking to the melting asphalt as they drove through the neighborhood. Sal didn't wave or blow kisses that morning as his mind was far too occupied. He could feel Carl studying him.

They drove up to the school and Sal parked the minibus. The parking lot looked like a big desert, with people in it who had been walking for hours on a flat, featureless, dangerous, and hot landscape before seeking refuge in the shadows.

Sal, Jack, and Carl stood for a minute by the bus, observing the scene play out in front of them. It was incredible how things could change so much in just one day.

They walked unusually slow, making their way to the school entrance as if they were frightened they might attract unnecessary attention or stand out in the crowd. Their brains struggled to figure out their next move. Carl kept an eye out for Louise, as well. He was devastated by the fact that neither he nor Alan was the father to her baby, but why would she lie?

What the hell was going on?

Sal wasn't the same, either. The fact that he was so obviously different burned a hole in his heart. He had to find someone who possessed the answers to his burning questions.

The trio walked mechanically up the stairs to the main entrance, as if under hypnosis. When they got inside the hall, something flickered at the back of Sal's mind, something pressing desperately to get his attention. He looked around the hall, which was filling up with people who'd rather be elsewhere. A heavy silence settled over him as he concentrated on the light igniting in his mind, and he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. He felt painfully out of place as he moved nearer to one of the windows and away from the traffic in the hall.

That was when Sal noticed him—his green, hooded, faceless attacker, at the far end of the street, across from the school, and his body stiffened.

Sal collected himself, dropped his backpack, and pushed his way through the crowd of students entering the school. He heard Carl behind him, yelling after him to stop.

Like a runner at the sound of the starting gun, Sal darted out the door and down the stairs as fast as his long legs could carry him, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Sal grunted as he followed his target's grueling pace without complaint. He didn't know where he was headed. All he did know was he had to keep running forward, without stopping for anything.

Who the hell was that guy?

As he ran, his mind practically burst with questions, trying to make sense of things. He moved past astonished people and the morning traffic and crossed the street where he'd last seen the guy.

Sal continued his chase downtown in the direction of Serenity Park. It wasn't too long before his eyes spotted his stalker further up the road. The green sweater urged him to go on as he raced along, jumping obstacles as they appeared.

He approached a traffic junction and watched as his target crossed the street as the light switched from green to yellow, and he considered, for a fraction of a second, if the guy was worth risking his neck for before he continued, full speed, through the junction.

The chase was on; he couldn't stop now.

Sweat poured from his face and body, soaking his t-shirt and making his hair stick to his skin. He felt as if he were roasting. As he crossed on the red light, people in the cars stepped hard on their brakes, leaving skid marks behind them. Horns honked loudly, and a bus barely missed him, leaving its passengers startled.

While the world passed by him in a blur of red and yellow lights, Sal continued running without looking back, the sound of his sneakers pounding on the asphalt drowned out by the noise from the frustrated drivers.

Sal kept scanning his surroundings as he kept pace, afraid to lose his target, who ran inside Serenity Park. Sal followed. He felt like a bloodhound with a strong and tenacious tracking instinct, hot on the trail of an escaped prisoner, the gravel crunching beneath his feet. After another few minutes of frantic running, dashing blindly, and avoiding obstacles, he was close to his target. Three more leaps and Sal would be able to tackle him. Salty drops of sweat dripped into his eyes and tasted salty on his lips.

Sal prepared to attack. He was about to strike when he was sent flying in a Superman pose, slamming hard into the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Sal found it difficult to draw breath for what seemed like ages. When he finally gained the ability to breathe, he gazed at his feet and discovered he'd been betrayed by his long shoelaces, which had untied themselves during the chase. He saw his target stop up ahead and writhe with laughter as if in a state of intoxication, the sound of it like nails on a blackboard to Sal's ears.

Sal clenched his fists in anger, tied his shoelaces, and rose to his feet, but by the time he'd gotten up, his target was gone. He hurried to the corner where his target had been taunting him, but there was no sign of him. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He'd had been so close. He rested his head in his hands. Sal was beside himself. He began to walk away from the scene, angry as hell. Sal had to walk all the way back to the high school. The adrenaline and the focus of the hunt had left him fatigued. There was a burning sensation in his throat, growing steadily stronger and harder to ignore as he walked on.

A long, cool draught of water was what he needed; he remembered the drinking fountains in the park. He felt like an idiot as he walked back to the park, searching for water as if it were a wishful dream.

Sal found a drinking fountain near the skate ramp and drank deeply. He felt less tense once his body had been hydrated. Sal wiped his hand across his mouth and gazed at a couple of female joggers passing by him.

He concluded it was time to get back to school. If he was lucky, he could avoid the Mackeys' watchful eyes.

Sal started his way back to the school less angry and more clear-headed. He'd come close this time. It seemed as if he didn't have to look for these people, that they would always find him, and the next time they did, he'd be ready.

The first thing he did when he found himself back at school was to take off his sneakers and let his toes breathe. Then, he got another drink of water. Oddly enough, his backpack was right where he'd left it by the window, and he picked up his phone.

There were a few unanswered calls and text messages.

Carl: What the fuck, Sal? Where are you? Text me when you read this.

Rosie: Carl is worried. Where are you? Are we still going to see Louise?

Jack: I think you broke the Olympic record today. Call your brother.

Unknown: Strong and without fear. See ya later, Sal.

Sal texted his friends and brother, telling them he'd explain things to them later, and that he was going home. He put his phone back into his backpack, put on his sneakers, and was ready to head to the minibus when he stepped out from his hiding spot behind a big plant.

It was Manfred Stone, the king of steroids, as Carl used to say.

"I thought you might return. That's why I asked the other students to leave your bag where it was. I told them I'd keep an eye on it."

"Thanks," Sal said without looking at Manfred, and he turned to leave, which provoked Manfred.

“Your brother wasn’t fond of leaving it there, but I convinced him. We can’t have students just up and leave as they please.”

“I know. Please excuse me.” Sal said brushing him off heading for the exit.

Manfred’s voice changed. It sounded like a stick of dynamite, sizzling as it prepared to go off. “Don’t they teach you any manners in that freak circus you call home?”

Sal dropped his backpack and turned around, looking at Manfred in disbelief. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“Are you deaf as well as ugly? I said your brother's just a poor loser, but you take the cake. You think you have them all fooled but not me. You're nothing but a freak." Manfred snarled more than he spoke.

“In a few years, you and your brother will be working for me in the school cafeteria." Manfred chuckled.

Sal hooked his thumbs into his pants and fixed on the former marine with a glare that could've frozen the Atlantic Ocean. “What do you make an hour, Manfred? Fifteen dollars?” Sal said roughly.

Manfred stood there with hard, staring eyes as they circled one another like trained boxers. “You're way out of line, Williams. I'll take this to Principal Johnson, that you can be sure off. You've broken several school rules.” Manfred seemed to feel as if he had the upper-hand again.

Sal’s mind produced information, subliminal messages, floating back and forth like items on an assembly line. The gateway fully opened, and Sal started to search for weak spots inside of Manfred. His mind found a leak. He went inside and treaded water in a sea of deadly information. “And what, exactly, are you going to tell him?" Sal asked. "Maybe why you were kicked out of the army? Are under-aged strippers still your thing?" Sal spoke carefully and without drama.

Manfred looked as if the rug had been pulled away under him.

Sal’s mind packed words in a powerful punch. “Or how about telling Principal Johnson about your top ten search on Google, number one being: 'Why is my penis so small? How can I make it longer? Thicker?'" For a minute it looked as Manfred had tears in his eyes.

“Your voice makes you insecure. It's a little higher than you'd like for it to be,” Sal continued.

“How do you...?” Manfred made a sound like he was choking.

“And before I forget, you're gay and still in the closet! I wonder if that male prostitute would still be able to recognize you.”

Manfred surrendered. He sat down on a wooden bench, tucked his knees to his chest, put his elbows on his knees, and covered his face with his hands.

With a barely concealed smirk, Sal turned on his heels and walked away.

Check and mate.

Sal was euphoric as he sat in the minibus. What the hell had just happened? Had he just knocked out an ex-marine? The feeling that nothing could go wrong, everyone was awesome, and life was nothing but optimistic filled his entire being. Everything had changed so much since the previous day. He'd changed, and suddenly the world seemed pretty peachy.

His thoughts reached back to the trip to The Diner and the handsome stranger that was looking at him and felt a sudden urge to go and look for him as he turned the bus's engine on. He looked out the rear mirror and was getting ready to back out from the school's parking lot when he saw someone standing behind his bus.

Was that Robin?

Sal stopped the motor from running and stepped out of the bus with a thumping heart. What the hell did she want?

The girl—who hadn't fallen for his charms, unlike many others—was fidgeting where she stood.

"Hey, Sal, how have you been?" she asked nervously. The anxiety sat below her smile, her actions, and her greeting. She seemed as if she was trying to shake it off.

"Hey, Robin, I'm good. How have you been?" He smiled a fake smile, trying to figure out what was going on.

The corners of her lips fought to fall and reveal her true purpose in meeting him there. "I'm good, thanks. Where have you been? Your t-shirt's soaking wet, and everyone saw you run away from school at the speed of light...well, almost." She chuckled.

He was certain she knew he was up to something. "Oh, that!" he said. "I suddenly remembered I had to finish my cottage cheese sculpture, so I had to hurry before it melted away." He hadn't meant to sound sour, but she was fishing for something, and it annoyed him.

"This isn't you, Sal." She looked directly at him.

"What isn't me, Robin? Share your wisdom with me!"

She paused for what felt an eternity, which irritated the hell of Sal—he didn't have all day.

When he'd decided she'd had her chance and hadn't taken it, he said, "Whatever, Robin. I got stuff to do." He waved her off and turned back to the bus.

"I saw you!" she said quietly.

Something boiled deep inside Sal, hot as lava and waiting to explode. He felt himself suppressing a raging sea of anger. Sal saw her eyes flicker as he stepped up in front of her. She looked like someone who had been outgunned. "Please, enlighten me," Sal said, irritated. He could practically smell the fear rolling in over her.

That was when he'd realized that she'd witnessed the incident with Manfred.

The subliminal messages rummaged through his brain, and it was as if a switch had turned on inside of him. He stepped forward with confidence and stared deeply into Robin's eyes. "You haven't seen anything, weed smoker. Your high-society, anti-drug father probably wouldn't like it if he knew his innocent daughter was using substances. It would hurt his reputation. You saw nothing but a friendly chat." Robin blinked a few times as her brain absorbed every detail. She started to walk to the school entrance, but then she stopped, turned around, tilted her head, and smiled a genuine smile at him. "See you later, Sal," she said before walking away.

He stood there, nailed to the ground, gazing after Robin. His encounter with her was like an out-of-body experience—something inside of him had just torn itself loose and taken over. It was him, but not him at the same time.

What was just going on?

How did Robin go from being a concerned citizen to a careless kid in sixty seconds flat?

Sal had never spoken to Robin that way before, but he wasn't sorry.

The perfect façade she'd tried to maintain was fake. Maybe that was what he hadn't been able to break through before?

He couldn't control the information he was given. It was crazy, but he supposed it helped him to see Robin for who she really was.

The hurt of having been turned down by her had lost all meaning.

It was good riddance, as far as he was concerned.

Sal got into the bus to head for home. He was exhausted. As he backed out of the parking spot and geared up to leave school, he saw Coach Heffernan stepping out of the school building. He waved at Sal, encouraging him to stop the bus. "Hey, Sal, Robin told me you were out here. How come aren't you in class?"

"I don't feel so good, so I'm going to get some rest. I have to be ready for the game," Sal answered in a raspy voice.

"Yeah, about that—the school has decided to postpone the game due to safety concerns."

"That sucks, Coach," Sal replied, meaning what he'd said.

Coach Heffernan looked disappointed. He'd worked hard to get the team to the top of the league. He was a great and dedicated coach, spending hours writing up a master practice schedule for each season, making sure each player learned new skills. Coach always made sure each player had a strong foundation on which to build. Everything was taken into consideration, including all the practice days, game days, days off, days when sessions might be doubled, days when practice had to be cut short, and so on.

The coach had always been good to Sal. He never treated him any worse or any better than anyone else on the team. It helped Sal to feel less out of place on the team, despite his obvious, distinct appearance. The coach had quickly discovered his talent for basketball and had shown a lot of patience when teaching Sal the magic of the game and had developed his skills.

"Oh, well, we'll get there. We'll bring the championship back to Strong Edge," Coach said, drumming his fingers on the bus. "You head on home and get some rest, you hear, and I'll inform the school that I sent you home. That way the Mackeys won't put you in the hot seat." He winked at Sal.

Sal snickered. "Thanks, Coach."

He drove home, dropped into his bed, and slept soundly until his phone buzzed. It was Rosie notifying him it was time to go and see Louise. Sal dreaded the task more than anything. Something wasn't right where Louise's pregnancy was concerned.

Sal drove back to school to pick up Rosie and Carl.

They didn't speak.

Sal and Rosie dropped Carl off at home and drove on to the Adler Residence. The ride felt long and tedious, and Sal didn't hear a word Rosie said to him.

As they drove up to the front of Louise's house, Sal felt sick.

Cold sweat triggered by his anxiety left his skin cool and damp. The subliminal messages in his head ran amok to an extent he'd never experienced before. Usually, the subtle messages fed his brain information, and he'd slowly absorb it, but what he was going through now was different in that he was unable to control any of it.

Something was definitely not right.

His stomach shifted uneasily, and he noticed Rosie's hand on his.

"We're here," she said in a strained voice.

As they got out of the car, it was as if time had slowed, and Sal's stomach knotted up.

The house was, what some folk would say, located in the less desirable part of town, in a low-income housing area. The four-bedroom house had a low-pitched, hipped roof, attic dormer, and square porch columns. The house suffered from a lack of attention. Everything about it seemed broken or worn down, and the front door was no exception, and the garden was uncared for, overgrown with weeds and out of control.

As they stepped closer to the front door, Sal felt like he was being torn apart on the inside, pulled in opposite directions, caught between differing needs. He couldn't see straight.

Rosie knocked on the faded front door which threatened to fall over with each knock. When no one answered, Sal sighed in relief and started to walk back to the bus, but when he looked back over his shoulder to check on Rosie, the front door slowly opened.

"What do you want?" a slightly hoarse voice asked.

“I was worried—I mean, *we* were worried, since you weren’t at school today,” Rosie answered calmly.

Rosie got pushed aside when Louise stepped out on the porch. She pointed angrily at Sal and said in a squeaky voice, “He told you, didn’t he! He said he wouldn’t!”

Her eyes shifted to the side and became glazed with a glassy layer of tears, indicating she was screaming for help on the inside.

Sal tried to speak, but he couldn’t. He put one hand on the bus for support.

“Carl likes you, Louise, very much, and he wants to help you,” Rosie said in a tender voice while putting a hand on Louise’s shoulder.

Louise looked so fragile there on the porch. Thoughts seemed to loop around inside her head, and she wobbled backward and fell into a dirty basket chair. “Dad’s missing,” Louise said quietly. “I can’t find him or reach him anywhere.” She put her elbows on her knees and stared down at the ground. “Larten won’t stop crying.”

Rosie sat down in front of her. “We can help you look for him.”

Louise sat up straight as if she’d been stung by the words. Something dark inside of her started to wake up. Fear seemed to materialize inside of her and hover around her body. As she sat there, it was as if she’d stepped out of the shadows.

She became an open book, mirroring all her fears, frustration, and hurt right back at him. It showed distorted fragments from a life so horrible, Sal’s head hurt.

The pictures that came felt endless, and still, they kept ruthlessly coming, diminishing all happiness and bliss.

A stabbing pain went through him, so powerful that he turned to the side and vomited. Sal looked back at Louise in disbelief of what he’d just experienced before the messages wore off, and he slouched forward and passed out on the ground.

Ben Alder awoke to the sound of his own panicked breath. His body felt tingly, and he was dizzy. It felt as if ice were running through his veins. The last thing he remembered was going to the gas station to pump his car. The next thing he knew, he was being grabbed from behind by strong arms and injected with something that was most likely a sedative.

Ben had never, in his adult life, felt truly primal fear, but now he felt it—fear: complete, crippling, and absolute.

He quickly evaluated the situation. Ben seemed to be in some sort of shed and both his hands and feet were tied. The shed smelled moldy. Only a single ray of light slipped through the cracks in the shed. He looked around for something sharp—a knife, a piece of metal—anything with which to free himself. He squirmed around on the ground like a worm trying to escape a fishing hook. Then, the door to the shed was opened, exposing the setting sun.

A tall person wearing a green sweatshirt pulled Ben to his feet. He was yanked from the shed and out onto an open field. Ben didn't recognize his location. He was a couch potato who liked beer, chips, and sports on TV, and he hadn't been out in the wild for years. His wife had left years ago—she'd run off with another man, leaving him with two snotty kids and a mortgage. He worked as a plumber for anyone willing to hire an old drunk. The town often took pity on him because of his two kids, Larten and Louise.

Ben fell hard to the ground, helped by a brutal push from the same man who had pulled him out of the shed.

Four equally tall, pale people with black eyes looked down at him. Ben had never seen anything like them. They looked like extra-terrestrials or those Black-eyed Children from that urban legend, but these were grown men.

“Leave me alone, you freaks,” Ben growled.

“But we just want to play with you,” the green hooded one answered, mocking him. “Isn’t that what you said to your daughter when you had your way with her?” His voice was cold as ice.

“Uh, what do you mean?” Ben mumbled insecurely.

“He’s as dumb as he looks,” one of the other creatures said. He spat at Ben.

The creature with the green sweatshirt put his right foot on top of Ben’s chest. “You are not worthy, Ben Adler—or do you prefer Mr. Child Molester?”

Ben started to cry. “I’m only expressing my love for her, keeping her safe from other men,” he said.

“Are you sure she feels the same way?” a voice answered, full of contempt.

Ben suddenly remembered the businessman who had been found in the park, stabbed to death, and panic ran through his body like a bolt of lightning as he battled against the ropes to escape.

His captors laughed. The sound was so evil that chills went down Ben’s spine and goosebumps formed on his skin.

“What do you say, guys? Should we cut Mr. Adler loose before he pisses himself?” one of the Black-eyes said.

The rest of them clapped and laughed, and Ben was cut loose. “Let the game begin!”

Ben bolted into the woods, hoping the trees would shelter him. He didn’t dare look back. Ben sprinted for a couple of minutes before taking a sharp left turn off the path and into the trees, hoping to lose his pursuers.

It was hard to see anything. Tree branches caught on his clothes like hooks, whipping and scratching his face until he bled. As he ran, his lungs protested in pain while his heart beating hard against his rib cage as if trying to escape.

He needed a break and to get hold of himself, so Ben threw himself on the ground behind a thick trunk, gasping for air.

The best way for anyone or anything to hide in the forest was to keep absolutely still, that much he knew. He wasn't particularly agile, anyway.

Ben listened. A few minutes passed. He heard some snapping twigs behind him, and his eyes examined the area. Everything looked the same under the cover of forest herbs, weeds, and wildflowers.

The woods seemed endless.

Ben picked up a nearby rock for defense.

It became darker outside, which made it easier for him to hide but also more difficult to navigate.

Ben decided to sit tight and wait until his pursuers had given up, but then he felt fingers snatch his hair, and his head bobbed backward. He suddenly remembered the rock in his hand, and he hit whoever had grabbed him as hard as he could. It wasn't very effective, but it was enough to shake his pursuer.

Ben got to his feet and started to move forward as fast as he could. He reached a wide ditch and nearly fell in.

There was no bridge in sight, only a ledge, a foot wide and wet and slippery as black ice. Most certainly, it was never designed to be walked on, but he had to take his chances.

He took a step and began his journey toward the other side when he heard something breaking. It was the unmistakable sound of rotten wood falling apart. There was a sinking feeling at the bottom of his stomach, queasiness, and then he fell into the dark, cold water below him.

Someone was laughing on the shore. "That was too easy!"

Despite the hot weather, the water was had been incredibly cold, and the sudden lowering of his body temperature upon immersion left Ben feeling like he'd been hit by a bus. He felt as if he were being suffocated. Ben felt the need to gasp for air, but he knew that with his head underwater, he'd immediately drown. He felt a ringing and a buzzing in his ears as he tried to swim to the surface, but it was as if something was holding him back.

Ben was beginning to lose consciousness as whatever had been holding him back disappeared, allowing him to surface. When he reached the surface, he gasped for air, and the oxygen filled his desperate lungs, reviving his brain.

He managed to crawl upon the shore where he sat for a while, coughing. Ben even vomited. There was a pain in his chest as he crawled forward on hands and knees, not knowing what else to do. He looked up and saw something in the distance, which might be his salvation.

Ben zigzagged his way over the pasture to its location, hoping to fool his pursuers, shaking them off.

After a terrifying chase through the woods with the killer behind him, he had begun to believe he'd managed to escape the deadly game of cat and mouse.

He vaulted a fence, walked up to a small cabin, and prayed to be let in.

Ben banged on the door. "Please help me!" he cried. The door slowly opened, and one of the Black-eyes stepped out, applauding him.

"I was beginning to think you'd drowned," he said, spiteful.

Ben felt his heart sink.

"Sorry, you lose. You're simply not worthy!" The others came creeping out of the dusky shadows and closed in around him.

Ben Adler suffered the same destiny as Daniel Masterson, when he, too, was stabbed brutally to death.

When Sal woke up, he found himself in a hospital bed in a sparse but functional room. There was an old TV on a table and two chairs in each corner. A curtain separated him from the other people in the room. There were stands for intravenous drips and monitors on his right. The air had an undertone of bleach, which wafted over him. He couldn't make out whether it was day or night.

Someone was moaning somewhere in the room, and Sal decided he'd had enough of the place. He freed himself from the monitor watching over him, killing its beeping which threatened to expose him. He was still wearing his pants, but his t-shirt was absent.

He swung his legs over the bedside and was preparing to leave when someone spoke to him.

"I am impressed," the voice said. It had a calming effect on him. "Not only are you a very skilled mind-hacker and telepath, but you are also an absorber."

Sal inspected his surroundings, trying to figure out where the voice had come from.

"Your skills are evolving fast, but you are untrained. The emotional stress you experienced today was overwhelming, and your mind got overloaded and shut down," the voice continued.

"Where are you?" Sal asked, pulling the curtain hard aside.

"Shhh...not so loud," the voice replied with a laugh. "Can't you feel me?"

Sal eyed the room, sat back down on the bed, and closed his eyes.

"Where are you?" he asked inside his mind. He felt a presence very clearly—and it was pleasant.

When he opened his eyes, a tall man glanced at him from the end of the bed. It was the man he'd seen at The Diner. He was more striking, if that were at all possible, given his breathtaking smile, which was structured—fine yet manly at the same time.

“Where did you come from? Why couldn’t I see you before?” Sal was mystified.

“I blend in wherever I want. It’s my trade,” his visitor answered.

“Trade?”

“Yes. My specialty. I believe your specialty is mind-hacking and the ability to glamour people. Please excuse the vampire terminology; you must be sick of that.

“And I do believe that you can also absorb energy. The tribe is impressed.”

Sal was taken aback. “The tribe? You mean there are more?”

His visitor smiled. “Yes, Sal. You are one of us. Your questions will be answered, but I have to leave now. They are coming.”

“What is your name?”

The man said, “My name is Seth,” and then he vanished like a ghost. As foretold, the door to the room opened and his parents and a physician walked in.

The next moments were a blur to Sal. He was still mesmerized by Seth's image, stuck in his mind. Seth was a stranger, but Sal was infatuated by him.

People around him were talking about stress and physical exhaustion. Someone measured his pulse.

“Well,” the physician said in a high-pitched voice. “You’re fine, Sal. You can go home, but you need to take it easy for a while. It’s a good thing summer’s just around the corner.”

Sal just nodded. He stood up, picked up his t-shirt, and left the room without a sound.

People stared after the tall, young man, leaving the hospital with his half-naked body and no shoes on.

Sal’s parents found their son standing at the entrance, staring out into the night sky. “Where’s my bus?” was all he said when his parents caught up with him.

“It’s back home. It’s parked in the driveway.”

“Sal, are you okay? Everyone's been so worried. The doctors only discharged you because they put you under our care. You need to rest.”
“I'm fine,” he answered. He sounded indifferent.

“Sal, we just want to understand what's going on with you. What happened today? Why did you and Rosie go to see Louise Adler?”
Sal didn't answer. He didn't want to. He just turned his back on his parents and put his t-shirt on. His mother handed him his sneakers without a sound.

Something had changed inside of Sal. He didn't trust his parents anymore. A peculiar feeling of them having overstepped their privileges filled his being. He believed they were truly worried, but he couldn't figure out whether they were worried about him or themselves. His head was quiet and clear, and he wanted to stay in that state of mind for a while.

Questions in need of answers piled up, but his parents only met them with silence. Finally, his parents stopped objecting to his silence, and they led the way to the car.

As they drove home, the silence, closely followed by tension, filled the air.

Sal believed what he was experiencing was, according to philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, a moral moment. He'd discovered his own freedom, his own truth, and his own values that were constructed and not absolute and eternal.

He had to count on himself to find the answers. His parents' norms and values had prevented him from seeking out the truth—*his* truth. He could not abide this anymore.

The information stung a little—his parents never meant him any ill will, but their obstruction to the truth did him no good. This was the moment he chose to be free.

His decision was made in what Sartre, the philosopher, called “good faith,” a decision expressed from an authentic self. He was on a journey toward who he truly was.

After what had seemed like forever, they arrived at home. Sal got out of the car, hugged Carl as he walked past him in the doorway, and went straight to his room. He locked the door, kept the light turned off, and fell into a deep sleep.

A vivid dream of a building burning in a sea of yellow and red while people's cries echoed through the air as they tried to escape the blazing inferno haunted him. Sal tossed in his sleep until a familiar face stepped in to save him—it was Seth. The incredibly handsome Seth took his hand and led him away from the chaos. "Don't be scared, Sal," he said in a light tone. "You chose to be free and seek the truth. Now, let go and claim what's yours.

"It's like opening a door that's floating in the middle of nowhere, and all you have to do is turn the handle, open it, and let yourself sink into it." He touched Sal lightly on the cheek.

Sal wanted to stay in the dream with Seth and consider his words, but he was awoken by an unsettled Carl, banging heavily on the door.

"Wake up, Sal," Carl hissed. "He's fucking dead!" Carl hissed.

Sal sat up straight in bed and rubbed his eyes. He made his way to the door and unlocked it. Carl came crashing in. "What?" Sal sat back on the bed. "Who's dead?"

"Ben Adler, Louise's dad! Someone found the body early this morning in a cabin in the woods.

"What happened yesterday, Sal?" Carl's voice was filled with panic.

"Shit, Carl, I—" Sal was interrupted by a knock on the door. Their mother peeked inside and cleared her throat. "Good morning, Sal," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. What's going on?" Sal was confused.

"Another murder's been committed, and there'll be a town meeting held later today at the school assembly, so will you please watch the twins today?" Their mother looked at her shoes.

"Yeah, sure," Sal answered, hoping she'd go away so he could deal with Carl.

"Thank you," she said and closed the door.

Once the door was shut, Carl was all over Sal like a rash. “I’m not stupid, Sal. I know what happened yesterday was bad. It sent you to the hospital, for God’s sake. Rosie was totally freaked out.”

Sal sighed. “What I experienced was bad—really bad. Ben Adler was a bad man. Are you absolutely sure you want to know?”

“I’m sure. I want to help Louise.” Carl sounded determined.

“He abused her, Carl. I don’t know for how long, but he abused her. The child she’d carrying is his. Ben Adler abused his daughter and got her pregnant. It’s so dark inside Louise. I can’t believe no one knew.” Sal felt sick again.

The words hit Carl like a bombshell. He looked as if all the blood had left his body. His mouth fell open and his eyes filled with shock and disbelief.

“I’m sorry, Carl,” was all Sal could say.

Carl swallowed a couple of times and blinked. Sadness filled his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Sal, but you opened Pandora’s Box. I should’ve been there. I should’ve been there for Louise.”

“None of this is your fault, Carl!” Sal ran a hand through his hair.

“Maybe Ben Adler got what he deserved. What happens to Louise and her brother?”

Carl shook his head. “I suppose they’ll go and live with their mother.” The two brothers sat side by side a stared into nothingness, everything seemed so unreal.

“What did you say to Mom and Dad?” Carl asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Sal answered indifferently. “They think I’m exhausted, which is the truth, just not in the way they think.” He took Carl’s hand and looked him directly in the eyes. “I was so cold toward them. It was cruel, but I don’t trust them, Carl. Am I way off track here?”

Carl clenched Sal’s hand. “No, you’re not,” was all he said.

Sal was relieved. He wasn’t alone in this, and he wasn’t going crazy. Sal decided to tell Carl about Seth. Carl just sat there quietly, taking it all in. “I’m with you, Sal,” he finally said. “All the way.”

City Councilwoman Lori Gilbert was hosting the town-hall discussion featuring police officials and Crime Stoppers. Even the FBI was present to answer specific questions regarding the murders, along with District Attorney Howard Clayton.

The school assembly was at its boiling point.

“We don’t expect these things to happen in a rural community. People don’t lock their doors,” a Strong Edge resident said.

“The fear in my children’s eyes—I don’t know how to take that out of them,” another resident said. “I don’t know what to tell them.”

Chief of Police Michael Henderson stepped up to the microphone.

"Keeping a safe community means developing partnerships between citizens and the department that serves them," he said in a calm voice.

“We strongly believe that by providing crime prevention education to our community, we can help citizens learn how to keep their families, homes, and property safe and at the same time, keep crime and the fear of crime at bay within our city, but we must avoid panic.”

The Chief of Police continued. “Such partnership relies heavily on those citizens who are willing to report crime in their area. We need the help of the whole community. You can call the tips number, call us individually, or call anybody you know to pass the information to us, and we will be glad to go wherever they are. To report a crime, call the police or Crime Stoppers at the number on the flyers which are being handed out. Thank you.”

Small chatter spread amongst the agitated people, but it ceased when a man in an expensive suit stepped up to the microphone. He was Investigator Lou Adams, from the FBI.

"There are similarities—which I can’t discuss—which indicate Ben Adler was the second victim of the same killer as Daniel Masterson. There is a small chance the killer could be someone local, and I’d like to stress that this should turn into a witch-hunt. I suggest a temporary curfew for those under the age of eighteen.”

The investigator went on to describe the scene where the first victim, Mr. Masterson, had been found dead, which he said was horrific and bloody. The victim had been killed Sunday night and found late Monday night. How the bloody rhododendron bush had escaped people's attention for twenty-four hours remained a mystery. The primary crime scene was located in the park. It was suspected that Mr. Masterson had tried to outrun the perpetrators. He'd probably been forced to leave his car at his last known location and attempted to struggle with—and perhaps escape from—the murderer, but had been silenced along the way. The murderer had probably hoped to find cover at Serenity Park.

His throat had been slit to the point of decapitation, and his lungs had been punctured due to several stabs to the chest. No murder weapon had been found.

The victim had been an outsider. He'd announced his trip to Strong Edge to no one, but from his belongings, it seemed he'd been there on business.

They'd identified the victim as Daniel Masterson. He'd been a businessman with a shady reputation—a fraud, and he was bound to have enemies.

The analysis of the crime scene indicated there had been little struggle between the victim and his killers—they believed there had to have been more than one. Stabbings were time-consuming, difficult, messy, and required a strong hand.

They'd traced the anonymous call to a prepaid phone that had been dumped in a trashcan. His car was found by the National Park Rangers, still running. A message, written in the victim's blood, had been left near the dead body, reading "NOT WORTHY." The information about the message would never have been leaked to the public if a citizen hadn't discovered the second victim and the writing on the wall with the same message. Before investigators had been able to prevent it, news of the bloody message had spread like wildfire—a serial killer was on the loose.

Victim number two, Ben Adler, had been found in a cabin. In front of the cabin, a trail of blood had been left as evidence of a crime. There had been blood spattered on the walls. Most gory of all was the writing in blood: "NOT WORTHY!"

He, too, had been stabbed to death, rather brutally. By the looks of it, Ben Adler must have been filling his car with gas when he was snatched by his perpetrators. His car had been left at the gas station, which was puzzling—Daniel Masterson's car had been dumped in the wild, yet Ben Adler's car had been left where he had last been seen. As was the case with Daniel Masterson, no one had seen or heard anything regarding Adler's disappearance. A citizen of Strong Edge had discovered Adler's body, while Daniel Masterson's discovery had been the result of an anonymous tip to the police. As the cases were still under investigation, no more information was available to the public. "It's a challenge for us," Michael Henderson said. "By killing these people, the criminals have challenged us, but we will smoke them out, even if they hide."

Over the course of the investigation concerning victim number one, seventy-five people had been interviewed thus far, including people at the bar, people at the hotel, and the woman, Loretta, with whom Daniel Masterson had gone home, plus people living in the area around Serenity Park, but the case had gone cold. No one had seen or heard anything, oddly enough. How could anyone not notice a crime being committed on an open street?

"He was a bad man, that Masterson, Dr. Williams," Loretta Cornel softly confessed to Sal's mother. "He was a bad man. He had it coming, and I'm not weeping for him."

As for victim number two, the crime was still fresh, and the victim's children were still in shock. They were unavailable for interviews for the time being.

"DNA evidence left behind at the crime scene still needed to be tested." It was a lie, but the crowd didn't need to know how little the police had to go on.

“Small communities are hiring outside patrols to fight crime,” someone in the crowd said, ignoring the investigator. “Maybe we could do the same. Perhaps just for the summer and see how it goes from there.”

The crowd mumbled and nodded in agreement to the idea.

“We could raise some money and paid for it ourselves,” someone said, doing research on his smartphone. “It’s a budget of eighty-six thousand dollars, as far as I can tell. I think it would be money well-spent.”

That spurred a young mother to speak up: “I understand the cost is high, but can we really put a price on our children’s safety?”

A second woman added: “I believe the eighty-six thousand will save a lot of people a lot of money in possible losses. I would definitely feel safer.”

The sessions weren’t meant to enlighten a frightened population, but a way for the authorities to let the criminals know how much they knew. In this case, they didn’t know shit, no matter how hard they tried to convince people otherwise.

Sal was restless. His room wasn't just a mess—it was a dumpster: several pairs of underpants, sweaty t-shirts, a pair of jeans, and several library books formed a pile on the floor. It was as if a hurricane had swirled through the room and tossed everything aside. The only clues the chaos was human-made were the plates, cups, and Pepsi cans scattered about the room.

He barely left his room. Sal hadn't showered. He wore a sweat-stained t-shirt with matching sweatpants. His hair resembled a bird's nest, and if he'd been able to grow facial hair, he would've had a minor beard by now.

The experience at Louise's house and the trip to the hospital had him going crazy. His mother had insisted he stay home from school, and Sal hadn't objected. The terrible vision of how Louise was suffering was tearing him apart. He felt that it served Ben Adler right to meet his end in the brutal way he did; he was a monster.

Then there was the matter of Sal's skills, which were quickly multiplying. He didn't understand any of it.

From where had these "gifts" come and why had there been so many of them?

Then there was Seth, beautiful, amazing Seth.

Sal barely knew him, but he couldn't get him out of his mind.

He had to find him. Sal believed Seth was able to teach him many things.

Seth had skills, too. What was it he'd said?

Something about a "trade," and how he was able to blend in.

They looked alike, Seth and he did. They were both tall and had raven black hair, except Seth's eyes were different.

They were magical.

The icy-blueness generated a warm, fuzzy feeling inside him, simultaneously making his blood boil.

Sal had to find him, but he had a feeling Seth would find him first—he always seemed to.

He heard the front door open and slam closed, and then the door to the basement opened and slammed.

Carl.

He was currently quiet. He'd been low-key at school. He kept to himself and hadn't uttered a word to anyone, not even Jack or Rosie. It wasn't hard to tell to whom Carl's thoughts belonged.

Louise was unknowingly breaking his heart. His eyes were glassy, his skin dry and white. The sorrow he felt had crept into his bones, leaving him unable to speak. His memory of Louise played on his mind over and over again, like a broken record.

The Mackey's had tried to work their voodoo on him, but they'd failed. Carl had nothing to say to them.

Sal had respected Carl's wish for privacy and to grieve on his own. He affected a mask of contentment most days, to keep his parents from asking questions. Carl didn't want them to further interfere with his business. He had to stay strong.

Carl couldn't keep Rosie and Jack at bay for much longer, as they were in it together.

Jack had sent him a text that he'd be playing with his band, *Appropriately Wicked*, on graduation day.

To their parents' great relief and surprise, the school had announced that Carl would be graduating from high school.

Sal hadn't replied back to Jack, and he felt awful about it. Jack was a good friend who deserved a little sunshine in his life. God knew they all deserve a little sunshine. He hadn't spoken to Rosie either since their visit with Louise. Sal hadn't even bothered to ask how she was doing.

Things had calmed down in Strong Edge, thanks to the proposal made at the town hall meeting. Someone had, with the help of concerned citizens, raised fifty percent of the required target to pay for outside help to patrol the city. The money kept coming in to preserve the paradise on Earth which Strong Edge had become for some people. Sal wondered if the initiative would cover the low-income areas or if they'd be on their own in the matter.

Sal dug up his phone from under a pile of dirty laundry and flipped through it to find Jack's number. Just as he was about to press the call button, a quiet knock sounded from the door.

No one had dared enter his premises for the last couple of days, not even to bring him food or offer comfort. He'd made it clear he wanted neither company nor food. Instead, he gathered food during nighttime, like a small mouse, hoping the darkness would conceal him. He just wanted to be left alone.

His mother had tried to get his attention continuously, but his silence had left her defeated. His father had gone right for his guilt buttons. It used to work on him, but not anymore.

The lies had come between him and his parents. Sal felt his father's slow-burning annoyance building to a rage, the anger bubbling up inside him until it exploded like a tea kettle letting off steam.

"Answer me, you spoiled brat!" had come from between his father's lips. Sal had clenched his hands and smirked. "Are you done? I have things to attend to."

It had stopped his father, pretty quickly. The lack of confrontation had left him paralyzed. Sal had felt the questions as they built up inside his father's head. Most of them had been from a medical perspective: was the boy traumatized? Did he need medication? and so forth.

Sal had just crawled back under the covers, and his father left the room in a state of wonder.

His had parents decided to leave him alone for the time being—Sal was obviously suffering from stress and needed time and space.

Sal reached out to the doorknob and opened the door wide enough to see who was out there. He found himself looking into a pair of sad eyes and an awkward toothy smile, molded onto an unhappy face. The corrupted smile made Sal's heart bleed—he was responsible for this.

“Carl, come in.”

His brother kept the strange smile plastered on his face as he entered the room. “She left today, Sal. She stroked my cheek lightly and said she was sorry, then she got into the car and drove away.”

Sal turned his head and gazed out the window to life on the street.

Louise and her younger brother, Larten, had been picked up by their mother and taken away from their cheerless lives. Sal wanted to say something that would make everything better, but he choked up. Tears spilled from his helpless eyes. All pretense of quiet coping was lost. The guilt had built up inside of him, and he finally let out all of the frustrations and sorrow.

“It's all my fault, Carl. I shouldn't have told you about Louise. I made you feel responsible and guilty. To hell with these so-called gifts I have. I don't want them.”

Sal threw a pillow hard against the window in anger. “I've been so fucking selfish. I've made it all about me.” He sat back down on the bed.

Carl sat down beside him. They stayed like that for a while in silence.

Carl finally spoke: “It smells like the inside of a whorehouse in here.”

Sal chuckled. He definitely hadn't expected that. “How do you know what a whorehouse smells like?” He punched his brother lightly on the arm, and they laughed.

“Seriously Sal, it isn't anyone's fault that Ben Adler was a sick bastard.

At least we did something about the situation. At least, we tried to.”

Carl squeezed his arm.

Sal nodded.

“Regarding your...ah, talents? They aren't necessarily bad. You just need to learn how to control them.”

“Thank you, Professor Xavier.” Sal smiled.

Carl folded his arms in front of his chest, so they formed an x. "X-men," he said.

"You do know that I prefer DC Comics, right?"

"Okay, Wonder Boy...or do you prefer Aqua-Sal?"

On that remark, they both laughed, and the energy in the room changed. Being around Carl for even fifteen minutes was better than spending days in the self-absorbed environment Sal had created for himself.

"Go take a shower, Wonder Boy, and I'll call Jack and Rosie and have them meet us at The Diner."

Forty-five minutes later, Carl, Jack, Rosie, and Sal were sitting in The Diner, waiting for their burgers to be served. Their reunion at The Diner after the episode at Louise's house wasn't awkward, nor was the air thick with tension. It was as if they'd picked up where they'd left off the last time they'd visited the place.

They had hugged each other, and Jack, Rosie, and Carl had listened without judgment, never commenting until Sal had finished pouring his heart out with his story of what had gone down at Louise's house. It was that kind of friendship where love, support, and the occasional clever remark was in high supply.

Sal had the threesome move in close together so he could snap a photo with his cell phone.

"So," Jack said with his mouth full of food, addressing Carl, "you're finally graduating from high school. How cool is that?" Jack washed his food down with some lemonade.

"Yes, it's finally here: the moment of truth. After thirteen crazy, idiotic, memorable years with the Mackeys, it's finally time to shake Principal Johnson's hand and grab my ticket to freedom, the piece of paper that will remind me I've accomplished something.

"Fuck high school," Carl said, drowning a French fry in a pool of ketchup. "And it's all thanks to Google, Wikipedia, and copy and paste."

Waves of laughter spread across the table.

"Graduation's the happy occasion when faculty and staff at the school gather to celebrate the achievements of the students, alongside their friends and families," Rosie said, spiritless. "I can't wait to hear your name horribly mispronounced at the ceremony," she continued.

"Graduation: a ritual event where they award you a diploma in the hope you've learned enough to be able to read it," Jack said with a wink. "Just keep moving in case they try to take it back."

“I can almost hear Mr. Mayer: 'I always knew you would barely graduate, Williams.’” Carl spoke in a dry, unfriendly manner, doing a passable impression of Mr. Mayer.

“Graduation day's also my birthday. My eighteenth birthday,” Carl said in a flat voice. “It's kind of freaky—I have no idea of where to go from here.” Carl looked down at the table.

“Well, Appropriately Wicked's playing, right, Jack? Why don't we take it from there?” Sal said, squeezing his brother's shoulder.

“We sure are!” Jack lit up like a Christmas tree. “After the ceremony at Giantsfair.”

It was a tradition for students to go to the Giantsfair amusement park to celebrate the end of the school year.

“Besides, I don't think Mom and Dad will change the locks just yet.”

Sal grinned at his own joke.

“Wow, Sal, you should unplug that joke for sixty seconds and then plug it back in,” Rosie said, laughing and shaking her head.

“By the way, you're both invited to Graduation Open House at my place after the ceremony. It is an 'everyone's invited' party. You can come and go as you please. My mother insisted, and I think she's invited half the town. There'll be lots of food and drink.”

Carl said with a smirk on his face, “We'll head to Giantsfair after.”

Jack held both of his thumbs up in consent, and Rosie nodded.

Graduation day was finally upon them. Carl wasn't impressed that he had to be at school at least two hours before the start of the ceremony to make sure he had enough time to register. Everyone also had to be seated in the hall thirty minutes before the start of the ceremony.

Make sure you leave home in good time. It's a really busy day, and you're guaranteed to get caught up in the excitement!

Carl texted, copying the Mackeys' memo to the student body. What a load of shit.

He did, however, look forward to leaving that godforsaken place. Everyone at school was happy when he arrived. They all looked ready for a magazine photo shoot.

"OMG!" Rosie said with a girly lilt when they met her and Jack at the school entrance. "How do you make your graduation cap stay on, Carl? It looks good, and it doesn't seem to have caused you permanent hat hair."

"Because you know hat hair's basically the worst," Jack added.

Carl thought it was the ugliest hat made in the history of mankind, combined with a gown that looked like a tube sock. Sal giggled beside him.

The ceremony was incredibly boring, and it was hot outside. People in the assembly hall waved brochures in front of their faces in a feeble attempt to stay cool.

To Mr. Mayer's great joy and the regret of everyone else, Strong Edge High School embraced a formal, somber graduation ceremony.

Whooping and hollering had been replaced by applause and serious, bored-looking faces.

Eugene Waldo, the valedictorian and highest-ranking academic student in the graduation class, made the most boring speech ever; time flowed like asphalt.

Sal checked Jack's watch. A whole minute had passed since he'd last checked. He was thirsty and bored. A few rows in front of him, a lady drank greedily from a bottle of water. Sal stared dreamily at the bottle. His head felt hot, and the heat sunk into his black hair. He couldn't wait to break free of the sweltering heat.

Nothing had been left out from the speech: paths through life; what it meant to be on the brink of a new beginning; overcoming obstacles; high dropout rates; economic worries; health problems; classmates as individuals; friends and friendship; and looking back to the early years. He'd even covered memories of high school, including the terrible, recent murders and what might be learned from them. He ended with a big thank you and a heartfelt gratitude for the hard work and support of the teachers. This was followed by a tribute with special recognition for Principal Johnson, topped off with advice for making a difference in life.

The speech had been delivered in monotone in an adenoidal, nasal voice.

Sal actually caught a glimpse of a guy taking a nap during the boring speech, proving Eugene Waldo was the cure for insomnia.

When Eugene finally congratulated his fellow graduates, a collective sigh of relief went through the hall. Cell phones had to be turned off during the ceremony, and everyone fought to resist the urge to text or Google as it unfolded. Everyone also had to remain in their seats until the last of the students had received their diplomas so they'd feel properly acknowledged.

Thankfully, the handing out of diplomas was a quick and orderly process. The faculty made sure no one drowned out the recognition of another. Unlike Eugene Waldo, Principal Johnson's voice sounded out like a foghorn.

At the end of the ceremony, the graduates retreated to *Pomp and Circumstance*, which looked ridiculous. Sal felt like an elephant in a glass store. He smothered a giggle when someone stepped on Eugene Waldo's gown making him trip, causing a domino effect through the row of the students.

The Open House after the ceremony was luxurious. It was expected that more people would show up than those who had been invited. Graduation balloons had been tied to the front porch, indicating that the building was a place of fun, food, and festive atmosphere. The house was sterile clean, with framed photos of Carl, the guest of honor, placed around the room. There was a sign-in book in the front hall for guests to leave a message for the graduate. It also ensured no guest would be forgotten. Crepe paper streamers hung from the ceiling inside the house and the big tent in the backyard which served as the food court.

And there was plenty of food to go around. A huge buffet with a colorful tablecloth and beautifully organized centerpieces was featured in the middle of the tent, with tables and chairs positioned around it. There was a variety of chips and dips, vegetable platters, nuts and fruit, sushi platters, pizza, and soft drinks and tea and coffee. A tall, three-layered chocolate cake and cupcakes topped it all off. A banner over the cake read "Happy 18th Birthday."

Sal's mother had outdone herself. He felt a wave of guilt wash over him like ice in his gut when he realized he'd neglected everyone while he'd wallowed in self-pity.

His family had made sure Carl received the celebration he'd deserved. He figured he could make amends in subtle ways, but a confession was out of the question.

The turnout for the party was unbelievable. People that neither Carl nor Sal knew stood munching by the buffet. It seemed like half of the student body of Strong Edge High was present before they moved on to their own celebrations.

Everyone congratulated Carl and asked Sal if he was feeling better. "Eugene Waldo should receive a gold medal for the most boring speech ever," Rosie said while the foursome was eating chocolate cake at one of the tables in the tent.

"I swear, even the Mackeys were dozing off," Jack said, his mouth full of cake.

“Do you always talk when you're chewing?” Rosie asked Jack. “Talking while chewing makes me appear more powerful. What's the logic behind this theory, you might ask? It's that powerful people often behave as if the rules do not apply to them,” Jack answered with a teasing expression on his face.

“Where do you learn this crap?” Rosie said, annoyed.

“I learned it from you. You always text on your cell phone while we eat,” Jack replied.

“Anyway, I gotta go,” he quickly added before Rosie had the chance to answer. “I gotta head to Giantsfair to set up my gear.”

“We'll come with you, man,” Carl said. “I need to get out of here.”

Rosie and Sal agreed.

Finally, they were able to slip away to Giantsfair to celebrate Carl's birthday, graduation, and the end of the school year on their own.

Sal softly, almost wistfully, opened and held the door for the others to pass. Then, he smiled at his parents, and he walked out the door.

Sal loved the smell of candied popcorn and the thrilling screams from the people riding the roller coasters. He'd been to Giantsfair Amusement Park every summer since he could remember. Like many other parks, Giantsfair had started out as simple picnic grounds and had grown into something spectacular. In the beginning, it was most popular for its boating, swimming, and skating attractions. Later it had become an amusement park, with the addition of rides and booths with almost everything you could possibly desire.

From the slow dances at "Dancer's Square" to the countless hours spent at the arcade hall featuring old-school games like *Street Fighter*, *Mario*, and *Pac Man*, there was something for everyone at Giantsfair. It was the ideal scene for young couples, families, and even those just looking for something to do on a Friday night.

The park was filled with lively music and great spirit, creating a sanctuary away from one's problems and truly transforming the grounds into someplace uplifting.

Giantsfair had a wooden roller coaster, three thousand feet long and ninety-eight feet high, boat rides, carousels, bumper cars, a horror house, and fun houses. A small water park had been recently added, and it quickly became a hot spot for social gatherings for teens youngsters.

The entrance to Giantsfair was adorned with a couple of circus horses, welcoming guests and setting the mood for the thrills to come. There was no absence of excitement as kids waited in line, cotton candy in hand, to go on the rides and take on the dizziness which almost always followed.

Attractions had been introduced to appeal to adults as well. The ride known as “Hellacoaster” was probably the most popular, bringing riders through a funhouse with screaming clowns and plenty of jump-scares. Rumor had it that a young woman had supposedly perished after riding the “Hellacoaster,” which only served to make even more attractive.

People poured into the park like a herd of wildebeests running across the African savannah.

There was a poster nearby that said there would be a special performance by Appropriately Wicked.

“Sal, take my picture,” Jack said, posing in front of it. When they were done, he ran off to the stage area, yelling, “See you guys later,” over his shoulder.

“Life in a herd—you sacrifice individuality for safety in the crowd,” Rosie said, pointing to a group of girls who looked alike, wearing the same hair-do and the same clothing.

Sal turned to look, and he recognized one of the girls as one of the new kids at Strong Edge High. She was the one who had given him her phone number. Sal was a smooth cocktail of confidence, sex appeal, looks, and sweetness. He ran his fingers through his hair, locked eyes with her for several seconds, and then he looked down to the ground. When he looked up, he smiled and seemed more than pleased to see her.

The girls giggled as they went past him and the new girl blushed.

“Oh, my God, he is so hot,” one of the girls whispered to the others.

“Come on, Carl,” Rosy said in a dusty tone, “the struggle bus to Single Central is leaving soon, and I don’t think Sal intends to be on it.”

Carl sighed. “My mail order bride just hasn’t arrived yet, Rosie.”

“I don’t have the courage to tell you guys how much I adore you, so I guess I’ll just keep it to myself,” Sal said, a mischievous smile on his face.

“Would you mind emptying your pockets?” Rosie retorted. “I believe you’ve stolen my heart.” She couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Let’s go, Romeo. I want to try the Hellacoaster before the concert starts,” Carl said, and he started to walk away. Rosie followed. Sal had noticed Carl’s interest in the girls, but something was holding him back.

It was Louise.

Sal was able to smell the guilt on him.

He bit his lip and followed Carl and Rosie.

The Hellacoaster was as epic as ever: the screams, the thrill, the laughing.

The mood had lifted some by the time the three of them were back on the ground. The adrenaline rush and euphoria of the ride was still pumping through their bodies. “Let’s just have a great time today,” Sal said, looking back and forth between Rosie and Carl. “Screw everything else. Let’s this night like we just did on the Hellacoaster, not knowing what’s happening next, besides just having a great time.”

“You’re absolutely right, dude. Let’s stay on the high from the rollercoaster,” Carl said, wearing a big grin. “I’ll be right back.”

“This is like the time he tried to impress Louise with his ice-skating tricks, and he slipped and fell on the ice. He uttered those exact same words: ‘I’ll be right back,’ but he never returned.” Rosie said in a “behind the scene” type of way.

“Yeah, he sat at home with ice on his crotch,” Sal said, trying not to laugh.

“Are you okay, Rosie? I mean, after the whole incident at Louise’s house?” Sal spoke softly. Before she could answer, Carl returned with beer, vodka, and tomato juice.

Rosie smiled and nodded. “Did you rob a liquor store?” Rosie said, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t ask,” Carl said, walking past them, clutching the plastic bag containing the goods. “Come on—there’s too many people here.” They stumbled to a deserted park bench at the far end of the park.

“What will it be: Bloody Marys or a beer?” Carl asked.

“Bloody Mary is me, I suppose, so hit me,” Rosie answered, matter-of-factly.

Carl mixed the vodka with the tomato juice in a paper cup.

“Coming right up.”

“I’ll have a beer, thanks,” Sal said, but he was unsure. He’d never had alcohol before, due to his commitment to basketball.

Carl tossed him a cold can of beer and said, “Let’s board this crazy train,” with a smirk.

Sal took a sip of the beer. When that first drop of bitter, malty drink hit his tongue, his mind and body were taken to another place, one that was wonderful and carefree. The buzz soon hit Sal. His whole body felt warm and cozy. He felt like one giant, vibrating being. Everything seemed to be more exciting than it was a half an hour before. Even the party’s conversations felt more important, and they were significantly louder.

“I’m leaving,” Carl said out of nowhere. “I’m going where she is.”

Sal gazed at Rosie, his intoxicated mind unable to fully comprehend.

“Louise. He means Louise,” Rosie said, blinking a few times.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, of course. You guys are like Romeo and Juliet.” Sal knocked over a vodka bottle and bent swiftly down to pick it up.

“Oh, my God, Sal, control your limbs,” Rosie said, patting Sal on the head. “How many girls have you slept with?”

Sal sat there with a goofy expression on his face. "I don't know."

Rosie stared at Sal disapprovingly. "You're such a slut, Sal. Carl, your brother's a slut," she said drunkenly.

"Don't I know it," Carl answered without paying much attention to the words.

"Are Louise and I really like Romeo and Juliet?"

"Yes, you are. It's you two against the world. I'd wish I had what you two have," Rosie answered reassuringly.

Carl's blue eyes were hidden behind his hair. He held onto his beer as if it were his only anchor. "I...like...love her," he said quietly.

Sal knocked over another bottle in amazement.

Rosie sat petrified, looking at Carl. She sighed and broke the silence.

"For god's sake, Carl, you're worse than Jack."

"Wow, Rosie, what do you say about me when I'm not around?" Carl said, pretending to be hurt."

Rosie ignored him. "Are you for real, Carl?" she asked. "I mean it isn't some sort of infatuation you are experiencing?"

"Maybe, but I don't want a lover in every corner in the world like Sal—I want her."

"You do know I can hear you, right?" Sal said, looking at Rosie and Carl.

Carl rose from the table and took a few steps away from it. He stood with his back turned to Rosie and Sal. "Go and talk to your brother," Rosie mouthed to Sal.

"I would if I could, but it seems that I'm somehow stuck to this table," Sal whispered back. "Man, I'm drunk."

Rosie crawled under the table to survey the damage. Sal's foot had somehow gotten stuck between the table leg and the bench he was sitting on. She yanked his foot free. In the meantime, Jack had shown up next to Carl. He stared inquisitively at the scenery by the table. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Shut up, Jack!" Rosie crawled out from under the table. "You're free, Sal."

Sal tried to stand, but he tumbled away from the table instead. "I'm not as thick as you drunk I am." He laughed hysterically.

Jack chuckled. "I'll say this to all of you: with this much vodka in your system, don't be surprised if you wake up with a Russian accent." He helped Sal up from the ground.

"The girls are beginning to wonder where you are."

"Rosie thinks that I am a slut, Jack."

"Aren't we all, Sal," Jack said. "Aren't we all?"

"Anyway, the concert's beginning soon, so please make your way to the stage." Sal took the beer cans and vodka bottles, put them into the bag in which they'd arrived in, and he tossed the whole thing over the fence surrounding Giantsfair.

"Let's go," he said.

The quartet wandered off in the direction of the concert, Sal with his arm around his brother.

"Let's find Louise," Carl said. "I mean when I'm sober and can walk in a straight line."

Appropriately Wicked performed a killer concert. The best concerts are about more than just the music—they bring an extra level of sense-blasting awesomeness to whatever is happening onstage. And Appropriately Wicked delivered: the music, ambiance, and excitement, all rolled up into one hyped package. There were one hundred, like-minded people, hanging out and enjoying themselves. The concerts gave people a sense of community and connection. People showed off their dance moves, jumping and pumping their fists in the air.

Jack was intense on stage, a real crowd-pleaser. He flirted with the audience, but it was his final act—which had involved dry-humping his instrument and smashing it onstage—that made the crowd go crazy; it was also what would make him a star.

Carl, Rosie, and Sal hit the dance floor, screaming along with about fifty percent of the lyrics.

“I really need to pee,” Sal yelled into Carl’s ear before going off to the restroom to take a leak.

As Sal was washing his hands, he heard some people talking outside: “She’s a fucking whore, that Adler chick. I’ve heard that she got it on with both the football team *and* the swim team,” some punk college boy with a smart mouth said.

Sal’s fists clutched the outer seams of his jeans. Every time the guy opened his mouth, Sal got angrier.

“But with all that experience, I’m sure she gives a mean BJ.” He laughed. The guy he was talking to gave him a high-five.

I see you there, coward, analyzing your next move, Sal’s blurry mind thought as he stepped out of the restroom.

“Hey, you’re Sal Williams, aren’t you? You’re a fucking legend...on the basketball court *and* with the ladies.” The guy stuck his hand out to greet Sal, but he didn’t take it.

Sal took a lurching step forward instead. He felt sick that a lowlife like that guy admired him. The information he got in his head wasn't clear, but it slowly came to him. "Louise is my friend, you prick. You're only mad because she laughed at your tiny dick. That's also why you're still a virgin." Sal grinned. He couldn't even stand properly.

The guy raised his fist. "What did you say?" the guy hissed, angry over the fact that his reputation had taken a severe beating

"Let me spell it for you: V...I...R...G...I...N," Sal said. "It means you haven't had sex with anyone despite you telling people otherwise."

Sal saluted the guy.

A punch came out of the blue, hitting Sal on the chin. He staggered backward, but he didn't fall—Sal made absolutely sure he didn't fall.

"Is that all you got?"

The spry, smirking college guy got ready to launch a second blow, but Sal ducked under it. He knew he wasn't going to win the fight, seeing as he couldn't aim his blows or stand properly.

As Sal was trying to figure out his next move as well as his opponent's, Carl showed up behind him. "What's going on, Sal? What's taking so long?" he said semi-incoherently.

"Well," Sal said, drowsily, "it turns out that this dork is bad-mouthing Louise because he has a small dick—I kid you not."

Sal heard Carl's blood humming in his veins. His chest gently rose and sank with each shallow breath he drew in.

"Careful," Sal warned, "in a minute he's going to pull a knife to defend his hurt ego."

The guy looked confused, but he still reached into his pocket, searching for something. He withdrew a hunting knife, twisting it in the light from the restroom lamps as if testing to see if it could slice up the air. There was something about his expression that said it was the last time he'd allow himself to be mocked.

"What the hell are you doing, Dale?" the guy's friend asked, slightly panicked.

A shadow crept up around them, and Sal felt a strong presence, a powerful presence.

Seth appeared like a mist from behind the college guy, seeming to materialize from nowhere like some Dracula. The guy began to tremble with fear and surprise.

“I suggest you put that knife away and act like a gentleman or I'll break your arm,” Seth warned. He whispered something into his ear which made the guy's eyes open wide. The college guy made a gesture to indicate he'd understood every word and agreed.

Seth took the knife from him, put it in his pocket, and gave the guy a push, sending him in the direction of the exit.

In their drunkenness, Sal and Carl stood like a couple of zombies, unable to really comprehend what was going on. The display began to draw unwanted attention.

“Sal, I don't feel so good,” Carl said, holding a hand on his stomach. He walked over to a lonely bush nearby and emptied the contents of his stomach onto it.

Security approached rapidly, as fighting and drinking weren't allowed in the park, let alone drinking by minors.

Sal scratched his head.

Seth filled a paper cup with water and handed it to Carl. We need to leave," he told them. "You two have raised hell and now Judgment Day's coming." Seth gazed around the place. In one swift move, he lifted Carl up onto his shoulders as if he was light as a feather. He took Sal by the arm and dragged him along with him.

“Stay close, Sal," Seth said. "I'll make sure they don't see us.”

They stopped at a booth selling ice cream and leaned up against it, waiting for a couple of minutes while security paced back and forth, searching the perimeter. Apparently, no one had seen the drunks who had caused the commotion by the restroom. They'd vanished.

Sal had begun to feel ill as well. His stomach churned as if someone was making butter down there. He touched Seth on the shoulder.

“Seth, I'm going to be sick, too.” He stood there, feeling like a little kid.

“Oh, God,” Seth said, wiping his forehead. He hurried across the Giantsfair grounds, carrying Carl and pulling Sal behind him. “See if you can make it to the parking lot, Sal.”

Sal belched and said he would do his best. “What about Rosie and Jack?” he asked, suddenly remembering.

“They're fine, trust me,” Seth said without stopping or slowing his pace. Strangely enough, no one seemed to notice them as they made their way through the chaos of booths, rides, and high school kids running around the park.

Sal felt hazy. His vision was blurry. The lights and the screams seemed to melt together into something surreal, forming a funny-looking painting.

Carl had passed out, happily dreaming with his weight against Seth's shoulder.

Lucky bastard, Sal thought as the nausea in his stomach increased. When they'd reached the Giantsfair parking lot, Sal was no longer able to hold onto whatever was floating around inside him, and he bent over and puked. It felt as if his intestines were coming up alongside the vomit. His throat was sour, and he was dizzy. He was unfortunate enough to have stepped into the goo and almost slipped before a strong hand grabbed him and pulled him away.

“Keys to the bus, please,” Seth politely commanded. He unlocked the bus, put Carl into the back of it, and turned to Sal.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he scolded. “Were you planning to drive home drunk or didn't you stop to think about this before you went bottoms up?”

“Bottoms up!” Sal giggled like a little kid.

Seth eased up a little. “Why did you have to go and pick a fight with that dumbass? You could have really been hurt.

“Come on—I'll drive you home.”

Sal crammed himself into the passenger's seat and threw secret glances at Seth. My God, he was handsome. He was so elegant. The way he'd handled that punk was so cool. It made his blood roll faster in his veins just thinking about it.

“Thank you, Seth,” Sal murmured before he leaned his head against the window and fell immediately asleep.

Carl and Sal were still pretty wasted when Seth drove the bus up to their parent's house. They scrambled out the car, and Carl somehow managed to fish out his keys from his jacket to unlock the door. Seth lugged them both down into the basement on a dangerous and clumsy journey down the stairs where Carl collapsed onto the bed with an exhausted sigh and began to doze off. Sal crashed down onto the sofa.

"Maybe you should take your shoes and jacket off before you sleep," Seth said in a whisper.

Sal groaned and forced himself into a sitting position. "If you wanted to see me naked, all you had to do was ask," Sal said.

Seth smiled that incredible, heart-melting smile, his eyes staring intently back at Sal. "You're drunk, Sal."

"And you smell good, Seth...real good."

Seth didn't move for a few seconds, as if he was considering his next move. "Get some sleep," Seth told him. "I've smoothed things out for you." With those words, he disappeared, as he'd never been there.

Sal felt the room spinning, and then he fell asleep.

When Sal woke up, it was almost nighttime. The hangover felt like a balloon under his skull, adding pressure to his brain. A layer of dehydrated saliva covered his dry lips. The room swirled a little as he reached out to get a note which had been pinned to the table next to him, reading:

I don't know if you remember, but I took care of matters with your parents for you, so don't worry.

S.

As far as Sal knew, they were in big trouble. They'd been plastered the night before and had provoked a fight. He didn't even know what time they'd come home or whether his parents had seen them or not.

A voice echoed from upstairs as if to answer his questions. Footsteps came down toward him, probably to make him stand trial for his escapades. Sal was not in the best of shape, and he was dying for a drink of water, but he tried his best to seem appealing. He flattened his hair and rubbed his face with a dirty towel.

His mother stopped on the last stair. She seemed surprisingly joyful, and Sal was baffled. "Hello," she chirped. "Did you have a nice time yesterday, sleepyheads? You've been sleeping for an awfully long time. "You came home at such a decent hour last night, your father and I are pleased," she continued. "Considering everything that was going on last night."

Carl sat up in his bed, looking like a zombie who had just begun to rot. His head turned toward the sound of his mother's voice, and he rubbed his eyes as he tried to figure out what was going on.

"Thank God you didn't get into a brawl with those drunk kids at the park last night. That was just horrible."

Sal wondered about the smell of beer and puke which still clung to the air in the basement. Had she not noticed, or had her sense of smell somehow been damaged?

"You should shower and wash your clothes. I can't believe those kids, running around the park, spraying people with beer like that."

"That just wasn't right," Sal said, trying to keep a stern face. His mind was still a surging perplexity.

"I know. Well, there's dinner in the kitchen if you're hungry, and please take a shower." His mother walked back upstairs.

Carl wore a puzzled expression. "What the fuck, Sal?"

Sal handed Seth's note to Carl who read it a couple of times before gawking at Sal. "I like your boyfriend, Sal," he said. "I don't know how he pulled it off, but I like him."

Sal blushed. "He isn't my boyfriend. What the hell did we do last night?"

"I don't know, but I feel like someone's bashed my head in with a sledgehammer." Carl rubbed his forehead. "Get me a cold, non-alcoholic drink, please."

Sal agreed and stumbled upstairs, where he drank himself a few glasses of water to satisfy his dehydrated body. When he went back downstairs with a bottle of cold water, Carl was sitting, flipping through his phone.

“Who the hell's Anita and why is she texting me to tell me she had a great time at Giantsfair?”

“I don't know, Carl. I don't remember much, and I don't know whether that's a good or bad thing.”

“But seriously, your boyfriend really came through for us, saving us from a lot of shit.” Carl paused to chug the water.

“His name's Seth.” Sal looked around the room for his cell phone. Carl scrutinized Sal. “What's it's like to be into dudes?”

Sal sighed. “It is not much different from being into women.” Sal had only dated a few guys before. No one really knew about his bisexual side, or they just didn't care. He'd never been hassled like he'd heard some bis or homosexuals were.

He'd discovered he'd liked men when he was fifteen. They'd had a substitute teacher, named Mr. Callaghan, who couldn't have been more than twenty-two. Whenever his eyes wandered around the class, Sal's stayed locked on him. He felt himself blush whenever Mr. Callaghan looked his way. His eyes had this softness to them.

Sal felt remorseful about the whole Mr. Callagan thing—it had been his fault the man had to leave Strong Edge.

“Have you ever been with a dude?” Carl pressed on.

“What's with all the questions? Does it really matter?” Sal said uneasily. He'd never talked to anyone about it before.

“No, of course not. I'm not grossed out by it or anything, it's just that you've always been a ladies' man, but I have never seen you care for anyone like you seem to care for Seth. I mean, Robin doesn't count, that posh tart.” Carl had never liked Robin. She was the only daughter of a wealthy family in Strong Edge who, according to him, ignored unpopular students. She was a spoiled, stuck-up brat who enjoyed ridiculing those she saw as inferior, and she'd dismissed Carl as a loser after one of his many trips to detention. Carl couldn't stand Robin's snobby behavior toward their less-popular classmates, the so-called underachievers.

For a basement, the ceiling was pretty high, and Sal had no problem standing up. It was funny how he thought of that now.

“Yeah, I suppose I do care.” Sal ran a hand over his smooth skin—he'd never had facial hair in his life. “I mean, I've never met anyone like Seth before.

“Are you leaving?” he asked Carl. “You mentioned last night that you were going to wherever Louise was.”

Carl sat still for a while, considering his answer. “I think I am. You seem to be traveling down a path of your own, and I think it's about time I did the same.”

“What about Aunt Vickie?” Sal said in an attempt to make Carl stay. “I said I'd help you with that, and I will, but I think I'll leave the rest of your journey to you. Besides, you have someone more competent to help you now.” Carl winked.

Sal felt heart sink to feet. He'd never heard his brother talk like that before. He'd never sounded so mature, so settled.

“I love you, Sal, I do. You're a mystery, but so am I.” Carl smiled. “Just whistle, and I'll be there, just like that time in the woods.”

“I get that, and I respect that, but I was hoping we could spend the summer together.”

Sal changed the subject, “Do you know where to find Louise?”

“Nope, but I'm going to find out. Not now, though, because I feel like shit, and Anita wants to know if we can hang out tonight. This must be what it's like to be you.” Carl threw a pair of dirty socks after Sal.

“You don’t know the half of it!” Sal laughed. “Just let the girl down easy.”

“If all else fails, I have you to save me," Carl said, grinning. "Besides, we're going to visit Aunt Vickie tomorrow. It's my excuse to blow her off.”

Sal felt much better when the sun rose the next morning. He was still exhausted, but the nausea and dehydration were gone. Events from his drunken night came back to him in flashes. He cringed over what he'd said to Seth: "If you wanted to see me naked, all you had to do was ask," Sal repeated to himself. He could kick himself. He truly suffered the remorse of a drunken high-schooler. Sal had no idea what he might say to Seth if he ever saw him again.

Sal went to the kitchen while everyone else in the house was still asleep. He heated a scone and boiled some water for tea. Angel, his beautiful Labrador, came running happily into the kitchen. Oh, how he'd neglected her. He decided he'd take her for a walk. It was hot out, the wind wasn't moving, and the world was quiet, yet again.

Things had calmed down a bit in Strong Edge since the murders of the businessman and Ben Adler. It turned out that the businessman, Daniel Masterson, had been a shady fellow, a person with a low morale, and his loss wasn't mourned.

Sal knew better than anyone that Ben Adler was more than shady—he was a freaking monster.

The patrols in the city had been minimized even though the murders were still being investigated. There had been no sign of trouble since the murders except for the drunken troublemakers at Giantsfair.

Sal went outside with Angel and walked to the end of the street before he let her loose. He couldn't help but believe that the two murders were somehow connected, but he had no idea how. Sal didn't think Masterson and Adler knew each other, but what if they had?

What he did know was that someone out there had an agenda and that it was based either in justice or revenge.

“The drunken brothers. How are you feeling, fellows?” Jack said merrily when they met up by the minibus in front of the Williams' residence. “Did you know you're famous?”

Sal stuffed his backpack into the bus. “What do you mean?”

“You got drunk and started a fight in an area where such pleasantries are forbidden, and you got away with it.”

“But you know it was us starting that fight?” Carl was confused.

“Guys, it's me: your pal from when we kicked ass in the woods. Only the Williams brothers could pull off such a stunt.” Jack sounded impressed.

“Yeah, well, it was mostly thanks to Sal's supernatural boyfriend,” Carl said. Sal gave him an evil glare. “What I mean to say is that Seth got us out of that pickle.”

“Nice,” Jack said. He definitely sounded impressed.

“What happened to you?” Sal asked Jack.

“Well,” Jack said. He put his palms together, looking like a priest about to pray on a Sunday. “I ended up with a damsel in distress.”

“You're kidding,” Carl said, fascinated. “Who?”

“Ah, a gentleman never kisses and tells in such matters,” Jack replied cheerfully. “Even though I must confess: it was unexpected.”

The guys laughed and sprayed each other with their water bottles until they were soaked. They stopped when Rosie showed up behind them.

“Don't stop this Mr. Wet t-shirt competition on my account.”

She went straight for the bus and got in without saying anything further.

Sal stuck his head inside the bus and said, “Hey, good to see you. Are you okay? What happened to you the other night? Sorry I bailed on you. I can't remember much.” Sal was embarrassed. He hadn't stopped to think of what had become of Rosie that night.

Rosie smiled. "It's okay," she said. "You didn't exactly drink alone, remember? I was right there with you. I knew you weren't used to drinking alcohol, and I don't blame you for anything." Her eyes begged: please, don't look any further into the matter, and he didn't. Instead, he glanced over at Jack and Carl who were scrolling through Carl's phone, trying to figure out who Anita was.

"I get to ride shotgun," Jack said, full of optimism. "Unlike Rosie and Carl, I can actually manage to stay awake for the whole trip, and I have mad DJ skills. I'll even set up the GPS."

Carl held up his thumb to show his approval. He was still drained. After his successful performance with Appropriately Wicked, Jack was walking on air. Rosie put her headphones on and peered out the window while Carl napped like a boss beside her.

Jack was talking, but Sal wasn't listening. His mind was occupied with Seth. He felt like a damn cliché: he was aware he barely knew Seth, but he couldn't help himself.

The landscape slowly changed from rural to suburban. Everything was neat, even the length of the grass, which was a total rejection of the meadows and all things natural. The neighborhood oozed of indifference at the destruction of the natural world. How disturbingly fitting that Vickie would live there?

Sal and Carl—or their family, for that matter—had never visited Vickie in her home. Ted had probably made sure of that.

Vickie Valentine used to be a beautiful woman, but the years of abuse had changed all that. She'd gotten to know Ted when they'd worked at the same, small, bakery shop. They'd dated, casually, at first, and eventually married.

Ted loved her, provided for her, and protected her for a year, which Vickie remembered as nothing but wonderful, but as the years went by, Ted slowly isolated Vickie from her family and friends.

When the psychological abuse began, Ted had accused her of cheating and told her that no one else was going to love her as much as he, that she'd never be good enough for anyone else, and she started to believe she really was worthless. Eventually, she didn't leave the house unless it was to go to work.

The physical abuse started soon after that. Vickie looked for a job in which she wouldn't have to deal directly with customers and would be able to hide the black eyes and bruises on her face, but she didn't know how to escape.

Vickie tried shelters, but she wasn't strong enough to stay away from Ted on her own. She'd called her brother a couple of times but always hung up the phone when someone answered.

She remembered one Christmas at her brother's house, and Vickie had screamed at her nephew, Sal, because he'd known things. He wasn't like the other children, either. His eyes had begged her to reach out for help, only she couldn't.

Asking her brother for help would mean admitting she'd been wrong. Her brother had never liked Ted and had stayed away from their wedding. Also, ending an important relationship was never easy. It was even harder when you'd been isolated from your family and friends, psychologically beaten down, financially controlled, and physically threatened. She'd always hoped Ted would change. Also, statistics show that women who leave their batterers are at a seventy-five percent greater risk of being killed by the batterer than those who stay.

They pulled over to the curb in front of Aunt Vickie's house. Every house in the neighborhood was identical to every other house on the street. Only the house numbers made it possible to tell them apart. It was a place where teenagers would either grow-up stupid or procreate to create more idiots. Either that or turn to violence and vandalism after years of boredom.

A perfect garden—one of many similar gardens on the block—met them as they walked up the driveway to the house. The door was open, and no one answered their call, so Sal and his party stepped inside, calling out for Vickie, once more.

The place was dead silent, and there wasn't a neighbor in sight. Somewhere, further into the house, a table appeared to have been knocked over.

Sal felt his mind take over in the same way it had when he'd seen Louise, and he panicked slightly. This was bad.

He took a few deep breaths, which calmed his mind a little. No one spoke a word. He felt Carl breathing heavily, close behind him. Rosie clung to his t-shirt, causing it to sit tightly across his neck.

Someone was sulking in the house. The party froze and cast uneasy glimpses at each other.

“Let's do this,” Jack said, and he stepped further into the house. Sal, Rosie, and Carl followed Jack like a couple of ducklings following their mother to water for the first time.

“Are you all right?” they heard Jack say.

“Who are you?” a female voice answered anxiously. “You're not supposed to be here.” Vickie stopped talking when she saw the rest of the group approaching slowly.

“What are you doing here?” Vickie said, her expression changing from anxious to surprised. Her face looked as if it had been in a fight with those flights of stairs she usually blamed for her bruises. The red and purple marks at her neck looked like they'd come from choking, and she had a broken wrist, indicating she'd attempted to defend herself. She also had a black eye, showing she'd taken a hard blow to the face. Sal cleared his throat. “We came to talk to you, Aunt Vickie. What happened to you?”

Vickie shrugged her shoulders. “I can't lie to you, can I, Sal?” She appeared frightened and exhausted at the same time.

An image of Ted and his obsessive need to have intense control of the woman he claimed to love burned a hole into his skull. Vickie's recent beating had been the result of her failing to empty the lint from the filter in the clothes dryer. Ted had felt justified in his behavior, and so far, society had failed to prosecute him for his actions.

“Why not get a restraining order, Vickie?” Rosie asked.

Vickie stroked her wrist. “A restraining order is nothing but a feeling of false security. You're not necessarily safe if you have a restraining order or a protection order. The abuser may choose to ignore it, and the police may do nothing to enforce it. My friend, April, learned that the hard way.”

“Leave Ted, Vickie,” Carl pleaded. “You don't deserve this.”

“Where would I go?” Vickie said, tears filling her eyes.

“It's the fear of the unknown; sometimes leaving the abuse and being alone is more frightening for the victim than remaining in the relationship,” Sal said, staring right at Vickie.

He fought the horrible images of Vickie's miserable life with Ted, pressing into his mind. He saw how Ted had lashed out at her, watching her crumple with grim satisfaction, enjoying the sting on his knuckles and the anger built up inside of him.

Sal was angry at his parents for having allowed this to happen. He was also angry at Ted, but mostly, he was angry at himself for buying into all the lies.

Vickie looked at Sal with tired eyes. “Like I said, I can't hide anything from you, Sal.”

Carl tried again to convince Vickie to go along with them, but she just rocked back and forth in her chair.

“We’re losing her.” Carl was frustrated. “Can’t you do something, Sal?”

Sal sat down in front of Vickie with no more than a few centimeters between them. “Look at me, Vickie,” he commanded softly.

Vickie slowly lifted her head, doing what he'd asked.

Sal looked into her eyes and beyond that and inside of her. He felt his body shaking. To be honest, Sal didn't know what the hell he was doing. He just let his mind guide him. Sal soon experienced a detachment from his body and from the surrounding environment.

Vickie began to speak to him in a thousand different ways. Non-integrated parts of the self, started to fall into place, and Sal realized he was prying inside Vickie's soul. He knew it was possible he'd see things that might scare him—he might see an angel, or he might see the devil. There was nothing but darkness inside.

He saw a confused child, running on a meadow after her brother, chasing a flying kite. He saw a heartbroken teenager, longing for her first kiss. Then her soul darkened, and he saw some sort of devil, full of hate and anger, covered in swastikas.

The devil put her down constantly while poisoning her, taking away all of her hope. A demon followed the devil, a sweet-talking demon who promised the world but turned out to be just as bad as the devil.

Sal's mind connected to Vickie's, taking her back to the meadow from her childhood. It was the only place that seemed to have any sort of light.

"You will leave Ted," he thought to her. "There is no doubt in your mind that this is the right choice. Rosie will help you pack your things, and you will get on the bus and leave Ted forever. Whatever Ted will say or do to convince you to come back, you will know it's a lie. Ted no longer has power over you. You will get over his terrible abuse and live a good life. You will patch things up with your brother and get your family back. You won't remember any of this. You will remember only that we came to visit and you decided to come back with us."

A great force started to pull Sal backward as if a huge vacuum cleaner was sucking him up. He was pulled brutally from his condition and pushed backward harshly. Sal tumbled onto his back.

"What the hell happened?" he said, but then he realized—the demon had entered the premises.

Rosie was next to him, shaking him, begging him to wake up.

Sal looked at her and the others. They were all holding their breath, daring not to make a sound. Each second seemed to last an eternity. They were all staring at the door, all of them listening to the footsteps of the intruder.

Ted soon appeared in the living room doorway. He leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed. "Well...well...well. Uninvited guests. Why don't you get the hell out before I call the cops?" Ted snarled, cutting right to the chase.

Sal rested his head in his hands. His body had drained of all its energy, and his mouth was dry, and he tried to stand. "Rosie," he said, "help Vickie pack her things and escort her to the bus." "But..."

Rosie said, gazing in Ted's direction.

"Just do it," Sal insisted.

It was funny how they hadn't taken into consideration what might happen if Ted had shown up. They'd assumed he'd be at work the whole time. "You won't stop Vickie from going, will you, Ted? I mean, you're nothing special, so why even try?"

Ted's facial expression shifted from superior annoyance to the look of an enraged panther. "You're not going anywhere, Vickie. You're my wife, and I'm not letting you leave." Ted leaped into the living room.

“I am sorry, Ted, but I am leaving you. Have a nice life,” Vickie said, casually. She seemed hypnotized, completely in a world of her own. Fires of anger and hate smoldered in Ted's narrowed eyes as he seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

“Help Vickie, Rosie,” Sal insisted again. Like Bambi on the ice, he tried to stand up and couldn't.

Jack came to his aid, whispering, “What the hell are you doing? That guy's crazy.”

Sal panted as if he'd just run a marathon and broken the world's record. Yet again, Sal encouraged Rosie and Vickie to leave the living room.

Ted was furious. He was crazy—as crazy as flies in a fruit jar. Ted pulled a gun from his pocket, raised his red-laced eyeballs, and looked at the people who had invaded his home. His fingers curled tightly around the gun. Sal detected Ted's vision of Sal's blood on the wall in his mind and how good he thought it felt. He also thought he could always have Vickie paint the walls red to cover it up.

Gasps went through the room. The feeling of being caged-in lingered in the air, as each of them imagined their own funerals.

Sal ran a hand through his hair like he always did when he was flirting with someone, and he spoke soothingly, “In my opinion, Ted isn't a cold person, but he's more likely seething with distressing emotions, and it's gotten out of control. Ted's suffering, aren't you, Ted?” Sal got to his feet and looked right at Ted, knowing he had the upper hand.

“You have your own deeply personal experiences with rejection from the incredibly painful childhood abandonment of your father. He was ashamed of you because you constantly disappointed him. You were reared in an environment where violence was accepted as a proper method for solving problems and enforcing the rules.”

Ted would never, in a million years, admit his fear. He was at a level that induced paralysis in others, yet he carried on as if nothing was wrong.

No one spotted his tension except for Sal. To him, Ted looked fragile, inconsequential, and common. Sal could see the hurt in his eyes when the others couldn't, and he took a few steps so he would be face to face with the man.

"You're not going to hurt us, are you, Ted?" Sal said condescendingly. From the back of his mind, the shadows became vengeful form. Sal smiled a sugar-coated smile at Ted. He bent his head back and head-butted Ted in a targeted strike. There was a crushing sound when bone clashed with bone.

Ted dropped the gun as blood ran down his face and into his eyes, and he took a few steps back, leaving the doorway open to pass.

Sal kicked the gun further into the living room and ordered the others to leave, which they did without hesitation, passing Ted in the kitchen as he tried furiously to stop the bleeding with a dishtowel while trying to control his pain and surprise.

When Sal was halfway between the house and the bus, something inside him made him stop. Damage control. He had to stop Ted from causing trouble for them in the future.

The worried faces in the bus asked him not to turn back, but Sal didn't care. He walked back into the house, where he found Ted dialing on his cell phone. Sal picked up a nearby coffee mug and threw it at the phone, which fell, cracking the display. Ted was a wounded animal, and that made him dangerous.

There was stillness on both sides. Sal had the exit through the door covered. He stood, folding both arms over his chest. Sal didn't fear Ted. He wanted him smashed, with nothing left to bury.

In that frozen second between standoff and fighting Sal's eyes never flickered. His face was unreadable, without fear or an invitational smirk, unlike Ted, who was screaming with blood running down his face from the encounter with Sal's forehead.

Ted charged at Sal with a mighty cry, fuelled by rage.

Sal dodged to the side in one fluid motion and punched Ted in the ribs as he staggered past him. Ted fell flat on his face on the floor. Sal's next move was Ted's downfall. He took a kitchen knife from the counter and stabbed Ted in the hand, nailing it to the floor. His wound began to bleed.

Sal spat on Ted. "So, this is how this is going to go down," he said calmly. "You're going to tell whoever you meet that you, in a drunken state because Vickie left you, tripped, fell, and cut yourself. Only God knows what I'll do to you if you say otherwise."

He yanked the knife out of Ted's hand, causing him great pain, and placed his foot over Ted's mouth to keep him from making noise.

"Fuck you, Ted," he said.

Sal washed his hands and face by the kitchen sink and left Ted crying on the floor as he closed the door behind him.

Worried faces met Sal when he returned to the bus. "Don't worry.

Ted's fine," Sal said, buckling his seatbelt. "Let's get Vickie home."

"What happened in there, Sal? Are you all right? You just cracked another man's skull," Carl shouted.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired. I'll fill you in later, okay?" Sal put the bus into gear, and they started the journey home to Strong Edge.

Chapter 33

Outside, down the street, someone in a black Volvo was laughing. The kid hadn't disappointed.

Later that evening a faint cry from a locked trunk sounded from a black Volvo.

It was evening when the minibus pulled into the Williams' residence. Sal observed his mother staring out the window. Thirty seconds later, both of his parents were standing in the doorway. When Vickie stepped out of the bus, Sal saw the shock register on his parents' faces before they were able to hide it.

It took a second or two for the situation to sink in, but Vickie was concise. She walked up to Sal's father and asked for forgiveness and help.

"But of course," was all her brother was able to say.

Vickie was led inside, and a guest room was prepared. Before his parents walked inside, Sal's father sent him an inquisitive look, asking: how?

Sal felt his friends look at him. They seemed tense. The air reeked of nervous, restless suspicion. Sal leaned against the bus, making him seem arrogant and superior to everyone else. "You're scared of me," he said, glancing at his fingers.

Their silence was deafening.

He glanced at his hands again, annoyed by their lack of an answer.

"Sal, for God's sake, some idiot pulled a gun on us, and you make it about you," Carl blurted, clearly agitated. "You head-butted the guy like he was made out of cotton. Don't expect us not to be shaken.

"You saved us. Hell, you even saved Vickie, and we're grateful, but give us some goddamn space to be and react like human beings."

The words hit Sal like a hurricane. He was literally blown backward by their meaning, though he wasn't hurt by them. Rather, Sal had come to a realization—though he might resemble a human being, there was the chance that he wasn't. There was evidence enough to support that.

His body felt like it was about to explode, and he had a hard time confronting himself about it. He took a deep breath and let it out in segments.

“I am so sorry for all the shit I put you through. I don’t know what else to say.” Sal walked out into the backyard and crawled up inside the treehouse. It was the place where he felt safe from zombies and the rest of the world.

In the meantime, his parents had settled at Vickie’s outrageous explanation about how she'd called the boys, asking them to come and get her as she hadn't been able to reach anyone else. She didn't mention Ted.

His parents yelled at Sal for keeping the information a secret, but he didn’t care. Something dark inside of him—the thought that he could manipulate them any time he felt like it—rose to the challenge, and he crawled back into the treehouse.

Sal couldn't sleep, so he took Angel for a stroll. It was a beautiful evening, with the heat still hanging in the air. The last rays of the day's sun had kissed the earth goodnight. Sal walked down past the other houses in the neighborhood and continued past the field ending the row of houses where he usually walked Angel.

He walked past a cluster of trees with Angel happily bouncing alongside him, excited about their new adventure. Sal turned Angel loose, and she started to run, leading him to an old shed.

Sal remembered the wooden shed. It was where Jack had taught him, Rosie, and Carl to play poker. It seemed so long ago, though it had only been a couple of years.

Jack had suggested strip poker, and Rosie had punched him on the shoulder. They'd sneaked out to the shed on a Friday afternoon and hadn't stopped playing until a police officer opened the shed door. He called in on his radio that he'd found the kids in a safe condition, and they'd forgotten about the time their parents had raided the town in search of them.

After that, they'd been forbidden further access to the shed. Their parents had even threatened to tear it down, but the threat remained empty. The shed had, for a period, served as a secret rendezvous, but was eventually given up when the roof had started to rot. Now, the shed stood alone, lost, and full of holes.

Sal sat down on an old tree stump next to the shed. He watched as the light drained from the sky to make room for the moon. Clouds had gathered on the horizon. Soon, the stars and moon would cower behind the dense layer of cloud while his head was filled with a similar fog of questions that made him jittery.

He was brought out of his trance by Angel's sudden barking next to him. Her teeth were exposed, and her fur stood up on her back. "What is it, girl?" he asked, gently petting the enraged dog. "What do you see?" Sal gazed in the direction Angel was facing.

A mist had begun to form into the shape of something big. Sal felt his body preparing for a fight while his mind worked hard to figure out what was going on. With one hand resting on the soil beneath him and the other one Angel, he remained there waiting, breathing, anticipating the figure's next move before a wave of recognition and understanding washed over him. Sal had felt it before, he was sure of it, and the thought calmed down a little. "Please, tell your dog to refrain from killing me," said a buttery voice, hot enough to melt lead. "How are you, Sal?"

Sal blushed and seemed to produce as much steam as a boiling pot. Seth!

The episode in the basement popped up, burned a hole in his skull. What had he said about being naked?

If you want to see me naked, all you had to do is ask.

Not his finest moment.

He wished for the earth to open up and swallow him whole.

Sal grabbed Angel by her collar, and Seth squatted down, reached into his pocket, and pulled out some dried meat which he handed to the dog who tilted her head, inspecting their guest with suspicion. Once she'd decided the treat was all right, she carefully pried the meat from the hand holding it and lay down while she chewed happily on her new found treasure.

Seth looked pleased. "May I join you?" he asked.

Sal moved over to make room on the tree stump for Seth who sat, with only a few millimeters separating them.

"Why so bashful?" he asked. He ran a finger down Sal's chin.

Sal took a deep breath, thinking that he might explode. "I behaved stupidly, and I made a complete ass of myself last time we met," Sal said guiltily.

Seth chuckled. "No, you were very sweet."

Sal sighed with relief. "Thank you for saving our asses. You saved us from a lot of trouble.

"Don't mention it," Seth answered, his eyes lighting up the darkness surrounding them.

“What did you whisper to that guy with the knife?” Sal looked amused. “You scared him shitless.”

Seth leaned in really close to Sal, feeling Seth's warm breath on his neck. Seth said he'd whispered, “If you ever come near my friends again, I will cut you open like a Christmas turkey and put your remains for sale on eBay.”

Sal's body shivered as Seth paused for a minute while breathing lightly into his ear as if he wanted to say something else, but he leaned back instead. He was seductive yet obscure at the same time.

"My parents. They saw us come home early. How?"

“I can make illusions happen for a short period of time. It requires a lot of energy, so I don't do it often,” he said. A warm, electric feeling swirled around inside Sal as Seth spoke.

“You did it for my brother and me,” Sal said, trying to catch Seth's gaze.

Seth looked at the ground. “We always help out our own, like Darwin did for me. I want you to meet him, Sal. He really wants to meet you, too.”

Sal stood up confused by Seth's mixed signals. “Yeah, it's just a little remarkable that people I hardly know take such great interest in me.”

Sal put Angel's leash back on and shifted on his feet as if he were about to leave. “I'll think about it, Seth. Thank you for coming.”

“Sal, wait,” Seth said, resting his hand on Sal's shoulder. His hand slid down Sal's arm until Sal felt Seth's hand in his. He hated the power Seth had over him.

Sal closed his eyes. “My friends and I had a gun pulled on us. I head-butted the guy without suffering so much as a scratch before I nailed him to the floor. I scared not only my friends but myself as well.”

Seth squeezed his hand. “You are so very special, Sal, and you don't even know it.”

Sal detached himself from Seth and turned around to face him.

"You absorbed that wife-beating bastard's energy and created a force field. That's how you walked away unhurt,” Seth explained.

“I've walked in your shoes, please, believe me. Sit back down, and I'll share my story with you.”

How could Sal resist?

So, this was how it felt to be at the other end of the stick.

Sal unleashed Angel, and she started to sniff around for rabbits. He sat back down, and Seth joined him.

"I was born into great fortune," Seth began. "I was a rich kid, though I wasn't exactly pampered for my entire life. I more or less had to take care of myself.

"My father was embarrassed at having such a freakish-looking kid. I never knew what happened to my mother.

"I discovered early in life that I was blessed with certain gifts.

Whenever my father got mad at me, for some insane reason, I was able to hide from him. I'd look at my hands, and they'd look like the wallpaper I was leaning against.

"I was able to fool my father into believing I was in bed while I really was observing him having dirty encounters with hookers and white powder.

"I was lonely and had no one to talk to about my strange skills. I was homeschooled, and I manipulated the teacher to convince my father that everything was peachy.

"I never spend much time outside my father's house until I turned fourteen. I quickly learned that I could manipulate anything in the outside world to give me anything I desired. It was fun in the beginning, and I enjoyed life on the street, but there was never anything but petty thefts carried out by my hand.

"Later on, I had to become a full-time thief because I needed money. It started out as a temporary solution to support my cocaine addiction.

"Being a thief isn't as glamorous as the movies make it out to be.

I was a big-time thief because of my abilities, and I started to run with a criminal organization called the Skeletons. I didn't rob banks or anything like that, except for one time when I tricked the clerk in a jewelry store and stole a diamond tiara worth five thousand dollars.

"I learned how to combine my skills of creating illusions and blending in, but it took too much strength, and I'd have to rest for days to get on top again. At the jewelry store, the clerk conversed with what he believed to be me, while I pocketed the jewelry he'd taken out for show and slipped out the back door where I collapsed on the ground.

"I managed to get out unnoticed, or so I'd thought. When I came to, I found myself face down in a dark alley with no knowledge of how I'd gotten there. The tiara was gone.

"For a couple of years, I was a regular house burglar. A typical day's work would net me an average between two and three hundred dollars. On good days, I'd make six or seven thousand. Most people who break into houses get caught, but not me. I planned carefully, knew which targets to pick, and I was always able to hide. I always wore gloves and secondhand store boots which were easily disposed of. Plus, being a master of disguise helped.

"Anyway, it was a Saturday night, and I was on my way to a job assigned by the gang. It was at a banking boss's home. He was out of town and should have been gone for at least a week. The house security package was a joke and was easily hacked.

"It was in a typical, upper-middle-class, suburban area: neat lawns, the occasional basketball hoop in the driveway, and nice cars and vans parked here and there.

"I pulled up to the house a little after midnight, in a stolen car, of course. No neighbors were out, but I still used a lot of energy to blend in. I didn't want to risk getting spotted.

"I walked up the driveway and around to the back of the house where I found a window, which I covered with duct tape so that no glass would be visible. Then, I put several layers of thick blankets directly below the glass, placed a pillow against the glass, and tapped it gently with a hammer. This process broke the glass, but because the duct tape was holding it together, it didn't fall and make noise. If a few, small pieces did manage to fall, the blankets below would absorb the sound.

"Inside, I got to work, heading to the dining room, the first room on the right, where I found an impressive set of antique sterling silverware displayed neatly on the credenza. There had to have been at least fifty pieces there. I carefully packed the two thousand dollar case of silverware into my bag and continued into the next room.

"The master bedroom was always interesting. I started going through the dresser, looking for jewelry. I found a couple of bracelets and necklaces worth about two thousand dollars. As I continued searching the house, I found little more interest in a set of antique paintings and a coin collection. After one last, quick look around, I decided to leave when I heard loud voices outside.

"I tried to calm myself down. It didn't help much, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw next.

"A man and a woman entered the house. The man was carrying something in his arms. He put the package on the kitchen table and spoke words that sent ice down my spine: 'The younger ones have the most tender meat.'

"After a few minutes, they started to suspect things might be missing from the house. The woman started to yell, so I quickly used my skills and made the couple believe I was running from the house and down the street. They ran immediately out of the house to chase after me.

"With my heart still making flip-flops, I walked out, into the kitchen. There was something wrapped in a blanket on the kitchen table. My hands shook like crazy as I removed the blanket, and my heart stopped beating for a second when the small hand revealed itself.

"A little girl no more than six-years-old in a blue dress came to life before me, and I gently touched her cheek. She was still warm. She opened her lips and said, 'Mommy?'

"I picked her up to take her to safety when I noticed some bones that had been casually tossed into a corner of the kitchen. I told myself the people just were messy, and that the bones had been from a cow, but then I remembered the man's words: 'The younger ones have the most tender meat.'

"I didn't want to, but I had to see what was in the fridge. Clinging to the girl with one hand, I opened the fridge with the other. As the door slowly opened and the light came on, I stared into appliance with pure horror.

"A human body was chopped into pieces on a plate as if it were leftovers to be saved for later. Blood was dripping from some sort of unrecognizable organ I thought might be a heart or a liver.

"I didn't want to investigate the matter any further.

"The girl was crying on my shoulder. I hushed her and stroked her hair.

"Outside, the voices had returned. 'What are we going to do?' the woman said. 'We can't exactly call the cops.'

"'We'll figure it out,' the man whispered back. 'Let's go inside before the girl comes to.'"

"I felt a rage inside I'd never experienced before. A fire burned inside me, growing into an inferno. They were cannibals, eating little children. I wanted not just to hurt them but to break every bone in their bodies, but I had to get the girl to safety.

"I slid into the living room where I blended in with the wall. I closed my eyes and created an illusion of me standing on the first floor. My energy was draining out of me, and fast, but I had to leave unseen.

"As the front door opened, I call out to the couple, 'Hello, man-eaters!'

"The couple looked at each other in disbelief, and the man grabbed a gun from a drawer in the hall. 'Who the fuck are you?' he roared.

"The woman stepped out from the kitchen. 'She's gone!' she said, panicked.

"'Look outside. She can't have gone far,' the man said. 'I'll deal with this clown.'

"The woman went outside and frantically searched, but as the man went upstairs, I began to feel drained.

"I couldn't stay like that much longer, so I moved to the door and outside where the woman was searching behind bushes and trees, seeming desperate and enraged at the same time. I could tell she was angry that none of them had stayed behind at the house to keep an eye on the girl.

"I had to rest, so I sneaked over to the house across the street, but no one seemed to be home. I put the girl down on the front porch and asked her to be quiet. I needed to sit and gather myself and my thoughts and get some energy back. What the hell was wrong with these people?"

"The girl clung to my arm as we sat there on the wooden porch. She was crying in silence and asking for her mommy. I had to get to the police, but I also had to prevent the couple from leaving. I felt the little girl's hand in mine, and it gave me strength.

"'What's your name?' I asked her.

"'Millie,' she answered. 'Millie Wilkins.'

"'Okay, listen to me, Millie. I will get you back to your mother, I promise, but first I have to stop the people that took you, okay? So you have to be brave and stay here and be real quiet.

"She nodded.

"'I will come back, I promise,' I told her.

"She sat with her back up against the house, arms hugging her knees.

"I was still a little dizzy from the lack of energy, and I stood there for a moment, leaning against a tree. I remember thinking I had to start carrying chocolate around in my pocket for energy. I suppose I'd learned nothing from my encounter the jewelry store.

"I watched the woman stop her search and reenter the cannibal house, and I wiped the sweat from my face and walked back over to it. The rest of the neighborhood was sound asleep or away. Everything was quiet.

"I stopped, and I took a few deep breaths to let the oxygen get to my brain before I continued. When I felt I'd gathered enough energy to continue, I heard a voice behind me. 'Let me help you,' it said. 'You're not alone.'

"I turned around to see a man with thick scars on his face, a man whose appearance was similar to mine. He was tall with black hair and big black eyes and absolutely no facial hair.

"'Who are you?' I asked, still panting.

"'I'm a friend, Seth. I've watched you. I'm here to help you.'

"I closed my eyes. My body felt heavy. Just taking a single step would have caused me to crash.

"Your body's slowing its activity because it wants cocaine,' he explained.

"I looked at him.

"How do I know this?' He smiled. 'Like I said, I've been watching you.'

"I felt embarrassed—I was a freaking coke wreck.

"Come on, Seth. Let's teach those freaks a lesson while there's still time.

"He walked in front of me, leading the way back to the house. I didn't question anything—I just had faith that he was sincere.

"When we entered the house, the couple was yelling at each other. We found them in the kitchen, throwing things around and blaming each other for their mistakes. They looked up in surprise when we appeared in the doorway.

"What the fuck?' the man exclaimed.

"The woman grabbed a kitchen knife, and the man held up his gun, but my rescuer just shook his head in disgust.

"What a couple of losers,' he said. 'Didn't your parents love you enough?'

"You must have a serious death wish, moron,' the man snarled.

"Funny,' my rescuer said, 'I was about to say the same thing to you.'

"The woman seemed to be inspecting his scars as if taking a moment to consider what she was up against. 'What freak train did you two come in on?' she asked, stupefied.

"The train of the worthy, something you two dipshits will never experience,' my rescuer said in a hard voice.

"Kiss your boyfriend goodbye,' the man said, pointing the gun at my skull. Then, my rescuer did something unexpected: he moved fast, like real fast like the Flash, or so it had seemed. The couple never saw him coming.

"He grabbed the man by the arm and twisted it until it snapped. Then, he took the woman and threw her against the wall. With the man was howling and the woman whining on the floor, he took some lamps from the living room and tied the couple up with the cord.

"He asked me to grab the woman's phone and call the police. I was still wearing gloves, so I didn't have to worry about fingerprints.

"When the call was made, we went over to the porch where I'd left Millie. She looked up when we returned. We sat with her, waiting for the police to show up.

"When the police pulled up to the house, I was once more asked to use my ability to blend in, and I did, despite my body's begging me not to. I was sweating hard, and I found it hard to stand up straight.

"Take her to the police,' my rescuer said, and I did what he asked. A female officer took charge once she'd spotted Millie, who she wrapped in a blanket and placed in a police car.

"I staggered back to the porch with my stomach in a knot.

"I sat back down, felt exhaustion run through my body, my stomach contents emptied onto the porch floor, and I blacked out.

"When I came to, I didn't know where I was, but my rescuer was sitting by my bedside.

"You did well,' he said when I opened my eyes. 'You are more than worthy.'

"It turned out he'd been watching me, testing me, and he took me in. He got me drug-free and taught me the truth about who I really was.

"Later, as I watched TV, I learned that Millie Wilkins was home with her parents and safe, that the couple had snatched poor Millie Wilkins from a playground as they'd done with two other kids.

"When the police searched their house, they found the two other kids. They were still alive, but cold and hungry.

"Suffice it to say, the couple never made it to court. They were found, having been tortured and hung from a tree."

Seth never paused as he told his story. All the way through, he spoke in a neutral tone, even though the speed his breathing increased slightly, along with a tortured expression in his eyes, especially when he mentioned little Millie Wilkins.

Sal hadn't been able to read him at all. He wanted to know more about Seth. There was a warrior in him, combined with a gentleness that made Sal want to reach out. Seth was a person he wanted to get to know better, though it felt they had never truly been strangers. That day he'd first laid eyes on Seth, he knew there was something special between them.

"You saved those kids," Sal said, wary that Seth might get up and leave. "You're a hero."

"Not really. I was just in the neighborhood. Anyone would have done what I did. Humans can be so cruel."

Sal dared himself to touch Seth's leg. "What happened to your father, Seth?"

"I don't know, and I don't really care. I haven't spoken to him since that day. He never cared about me, anyway."

"You must think I'm an immature, spoiled brat," Sal said staring down at his shoes.

Seth brushed some hair away from Sal's face. His touch was like liquid adrenaline being injected directly into his bloodstream, and he felt his body tingle all over "What makes you think that?"

"Some people would say I have it all, that I shouldn't complain or act out. Not like you—you've come such a long way."

"Then I'd say that 'some people' don't know what the hell they're talking about," Seth said resolutely. "You have to bring yourself back before your light fades."

Sal wasn't completely sure what Seth had meant, and he hated to seem like an idiot, but he asked, "My light?" anyway.

"Yes, you have so much light, Sal, I'd hate to see it go out."

Sal wanted his moment with Seth to last forever, but the weather seemed to have taken a turn for the worst.

Seth rose from his seat next to Sal and looked right at him with his magical, hypnotizing eyes. “Please, tell me you’ll let me take you to see Darwin.”

“Before my light fades?” Sal said defeated.

Seth laughed indulgently. “Exactly, my lovely. “I’ll text you.”

Sal just smiled, reconciling with the fact that he'd been beaten—he hadn't stood a chance against Seth.

When they parted, heavy clouds had gathered on the horizon; a storm was approaching.

When Sal woke up, it was raining heavily. The rain poured down mercilessly upon Strong Edge, pounding on the rooftops. The streets were empty, without even an occasional car to drive by to break the silence.

He stretched his naked arm out of the window and the droplets splattered on his fingers. The house was quiet. Sal checked his phone: six am. He was hungry. He couldn't stop thinking about his meeting with Seth. His story had been crazy...unbelievable.

Sal had done some Internet research on cannibals who had been hung from a tree. He found a newspaper article describing how the police had arrested a couple for child abduction when a Millie Wilkins had disappeared from a playground and was found in the couple's house along with two other children. The article didn't mention the couple being hung from a tree. Sal didn't believe Seth would lie to him, even though he hadn't been able to "read" him.

It had been quite strange, like there had been a warm shield around him, unlike the cold, armor-like shield which used to be around Robin.

He received a text message:

Thank you for listening to me, Sal. It meant a lot. I really like you. See you later.
Seth.

Sal wanted to text Seth back, but his number had been listed as unknown.

He likes me, Sal thought, lighting up like a Christmas tree.

Seth had wanted to take him to see this Darwin.

Seth could take him anywhere.

Sal got quickly dressed and grabbed his keys to the bus from the table. He was planning to go to The Diner.

He slid silently down the stairs, hoping Angel wasn't awake, lest she'd bark and wake the household. He looked for her and found her asleep in her dog basket before slipping outside, closing the door behind him, and heading straight for the bus.

Inside the bus, he found a shelter from the rain, and he put his shoes on. As he put the key into the ignition, a figure appeared in front of the bus. Sal couldn't tell who it was at first because the figure was obscured by the weather. It walked around the bus to the driver's site. Sal rolled down the window to find intense blue eyes looking back at him.

It was Carl.

"Did you really think you could go to The Diner without me?"

Carl and Sal looked like a couple of drowned rats by the time they'd entered The Diner. There were only a few people present at that hour, eating breakfast.

They sat down in a booth in the far corner. Sal swore it had been the very same booth in which Seth had been sitting in when he'd first seen him.

"So, you finally decided to come down from the treehouse. As you can see, I've already killed all the zombies."

"Yeah, I was only hiding from the Governor. You know he brutally killed Hershel, right?"

Carl laughed, then he became serious. "You do know that people still like you? No one hates you or thinks ill of you, Sal."

"Thinks ill of me? When did you start using sentences like that? When did you get so grown up?" Sal studied his brother. He'd matured a lot since graduation. The look in his blue eyes had somehow changed.

"You're my kid brother. I have to look out for you."

"You always have."

"Sal, I'm still serious about leaving. I've never been more certain of anything in my life before."

Sal took a bite of his breakfast. The food helped to fill the growing void inside him. Sal swallowed his food, having made a decision. "I hung out with Seth last night," he said, blushing. "He told me a story from his past."

"What I'm trying to say is that you should believe in yourself. You shouldn't walk away from your feelings." Carl sat listening with a foolish grin on his face. "Who would have thought Sal, that great seducer, would finally meet his match?"

“Shut up, will you?” Sal threw a pickle onto Carl’s plate.

Carl's laughter seemed heartfelt.

They ate and carried on small talk for a while before an opportunity arrived in the form of one of the Mackeys. Mrs. Jackson’s colorful clothes seemed to light up the place like a stick of dynamite. It felt out of place to see her there. At school, she always drank green smoothies and low-carb food. She glanced nervously around at the tables while waiting for her take-out.

Once she'd left The Diner, Carl put some money on the table and hurried along after her.

“Yo, Carl...wait.” Sal cursed his long legs as he wrestled himself free of the table and followed Carl out into the rain in search of answers.

They cornered Mrs. Jackson by her car like a couple of hungry sharks cornering a seal. Mrs. Jackson didn’t seem surprised to see them there.

“I was beginning to wonder when you were going to show up.” She put her take-out in the back of her car. She never gave the boys the chance to talk because she knew exactly why they were there.

“First of all, let me explain something to you: I did notice Louise. She showed all the signs. Her father didn’t show much interest in her schooling or in anything she did, but she was constantly aware of what she was doing so she wouldn't upset him. It was more like she was afraid of him, really.

"She also seemed to be suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, and her grades dropped rapidly over the semester.

"She'd started behaving in a way that wasn't appropriate, such trying to befriend every boy in school.

"She was frequently absent from school, and when she finally did attend, she was reluctant to leave, like she didn't want to go home. I think the only reason she didn't run away or try to commit suicide was because of her younger brother, Larten.

"That being said, keep in mind that older children may not talk about the problem because they fear the offender or want to protect them.

They may also feel as if they won't be taken seriously.

"Children who are the victims of child abuse are being let down by the system because professionals often fail to pick up the signs of abuse. Many teachers feel confident they're able to recognize the signs of abuse, but schools do not always fulfill their potential roles in preventing incidents by educating children about seeking help." Mrs. Jackson looked shameful.

"Research has found that although many children feel unable to disclose they're victims of abuse—sexual or otherwise—professionals often unfairly place the responsibility on them to identify their abuse. Meanwhile, schools frequently fail to fulfill their role in giving children the ability to recognize abuse and seek help when necessary, making the early identification of victims harder.

"Too much is expected of the victims themselves. Not only do many feel unable to disclose the abuse, but they wait too long to see their abusers charged.

"The bad economy presents newer and bigger challenges. Savings, budget adjustments, and even decreases in this area have a massive human cost, and in the long run, short-term savings are very expensive. With decisions made for financial reasons rather than according to the child's needs, the system winds up failing those in need.

"At Strong Edge High, we're changing the school policy to make sure young people are taught about safe and healthy relationships at school, giving them the life skills they need to help them stay safe and face the challenges of growing up in today's world." She was soaked through her clothes by the time she was done speaking.

"And no, I don't know where Louise is, and even if I did, I couldn't tell you. I'm sorry. I'd only wish that I could have done more." She got into her car and got ready to drive away.

The teacher shouldn't have disclosed the information the way she did about Louise but that was the impact Sal Williams had on people. You didn't deny him a goddamn thing.

Bad economy, Sal thought as he got ready to approach Mrs. Jackson's car, but Carl stopped him off. "No, Sal. Let her go. Mrs. Jackson has done all she could. We'll find another way." They watched Mrs. Jackson drive off, shocked at what they'd just heard: the government was deliberately letting children down due to money.

There was a strange car parked by the curve when Sal and Carl returned home. It was a black sedan.

Sal parked the bus, and he and Carl walked inside where his mother greeted them. "This is Mr. Porter," she said. "He's a private investigator. Ted's apparently missing, and Vickie has no idea where he's gone."

"A private dick? I don't have to answer your questions," Carl said, going straight for the basement. He had enough on his mind as it was, and he hated Ted.

Mr. Porter's appearance was clean, cool, and deliberately ambiguous. He looked like a cross between Agent Cooper from *Twin Peaks* and Hugh Jackman. He'd made sure to position himself so that he was seated at the head of the table in his mother's seat. His chair was pointed slightly to the right, which suggested that Sal should sit there during the interview, setting Porter up as an authority figure.

It was very clever, building rapport and preserving the upper-hand in an interview.

"Why hire a private investigator?" Sal asked, pretending to be stupid. "Why not call the police?"

"Since being a missing person isn't a crime, police are given a very limited role while conducting these types of investigations. As a general rule, all people have the right to be left alone, and police intrusion into their lives must be minimal.

"They've checked with local area hospitals, local homeless shelters, the County Coroner's website, and the County Morgue's website, and nothing.

"Ted's parents, however, believe there's foul-play involved in this case, so they've hired me," Mr. Porter said with a smile. "Mrs. Williams, do you mind if I speak to Sal alone?"

His mother was skeptical, but she left the kitchen.

Sal sat in the chair facing Mr. Porter.

“So, Sal, you're not on Facebook. That's unusual for a kid your age. You're quite the star of Strong Edge High. You're a straight-A student, a ladies man, and the star of the basketball team.”

He'd done his homework. A good investigator never asked a question to which he didn't already know the answer. The information was especially important if the interview became confrontational.

The more information you had about a subject, the easier it was to build a rapport. He had to earn his subjects' trust to get them to open up, which could be accomplished through small talk. Interviewers should look for common ground with the interviewee and start a conversation on that subject.

“Well, I don't need social media. I don't have to go on the computer to read people's annoying political rants or whining about failed relationships. One picture of a baby was barely distinguishable from the dozen posted in the days before. I also couldn't care less for pictures of what people are eating for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and in-between-lunch-and-dinner snacks.

“I don't need to see people flaunting their dirty laundry, lying, and going off on drunken rants—I can get all of that at high school.” Sal contorted his lips into a smile.

“Vickie's already explained why you were at her house,” Mr. Porter continued unaffected.

“And?” Sal lifted his eyebrows.

Mr. Porter paused. “You were the last person seen leaving the house. As a matter of fact, you were seen coming out of the house and then changing your mind and going back in. What made you go back in?”

“I forgot my cell phone,” Sal answered, never taking his eyes off of Mr. Porter.

The guy knew that he was up against an intelligent kid who knew more than he pretended, and he went in for the kill.

“I've come across an interesting tape of you, Sal. It shows you talking to the head of the kitchen at Strong Edge High, one Manfred Stone. He appeared quite shocked after you left. Do mind sharing what you said to him?”

The investigator mirrored Sal's body language, copying his gestures, hand motions, facial expressions—even how he sat and spoke. It was his way of showing he was just like Sal.

“The tape doesn't show?”

“Unfortunately, it doesn't record sound, and you have your back to the camera.

"I want you to know that I've spoken with everyone about the incident, and I feel that maybe you're not telling me everything you know,”

The guy was good. He wanted to throw Sal off and make him listen at the same time. Porter had finished his report long ago and was going straight for the confrontation, hoping Sal would slip up.

Something was lurking inside of Mr. Porter that told Sal he knew something.

“Why don't you ask Mr. Stone?”

“I did. He wouldn't talk. He said he didn't remember. It was like someone had gotten to him, you know?”

Sal almost burst out laughing. “Who would do something like that?”

“Listen, Sal, you're a smart kid, and I know you want to do the right thing. Ted wasn't going to be husband of the year anytime soon, but he's still missing.”

“I'm sorry. I don't really know what to tell you. I didn't really know Ted.”

Mr. Porter studied him as if he didn't believe a word Sal had said.

Sal decided to perform his "magic trick" on him, but he was interrupted by his mother. “I'm afraid I'm going to ask you to leave. I don't like the way you're talking to my son.”

Goddamnit—she'd probably heard the whole thing.

“Of course.” Mr. Porter's eyes seemed to glow as he gathered his papers. He said goodbye and left the house.

Sal clenched his teeth. That guy was going to be trouble.

David Bowie's *Starman* was playing on the radio while Sal was trying to navigate the bus through a twisting landscape and stormy weather. It was a task he found especially hard, given that Seth had insisted on taking off his shirt while they were driving. His upper-body was powerful-looking, and he had a chiseled chest, and Sal kept throwing surreptitious glances at Seth—he could be a fitness model, for heaven's sake. They were on the outskirts of nowhere, and Sal found it hard to concentrate. It was an accident waiting to happen.

Sal had been in his room where he was enjoying a game of *Hitman*. Carl was laying on Sal's bed, deeply engrossed in his cellphone. The rest of his family was out—his parents were at work, and Vickie had taken the twins to Giantsfair.

He'd entered the world of an assassin in the game in which he had the power and intelligence of Agent 47 at his fingertips. Sal was trying to figure out how he might assassinate Viktor Novikov in a most creative manner when Carl broke his concentration, Novikov slipped under his radar, and he had to restart the mission. "Goddamn, it," he said bitterly.

Carl was stomping around the room, searching for a charger for his phone. "Have you seen my charger, by any chance?" Carl paused. "No, wait...I found it."

Sal turned his attention back to the game—maybe he could assassinate Novikov from the balcony—but Carl's voice sounded again, annoying him. "What the fuck's that?"

"What?" Sal replied, throwing the PlayStation's controller away from him.

"On the outside of the window." Carl's face was pressed against the window. "It looks like a piece of paper."

Carl opened the window and took hold of the curious piece of paper. It was a laminated note with a small flower on it that had been taped to the window. Carl read it out loud:

"Dinner at 19.00. Be ready at 17.30. Seth".

He stared at Sal in great anticipation, waiting for him to comment on the note.

"What time is it?" Sal asked, trying to dodge Carl's well-founded curiosity.

Carl chuckled and looked at his phone. "It's 17.00. Are you going on a date?"

"I guess so." Sal could practically feel himself glowing.

He took a shower while Carl made his best attempt at ironing a pair of jeans and a black shirt for him.

Sal used a blow dryer to create a slicked-back look, brushed his teeth, got dressed, and asked Carl what he thought.

"You look like a million dollars." Carl gave Sal's shoulder a nudge. "If anyone asks, I'll say you're on a date with a Greek god."

Sal went outside. The note didn't say where to meet, but he had the feeling that Seth would find him.

Seth was waiting for him by the bus. He was holding an umbrella, and wearing a tuxedo. Seth looked so elegant in the crisp, black, cotton sateen jacket. Hell, he could wear an old tracksuit and still be impressive.

He smiled at Sal. "You look good," he said. "Can we take your bus?"

"Sure." Sal unlocked the doors, and Seth jumped in, taking cover from the rain.

"Why the note?" Sal asked while Seth was adjusting his seat. Sal wondered if he could raise the entire ceiling of the bus.

"I wanted to maintain my mysterious appeal. Plus, your phone was switched off." His lips formed a delicious smile.

"So, where are we going?" Sal asked, turning the key in the ignition.

"We're going where no man has gone before, Sal."

They made a pit-stop before descending into the middle of nowhere. Sal filled the bus with gas while Seth went inside the small gas station to get coffee. There were a couple of women waiting in front of the small store. Seth greeted them as he passed with a charming smile and slight gesture of the hand as if he were tipping his hat, before going into the small shop.

The women giggled at him and gazed enthusiastically as they straightened their hair and adjusted their bras. Though he knew that Seth had that spellbinding effect on everyone, Sal couldn't help but feel a bit jealous, and he focused on pumping gas instead.

He felt stupid standing there like some belittled lover, but then he remembered something Jack had once said: "After she left me for another guy, I had to go back to pumping my own gas.

Pumping gas—we all do it at some point." They'd been on their way home from some godforsaken field trip to a potato factory with the rest of the class when the bus, which was their transport, was in desperate need of gasoline. The driver had cursed loudly and made a stop at the nearest gas station. Mr. Mayer, who had, unfortunately, been their escort for the trip, constantly reminding the students that they represented the entire school, spotted a blonde woman having trouble with one of the pumps. He'd smoothed his hair, straightened his clothes, and went—hopefully—in her direction.

Mayer ended up getting gasoline all over the woman's shoes. He walked shamefacedly back to the bus, showered with threats that the woman would call the police. "Can you really blame the guy?" Jack had said with a big smirk. "He probably hasn't pumped gas in a while."

Jack had mimicked Mr. Mayer's voice and said, "After she left me for another guy, I had to go back to pumping my own gas. Pumping gas—we all do it at some point." Sal and Jack had laughed until they were blue in the face.

Sal burst out laughing as he returned the pump to the handle, but his amusement came to an end when Seth came out of the shop, followed by a couple of big hillbillies with an obviously bad attitude, who joined the women outside the shop.

“Have a nice day, ladies,” Seth said with his silky smooth voice. He put two fingers on his lips and then pointed them out toward the women who giggled. Seth walked back to the bus, pleased as punch.

As expected, the guys weren't amused by Seth's gestures and launched a diatribe at him, containing a substantial amount of anger aimed at discrediting his manliness.

“Hey, you fucking queer, what the hell do you think you're doing?” one of the hillbillies shouted.

Seth stopped, made a sign to Sal not to get involved, and slowly turned around, his eyes anticipating a confrontation. “Are you talking to me?”

“I don't see any other faggots in the area,” the guy said with confidence. The remark made the other hillbilly laugh.

“Why do you assume I'm gay—is it because I dress better than you, or do you just find me irresistible?” Seth ran his fingers over his lips.

The guy closest to Seth spat on the ground. “Your kind makes me sick.”

“You have your entire life to be a jerk,” Seth said, pushing all the right buttons, waiting for the inevitable to happen. “Why not take today off?” Seth seemed bored with the guys' tedious attempts at making up for their lack of confidence.

“Come on, Randy,” one of the women said, trying to reason with him.

“Let's go—we're going to be late.”

“Not until I've taught this little worm a lesson,” Randy replied. If hatred were visible, the guy's breath would have looked like fire.

The women stepped back as the other guy stepped forward until they'd surrounded Seth.

The first blow came from out of nowhere, steering straight at Seth's abdomen. Seth blocked the blow effortlessly, throwing his coffee in the guy's face, blinding him and leaving him howling in pain.

“Randy, are you okay?” the second guy asked dumbstruck.

“What the hell do you think, you moron? Get him!” Randy answered.

The moron attacked, trying to tackle Seth, but he didn't know how unmatched he was. Seth moved swiftly to the side, hooked the moron's ankle with his foot, and pulled it toward him. The guy fell face forward down on the stony ground.

"Are we done playing?" Seth quickly squatted down to pin the second idiot, placing his right elbow on his throat.

The guy with the coffee on him hadn't learned his lesson, it seemed, and he went in for another blow, moving quickly, thinking Seth would be more vulnerable crouching down. With the reflexes of a cat, Seth moved out of the way and delivered an uppercut that would have made Mike Tyson jealous, and the guy faltered back as blood spattered from his nose.

Seth turned to the two shocked women he'd greeted earlier and kissed each one on the hand. "I'm sorry you had to see this, ladies. Please, forgive me."

The two women stared at Seth in disbelief and nodded.

"What a waste of coffee," Seth said, rather vexed as he walked back to the bus. "And I got blood on my shirt." He was greeted by a fascinated and a slightly shocked Sal.

"You did that on purpose," Sal noted. "Why risk exposing yourself like that?"

Seth was low key. "The security cameras won't show anything—they aren't working.

"It's incredible what some people will share with you when you bat your eyelids."

"The clerk flat-out shared that information with you?" What a stupid question, Sal thought to himself; Seth could persuade a dead person to talk.

He gave a Sal an overbearing glare. "Dear friend, I used to be a burglar, remember? I know my security cameras. Plus, their equipment dates back to the 1970s. Plus, I blend in very well."

"You really dig confrontations with violent outcomes, don't you?" Sal said electrified.

Seth turned his head and looked warmly at Sal. “It's *you* I dig—I simply tolerate violent confrontations.”

Sal levitated from his seat for a moment as the euphoria increased in his body.

They passed the city limits of a village called Wallowdale. Population: none.

A huge sign in red letters warned them to stay out. Wallowdale used to be a bustling town, but it died when the local industry had fizzled.

Now, it was abandoned and consumed by the elements. The deserted town featured a big, steeple-shaped fish monument, a children's playground, a sports hall of fame, and the ruins of a train station.

Sal had vaguely heard of Wallowdale, as the place no one dared enter. Maybe they'd heard the story of how it had been irradiated from toxic waste or how people claimed to see the ghost of a sadistic nurse who'd used her patients as guinea pigs, administering a lethal cocktail of morphine and atropine on her patients, and holding them down until they'd died.

The nurse had claimed her goal was to kill more helpless people than any other man or woman in history. She was later found not guilty by reason of insanity. On a silent, clear night, it was rumored the spirits of former residents showed themselves, screaming in agony. A TV crew who had later wanted to conduct a paranormal investigation at Wallowdale mysteriously disappeared, never to be heard from again.

When they finally stopped, it was in front of a big old mansion's locked gates. "Welcome to Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children," Seth said with a smile. "Welcome to Giant Hill." The house was a large manor on the far outskirts of Wallowdale. The property was located along a quiet dirt road overlooking an old quarry and sealed off with a big fence and a large gate whose ironwork was intertwined with the initials GH in large letters. Inside gate was a front courtyard. It was reminded Sal of a fortress, with more security than Fort Knox and the White House combined.

Seth pressed the buzzer on the gate, leaned into the intercom, stated his business, and the gate opened without a sound.

They continued up to the house where a double-staircase framing a large, potted plant pot gave the entranceway an elegant symmetry, leaving a striking first impression. Sal parked the bus and Seth, and he went up to the massive wooden door. Seth knocked three times.

There was a security camera hanging over the door, keeping an eye out for uninvited guests. The door seemed to open by itself, adding to the already ghostly vibe of the house.

The inside had been meticulously updated: the kitchen had top-of-the-line appliances; there was a marble floor in the foyer; a spacious, formal dining room with a fireplace and exposed beams; a wet bar; a den with a fireplace; and an entertainment room with another fireplace.

Upon entering the foyer, the mansion split off in three different directions. On the left side of the foyer, a door led into the dining room. To the left set of stairs, there was a walkway leading to a large library. The set of stairs on the right led to a hallway featuring ten bedrooms, each with their own, full bathroom. The guest house was an updated 1 bedroom with 1 bathroom and with custom kitchen, office and entertaining space.

There was a fenced-in backyard containing an in-ground pool and spa, a bluestone patio, and a huge greenhouse. There was a barn that might've once held farm animals, but none of them remained.

A tall man with a black silk shirt and black trousers approached them. He had the same black eyes as Sal and thick, black, tousled hair. He was just as tall as Sal and had the same distinct cheekbones and angular jaw, which, combined with his pale skin, made him look very handsome. He wasn't a sophisticated beauty like Seth and his elfin features, but rather, more like a warrior. A scar ran across his cheek, and another scar ran across his neck as if someone had tried to cut his throat. "Darwin, there's someone I'd love to introduce you to.

"This is Sal," Seth said, greeting the man.

"Welcome, Sal. It's great to finally meet you in person. I'm Darwin."

His face was one of utmost confidence. He smiled like a long lost brother and shook Sal's hand warmly with the perfect squeeze and eye contact. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Yeah, I've been wondering about that," Sal answered politely.

Darwin laughed. "I guess I owe you an explanation, but first, come to the dining room and meet the others."

The dining room was a grand space, boasting ornate chandeliers, a grand fireplace, and beautiful artwork. There was a huge, mahogany table, fourteen feet long, able to seat eighteen people situated on an expensive old rug next to large windows, accompanied by Chippendale, mahogany, dining chairs with upholstered backs. The place settings were made up of designer plates, glasses embossed with golden lace, and Georg Jensen silverware. The display was topped off with a golden candelabra. Also in the dining room was a rustic bar with a black granite countertop, zinc bar, wood cabinets, stainless steel fixtures, and LED backlighting. The bar further featured a keg tap, a wine fridge, a dishwasher, a refrigerator, and ample storage for glassware and other serving pieces. Behind the counter stood a bartender cleaning glasses. Seven tall men, all with raven black hair and black eyes were standing at the bar, chatting and laughing. Sal ran a hand over his face. None of them had facial hair.

The chatter from the bar stopped as Sal, Seth and Darwin approached it. The men turned in amazement and inspected Sal.

“So, this is the mind-hacker we've heard so much about,” one of the men said, taking a step forward. “I’m Orion.” He shook Sal’s hand. Orion's long, black hair was pulled back into thin braids. His dark suit, made of the finest fabric money could buy, covered a strong, muscular body. He certainly looked successful, and like he wasn't one to be trifled with.

Sal had seen Orion, before but he wasn't sure where. “Mind-hacker?” Sal asked.

Darwin quickly cut in. “It means that you can dig information out from people’s minds. They don’t even have to think about it for you to see it. You're not a mind-reader—you're a mind-hacker.”

Sal opened his mouth to ask another question. He could feel his body tense up with excitement. Sal would finally be able to have his questions answered.

“Let’s get some dinner first, and I promise I'll explain everything and answer all of your questions.”

Sal silently agreed by nodding his head. He was restless and uneasy at the same time. Sal hardly knew these people, yet they seemed to hold the key to everything. They knew him so well, and he'd only met most of them a short time ago.

Seth sensed his restlessness and put a hand on his back.

“Well,” Darwin said, putting his hands together. “Let me introduce you to the crowd.”

He directed his attention to Orion. “Orion you've already met. This is Aaron, Trent, Walcott, Hagan, Mack, and Dante.” If he was certain he'd met Orion before, he was positive he'd met Dante before. Dante had stepped out of the crowd when Darwin spoke his name. He was a few years older than Sal. His black eyes stared suspiciously at Sal.

Dante's black hair had been carefully arranged in a Mohawk. He was lean as a greyhound. His cheeks were hollow, and his face was stern. There was a tattoo exposed on his wrist when his green sweater slid back as he stretched out his arm to greet Sal.

The green sweater!

Sal had a flashback to the Strong Edge High locker room when he'd been slammed into one of the lockers. There also was his long sprint through town which had ended so clumsily in Serenity Park.

He looked Dante directly in the eyes. "It was you! You were in the locker room, and you were outside my school! Did you also send me those anonymous texts?"

Dante's stern expression morphed into a wide, toothy grin. "Aw, you remembered."

"What the hell, dude? You could have killed me!" Sal felt Seth squeezing his shoulder.

"Only I didn't, did I?" Dante answered with unkind interest. "I knocked you into that locker, full-force, and you're still standing. That blow would've left anyone with a broken bone, at least.

"You didn't even suffer much of a concussion, so stop your bitching. You're a mind-hacker as well an absorber—that's freaking badass. I was only testing you, anyway." Dante shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention back to the bar.

"What do you mean you were testing me?" Sal asked, puzzled and annoyed at the same time.

"I promise I'll explain everything, Sal," Darwin interrupted, "but first, let's eat."

Dinner was good, yet different. It was meat-free, consisting of a house salad; bulgur- and cashew-stuffed eggplant; pasta with peppers, zucchini, and smoked mozzarella; spinach and artichoke deep pan pizza; and black bean, corn, and spinach enchiladas. The mood was great, and people were laughing and joking.

Sal had been sat next to Seth and Orion. Sal had to ask, or he'd burst. "Orion, I feel like I have seen you before."

Orion smiled and wiped his mouth on a napkin. "Why don't you put your mind-hacking skills to the test and tell me?" he dared.

The rest of the table directed their attention to Sal, and he wasn't sure what he should do. "I'd really rather not."

Darwin came to his rescue. "You don't have to do it, Sal. We all know what you're capable of. You're thinking about your friend who went away, aren't you?"

Sal felt his heart pound in his chest, and his mouth went dry. He wanted to yell and tell Darwin to mind his own business, but he couldn't because the words just wouldn't come out.

Darwin continued, "The girl, Louise, was begging for help. That's why you read her so clearly. It couldn't have been pleasant."

Sal managed to gather enough spit so he could speak. "Do you know where she is?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, and I know you want to help her; you and your brother," Darwin answered, sounding blue. "Of course, we'll help you. We help each other here."

"Thank you." Sal looked down at his plate.

The atmosphere around the table had tightened a little, and Sal grew annoyed with himself—he was embarrassing himself in front of all these people. Sal closed his eyes and sighed. When he spoke, his words came out in a gush. "You're the guy who rescued the cat that was hit by the car. I saw you when I was walking my dog." Sal stared firmly at Orion. "And you can heal—you're a healer."

Orion laughed out loud. The rest of the table joined in one by one.

“You all have trades, right? Seth told me you called it that.”

Darwin wiped his mouth and cleared his throat. “Well, we’re not the X-Men or the Fantastic Four,” he said.

“Thank God for that,” Dante said, raising his glass as if to make a toast. “But yes,” Darwin continued, “we possess certain skills.” He looked around the table as to confirm it was okay for him to go on. When no one said anything, he continued. “Myself, I have lightning-fast reaction time, great flexibility, and excellent jumping capabilities. In other words, I move fast.

"Seth can blend in and create illusions.

"Orion can heal any living being.

"Dante can manipulate objects and matter with mind-telekinesis.

"Aaron can talk to animals, and he has night vision.

"Trent can breathe underwater and climb any wall like a spider.

"Walcott can hijack bodies and astral project.

"Hagan can communicate and influence nature with something we call eco-kinesis.

"Mack's super-intelligent, he speaks any language, and he knows pretty much everything. And we're all connected, telepathically. Plus, we possess great strength.

“So, we have the Flash, Shadow Cat, Catwoman, Spiderman, Poison Ivy, and whatever it is Walcott does,” Dante finished.

Walcott glared at him.

Sal was stunned. He couldn’t believe his own ears. “If you have a superpower, wouldn’t the government hunt you down or detain you?” he asked, overwhelmed.

This time, Mack answered. “The government needs us.

“Let me quote the *National Geographic*,” he said.

"The human population will become more alike as races merge, but Charles Darwin's machine has lost its power. This is because natural selection—Darwin's survival of the fittest concept—is being sidelined in humans. The fittest will no longer spearhead evolutionary change because, thanks to medical advances, the weakest also live on and pass down their genes.'

"As we are the fittest, we are stronger than humans, and it is only right that we take responsibility. This is why we work so hard to find others like ourselves so we can help each other and help humankind. No government should interfere with that. They don't know what the hell they're doing, anyway. We have a responsibility."

"To make a long story short, have you ever seen the movie *The Abyss*? That pretty much explains it." Dante said, ridiculing Mack.

"Sarcasm is the refuge of a shallow mind," Mack said without looking at Dante.

Dante squeezed his eyes together, said nothing, and left the table.

Mack continued after Dante had gone: "Human DNA was designed by aliens. Scientists believe that our species was designed by a higher power, an alien civilization that either wanted to preserve a message in our DNA or simply plant life on other planets.

"Humans were designed by a higher power, and with a 'set of arithmetic patterns and ideographic symbolic language' encoded into our DNA. Advanced extraterrestrial civilizations were engaged in creating new life and planting it on various planets. The sudden boom in evolution experienced on Earth billions of years ago is a sign of something happening on a higher level of which we are not aware.

"Scientists have discovered some DNA is *not* from our ancestors. They say it could change how we think about evolution. The study challenges the view that evolution relies solely on genes passed down through the generation.

"What's known as 'junk DNA' is actually some sort of extraterrestrial code. What we see in our DNA is a program consisting of two versions: a Giant, structured code and a simple, or basic code. The first part of our DNA code wasn't written on Earth. Secondly—and most importantly—genes alone are not enough to explain evolution and the abrupt process of evolution, and there must be something more to it.

"Human-like aliens could have provided some of the genetic materials necessary, for evolution could not have happened on its own, and also, there's something extraterrestrial about our entire species.

"The million dollar question is, therefore, if extraterrestrial beings did, in fact, create the human race and life on planet Earth, then who—or what—created these extraterrestrial beings?

"Some people feel they don't really belong here. Perhaps it's because Earth hasn't always been their home planet. Then there are those who believe some souls have been incarnated on other planets before coming to Earth. They're called indigos, star-seeds, star-people...the name doesn't really matter—those people are wankers.

"We're the real deal, and we have the DNA to prove it. We're one step above the human race; a new species."

"What does that mean?" Sal said with a lump in his throat.

"It means we have a responsibility to help the human race," Darwin said, almost father like.

"Are humans really that bad? I mean, my friends and family are regular humans," Sal said, clinging to his glass of ice tea.

Mack peeked over the table and just stared at Sal for a while. "They're worse," he said, becoming spiteful.

"The eradication of Native Americans? World Wars I and II? The Spanish Inquisition? The destruction of planet Earth with pollution? Animal cruelty? Slavery? Child molesters? Even your own grandfather, to name a few."

"My grandfather?" Sal asked, clearly shaken.

Mack continued undaunted as if he hadn't heard Sal's question.

"Humans are the real threat to life on Earth. Humans are a plague on the planet. They threaten their own existence and that of other species by using up the world's resources. The only way to save the planet from famine and species extinction is to limit human population growth.

"Over the next fifty years or so, humans are going to be screwed. And I'm not just talking about climate change—it's a matter of sheer space, having places to grow food for this enormous horde. Either *we* limit population growth or the natural world will do it for us, and the natural world won't know the good from the bad.

"There's been a frightening explosion in the number of humans, and the need to invest in sex education and other voluntary means of limiting population in developing countries who can't support themselves, and that's not an inhuman thing to say. It's the reality.

"Until humanity manages to sort itself out and get a coordinated view of the planet, it's going to get worse and worse.

"That's where *we* come in."

Sal felt as if he was suffocating. He needed air. Sal pushed his chair back, knocking down his plate as he ran for the door. As he fumbled with the door handle, he heard Darwin scolding Mack behind him. He got the door open and stumbled outside, running past a surprised Dante who was standing under the canopy, smoking a cigarette. Sal continued to run until he literally crashed into the front gate Seth and he had entered earlier. The rain was pouring down. Blood dripped into his eye.

What the hell was going on?

He shook the gate angrily.

“Mack has a way with words,” Darwin said, walking up behind Sal, holding an umbrella.

Sal turned his head slightly to see Seth standing a few feet behind him. He looked back out between the bars of the gate, gazing into the horizon.

The water drummed hard on Darwin's umbrella, forcing him to speak louder. “He shouldn’t have gone off on you like that. My apologies. He gave you the wrong impression about us. Please, come back inside, get dry, and we’ll have Orion take a look at your injury.”

The thought of Seth still inside pulled on him like a magnet. How could he resist?

“Have you ever done deep research on something only to realize that if you talk about it with people, they'll think you're crazy?” Darwin said in a lighter tone.

Sal chuckled. “All my life. Maybe I’m just being foolish.”

“They say that foolishness is knowing the truth, seeing the truth but believing in the lies,” Darwin said with compassion. There was a truth to those words, and Sal willingly walked back toward the house with him.

Giant Hill.

The name was fitting.

“We’re Giants!” Darwin said. “A new species created by extraterrestrial life and stronger than regular humans.”

Seth met them at the door. Sal ran a hand over his face, trying to wipe the water from it. He couldn't believe what Darwin had just said. "Is that why we can't grow facial hair?" Sal asked. He heard Dante and Seth laugh somewhere behind him. "Was it the food that freaked you out?" Dante asked as Sal walked past him and into the house. "That rabbit food will give anyone the runs...seriously."

The curious case of Ted Valentine.

Logan Porter went through his papers. He always did stakeouts alone. Some people believed it best to have two people on the job, as the other person might notice something you didn't. It was best to have more than one person in case other circumstances arose. Logan Porter thought it a distraction.

He'd been a PI for twenty years, and in that time, he'd seen a bit of everything. Every case he'd ever worked on had ended up with a conviction or the case solved, but his new case was different, somehow...offbeat.

Ted Valentine had mysteriously disappeared from his home without anyone noticing. The only lead to go on was that his wife's nephews and friends had shown up a few hours later, taking the wife with them. The only real witness—the mailman—had seen the kids leave the house alongside the wife, Vickie Valentine.

There was no doubt Ted Valentine was a prick and a terrible husband, but his parents were worried, and they paid well. The case had also proved to be a challenge, and Porter never walked away from a challenge.

The nephew, Sal, had been slick as an eel in anticipating his every move. He knew more than he was telling. Sal was a popular kid, to be sure: handsome, athletic, and sweet-talking. He'd left his house with some dreamy guy. Porter wasn't gay, nor was he known to look at guys, but the guy with the dark eyes was something to write home about. Together, the two of them were taller than most people, and it was their appearance that had rung the alarm inside of him.

It had been almost ridiculously easy to follow them. He'd put a tracking device on the minibus in the driveway which the kid, Sal, was driving. He wanted to keep an eye on the boy, but he'd never have believed he'd lead him where he had: a mysterious mansion called Giant Hill, located in a deserted area.

He'd heard the stories of Wallowdale before, but believed it to be a myth; he didn't have time for ghost stories.

Porter sat in a rental car with tinted windows in the pouring rain, It was pretty draining, sitting in a car for hours. He'd driven past the location once to get a perspective of the area before permanently setting up his position. The country roads he was on made it difficult because there was nobody else around but the freaks in the mansion, which only served to make him stand out that much more.

Luckily, he was able to have parked the car behind some bushes. The bushes reminded him he felt something pressing on his bladder; he had to go. He had a wee bottle—a used coke bottle—but he preferred not to use it.

Porter stepped outside to pee in the bushes only a few feet away from the car, so he could still monitor the situation. He was wearing dark clothing and a baseball cap, which helped him to blend in well with the dark surroundings. He stiffened as he zipped up his pants—there was activity on the perimeter.

One of the freaks had come outside to have a smoke. Porter wouldn't have known he was there if it hadn't been for his loud cursing.

“Fuck you, Mack. You think you're so clever. What the fuck do you know, anyway?” Then there was silence.

Porter crawled back into his car and pulled out a set of binoculars. The freak was a kid, not much older than Sal. He was wearing a worn-out green sweatshirt, jeans with holes in them, and hair cut into a Mohawk. Other than the hair, he looked like the others: tall, and with piercing black eyes.

This was big, really big.

There was more to this case than just Ted.

Out of the blue, Sal came running out of the house. He looked like a horse scared out of its wits. Sal didn't stop running until he literally hit the gate, splitting his eyebrow open. He shook the gate wildly, like a prisoner who had been locked in to serve a life sentence in prison. An umbrella followed soon after. It some guy with scars.

They spoke for a couple of minutes and then went back into the house. The kid with the Mohawk stayed outside for another smoke before stepping on his cigarette and going inside.

Every cell in Porter's body screamed for him to leave, to go away to a safe place, but for once in his life, Mr. Porter ignored his voice of reason.

What could possibly happen? He had the perfect view to see anyone coming and going.

There was a tapping on the window.

What the hell?

There was no one in sight.

It must have been a bird.

The tapping seemed to form icy drips on his skin.

How could he have been so stupid, so arrogant?

He pulled out his cellphone to call the office when he saw a face grinning at him at the front of the car—the kid with the Mohawk.

Another face was glaring at him from the side window. Porter sucked at the air which had become suddenly thick and almost too difficult to draw in. There was no point in reaching for his gun. Instead, he locked the car doors.

These were no ordinary people—there was something almost supernatural about them. He put the car into drive and brought his foot down hard on the gas pedal, hoping he'd bump them out of the way with his car. Engine noises—similar to those which usually meant trouble for a car—cut through Porter like glass; the wheels spun like crazy, but the car hadn't moved an inch. It was as if the car had been lifted by something.

The kid at the front of the car was laughing maniacally, clearly enjoying the situation. The air sounded with the shatter of breaking glass as the window next to him exploded into a million pieces.

Porter closed his eyes knowing well that he was utterly fucked.

There was no use in screaming.

He'd been arrogant and incautious, and now he would pay the price.

Porter's body was pulled from the car by a couple of hands that possessed a force unlike anything he'd ever experienced and then tossed down on the ground...hard. Something broke inside of him. When he finally allowed his eyelids to flutter open, he saw the ground had been stained red. A wave of pain washed over him as if someone was poking him with a hot branding iron. Before he fell unconscious, he heard angry voices around him. "God knows who he's been calling, who he'd dragged into this," one of them said. "How could we have been so sloppy?" "We need to clean this mess up and fast. For that, we need the mind-hacker," another one said. Then someone ordered, "Stuff him into the barn until we figure out what to do!" Everything about the place and its people had told Porter's intuition it had been a trap, yet he'd walked right in and let the door swing shut behind him.

Sal sat on the expensive sofa in front of a fireplace. He stared into the flames, watched them dance; it calmed him down. His experiences at Giant Hill had been intense.

Alien DNA?

A new species?

It was hard to take in, but he knew there was a truth to it. He just knew too little of his own origin.

Mack had mentioned Sal's grandfather and the questions he had seemed to burn a hole in the back of his head. As far as he could tell from Seth's story, Seth had "normal" parents, DNA-wise anyway.

There was something else behind it, and his head spun—it was all too science fiction for him.

He'd spent thirty minutes relaxing in the Jacuzzi, and he could've sworn he'd heard alarmed voices from far away, but he hadn't cared; the water had been massaging his tense body. It had probably been Dante going off on Mack anyway.

Sal's clothes were in the dryer, and he was wrapped in a Versace bathrobe, crafted in absorbent cotton with printed borders—the place was over the top.

Orion had, with a single touch, healed his eye. There wasn't even a single scratch left behind. "Why aren't you a doctor?" Sal had asked with admiration. "You could change everything."

"I don't think the world's ready for it," Orion had sniffed. "Let alone the medical pharmacies. They would have me hunted down and shoot me like a dog. They don't like competition. Medical pharmacies don't create cures, they create customers."

"Have you ever heard the story of a guy named Rick Simpson?" Orion had asked.

Sal had shaken his head.

“Rick Simpson cured his own cancer using cannabis oil, and then he started helping others with his cannabis—or rather, Rick Simpson—oil. After his failed legal efforts to approve cannabis oil for medical purposes, Rick was a man marked by the Medical Mafia. He soon realized that the cancer industry was focused on endless treatments, until death do they part, for the highest possible profits, rather than focused on a cure, and Rick exiled himself to the Dutch city of Amsterdam for a time.”

“That’s fucked up!” Sal had said, upset.

“True, but it's an issue we’re working on,” Orion had said, patting Sal on the shoulder. He'd left without saying another word.

Currently, angry voices were sounding from somewhere in the house. Sal sneaked up to the door and opened it. The voices became clearer. Sal stepped further out into the hall.

“This is your fault, Seth,” he heard. “If you hadn't been so busy flirting with the mind-hacker we wouldn’t be in this mess!” The voice belonged to Dante, and he was furious. “You're losing your focus.”

“Why do you have to be such a dick, Dante?” Seth replied coolly.

“Because I never had what you have. You just waltz through life with your money and looks. Unlike you, I had to fight for everything. You just think you can smile your way out of everything.”

“Here we go again,” Seth said annoyed. Obviously, they'd had this conversation before. “Stop it! What's done is done.”

“Now we have to focus on fixing the problem,” Darwin said firmly.

“But Darwin—” Dante started, but he was cut off.

“End of discussion,” Darwin said irritated.

“*Seth!*” he commanded.

What followed after, Sal couldn’t hear. He did, however, hear footsteps coming up the stairs, and he hurried back inside the room with the fireplace and tried to look casual, expecting Seth to walk through the door at any moment.

Thirty seconds later, Seth was standing in the doorway, watching him with his devilish eyes. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” Sal responded without looking at him. He just kept staring into the flames.

There was something funny going on, and they needed his help. You didn’t have to be a mind-hacker to know that.

How long had he been there, staring at the fireplace?

He could feel Seth observing him as he came closer. “Are you doing okay?” Seth asked, still in that soft tone of voice.

Sal just held up this thumb. They expected too much of him.

Everything was so new.

“Sal, something happened, and we need your help,” Seth said cautiously.

Sal wanted to tell Seth to save his breath, but he couldn’t.

Seth touched his eyebrow lightly, where his injury used to be, and Sal closed his eyes for a second.

“I’d do anything for you.” Sal stood up from his seat. He looked deep into Seth’s eyes and reached out to touch his face.

Seth remained still as he gazed back at Sal.

“Has Seth filled you in on the situation?” Darwin’s voice echoed from the doorway, breaking the spell.

“No, I was just about to do it.” Seth sounded like a kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

“Sal, a private detective followed you and Seth here to Giant Hill. He knows too much. Will you help us? Just use your trade, and we’ll send him on his way.”

“Porter?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“I’m afraid so. Get me my clothes, and I’ll see what I can do.” Sal was full of confidence which had something to do with Seth, who hadn’t moved an inch from his spot next to him.

Darwin yelled some orders and Sal's clothes were immediately brought to him, nice and dry. The room cleared to allow him to get dressed, and Sal wondered what the hell he'd gotten himself into. For a minute, he considered climbing out the window, but he had to deal with his situation. That idiot, Porter, had come too close. He could spoil everything.

Seth peeked in through the open door. "Are you ready?" He smiled, led Sal down the stairs, and back into the dining room where all of the Giants were waiting. They paused whatever it was they'd been doing when Sal entered.

Porter had been tied to a chair and gagged with a rag. He looked frightened but also defiant at the same time. Dante stood behind him, resting a cup of coffee on his head.

"Work your magic, kid, and we'll ship him out of here," Darwin said determinedly. "And Dante stop using the guy as a coffee table, will ya?" Dante giggled and went to join the others.

Sal took a step forward, studying Porter with curiosity. "I knew you were going to be trouble."

Porter said something angry that was muffled by his gag. Sal sat down in front of him as he'd done with Vickie. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. Sal opened his mind, and the patterns began to form in front of him. They formed the shape of a gate, a big, iron gate. Sal took another deep breath in an attempt to grasp what was going on. Porter was a fighter, and he wasn't willing to give information up without a fight.

So, Mr. Porter, you think you can keep me out, Sal thought, as he built-up energy and focused solely on Porter's center. He pushed on, penetrated the darkness within Porter. Sal saw light, and he went for it, drilling his way through Porter's armor. Sal searched for a happy place, and it didn't take him long to come by it: a lovely wife and cute children, playing in a beautiful garden.

He felt Porter trying to shake him off, and he grabbed onto his subconscious mind and held on. Sal continued to hack his way through. All he had to do now was to change the codes.

Sal began to transmit: "When you met me at my house, you discovered me and my friends had nothing to do with Ted's disappearance. You decided to leave us alone and focus your attention elsewhere.

"You never came to Giant Hill, and you don't remember anything about us Giants. As a matter of fact, you received information after you left my house that Ted had been spotted at a local bar and you went to act on that information. Maybe it was Ted at that bar, maybe it wasn't, but your story begins there, at the bar.

Sal took a few deep breaths and withdrew himself the way he went in. When he opened his eyes, everything was black for a minute, and he was sweaty and thirsty as hell—Porter had put up one hell of a fight. Seth helped Sal to a chair. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Sal nodded. "I just need some water," he said.

Walcott fetched him a bottle of water, and Sal gulped it eagerly down. "You did it, kid," Darwin said. "You played him like a violin. He's knocked out."

"We need to dump him at a bar near Strong Edge. He'll pick up from there, unaware he ever met us," Sal pointed out.

"Good." Darwin rubbed his hands together. "Dante: get him loaded and take him to Strong Edge."

"Why me? It was the mind-hacker and Seth that brought him here."

Dante was clearly displeased with the order he'd been given.

"Because you need to learn some manners," Mack answered.

Dante's black eyes appeared lethal as he seethed in anger. The situation was tense—Dante's trade was not one to be taken lightly, but telekinesis, when mixed with Dante's mood swings could prove a lethal cocktail.

Sal could tell that Darwin and the others were prepared for a battle, as Darwin's muscles tightened, and he closed his fingers into a fist.

"I'll take Porter back, Sal said, hoping it would ease the tension. "This is entirely my fault.

"I fucked up. It's on me, not Dante." Sal scrutinized Dante carefully.

The look in Dante's eyes changed. "See? That wasn't so hard," he said, removing a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

What the hell was wrong with that guy? Sal wondered. He was totally manic.

“Let’s go have a smoke, Dante,” Trent—the one able to breathe underwater if Sal remembered correctly—said. He had a sort of 1950s charm to him. Given his leather jacket and the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, he sort of resembled James Dean.

Darwin sighed as Dante left the room. “Poor kid,” he said. “Why do you have to push his buttons like that, Mack?”

“I have work to do,” Mack answered indifferently, and he left the room.

“Please forgive us, Sal,” Darwin said. “It isn’t always like that with us.”

“That’s okay,” Sal said, choosing his next words carefully, “but what is it with Dante? He seems so...highly flammable.”

“I suppose it’s better you know.” Darwin pulled out a chair and sat across from Sal and cleared his throat. “Dante never had it easy. He’s just scared of losing his family again.”

“What do you mean, again?” Sal asked.

“Dante hasn’t had an easy life. The kids at school were unkind to him because of his appearance. He was feared among the townsfolk because people knew there was something about him to watch out for. Dante’s never met any sort of kindness or understanding. His only support in life was his mother who loved him unconditionally.

“Dante’s father left when he was only a year old because he didn’t believe Dante was his child. He didn’t look like any of his parents, and his father was convinced his mother had cheated on him. His father went on a rampage and pretty much smashed everything in the house.

“When he turned his rage on Dante’s mother, he’d had enough.

Dante’s desperate, anger combined with his growing power ended badly. Dante slammed his father against the wall and out through the closed window using telekinesis.

“The police didn’t think that either Dante or his mother had the strength to throw his father around like that, so they looked around for a mystery perpetrator which they never found.

“Things were quiet for a while, until the catastrophe years later.

"After school one day, a sixteen-year-old Dante returned to find his mother's badly beaten body hanging from the back porch. Her jaw appeared to have been broken, and her left temple had been smashed in. She'd been stabbed before the rope had been wrapped around her neck.

"Dante cried out, and neighbors came to his aid, but it was too late. His mother was taken to the hospital but was pronounced dead a short time later.

"Inside the house, the kitchen had been stained with blood, but nothing else had been touched. A blood-covered hammer was found behind the house.

"A heartbroken Dante was placed in foster care. Four days after the murder, Dante got a letter from the killer. The sender claimed he'd murdered Jane because she was a fucking whore. Dante was convinced it was his father who had been responsible for his mother's murder, and he ran away from his foster family and lived on the streets while he searched for his father.

"Dante eventually tracked him down.

"His father was found by the police two days later. He'd been brutally beaten to death. Luckily, I got to Dante before the cops did."

"Fuck," was all Sal could muster.

"How did you find him?" Sal asked.

"Well, it took me a while, but I always have feelers out for something unusual. Mack's supercomputer can sniff out almost anything."

"Is that how you found me?" Sal asked.

"Yeah, we heard of an exceptional talent at a high school, someone with an unusual appearance, so we began to observe you, Sal, and we weren't disappointed."

"My run-ins with Dante were all arranged by you?"

"Yes, except it wasn't supposed to end the way it did in the locker room, but Dante got too cocky."

"How do you know so much about Vickie and Ted?"

Darwin took a sip of coffee before he continued. "Mack hacks the computers of women's shelters. That way we know what to keep an eye out for. We learned that Vickie called them several times."

"What do you do with this information?"

"We help those who can't help themselves."

Sal was about to ask what kind of services they provided when Seth knocked over a glass of water onto Sal's pants. "Man, I'm such an idiot," Seth said, grabbing a few napkins and placing them in Sal's lap. "I'm sorry, Sal."

"I got it, thanks," Sal said. He felt a rosiness spring upon his cheeks and spread to the rest of his face.

Dante, who had reappeared in the dining room alongside Trent, stopped when he saw Sal and Seth. "No, that one's too easy," he said with a big sneer on his face.

The others at the bar giggled at Dante's remark, but Seth just rolled his eyes as Darwin poured another cup of coffee. Logan Porter made a snoring sound which made everyone turn to stare at him. They seemed to have forgotten about him despite his obvious presence in the room. Darwin rose from his chair. "We'd better get this fucker out of here before he wakes up."

"Right. Just put him in my bus, and I'll take him," Sal said.

"I got it," Seth said, tossing the guy over his shoulder. "Keys!"

Sal threw Seth the keys to the bus, and he disappeared without another sound.

Sal got up slowly from his chair, embarrassed about his wet pants and uncertain what to do next, but Darwin came to his rescue. "Thank you for coming, Sal." He shook his hand lightly. "You truly are remarkable."

"Thank you for having me," he said bashfully. "I can't believe there are more out there like me."

Darwin looked delighted. "We're one big family here. I hope you understand that."

Sal nodded and bit his lip. "I have to ask: do you all have 'normal' parents?"

“Yes. We're all children of the human race—we're just more evolved than our parents are,” Darwin said.

“Okay. Thank you, Darwin. Good night.” He turned to the rest of the gang. “Thank you, and goodnight. It was so nice to meet you all.”

They lifted their drinks in their hands and bid him farewell.

“See you, mind-hacker. Buckle-up and enjoy the ride,” Dante said.

Sal felt something lurking at the back of his mind. The situation felt peculiar, but these were peculiar people.

Like him.

What were they not telling him?

Sal felt his mind expand around the room. It crept in wherever it was possible, searching for cracks that might reveal information.

Thoughts flooded toward him like a spark running toward dynamite.

Sal looked at Darwin yet again. “South Africa,” he said. “You've been to South Africa. You almost died. You want to make the world a better place.”

Darwin didn't speak—the expression on his face said it all; he'd been caught off-guard. “Yeah,” he eventually said. “Where did that come from?”

Sal shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “I'm sorry. That wasn't polite, but I can't always control it. That's all I saw.”

“That's all right,” Darwin said, still flustered.

The rest of the gang sat frozen for second but eventually went back to their drinks. Dante was the only one wearing a big smirk on his face. He was a joker, able to flip in any direction, completely unpredictable. Sal left the house. He hadn't told Darwin the whole truth. He had seen something else.

Rather than head straight for his bus, he switched directions and headed to the barn. Something told him he needed to examine the barn.

Sal looked back over his shoulder. No one seemed to be watching him or following him. They were probably plastered and with Dante; they had their hands full.

The premises was big and packed with security cameras. The one called Mack could be watching him, but Sal didn't give a shit. He liked the Giants, but he felt sure they were hiding something from him.

The rain continued to fall in crazy, chaotic drops and a blanket of coldness crept over his skin. The sound of water hitting the ground was loud, drowned out only by the occasional boom of thunder. Sal jogged over the stone path while the piercing rain soaked his clothes yet again. His shoes were quickly flooded as water seeped in from everywhere, soaking his socks and feet. He turned the corner to see the barn towering ahead in the horizon. It was a functional, classic, red barn, with two-and-a-half-stories, Z-braced barn doors, and traditional window trim. The roof had a steep pitched to it with generous overhangs, topped with a cupola large enough to ventilate the barn.

When he was a few yards from the barn door, images of Ted surfaced inside his head. Ted was scared and very much in pain which wasn't a surprise. He was also locked up somewhere.

What the hell? Sal was a few yards from the barn door, and the handle was almost within his reach when a crisp-sounding voice called out to him, "Sal? What are you doing?"

Sal stopped even though he was close to solving the mystery regarding the barn.

Damn you, Seth! Sal thought. It was as if he was a puppet on a string and Seth was his master. Sal sighed and took another step toward the barn. It would be locked, but he'd crawl onto the roof, if necessary, to get inside.

Seth took his hand to stop him from moving forward and moved in front of Sal, so they were standing toe-to-toe. Seth's black hair seemed to have become one with his face due to the hard weather. His eyes sparkled in the increasing darkness. Sal was practically nailed to the ground, having completely forgotten about the barn.

He leaned in so that his forehead rested against Sal's, and they both closed their eyes. Sal could feel Seth's hand resting on the back of his neck before Seth's lips brushed his, and he felt like he was walking on sunshine. It was magic, the way Seth's lips connected with his. Though he'd tried, he hadn't been able to imagine how warm they'd feel pressed up against his own, and a smile grew on Sal's face before they pulled slowly apart.

Seth looked pleased as he brushed Sal's wet hair behind his ears. "Nice! Now, come on, mind-hacker, let's get that Porter guy back where he belongs." He put his arm around Sal, and they walked slowly back to the bus and an unconscious Logan Porter. Sal wanted to say something, but a tornado inside of him prevented him from putting a sentence together.

As the bus left Giant Hill, Darwin sighed with relief.

He'd underestimated the boy, and Dante and Mack had nearly ruined everything.

The boy wasn't ready yet, especially not ready for the barn.

Thank God for Seth, Darwin thought. All he needed to bring Sal around was to introduce him to a handsome, charismatic man who could touch him, make him feel his life for the first time, and then prepare him for what came next.

As the bus rolled past Wallowdale, the small town didn't seem as creepy as when they'd first passed through. Even the weather didn't seem that shitty anymore. Sal didn't care that he was wet from top to bottom; he couldn't stop smiling. It was like he'd won the lottery. Logan Porter was unconscious in the back of the back of the bus, covered with a blanket. He looked like a human sleeping bag. The barn and the odd behavior of his fellow Giants were long forgotten. When Seth got inside the bus, he delivered a smile that went straight to Sal's solar plexus, while appeared shy and pleased at the same time before he lay back on the car seat and closed his eyes. Something made Sal's foot ride the brake and drive slower, something that refused to leave his mind.

Darwin.

His story had also downloaded into Sal's head back at Giant Hill. It was this huge landmark in his life that made Darwin who he was. Sal had seen all of the injustice Darwin had seen, and the graphic vision inside his head had been terrifying.

Sal hit a pothole, waking Seth. "What's going on? Are we there yet? Is Mr. Porter awake?" Seth asked.

"Everything's fine, Seth," Sal said, turning his focus back to the road. "I was thinking we could drop Mr. Porter off at 'The Old Gnome.'" It was a pub and nightclub combined. Catering to a mature audience, they offered a wide selection of beer, whiskey, spirits, and pub food. The Old Gnome was located on a backstreet, away from the tourists. Back in the 1970s, it attracted a less-sophisticated crowd when it hosted bare-knuckle prize fights. Principal Johnson of Strong Edge High was rumored to have been a participant of such fights.

Because the pub was on a backstreet, it would be easier to dump Mr. Logan without causing undue attention.

“Cool.” Seth tried to sit up as much as he could. “Park a few blocks from the place, and I’ll create some illusions to make sure people think he was at the bar tonight.”

“That’s one mad skill you have, creating illusions. How do I know you’re really here now?”

“Touch me.” Seth stuck out his hand. “My illusions don’t come in flesh and blood.”

Sal touched his hand; it was nice and warm. He quickly returned his hand to the steering wheel. “Okay, you’re really here.”

Seth nodded and ran a couple of fingers over his lips.

Sal wanted to say something to Seth, something sweet, cool, and charming to try to sweep him off his feet, but for the first time, he couldn’t find the words which was weird, because being seductive was usually the easy part for him.

They closed in on The Old Gnome, and Sal parked the bus in a more or less abandoned area in Strong Edge called Strong Edge Plaza. It was the first major shopping mall to have opened in the area back in the sixties.

Strong Edge Plaza was originally an open-air mall, but it was enclosed in 1984. Over the last ten years, Strong Edge Plaza had changed ownership twice, but it hadn’t helped with its decreasing number of patrons who probably preferred the newer, open-air malls in the area. Since then, Strong Edge Plaza had remained completely vacant.

“Wow, this place is amazing,” Seth said, carefully pulling Logan Porter out of the car. “How come anyone hasn’t done anything with the place?”

Sal shrugged his shoulders. “Beats me. It was supposed to have been demolished years ago.” He tossed Porter over his shoulder while Seth admired the scenery.

“Are you thinking about buying the place?” Sal adjusted Porter on his shoulder.

“Yeah. I could turn it into a nightclub—what do you think?”

“I think we should get Mr. Porter to the pub before he wakes up,” Sal answered.

They walked carefully down the street leading to The Old Gnome. Seth walked in front, keeping an eye out. If someone came in their direction, he'd make them blend into the surroundings.

When they reached the corner down of the street on which The Old Gnome was located, happy voices moved in their direction as a young couple approached.

As they neared, Seth prepared to perform his invisibility stunt.

The couple stopped a few feet away, where they kissed each other passionately.

Seth stood silently, his eyes closed as he concentrated.

Sal couldn't believe his own eyes, and he nearly dropped Logan Porter in astonishment.

The couple was Jack and Rosie!

For real?

Kissing?

He blinked a few times to make sure he wasn't seeing things, but it was really them. Then, he remembered that right before they'd driven down to see Aunt Vickie, Rosie had been hiding something private, something she hadn't wanted him to see.

Jack had been with a girl on the night of the concert at Giantsfair, and Rosie had been that girl.

They turned and walked away, chatting away about the evening they'd just shared.

Seth opened his eyes when Jack and Rosie turned a corner.

"I thought they'd never leave," he said, wiping his face free of sweat.

Sal didn't respond. Rather, he began to walk toward The Old Gnome, still unsure of what he'd just witnessed.

Seth took the lead again, making sure the coast was clear. Sal leaned Porter up against a brick wall close to the pub, and Seth closed his eyes to create his little decoy, making it seem like Porter had had too much to drink, and he'd tumbled outside of the pub to get some fresh air, only to fall asleep against the wall.

"Okay, let's go." Seth started to jog down the street back to the bus.

Sal went after him. “Are you okay?” he asked when they'd reached the bus.

“I'm fine. I just need some water. Can you take me to the gas station we stopped at earlier? They had a vending machine.”

“The gas station where you kicked the shit out of those two bozos?” Sal said, amused

“You liked it, you derp, and you know it,” Seth responded with a smile on his face.

They drove up to the lot at the empty gas station, which had been closed for the night. The area had been deserted, making the place seem unearthly. Sal almost expected zombies to creep out of the building at any moment, making him flee in horror.

“What's inside the barn?” Sal blurted out as soon as the bus stopped.

“Unsettling things,” Seth replied honestly. “I'll show you later.” He stepped out of the bus and went over to the vending machine where he bought a bottle of water and a canister of Pringles.

Sal turned on the radio.

When Seth returned to the bus, he walked around the car to the driver's seat and opened the door. “The song on the radio. What is it? It sounds familiar.”

Sal turned up the volume. “It's some weird disco song. Why?”

“Some disco-song?” Seth laughed mildly. “That's *Night Fever* by the *Bee Gees*, dude—they're legends. They helped define the disco era. Have you ever heard of a film called *Saturday Night Fever* starring John Travolta?”

“Vaguely.” Sal chuckled. “I don't do disco.”

“Oh, but you don't know what you're missing,” Seth said, reaching in over Sal and turning up the volume as high as it could go.

“What the hell, Seth?”

“Dancing's always fun, even for those who think they have two left feet.” Seth took a step to the right, one to the left, one backward, and one forward in time to the beat. He even did the disco-point, moving his hand up and down with his index finger pointing out. Seth looked hot, even while doing those idiotic dance moves.

"Come and dance with me," Seth said, putting out a hand and waiting for Sal to take it, "don't be such a wallflower. Are you afraid you might enjoy it?"

"The 1970s called. They want their tailored three-piece suit, shiny shirt and hip-hugger pants back," Sal said, trying to be dismissive, but he couldn't help but laugh. "Besides, it is still raining."

"Dance with me." Seth's eyes glowed in the darkness. "You're still wet besides, aren't you?"

Sal took Seth's hand. "Seth, I really don't dance." He felt like a small kid on the first day at school: unsure of everything.

"But that doesn't mean you can't dance." Seth more or less pulled him out of the car. "Just follow me."

Sal did what he was told, the infamous puppet on a string, but to his surprise, he actually enjoyed himself. He moved around after Seth, copying his moves. Gradually he started to do his own twists, turns, dips, and tricks. The scene was wacky: two young men, dancing disco, in the rain.

It was also perfect.

The music from the radio faded out, and Sal and Seth laughed. Sal felt light-hearted. He ducked under the roof of the bus and turned off the radio. When he faced Seth again, Seth's features were serious, and his seductive eyes had become regretful.

"I have to go, Sal. I'll see you around." He put two fingers up to his lips, kissed them, and put them on Sal's lips. "I left something in the glove compartment for you."

"What?" Sal dropped his car keys, and he bent to get them. When he stood back up, Seth had vanished into thin air. It was a nice party trick, having the ability to simply vanish whenever you felt like it.

Confused, branded a fool, and left behind with mixed emotions, Sal got into the bus and drove home.

The bus rolled out of sight.

Shit! He was losing grip. Seth's objective had been to seduce the mind-hacker and lure him in, not to fall for him.

Could the night get any worse? A thin spittle hung from his lips like foam around the mouth of a hard-driven horse. Sal stepped as hard as he could on the gas pedal, caused the bus's wheels to screech. His fucking driving instructor's voice reverberated inside his head when he stopped at a traffic light further up the road: "You need to slow down in conditions such as heavy rain. Driving even a few miles over the speed limit increases the chances that you'll lose control of the vehicle." The instructor had been a total moron. He hadn't liked Sal's way of braking, so the instructor kept slamming his own brake repeatedly, causing the car to jerk back and forth which made it impossible to drive.

To hell with it.

Sal didn't slow down, even the lights changed to yellow. He barely saw it turn to red as he blasted past the intersection.

The bus skidded on the wet road. Sal was smart enough to know not to slam the brakes.

Adding further fuel to Sal's aggravation was the sudden roar of a siren. A police car cropped up in the rear mirror, its red and blue lights flashing brightly. Sal had no option but to pull to the side of the road and wait for the officer to get out and make his approach.

He could handle this.

He lifted his foot off the gas, and the bus stopped its insane pace, finally coming to a full stop.

The officer—wearing a traditional blue police officer's uniform and black sunglasses—climbed out of his car and approached the bus. Sal noticed that the officer was slightly overweight as he tapped the window, signaling for Sal to roll it down.

"How's your day going, officer?" Sal asked the ruddy-faced cop.

"Good evening. I'm Officer Green, and I'm stopping you for driving one hundred and twenty-two miles per hour in twenty-five mile per hour speed zone. Do you have any reason for driving that fast?" the cop asked, ignoring Sal's question.

Sal resisted sassing the officer: No, I don't, because *Law and Order* lied to us all. "I was driving recklessly," he answered instead.

The cop raised his eyebrows as if he'd expected Sal to plead his innocence.

An immediate download crashed into Sal's head. The officer was trying to open a dialog to see if he could get some information about Sal, if he was intoxicated, nervous, or if he showed some other indicators that something was amiss. "You look wet. Do you always walk around in the rain late at night?"

"Only when I take dance lessons," Sal replied sourly.

"Can I see your license and registration, please?" the cop continued. Sal opened the glove compartment; it was the last place he'd seen his license.

He was searching for it among all the crap that had been shoved in there when he stumbled upon the note from Seth—he'd gone temporarily insane when Seth had walked away, and he'd forgotten all about it.

Help your brother find the girl he loves.

Love Seth.

An address had been written neatly beneath this.

Sal was taken aback for only a few seconds, but it was enough for the cop to get suspicious, and he loosened the holster on his gun and took a step back. "Please, turn off your engine and get out of the vehicle." Another download seemed to burn a hole in his skull; his mind-hacking skills had gone through the roof! Sal sucked in a deep breath and prepared for whatever graphic would hit him.

Officer Green was a paid informant for a local drug cartel. Because he worked in vice, he knew who was being investigated for violation of drug laws and whenever one of the cartel people came under investigation, he'd tip off his contact, which would inadvertently disappear, often to resurface in another country.

"Or what?" Sal's body hardened. "Are you going to tell on me?"

"What the hell's a vice cop doing working traffic anyway?"

"Huh?" Officer Green stiffened with shock. His eyes opened wide as he began to wonder who'd ratted him out. Slim Jim, perhaps?

Officer Green reached for his gun.

Sal swung the car door open with full force, hitting the cop who went staggering backward. Quick as a panther, Sal jumped out of the car and body tackled Officer Green. Sal had to resist the urge to yell "Timber!" as the officer hit the ground. He kicked the gun away, stepped hard on Officer Green's right arm, leaned in over him, and looked directly into the officer's core.

He saw his wife leaving him due to the lack of money.

So, that was how it had started.

Sal almost felt sorry for the guy.

"Here's what's going to happen, *Officer*," Sal wheezed. "You're going to forget that you ever saw me, and you're going to spend some of your blood money on something too expensive for a cop's pay—a yacht, shall we say—revealing your extra income.

"And no, you can't say you won the money."

Sal stood up and looked around, inspecting his surroundings. The weather had kept the roads empty, and there weren't any houses nearby. If there were any witnesses, he'd just have to deal with that later on.

He got into the bus and left a groggy Officer Green behind to deal with his newly assigned headache.

It was past midnight when Sal drove into the driveway of his house. The rain had stopped, but his entire body was aching. He turned off the engine and rested his head on the steering wheel. It had been a crazy night. As far as anyone knew, he'd been on a date.

Some date.

Sal laughed gravely. He pulled himself together, got out of the bus, removed his shoes and socks, and ringed them out. Sal unlocked the front door and stepped quietly inside. The house was quiet. Only Angel came to greet him.

"Hey, girl," Sal whispered. "How was your night? Mine was awful." Angel licked his hand in what seemed to be an attempt to comfort him. Sal threw her a snack and went upstairs to his room.

He found Carl where he'd last seen him, in his room, sound asleep in his bed.

Sal pulled out a spare mattress they used for sleepovers. He dropped his wet clothes and lay down on the floor next to Carl. His body was in an uproar. What the hell was going on? First Seth had kissed him, and then they'd danced and laughed in the rain. They'd really connected, or so he wanted to believe, before Seth had picked up and left.

That fucking barn. Those fucking Giants and all their bullshit.

They hadn't provided him with any answers besides the fact that he was somehow related to E.T.

If that were true, that would make Darwin Klaatu, the ambassador from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He imagined what the results of one of those personality tests in those stupid magazines for idiots Rosie read: "You are firm but fair. You are logical and emotionless. Your mission is to convince Earthlings to live in peace and to love one another. And if they don't, your people will crush them like the bugs they really are."

"Rosie." Sal sighed. "And Jack." He'd missed them both all of a sudden.

Why couldn't he have just read Darwin and the others from the beginning? It would have saved him a great deal of trouble. The problem was that he couldn't because they were supposed to be his peers. Besides his "trade"—or whatever the fuck it was called—had a mind of its own. He'd been so blissful in Seth's company that his sense of critical thought had been completely drowned out.

Damn you, Seth.

He had to take his mind off Seth, or he'd go crazy. He found some headphones which he plugged into the TV. *Agent 47* showed up on the screen to take his mind off things. He watched until he was exhausted and fell into an uneasy sleep with a disturbing dream in which Darwin was the storyteller.

"I went to South Africa," Darwin had said in the dream. "I wanted to make a difference in my life.

"The country has a very high rate of murders, assaults, rapes, and other crimes compared to most countries. With the domestic violence in South Africa along with the high murder rate, its a particularly dangerous place to be a woman.

"The country has been labeled the rape capital of the world, with one in four men admitting to having raped someone.

"There is the normalization of violence, which is seen as a necessary and justified means of resolving conflict. Males believe that coercive sexual behavior against women is legitimate.

"The reliance on a criminal justice system that is mired in many issues, including inefficiency and corruption, was troubling, and a subculture of violence and criminality, ranging from individual criminals who rape or rob to informal groups or more formalized gangs, was continually growing. Those involved in the subculture are engaged in criminal careers and commonly use firearms, with the exception of Cape Town, where knife violence is more prevalent. Credibility within this subculture is related to the readiness to resort to extreme violence.

"As a result of the poverty, unstable living arrangements, and being brought up with inconsistent and uncaring parenting, some South African children are exposed to risk factors which enhance the chances they'll become involved in criminality and violence.

"South African police have been heavily criticized for failing to reduce crime levels. Violence—whether it's murder, rape, or assault—isn't something that the police can prevent or reduce on their own, and that's where I came in, trying to build better communities.

"Just east of Johannesburg's flashy suburbs is Urbanette. The population was around two hundred thousand people when I was there with newcomers arriving daily, most of them poor South Africans or migrants. At the time, Urbanette was a congregation of wooden, corrugated iron shacks and dusty streets.

"Many youth hoped to improve their lives and the places they called home. There were only a few permanent brick houses and several schools in the area. Most of its residents, however, continued to live without electricity and running water.

"Life in Urbanette was cheap—you didn't have to pay rent for your hut, and you could buy meat for under a dollar and enough to live off of for two days.

"Volunteers in the residents' association built and maintained the public toilets in Urbanette. The government did little to improve sanitation in the area. Like many informal settlements in South Africa, Urbanette was the result of the politics of racial segregation under an Apartheid regime, and the government failed to implement a proper housing program.

"After the end of Apartheid in 1994, the democratically elected African National Congress (ANC) government promised every South African their own brick house. They built millions of houses but failed to meet huge the demand of the growing urban population.

"I started to patrol the streets, and things got better for a while. Crimes dropped a bit out of fear for the tall, thin, pale, scary man. Sure, I got into fights, but it was nothing that I couldn't handle. I had followers who liked my initiative.

"Then, one day, two mutilated bodies were discovered. A man who was arrested on suspicion of raping and murdering the two small girls in Urbanette confessed. Urbanette residents went on the rampage after the murders, blocking roads with burning tires and pelting police with rocks. Some of the residents gathered outside a police station, demanding the suspect be handed over for vigilante justice.

"That was when I turned cowardly. In my sorrow over not being able to help those people, I got drunk. Not just drunk, but smashed, wrecked, hammered...you get it.

"So, being stupid like that, I was attacked while trying to take a piss. I nearly had my throat slashed. If it hadn't been for Orion being in the neighborhood, I would have been dead.

"He saved me. He healed me.

"That's what I do: go about the world, helping people. It's my responsibility to do so."

Sal woke up from his dark dream with Carl shaking him hard. Sweat trailed down Sal's back, and his muscles felt tight. He looked up at Carl.

"I was having a bad dream," Sal said.

"Yeah, no shit," Carl said. "You were screaming like crazy. It must have been some nightmare."

"What time is it?" Sal's eyes squinted at the daylight.

"It's noon. Are you okay? I didn't hear you come home last night."

"I got sidetracked." Sal pushed his blanket aside and decided to head to the bathroom. He needed some space before the questions rained down him. Sal had made to the door before Carl asked how Seth was doing. It was a question that made him lose focus, and he slammed his small toe hard against the doorframe. He grabbed his foot and held hug it.

Goddamn it.

Seth. The name was like a bucket of cold water to the face.

He half-turned to face Carl. "The truth is I don't know. We kissed, we danced, and then he ditched me."

"You kissed? He ditched you?" Carl asked. "How? When?"

"I'm as surprised as you are." Sal was annoyed. "You see, Seth can disappear whenever he wants. I suppose he got bored that I didn't stay around for a game of Hide-and-Seek." Sal rubbed his throbbing toe.

"I'm sorry. I know how much you liked him." Carl sounded sincere, and Sal felt bad for being so touchy.

"The good news is, I know where Louise is. Mr. Hide-and-Seek gave me a note. I guess it checks out." He hoped it would. He was distracted by Officer Green when he'd read it. "It's in the glove compartment in the bus."

"Best brother *ever!*" Carl hugged him swiftly, and then he hurried to the bus. Carl had more faith in Seth than he did at the moment.

Sal stepped into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He looked awful. Hell, he felt awful. He'd make the perfect zombie at that point—George A. Romero would've been proud. His eyes looked sunken, his pale skin looked like dough, and his hair had mud in it.

When Sal stepped out of the shower, his physical body felt better, but his insides were still in chaos. All he wanted to do now and for a long time to come was to indulge himself in *Hitman*. Even his beloved basketball was far from his mind.

He passed his father in the hall. "Hey, Sal," he said. "Good to see you up. It's Vickie's birthday today, so we're all heading over to The Ugly Duckling for dinner tonight."

"I'll be there," Sal said, holding up his thumb.

"Great! Six o'clock." His father looked pleased.

Sal grimaced when he entered his room and closed the door behind him. He wasn't in the mood for social functions right then.

He looked out the window to see Vickie playing catch with the twins.

She looked so happy, so free. At least he'd done something right.

Sal found his phone, flipped through it, and collapsed on the bed, his thoughts running amok. He was sure he was going crazy. Sal opened a

playlist on his phone, feeling the need to add some music to his game.

To his great dissatisfaction, *Against All Odds* by Phil Collins came flying from the phone.

"Oh, hell, no!" Sal addressed the phone. "Why are you mocking me?"

Sal desperately tried to turn the song off, but the phone seemed to jam instead, and the volume turned up and the song continued.

Sal tossed a blanket over his face.

Carl came crashing through the door. "Sal, I..." was all a bemused Carl was able to say before he chuckled. "If only the world could see you

now: Don Juan brought to his knees by a knight in shining armor. All of the fair maidens in this city would go crazy at the sight of you."

Sal flicked Carl an "up yours" gesture using his index and middle fingers, and Carl's chuckle turned to loud laughter.

"I really dig the choice of song, bro. It really compliments your torment."

“Can I help you with anything?” Sal said from beneath the blanket.

“I looked up the address. It’s a four-hour drive from here.” Carl switched off his phone and Sal sighed.

“Thank God.”

“Please remove the blanket while I’m talking to you. It’s like talking to Casper the Friendly Ghost.”

“Only if you promise to stop badgering me, and *don't* say his name.” Sal reluctantly removed the blanket.

“Thank you. The city’s called Limestone. It has a population of a thousand people. It’s surrounded by weather-beaten desert, as far as I can tell. If the note’s for real, Louise’s out there, in Limestone.” Carl stared at the note like it was poetry, and he was a dreamy boy absorbed in it.

“When are you planning on leaving?” Sal said, hoping to break the notorious spell Carl was under. It was the same spell Sal was under, a spell causing the chemical meltdown of his thought and reason. At least Carl had hope.

“Tomorrow morning. Will you see me all the way to her door? That way, if she rejects me, we can listen to Phil Collins together.” Carl was joking, but his voice had a hint of the jitters.

“Of course. I need to get out of here, anyway.” Sal and Carl touched knuckles.

“What are you going to say to Mom and Dad?” Sal asked as he reunited with Agent 47.

“Nothing. I figured I’d call them once I was in Limestone when it was too late for them to talk me out of it. Besides, I don’t want to spoil Vickie’s birthday.”

The dinner at The Ugly Duckling was a catastrophe. One of the twins, Joanna, threw a piece of meat which landed on someone's plate a few tables over. Thankfully, the man was very understanding. Anthony, the other twin, started to complain that he wasn't feeling well. After taking his first bite of his food, he coughed and vomited all over the table.

Luckily, the vomit didn't affect anyone else in the restaurant. Who would've thought a kid that size could spew so much vomit?

Sal's mother took him to the bathroom to clean up, and a brawl broke out, reportedly started when one woman accused another of cutting in line. The parties of both women interfered, and a regular fist fight broke out. Staff members appeared helpless to stop or remove people from the restaurant during the aggressive incident which escalated when people climbed over chairs and tables as they tried to get at one another. In addition to tables and chairs, people used whatever they found in the restaurant as weapons: forks, knives, and the like.

The custom-made birthday cake for Aunt Vickie was destroyed in the process.

Sal sighed, gave a resigned shake of the head, stood up, grabbed the first guy in his way, and tossed him to the side in an attempt to clear a path for his horrified family and anyone brave enough to follow to escape through the back entrance.

The police were eventually called to the scene, and the rest of the horrified guests were escorted out the back door. Although the incident was isolated, many people in Strong Edge weren't happy about it.

Furious customers asked why management hadn't intervened sooner. Some customers even threatened to boycott the restaurant. Luckily, no injuries resulted from the chair-throwing brawl.

“Did you know that Rosie and Jack were dating?” Sal asked Carl as they were driving down a lonely, two-lane highway with no gas station in sight. Civilization seemed like a distant memory out there. They passed endless miles of asphalt running toward distant mountains in a beautifully desolate desert. They'd packed some survival supplies and brought an extra can of fuel along.

Carl reached out for his water bottle and took a sip. “What do you mean?”

“Holding hands, kissing, laughing, and going out together.” Sal turned up the air conditioner in the bus. The rain was on a fast retreat, and the heat and dry weather had returned.

“What are you talking about?” Carl studied the note with Louise's address as if it was a secret map. The GPS had found the place through some alternative routes, and Sal hoped it would turn out to be accurate. He'd hate to be stranded out in the middle of nowhere.

“I saw them together on Friday night, down by The Old Gnome.” He immediately regretted his words.

“What were you doing by The Old Gnome?” Carl looked up at Sal with great interest.

“It's a long story. I was there with...” Sal searched for the words, “...him.” He could feel Carl studying him, getting ready to give him the third degree, so he continued to talk.

“He wanted to see Strong Edge, so I showed him around. He seemed interested in the old Strong Edge Plaza.”

“You went to a shopping mall that's been closed for years?” Carl had a big smirk on his face. “Is that where you *sealed the deal*?” Carl emphasized the last three words. “By the way, did he kiss you or did you kiss him?”

“What?” The questions had left Sal thoroughly perplexed.

Sal stopped the bus and got out. He stood on the side of the road with his arms crossed and his eyes fixed on the horizon.

“Sal, come on. What’s up with you? These are easy questions. We’ve always shared this kind of stuff,” Carl called out of the window.

“I’m sorry. I won’t mention the ‘unnamable’ anymore. Besides, it’s fucking hot, and we’ve got a long way to go.”

“You promise?” Sal yelled over his shoulder. He looked like a child who’d been promised a trip to an amusement park but had ended up at the doctor’s office instead.

“I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die. Now, come on.”

Sal turned around, faced the bus, and yelled, “He kissed *me*, okay?”

Carl held up his thumb. “I’ve never seen anyone wipe the floor with you this way before,” he added after some hesitation as Sal entered the bus.

“Do you want to walk to Limestone?” Sal flicked Carl the Vs while Carl just laughed.

Though Sal was annoyed, he set the bus back in motion. He’d checked his phone a million times for text messages from Seth—he couldn’t help himself. It sucked, big time. His unresolved situation and feelings left him absolutely frustrated. “And who are you to talk about wiping the floor? We’re driving through a fucking wasteland to get to the back of beyond because of a girl *you* like.” The words flew out from him like steam from an overheated kettle.

Carl was quiet as he considered his brother’s words. When at last he spoke, it was with great patience. “I tease you because you’re my kid brother, but what I’m trying to say is I’m not walking away from this. I think she’s worth fighting for, even though there’s a chance I’m going to fail and look like an idiot.

“I just don’t think you should give up on He-Whose-Name-We-Should-Not-Speak. Don’t walk away, not just yet.”

“Oh, he’s doing all the walking, I assure you,” Sal said rather miffed.

His voice softened, and he said, “But I hear what you’re saying.”

“All right.” Carl punched Sal on the shoulder. “On that note, here’s a little music for the road: *Hopelessly Devoted to You* by Olivia Newton-John.”

Sal turned his head and glared at Carl, giving him a hostile stare.

“Just kidding.” Carl grinned.

The brothers raced toward the lonely town containing a certain person of interest to the tones of *Rage Against the Machine*.

Limestone was a small town in the middle of the wilderness. Once you exited the highway, it was only accessible by a dirt road, some twenty kilometers long. For anything more than a tank of gas, you'd have to drive to the neighboring town Compton, whether it was to stock up your fridge or go to school; it wasn't a town you just stumbled upon.

Old bikes, front porches, and dusty cacti seemed to be the common ingredients for the typical yard. Nestled in the heart of Limestone, a diner in classic, small, vintage, train car style served hungry customers. Murphy's Diner & Soda Fountain was an old-school diner, complete with old-school soda-fountains.

Sal pulled up in front of the diner and parked the bus. There were no street signs posted, so it was impossible to know exactly which street was which. The GPS had taken them as far as it could, leaving them stranded outside the diner.

Carl was disheartened. He was so close to Louise and yet so far. Heads turned when the two brothers walked into Murphy's Diner and introduced themselves: a good-looking, young man with blue eyes, shoulder-length hair, dirty jeans, and a skull-faced t-shirt followed by a tall, muscular, outlandish-looking young man with pitch black hair and eyes.

"How can I help you two gentlemen?" a kind waitress asked when Sal and Carl approached the counter.

"Coffee, or perhaps a Limestone Special?" she pointed behind her to a picture of a huge burger.

"Two half-pound burger patties, cheddar, mozzarella, Swiss, bacon, onion straws. BBQ sauce. Lettuce, tomato & red onion. Served with fries and onion rings," read the description below the photo.

Sal nodded with a lively expression on his face as he studied the burger.

"Maybe later. I need to find Circle Drive. My friend lives there." Carl showed the waitress the note.

“Yeah, I know this house. New people just moved in there. People usually move to Limestone to get away from something.” The waitress surveyed Carl suspiciously. “This town isn’t easy to come by.”

Sal stepped closer to the counter and gazed directly at the waitress. He was too tired for this bullshit, no matter how good the waitress’ intentions were. Sal leaned slightly forward, his black eyes unblinking as he locked onto the waitress like a missile locked onto a target. “I’d like the Limestone Special to go, please, and directions to Circle Drive.” He spoke softly, his hypnotic tongue seeming to enchant the waitress. Carl was a bundle of nerves next to him, scared to attract unwanted attention.

The waitress looked animatronic as she stood behind the counter, nodding mechanically. She smiled, noted Sal’s order on her notepad, and placed the order with the chef. When she returned, she gave directions to the light blue house with the red door on Circle Drive.

“That was fucking reckless, Sal,” Carl said when they were back in the bus and out of hearing range for curious ears. “We don’t need the town to chase us down with torches and pitchforks. What were you thinking, doing your voodoo?”

“I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry,” Sal apologized

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you disturbed the peace.” Carl gazed through Murphy’s Diner’s clean-scrubbed windows. The waitress was cleaning the counter, and the customers sat, happily eating their food. They looked a bit like cows chewing cud.

Circle Drive wasn’t hard to find, and the blue house with the red door stood out beside the other, less-colorful houses.

Sal parked the bus across the street from the house, which was in great contrast to where Louise had lived in Strong Edge. The front lawn was healthy and well-kept. Someone had taken the time to water it, mow it, and remove the weeds to increase curb appeal. The bushes around the house had been neatly trimmed, and the shadow of a beautiful apple tree was there to provide an inviting refuge from the sun. The house itself was well-maintained and surrounded by a white fence.

Carl crawled slowly out of the bus. He was nervous, shaking despite the hot summer breeze. Sal could sense his brain searching for any sign that Louise was home and that she was all right.

Sal carefully closed the car door as not to frighten his mesmerized brother. “Are you going to take a closer look?”

“Yeah.” Carl let it sink in a bit before he moved closer to the house.

“Yeah.”

“You want me to come with you?” Sal asked his brother who was moving at the same pace as a turtle.

“No, I got this.” Carl finally reached the white fence and clenched it for a while.

Sal sat on the curb, eating his burger, watching Carl’s every move. After what seemed to be an hour—enough time for Sal to have chewed his way through half a burger—Carl finally reached the front door and rang the doorbell.

No one answered.

He tried again with the same result.

Disappointed, he drifted back to the bus, fighting a mixture of competing emotions.

Sal swallowed a chunk of burger and licked his fingers.

Carl collapsed next to Sal on the curb. “Wow, that burger didn’t stand a chance, did it?”

“If Jack were here, he'd say something like, 'You eat like you mean it. You should be the face of a sexy, new, Carl’s Jr. campaign.’” Sal said, and a smirk crept over his face.

“And Rosie would say something like, 'Is there an app I can download to make you go away?’” Carl added.

They laughed, and for a minute. Carl seemed less worried. The boys sat for a while, studying the house in front of them. The house held the answer to a heartbreaking mystery and redemption. “Arg! I'm going fucking nuts, Sal. We've ridden all day, through flat and uninteresting landscape, only to find an empty house.”

Sal studied the neighborhood. There had to be something they could do to pass the time until Louise had returned. If she returned. Sal noticed some ugly lawn gnomes, staring at him from the front yard diagonally across from him, reminding him of The Old Gnome back home.

“Come on: it looks like someone's having a garage sale a few houses up the street. Let's check it out,” he said hastily and got to his feet.

Furniture, books, tools, clothing, and sporting and exercise equipment were lined up on a well-kept lawn. Sal picked up an old basketball. It had been well-used, and he felt sure it had made someone happy.

The game.

It seemed so long ago that he was supposed to have played in the big game. He felt different. At its heart, basketball was a simple game; things didn't feel so simple any more.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he spotted an old basketball hoop hanging over a garage, and he couldn't help himself. He jumped slightly forward and threw the ball. I made a perfect bow and went clean through the net.

He decided to buy the ball. As he went to locate the person in charge of the garage sale, he stumbled upon a stack of old newspapers. For some reason, an article on the front of one of the papers caught his attention:

House burned to the ground. Was it accidental?

The Estate Gazette, 2000

A small town was in a state of unimaginable grief Tuesday, as investigators tried to determine the cause of a house fire that killed two people. Firefighters were called to the house on Friday, shortly before 3 A.M.

The family lived in a single house that has now been blackened and badly burned, leaving the townsfolk wondering why they couldn't get out alive. A baby had been saved from the fire but died sadly later at the hospital as a result of smoke and soot inhalation.

The fire moved very quickly, and the loss was horrendous. Many people are questioning why the fire department was not alerted sooner and what could have possibly ignited the deadly flames. The family had not been alerted by smoke detectors, which only adds to the mystery since there were five of them in the house. The Fire Marshal is currently investigating any issues related to the performance of the smoke detectors. They stress how important it is to ensure that your smoke detectors are properly maintained.

“The family were newcomers and had renovated the home themselves. They were always polite and kind when they were in town, but they mostly kept to themselves. Nevertheless, they didn’t deserve a fate like this,” said one of the townspeople, a Mr. Jacobsen.

It’s not the only tragedy the town has endured, as two weeks prior to the fire, a middle-aged couple was found lifeless in their house. Whether they were victims of a crime is still uncertain.

That was when Sal remembered the awful dream he'd had that had terrorized him: an old barn, blood spatter on the wall, and people yelling and screaming. Something was burning, and he was suffocating. Had it been a coincidence?

An alarm sounded inside of him. He just couldn't seem to gather his thoughts. His mind was preoccupied by the article, and he couldn't seem to shake their screams inside of him.

“May I help you?” An older, friendly-looking man smiled at him.

“What?” Sal answered. He was at a loss.

“The basketball,” the man said with kind interest. “You have great talent, and you're a good height for basketball. Do you play?”

“Yeah, I do. How much for the ball?” Sal asked.

“Take it. It deserves a good home. It was my son’s.” The man's eyes took on a distant look.

Images flashed, forcing Sal to cover his face with his hands—the boy had been fourteen when he was killed by a drunk driver.

“Are you all right?” The man looked concerned.

“I’m fine. I just got dizzy for a second.” He had to learn how to control his mind-hacking. It was only getting stronger, and he couldn’t let it get out of control.

“Let us get you some water.” The man hurried back to his house. Sal gazed over at Carl who was standing on the sidewalk, staring desperately at the blue house.

The man returned with a glass of water.

“Thank you, sir,” Sal said politely.

The man chuckled. “The name is Ned.”

“Nice to meet you, Ned. I’m Sal.” Sal hesitated for a minute, but he had to ask. “Ned, this paper...is this a local paper?”

Ned looked at the paper. “Yes, only they closed down about seven years ago.”

“The fire...” Sal didn’t know how to continue.

“I remember it. It was horrible. The poor family was burned alive: a woman, her sister, and a poor baby.” Ned shook his head. “It was a tragedy. The father was badly burned when he tried to save them.”

“The father?” Sal asked with thoughtful attention.

“Yes. Charlie. He still lives here, in Limestone. He lives in an RV on an old camping spot outside of town.” Ned went silent and looked around him.

“Thank you, Ned. I’m not here to cause any problems, I promise,” Sal reassured Ned who he thought resembled a skeleton.

“I know.” Ned smiled. “You just remind me of something.”

“Carl? Oh, my God, it is really you!”

Sal and Ned were interrupted by shouts of joy from Carl and Louise who were running toward each other with outstretched arms. It was like a scene from a movie, Louise being bundled into Carl’s arms, and Carl caressing her gently. Everything on the small street stopped as people watched the two lovers reunite.

As a mechanical response to the situation, Sal reached for his phone to check his messages. He had a few texts, but none of them from him.

Sal was being ridiculous, opening an invitation for mockery. Rosie's voice echoed inside his head, "You might as well pour a bucket of glitter over you and stand in the sun." He jammed the phone into his pocket; it was time to pay Charlie a visit.

Sal watched the RV with great anticipation. The small campsite was located in the middle of nature. The scenery was characterized by granite outcrops, spectacular views, and roaming wildlife. He'd left Carl back at Circle Drive. "I'll be back later," he'd shouted through the window.

Down near the diner, a couple explained to him where he'd find the old camping spot.

His heart was beating fast as he approached the door and reached out to knock. Sal knocked a few times, but no one opened it. He sat down on an old camping chair with a side table when he heard twigs snapping and the sound of a weapon being loaded. Sal rose to his feet so fast, he knocked his chair over.

"What do you want?" a deep voice sounded somewhere from behind the RV.

Sal tried to get his breath under control. "I'm here to speak to Charlie." Where the hell was the guy?

"Why?" the voice demanded to know.

"I think we're somehow connected," Sal said with a trembling voice.

The deep voice laughed.

"Please, I am not here to cause trouble." Sal's eyes desperately searched the site for the person behind the voice.

There was no response to his last statement.

"Okay, I'll just leave." Sal maneuvered toward the bus.

"Wait. Let me see you." The deep voice didn't sound as hostile as it had before.

A tall black man appeared from behind the RV. He studied Sal as if he was memorizing his every feature, lowered his weapon, and came closer.

“I'm Charlie. Who are you?” Charlie was a handsome black man with a golden-brown complexion. There was sadness in his dark eyes. His rich, chocolate brown hair was thick and lustrous. His body was fit, and his hands slightly rough from working. His face and neck had burn marks on them.

“My name's Sal. I read an article about a fire, and it reminded me of something.” Sal looked at something behind Charlie and felt his seductive eyes grow sad.

Charlie softened. “You look so familiar. Those black eyes...your features...your complexion...I need a drink.” He stomped back to the RV.

Sal stood nailed to the ground as his mind was blasted by information. It was like gigabytes had downloaded into his brain, and he felt blood run from his nose.

He saw himself walking down a hall in a hospital. He was panicked, and he was searching for something...someone. People around him ignored him until a young doctor pulled him aside. He asked for his son who had been rescued from the fire. When the doctor told him his son was dead as a result of the fire, his world fell apart. He asked to see the boy's body and was taken to see a small, lifeless body. He screamed and started to throw things until security arrived and held him down while the doctor sedated him.

When he came to, he was in a prison cell, but he was released soon thereafter. His heart was broken, and his life no longer had no meaning. Johnnie Walker soon became his new best friend.

Sal collapsed on the ground, a look of horror crossing his face. “She lied to you...the doctor.” A lone tear traced down his cheek, quickly turning to beads of water streaming down, one after the other, and then to heaving sobs that tore at his throat.

Charlie ran out of the RV, got down on his knees, and put a warm arm around Sal, who sobbed into Charlie's chest while his hands clutched at his shirt.

They sat like that for a while until Sal had stopped crying and Charlie dragged him into the RV.

Sal washed the blood from his face while Charlie made tea. The van was tall enough for them to stand up inside. Even though there was a kitchen, living room, and a bathroom, it was small. The toilet and the shower were combined into one space.

Charlie placed a steaming cup of tea in front of Sal. "Who are you?" he asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Sal shook his head.

"Try me." Charlie leaned forward. "You didn't come here by chance." Sal sighed deeply. "I can see things. Things inside of people. I saw you walking around the hospital. You were looking for someone. You were looking for...*me*."

He expected Charlie to grab him by the neck and toss him out of the RV, only he didn't, so Sal continued. "I know this because I saw her, the doctor." Sal pulled a photo up on his phone and showed it to Charlie who took the phone and stared at the photo in disbelief.

"I remember her because she cried when she showed me the dead body of my son."

"She's my mother, and I think she lied to you." Sal felt the tears stream down his cheeks once more while Charlie sat in front of him, shocked to his core.

Sal took his phone, dialed a number, and waited for an answer. The reception was poor but functional.

"Hello? Sal? Is that you? Where are you?" his mother sounded worried on the other end.

"I'm here with Charlie. You remember Charlie, right?"

"Who?" his mother sounded confused.

"Charlie, my real father. The guy you stole me from." Sal's voice was cool but on the verge of erupting into anger.

"Sal, I don't know what you mean." Sal assumed she was trying to buy herself some time to think of an answer.

"Tell me the truth, because believe me, I know you were there that day," Sal hissed into the phone.

"We did what we believed was the best for, sweetie. We never meant to hurt anyone." His mother started to cry.

“You showed him someone else’s dead baby. That's fucking sick,” Sal yelled and ended the call. Darkness rolled in over him. He grabbed his teacup, threw it against the wall, and ran out of the RV, screaming, “That fucking bitch. That lying, fucking bitch,” at the top of his lungs. Sal began to hyperventilate while the world around him started to spin. “Sal, my boy, please, listen to me. I think I know why she did it, why she lied,” Charlie pleaded with him. “Please, come back inside.”

"I spent four years in prison for a crime I didn't commit," Charlie told him. "And I wasn't alone.

"My wife—your mother—went to Hell and back trying to prove my innocence, but it started to take a toll on her.

"I was accused of assaulting a woman. She'd been drunk when it happened and couldn't remember the name of the guy who did it, so she said it had been me.

"Based on a physical description of the attacker, police showed her my photo in an array of nine men. The woman selected my photograph, and I was arrested the following day.

"There was just one witness—her friend—who had been just as drunk to back up her story.

"They never contacted me to ask my side.

"I was strip-searched, put in an isolation cell completely naked because of my past use of antidepressants, which deemed me worthy of suicide watch. Next, I was marched into court in an orange jumpsuit and shackles.

"I spent four years in jail. I lost my job, had my life threatened, spent almost ten thousand dollars in out-of-pocket legal fees until I was able to leave the slammer and clear my name. Someone finally stepped up and provided texts proving the girl didn't know who'd assaulted her. She and her friend were both charged with perjury.

"Jail was terrible, I might add, living like an animal locked in a cage wasn't for me.

"I wasn't angry. Instead, I channeled my energy into raising awareness about the problem of wrongful convictions, and the danger the death penalty posed with respect to executing innocent people.

"To date, nationwide, there have been two-hundred and eighteen wrongful convictions have been proven through DNA, and many additional exonerations achieved by other means, including the discovery of new evidence, materials purposely withheld from the defense, and the recantation of eyewitness identifications.

"Nevertheless, I couldn't escape the stress of being a prisoner. Even years later, I'd have panic attacks triggered by a memory, a casual event, someone yelling at me, or looking at me funny.

"The anxiety would arrive even in the most casual and safe of circumstances, like at family gatherings. I became hypersensitive to what people said or didn't say, and how they'd said it.

"In the end, your mother and I decided to move away and we pretty much kept to ourselves. Your mother had inherited some money from some relative, and she supported the family and kept us together.

"Once, when I'd come home from doing the groceries, I found the house on fire. You know the story from there—I managed to get you out of the house and went to look for you after my burns had been treated.

Sal was sitting in Charlie's RV, listening to his story. How could Charlie not be bitter?

"Your parents, they wanted to give you a life free from danger. The arsonist who had burned my house down was a man who believed me to be guilty." Charlie said earnestly.

Sal kept looking at the floor. What the hell was he supposed to say? He'd been lied to all of his life.

"The day you were born was the best day of my life. The doctors and nurses were puzzled because you didn't look like any of us." Charlie smiled at the memory. "I didn't care. I knew you were mine.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters, Sal?"

"The twins...and Carl," Sal said without taking his eyes from the floor.

"Carl's the one I came here with. He came to find his girlfriend."

"I see," Charlie said. "I take it you two are close?"

"I would die for him," Sal said without hesitation.

"*That's* what I am thankful for, Sal." Charlie forced Sal to look at him.

"You said he came to see his girlfriend. That must've been a long trip."

Charlie took a sip of his tea.

"She got into some trouble and moved here. Carl decided he couldn't live without her, and here we are," Sal said absently.

"What about you? Do you have a special someone?" Charlie asked in a warm voice.

"Not really. I don't really date."

Charlie saw right through him. "You're so full of shit," Charlie said laughing. "Someone broke your heart. What happened?"

"I thought we had something. I've certainly never felt this way before. But then he just left. He left me behind like a fool and without an explanation, and I haven't heard from him since." Sal said bleakly.

"Him?" Charlie seemed surprised but not outraged.

"I like all people." Sal looked at Charlie to make sure he'd gotten the message.

“I see,” was all Charlie said. “What’s his name?”

Sal shifted, uncomfortable in his seat. Charlie was just like Carl, always poking at his weak spots. “His name's Seth.”

“Seth,” Charlie repeated. “The god of the desert, storms, disorder, violence, and foreigners in ancient Egyptian religion. I assume he's very handsome.”

Sal nodded.

“It’s like an addiction, isn’t it? Your mother had me going insane when I first met her. She never left my mind, she was always there—the perfect drug.

“You want to see a picture of her?” Charlie pulled out his wallet. A face cut right from the pages of a woman's magazine met Sal. A woman with piercing eyes of green and straight, light brown hair smiled at her audience.

“She’s...” Sal held his tongue.

“White,” Charlie said, finishing Sal’s sentence. “Like you, I am a people person.” He laughed heartily.

“Her name was Gloria. She did to me exactly what Seth did to you. She left me behind at a restaurant. I sat there like a jackass until closing time, waiting for her to come back.”

“Man. that’s tough. Why did you stay behind for so long?” Sal was full of admiration

“She was the girl I wanted to marry.” Charlie ran a finger over the picture. “So I drove to her house, put Frankie Valli on—*Can’t Take My Eyes Off You*—on the stereo, and sang the lyrics as loud as I could. I woke up the entire neighborhood.”

“That's *so* cool.” Sal laughed.

“I suppose so. She said she was testing me, to see how badly I wanted her. From that day on we were inseparable. She stood by me and fought for me while I was in prison, never doubting my innocence. That night, when I was released from jail, it was magical. I’ll spare you the details, but you were born nine months later.”

Charlie held Sal's hand gently. “I can’t believe you're here.

Sal's eyes filled with tears. "Me neither. Will you come to see me play basketball? I'm good."

"I'll be damned. You *do* take after me. Born gifted with incredible height." Charlie was all smiles. "Of course, I will."

Sal dried his eyes.

"This one time, in college, with 45.9 seconds left in the game, a fight broke out on the court between players. After the fight was broken up, a fan threw a drink at a friend of mine. My friend entered the crowd and sparked a massive brawl between players and fans that stretched onto the court."

Sal and Charlie talked for hours in the RV. Charlie told Sal about his life, and Sal did the same, but he left out the part about the Giants and his visit to Giant Hill.

He forgot about Carl until he received a text message. "It looks like my brother's staying in Limestone with his girl. Someone on Circle Drive lent him a room to stay in." Sal was happy for Carl, but at the same time, he was sad to leave without him.

"Let me guess: he's staying at Ned's house?" Charlie asked.

"How did you know?" Sal asked.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. "Ned's a good guy. He helped me quit drinking."

"Can I stay here with you?" Sal urged Charlie.

Charlie sighed. "Go and say goodbye to your brother. Then, you need to go home and forgive your parents."

"Why?"

"You know why. Don't let the darkness consume you. I'll still be here."

Charlie said softly, "You are my boy. Always. That will never change."

Sal felt the muscles of his chin tremble and tears spill down his face.

Charlie reached over and dried his tears away. "Besides, I still need to kick your ass at some one-on-one basketball."

He smiled beneath the tears.

Charlie walked Sal to the bus. He wrapped an arm around Sal's shoulders and pulled him close, gently rubbing his arm. Sal cried his eyes out as he drove the bus from the old campsite.

What a circus his life had turned out to be.

He found Carl with Louise at Circle Drive in front of Ned's house. As Sal got out of the bus, Carl's eyes showed a kind of gentle concern, and he laid his hand on Sal's shoulder.

"What?" was all he said.

They sat on the curb while Sal, all torn up, told Carl Charlie's heartbreaking story.

"I am sorry, Sal, but I suppose we both knew something was off. Why don't you stay here with me for a while?"

Sal shook his head. "Thanks, but I have to go back and finish this."

"Then I'll go with you." Carl put his hand on Sal's.

"No. Stay here with Louise. I'll come back."

Carl hugged Sal goodbye. "I love you, kid brother."

"I love you, big brother." Sal waved goodbye and jumped into the bus, feeling sick at heart as the bus rolled out of Limestone.

It was a lonely, long drive home. His thoughts kept looping around, and it was driving him crazy. When he pulled up to his house in Strong Edge, he didn't want to go inside. He wanted to crawl into the tree house and stay there until someone arrived to save him. There was a gaping hole inside of him, yearning to be healed. After everything that had happened, it was hard to go inside the house.

The light was still on in the kitchen, which meant his parents were still up, waiting for him.

Parents.

Sal gave a dry chuckle. He remembered Charlie's words: he had to forgive them, if not for his own sake, then for Charlie and Carl's sake. If it hadn't been for his doctor parents, he wouldn't have Carl.

He got out of the bus, slammed the door hard, and walked to the front door of the house. Sal took a couple of deep breaths, slapped his face a few times, and entered the house.

The atmosphere was quiet, dull, and dark, like in a graveyard. The house suddenly lacked color and life. Angel didn't come to greet him like she usually did.

Sal removed his shoes and waited for his parents to appear. He knew he should just stay quiet and wait for the storm to abate.

"Sal is that you?" A soft voice sounded from the kitchen. "Is Carl with you?"

Who the fuck else would it be, Sal thought to himself. He walked to the kitchen where his parents were sitting like two ghosts at the kitchen table. "Sal we don't know what you were told today, but—" His father had spoken with a shaky voice. His mother was sniffing like crazy, and Sal knew she'd been crying.

"Just stop. The thing is I forgive you. What you did was shitty, but I forgive you. You only did what you thought was right." There was some truth to the words despite the rage inside of him.

“Sal, you're not thinking straight. Whatever this man said to you...” His father was grasping at straws.

Sal laughed. The atmosphere was suffocating and tragicomic—they still believed they could lie to him. He took a chair and turned it around so his chest would be against the backrest when he sat on it.

Sal inhaled a big breath of fresh air and stared at his father, nailing him to his seat. “What are you hiding, Dad?”

His body still ached from the flashes back at Charlie’s place, and a shooting pain went through his skull as more images came trampling through.

He got into white supremacy when he'd said he was a lost fourteen-year-old boy who had hooked up with a rough crowd. He'd shaved his head, waved swastika flags, and learned to hate.

Sal tasted blood in his mouth, and he had to pull back from the vision. He wiped sweat and blood from his face while his parents seemed to have turned into stone.

“A fucking Nazi?” Sal snorted. “Do you still have the tattoo, Dad? Is that why you took me away from Charlie? Because he was black?”

His father was sweating bullets, and his mother seemed ready to press the panic button.

“Don’t look like that,” Sal said to his father’s terrorized face.

“Mom saved you. You took her name and put that shit behind you, but one can’t help but wonder.” Sal rose to get a glass of water. He drank and splashed some of the water on his face. The cool water felt good on his warm, tingling skin. When he was done, he turned and began to drum his fingers on the kitchen counter.

“The picture you showed me, the one with the man you claimed to have been my grandfather—who was that?”

“It was something we had made,” his mother replied in a dry whisper. Sal decided not to dig any deeper. There was only so much he could take at one sitting. “I’ll do you a favor...look at me.” Sal pulled his parents into a trance, put them under his spell. “This is what happened: I came home, I forgave you, you accepted, and everything's peachy. Right?”

His parents nodded mechanically.

Sal snapped his fingers.

“I’m glad we had this talk, son,” his father said pleased.

“Now we can put all this behind us,” his mother added.

The scene was surreal, and Sal left the kitchen bubbling with laughter.

He opened the door to the basement and went down into Carl’s old nest.

Carl—they hadn’t even asked about him.

Sal laughed hysterically as he sat on the old sofa. For a moment he went insane, the darkness swallowed him, and he blacked out.

Sal woke up twenty-four hours later. He had no recollection of falling asleep. The world was a blur. He could feel somebody looking at him, but he couldn't keep focus. His world had turned into a bad quality movie.

"Do you think he's dead?" a male voice spoke

"I think he looks like he's partied too much," a female voice answered.

"Where do you think he's been?" the male said.

"From what Carl told me, he's been spending time with some heartbreaker." The female voice again.

"Really?" The male voice.

"Yeah, he fell in love." The female voice.

"Ah, no way Romeo found a Juliet." The male voice sounded excited.

"Not a Juliet, you idiot. He found another Romeo." The female voice had an annoyed edge to it.

"Wow! Where's the guy now?" The male voice.

"How the hell should I know? All I know is that he was devastated. He listened to sad love songs and shit," the female replied.

"But he's so handsome," the male voice said.

"Sometimes, I'd wish I could put you on mute," the female voice snapped.

"Don't judge me. I was born to be awesome, not perfect," the male voice retorted. "I'll get him some water."

"Hey, Jack, come back. You forgot your bullshit."

"You know what, Rosie? Please, cancel my subscription to your issues."

Jack and Rosie.

Sal was slowly coming to his sense. He felt his lips form a smile.

"Honesty's better than sugar-coated bullshit," he said, struggling to a seated position. "I missed you two."

The pair stopped arguing and looked at Sal with curiosity.

"Hey, you're not dead," Jack cheered.

“How are you? What happened to you?” Rosie sat down next to Sal.

“What Carl said: I fell in love and got left behind. The sad part is, I can’t get him out of my freaking head.”

“It’s like Muse wrote, dude: ‘I tried to give you up, but I am addicted.’”

Jack peered over at Rosie.

“As it turns out, I got stolen from my real father and adopted by the Williams,” Sal said out of the blue. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.” Sal looked at his friends, half-expecting them to slap a straight jacket on him.

“Relax. We’re all crazy. It isn’t a competition,” Jack said, undisturbed.

“My family’s just one tent away from a full-blown circus.”

“Ignore him. What happened, Sal?” Rosie said.

“My brain had too many tabs open, and it nearly killed me.” Sal sighed.

“I need a shower and something to eat, and then I’ll fill you in on my crazy life.”

“You do smell like feet,” Jack noted.

“The Diner?” Rosie asked.

“I’ll meet you outside in fifteen.”

With a heavy heart, Sal told his friends about his date with Seth, his meeting with Charlie, and how his skills had expanded. He also told them how he'd hypnotized his parents, which had to have been the reason they'd let him sleep so late. Sal hoped he hadn't fried their brains in the process.

His friends listened without any judgment; they never frowned or called him a liar. He'd decided to leave out the part about the Nazi skeleton in the family closet; Rosie and Jack had suffered enough, and he hadn't the heart to drag them through another crazy adventure. "So, what's next, lover? Are you going to reconnect with Seth?" Jack chewed his fries as he spoke.

The question took Sal by surprise, and he knocked over his cola, making it drip from the table and down to the floor.

"Real subtle, Jack. You'd be much more likable if it weren't for that hole in your mouth that noise comes out of." Rosie gathered napkins and used them to let soak up the wasted beverage.

"I can always count on you to relentlessly point out the negative, Rosie," Jack said offended. "I am only asking because he's clearly in love, and I'd like to see my friend happy."

"How do you know that, Casanova?" Rosie said.

Jack looked hurt. "Because I know how he feels."

Rosie eased a little and looked at Jack with suspicion.

"You know I can hear you, right?" Sal tried to cut in.

"At some point, you have to realize that some people can stay in your heart but not in your life." Jack stared straight out into space.

Rosie didn't move. She just stood there as still as a statue while a waitress came over to clean the cola from the floor.

Sal sat there speechless at the drama unfolding before him. How had they gone from talking about his fucked-up summer to this?

It wasn't like Jack and Rose's usual bickering, but more emotional, more intense.

He cleared his throat and asked, “Are you two dating? Maybe I should step aside and give you some space.” Sal wanted to leave, but Jack was blocking his way.

“There you go, nice and clean.” The waitress smiled.

Jack and Rosie didn’t respond. They only had eyes for each other, like two boxers in a ring.

“Thank you,” Sal answered, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“I’m addicted. I used to feel safe because I thought you were equally addicted to me,” Jack said, locking Rosie in his gaze.

Sal was impressed. Jack didn’t usually express himself in that way.

Rosie’s lips, the ones that really didn’t want to smile, crept into a grin.

“What did you say?”

“God, now who’s daft? Let me say it in a way you’ll understand: if this diner was a meat market, you’d be the prime rib.” Jack looked tired all of a sudden.

Rosie took Jack’s hand and said softly, “Cool. So the magic love potion’s working.” They engaged in a long kiss, seeming to have forgotten Sal had ever existed.

“That’s great, guys. I’m happy for you, but I guess this is my cue.” Sal somehow managed to get his long legs untwisted from beneath the table and to a standing position on the seat of the booth. He climbed over the backrest to the booth next to his, interrupting a family dinner, swiftly stepped on the table, and jumped elegantly to the floor. His eyes sparkled as he ran a hand through his hair. Sal turned to the family and said, “Sorry about that. I hope I didn’t scare you too much.”

The father pulled his teenage daughter closer.

“You’re Sal Williams, right?” the son asked, impressed. “I’ve watched you play basketball. You’re really good.”

“I am. I hope to catch you all at the final game,” Sal said with a smile on his face. For a minute he was back in the game, back to his old, charming self, but then his phone buzzed, and Sal excused himself. He walked quickly out the diner, yanking the phone from his pants. He'd hoped the caller ID would read “Unknown” (and just like that, he found himself back in his role as the hopelessly devoted lover. Thanks, Seth.)

He recognized Coach Heffernan as the caller, and he picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sal. How's your summer going?” Coach Heffernan sounded like he was far away.

“Good,” Sal answered. How the hell else was he supposed to answer? Guess what: I learned that I'm some sort of new species; I'm in love with a guy who ditched me and disappeared into thin air; my parents stole me from my real father; and oh, I can make you spill your darkest secrets without even saying a word.

“The championship game's back on in a few weeks. I know it's short notice, but can you make to practice tomorrow? They want the finals to be concluded before the new season.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sal said, trying to sound relaxed. If nothing else, the game would help to take his mind off things for a while.

He ended his conversation with Coach Heffernan and looked through the diner's window to see Jack and Rosie, still kissing each other in the same booth in which he'd first had spotted Seth.

Sal jumped into the bus and drove home, called Charlie, and told him about the game. They talked for hours. It was like they hadn't been separated in the first place.

61

A golden moon hung over the city, and as night deepened, an old man lay in his bed dying.

Another man leaned in over the bed. “I found him. He changed his name and seemed to have removed his tattoos, but it is him.

The old man coughed. He ached with pain. His body was giving up on him.

“Shall I set the process in motion?”

The old man nodded eagerly and stared at an old picture by his bedside. “Very well. I’ll make the call.” The man silently left the room, leaving the old man to his memories from a past long ago.

The ironclad rule for entrée into the Brotherhood was simple: kill a black or a Hispanic prisoner. The other rule, which was just as ironclad, gave rise to their motto: “Blood In/Blood Out.”

Quitting wasn’t an option. There was only death.

62

“We know where you are. We’re going to come to kill you,” a voice growled into his voicemail. “Traitorous Scum.”

He refused to be identified by his real name or even his old, underworld alias. Even though it had been many years since he'd left the group, he still feared reprisals.

He'd had idolized his father and sought out his approval, but his father had left him angry and confused. The only time he'd ever smiled at him was when he'd knocked a gay man's teeth out.

No hopeful kid joins a gang. The reality is a kid that lacks hope is going to look for something that gives him that hope. They run to the streets because it's not happening at home.

So, he quickly learned that hurting others made him feel invincible, like nothing was against him.

If you had sadness inside you, it would make you happy. He felt badly in the beginning, but then he got comfortable with his emotions.

The gang knows your weak spot. They understand you. They hear you. He was pretty weak when he'd first met them. He was also pretty much alone.

He actually wanted to join because he felt he'd have more power in an extremist group—nobody could hurt him if he was one of them. They used violence to send messages, to make it known they were in control, to tell others not to step on their turf. If there were a party going on somewhere—Jews, blacks, whatever—they'd crash it, but they'd also confiscate their food and their drinks.

And if anyone ever looked at them the wrong way, they'd beat them up.

He was involved in anti-immigrant activism, Holocaust denial, and street violence. His own violence often took the form of “gay bashing.” He never killed anyone—though it was a requirement of joining—they only believed he had. He destroyed lives, nevertheless. By the time he was twenty, it had finally clicked this wasn't the lifestyle he wanted to live. He wanted to get an education. He wanted to help people. All people.

He met her and decided to change his life completely. He wanted to be a husband, and he wanted to be a good father.

He sought out "No More," an organization—all of them former extremists—which tried their best to guide people. The group ran a support network for those who, like them, had made the decision to leave violent extremism behind. No More helped those wishing to leave gang life by providing them with a comprehensive, holistic set of services, including case management, mentoring, counseling, education, tattoo removal, community service, health/fitness programs, spiritual programs, interim employment, life-skills training, job readiness, and job placement.

He looked completely different now. No one would recognize him because he wore different clothes and his tattoos had been removed. His shame was toxic as he tried to make sense of what he'd done, and now it seemed as if his past had finally caught up with him. He got ready to deal with whatever it was he had coming.

Sal had a fixed route between his house and the gym.

He spent his days talking with Charlie, texting with Carl, and playing basketball. He'd succeeded in pushing Seth back into a far corner of his mind.

He bumped knuckles with his teammates as he walked into the gym before engaging in total-body exercises. Basketball required a combination of speed, strength, power, stamina, and agility. It was a great alternative to running while maintaining a competitive edge. They spent a lot of time at the gym, working on ball-handling, getting shots up, and chasing rebounds.

It was helpful to have teammates there to encourage him through it. The coach often noticed something he could do better and offered advice. It was a fun way to push and test himself.

Practice ended. Sal lay on his back on the floor for a minute, enjoying the feel of the cold on his heated body. He'd done a good job. The weight had lifted from his shoulders, and he was lighter and more carefree. All of the mundane worries of his life seemed to have been muted.

He couldn't wait to show Charlie his competence and finesse.

Sal sat up when the cheerleaders entered the gym; it was their time to practice. He removed his old-school, retro basketball shoes, colored red and white and with a star on the side.

A couple of the girls glanced in his direction, and he broke into a boyish grin. The cheerleaders giggled. Their laughter filled the air with gorgeous sounds. He rose to his feet and bowed deeply before slowly walking away—what was the point when somewhere out in the world was a man with his name on him.

There was nothing he could do. He was still hopelessly devoted to that jerk.

Sal's teammates stayed behind to flirt with the cheerleaders, so he went to the locker room by himself. As he took a quick shower, his encounter with Dante in the locker room ran through his head. It was one of his least desirable memories. Memories of Seth invaded his mind, recalling their dance in the rain.

He banged his head lightly against the locker door when he could hear his phone buzzing.

Now what?

He dressed first and then sat on the bench as he opened his phone.

Number unknown:

I just think that you should know your father is in trouble. The baby-stealing one.

Check the hospital parking basement.

Sal threw the phone down into the bag and hammered his fist on the locker. He'd finally found some sort of peace in his routine—of course, there was going to be trouble.

He trotted past his teammates and the cheerleaders who seemed completely preoccupied with each other. Sal cursed loudly once he was outside before he jumped into the bus and drove to the hospital. His muscles tightened, and he felt stronger and more awake. He parked the bus on the sidewalk—there was no time to park properly; this was an emergency.

Fuck you, Mack, Sal thought as he stood in front of the entrance leading to the parking basement—he had a strong suspicion it had been Mack that had sent the text. Who else would know all of this personal stuff about him?

Sal hated the hospital basement. He'd been there once before with his parents when he was a kid. The sounds, the smells, and the shadows, along with the creepy story attached to it only added to his discomfort: before it had been a parking lot, the basement used to serve as storage. Back in the 1950s, the decomposed body of a man was found in the hospital basement. Its head had been chopped off. A janitor had found the body, naked, on the basement floor. The police were called in. They took the body away for an autopsy.

The staff had claimed he was the missing Dr. Omar, who used to roam the hospital basement after he'd gone crazy on the job. He'd already had a reputation among hospital staff for being a little nutty, given his fashionable dress and joking nature.

As the police investigated the bizarre death, they found out that Dr. Omar had explored his occult side. Candles, a Ouija board, and slaughtered animals were found on the premises. Dr. Omar appeared to have committed suicide, but who had cut off his head?

Next to the fancy architecture of the hospital, the basement looked like it had been beamed in from a horror movie. It was shadowy, and the cars offered a wealth of hiding opportunities.

Where the hell was the guard? The security guard's booth was empty. Sal stared at the cameras in the basement. Were those things even on? Parts of the basement had no CCTV camera and security guards were hard to spot. His brain searched for any sign that his father was all right. Sal's pulse pounded in his temples.

He was just going to have to wing it.

The smart thing would have been to call someone: his mother or the police. Only Sal wasn't smart—he was angry. He had that same feeling in his body as when he'd nailed Ted to the floor: vengeful and with a "get out of jail free" card.

He inspected his knuckles, they'd serve him well, but he decided to take a weapon with him anyway.

Sal grabbed a fire extinguisher off the wall and moved closer. His father was outnumbered. A gang of four men stepped forward to form a barrier between him and his father with confidence. It was better to be a dog in a big group.

One of the attackers punched his dad in the head and then put him in a chokehold as he struggled to drag him to the ground. Almost simultaneously, another man delivered a swift blow to his dad's head, at which point he collapsed to the ground, face first.

"Aren't you those little shits from the elementary school?" Sal said cockily as his blood hummed in his veins. The mentally defective dummies had nothing on him—he was too strong, too superior.

“I would be lying if I claimed I took no pleasure in taking you down. That I didn’t come looking for a fight,” Sal said mockingly.

One of the Nazi bastards came toward him wearing a sardonic grin. He looked unimpressed.

Sal didn't know who threw the first punch, but his fist was suddenly slamming into someone’s ugly face. Blood leaked from both of the guy's nostrils and his nose was bent to the right.

One of the other ugly faces came up on him from behind, and Sal struck him with his elbow causing, something on the ugly face to bleed. The blood spatter reached the guy’s eyes, temporarily blinding him. Sal grabbed his ear and yanked hard. It made a nasty sound as the ear pulled halfway off.

A cruel sneer formed on a smooth face standing a few feet away, eyes staring straight at Sal. “Stop it, or the old man gets it.” He pressed a knife to his father’s neck. The man's eyes widened for a second before narrowing again, in anger.

The fourth guy closed in. Sal put the sole of his foot to the attacker's knee which incapacitated his opponent long enough for him to whack him with the fire extinguisher. At the same time, his father jammed a pen into his captor's shoulder. As his father escaped the unloving embrace, Sal threw the fire extinguisher with great vengeance, hitting the guy in the gut and causing him to vomit.

Sal looked at his father’s bloody face. His left eye had swollen over, and bloody spit drooled from his mouth. Sal's father got onto his feet, put his hand on Sal’s right shoulder, and leaned his face closer. “Are you all right?”

He shoved his father's hand away. “Just tell me: are you sorry about Charlie?”

“The guilt's poison in my guts, Sal. I never meant to hurt you, you have to believe me. It's been hard to move past my mistakes, but I own them.”

Sal nodded, and the guards finally came running.

“Dr. Williams," one of them said, "are you all right?”

“Why aren’t the cameras working?” the other guard asked.

Sal looked around to see broken limbs and hurt egos, and what was he going to get? Probably more trouble. If it all went to hell, he'd have to ask Darwin for help.

A smile curled on Sal's lips, and he covered his mouth with his hand. Was it fun watching those bastards suffer? Did he get a buzz of power doing it?

Yes, he did.

“Just so you know: Charlie’s is coming to the game,” Sal said, and he slipped away.

Yet again, he'd walked away unharmed. He stood in the fresh air, intoxicated by his own power. It was the same, intoxicating feeling he'd had when he seduced someone, like the pizza guy. He truly was a Giant.

In case he'd ever wondered, yep, he was also a selfish dick.

He deserved his heartache. He deserved the torture Seth had exposed him to.

On top of everything, he'd been given fucking parking ticket.

Sal began to laugh uncontrollably. He soon got a hold of himself. After all, he still had some mind-hacking to do.

The boy did well; Sal heard something speak inside of him. He's growing with the task of being a Giant. He'll make a perfect addition to the tribe.

Sal sensed Darwin give the sign, and Mack switched the security cameras back on.

Later that night, in an empty parking lot, four bruised Nazi guys were convinced to leave the matter concerning Dr. Williams alone.

An hour later they disappeared into the back of a van.

The family lived in a quiet, suburban enclave. Her mother was a nurse, and her father owned a small bar. For most of her life, Vickie could not talk about her childhood. She had a father who couldn't control his temper and a mother that decided to stay with him.

Vickie and her brother grew up in an incredibly difficult household, complete with a Nazi father who was also physically abusive. He collected Nazi memorabilia and claimed the Holocaust had never happened.

They'd witnessed actual incidents of physical abuse toward their mother, hearing the threats and fighting noises from another room. The aftermath of the physical abuse—such as blood, bruises, tears, torn clothing, and broken items—left Vickie trembling with fear. The tension in the home was thick, especially when their father's car pulled into the driveway, and their mother would stiffen with fear and turn white in the face.

Being exposed to battering herself made Vickie fearful and anxious. She was always on guard, watching and waiting for the next event to occur. Vickie never knew what might trigger the abuse, and therefore, she never felt safe. She was always worried about herself, her mother, and brother. Vickie felt worthless and powerless, not knowing where to turn. She didn't understand why she had been expected to keep the family secret when they didn't even talk to each other about the abuse. Vickie did everything she could to look fine to the outside world—her teachers and so on—but inside, she was in terrible pain.

Their family was chaotic and crazy. Her brother would blame her for the abuse, saying if they had not done or said a particular thing, the abuse would not have occurred. He'd become angry at Vickie and their mother for triggering the abuse. Vickie felt isolated and vulnerable, while her brother was angry and embarrassed. They were both starved for attention, affection, and approval, Vickie from her mother, and her brother from her father.

Their mother was struggling to survive, so she often wasn't present for her children. Their father seemed so consumed with controlling everyone. He often put their mother down in front of them, saying she was crazy or stupid and that they didn't have to listen to her. Seeing their mother treated with enormous disrespect taught the children it was okay to disrespect women the way their father did.

Vickie and her brother were physically, emotionally, and psychologically abandoned. She grew angry at her father for the violence and frustrated at her mother for being unable to prevent the violence.

Vickie always hoped that her brother would intervene on behalf of her mother and herself, but her brother had started to act out and was anxious to please their father. He also used violence to express himself, displaying increased aggression with peers and their mother. He started to self-injure, cutting himself and burning his skin with cigarettes.

She had grown up observing her mother being abused, her only role model for intimate relationships one in which one person used intimidation and violence over the other person to get his way.

Vickie learned that threats and violence were the norm in a relationship.

Her brother had learned that violence was an effective way to resolve conflicts and problems, and he became a maniac who turned away from her and went down some insane rabbit-hole only to emerge as a crazed Nazi.

Sal awoke to raised voices coming through the closed door; his parents were fighting. Their heated quarrel had risen above the sacred silence, their voices coming through the walls like a wrecking ball. They agreed with one another for the most part, but they nevertheless fought like hungry dogs fighting over pack dominance.

He crept out in the hallway. Didn't they realize he was in the house?

"How could you be so reckless, Jerry?" his mother hissed. "Why didn't you call someone?"

"I believed I could handle it. I figured if they got what they came after, they'd leave us alone." His father had spoken in a polite voice, showing interest in the lives of his family, of his wife.

"What if they'd come to the house? What then?" his mother's had voice turned high-pitched.

"Only they didn't, did they? I know these people," his father said.

"No, they didn't. They ganged up on you at your workplace, and you got saved by our son." She was angry.

His father sighed. "I'm sorry, Beth."

"Sal." She chuckled. "What high thoughts he must have of us by now. What the hell were we thinking?"

"We wanted to provide a safe life for him. That's what we were thinking. That man's life..." his father paused. "Charlie. What kind of life could he have given Sal? It was chaos."

"I know we were in it together, but does that make it all right?"

"How the hell did he find Charlie, anyway?" His mother yelled.

"I don't know. He's resourceful, Beth, he always has been. We just didn't want to see it. Ever since he was little, he had this expression on his face, like he knew everything."

"I still can't believe he forgave us." His mother sounded as she was gasping for breath.

"You should've seen him down there. He was like a wild animal. He took those guys out like they were common bullies, not insane thugs."

“He is special, isn’t he? The perfect student, an amazing athlete, popular with the girls...but we don’t really know him, do we? He’s always doing his own thing. There’s something almost supernatural about him.”

“Supernatural?” His father was skeptical.

“You said it yourself: he beat up four grown hooligans and walked away unharmed.

"He brought Vickie back.

"His whole appearance..." His mother sounded exasperated.

Their voices lowered. “Haven’t you noticed how he’s always flirting with people, charming them...and not just girls—guys, too.” “What are you getting at?” his father asked.

“I just think it’s odd there are certain things we haven’t noticed about him, despite it being right in front of our noses.”

They seemed to have forgotten about the issue at hand—the Nazis—when the phone rang. His father answered.

“Hello? Yes, this Dr. Williams. No, I just want to forget the whole thing. Yes, thank you.”

“Who was that?” his mother asked, sounding worried.

His father hesitated. “The police.”

“Well? What did they say? Did they make an arrest?” his mother pressed on.

“No.” His father sighed. He knew he was on thin ice.

“Let me guess,” His mother sounded angry. “The police asked you to consider pressing charges on those psychopaths, isn’t that so?”

“Listen, Beth, I didn’t want them to inform on me. You know how hard it’s been for me to put my past behind me.” He sounded bitter.

“I know, Jerry, but what if they come back with reinforcements?”

“Maybe we could have Sal in a SWAT uniform, patrolling the premises.” A dry chuckle escaped him.

“Jerry, I’m serious.”

“Okay...okay. I’ll call the police and see if I can fix this.”

Sal grew irritated while listening to his parents' conversation. They really tried his patience. He decided it was time to come out from hiding. Shock registered on his parents' faces when he turned up in the kitchen.

"Hey, sweetie. We thought you were out with Vickie and the kids. I could've sworn I watched you leave." His mother's face was awash in confusion.

"I'm hungry." Sal went to the fridge, the feeling of being in control making him high.

"Sal, I don't know how much you heard, but you need to understand that we're only concerned about you...about the whole situation." Sal's father had used his doctor's voice, the same voice he used when he ordered his patients around.

Sal pulled some yogurt out of the fridge and drank it straight from the carton. The conversation was already beginning to bug him. He wiped his mouth with his hand. "Well, we all make mistakes." He was arrogant; all that power and so little grace.

"With great power comes great responsibility." Sal laughed. He was beginning to sound like Darwin. His mind began to swirl, his breath went shallow, and he sought into their unconscious minds, manipulating them.

"The Nazis aren't coming back," Sal said, his voice harmonious.

"They've been dealt with. There's no need to pursue the matter any further. Leave it alone. Get on with your lives."

His parents seemed more or less disabled by the experience, so he went upstairs to get dressed.

"I'm taking Angel for a walk," he said as he walked past the kitchen where his parents' behavior had gone back to normal.

"Okay, sweetie, have a nice time," his mother's voice responded back. Their prior conversation seemed to have been dismissed from their minds.

Perfect.

His mother had believed she'd seen him leave earlier that day with Vickie. Maybe it had been one of Seth's tricks. Perhaps he was back.

Sal spent the rest of the day sitting on the field by the old shed, hoping Seth would show up.

He was pathetic.

He was a freaking doormat.

“So, what are you thinking?” Jack asked Sal as they were loading the bus with supplies.

“I’m thinking about ripping your clothes off and ravaging that body of yours,” Sal answered, trying to keep a straight face.

“I know the voices in your head aren’t real, but they have some great ideas,” Jack answered keeping a poker face.

“You really mean that? I’m not just chasing rainbows?” Sal asked eagerly.

“I’ll be your sex object—every time you ask for sex, I’ll obey,” Jack said, trying his best not to laugh.

When, at last, they had burst into joyful laughter, it was loud enough to have been heard from miles away. The boys laughed till their ribs hurt.

“Is your sexual tension drama going to have an intermission soon? We’ve got to go,” Rosie said saltily.

“But Rosie, the voices inside my head are telling me to say no, but I find it so hard to resist. Look at that face.” Jack looked at Sal with a goofy smile on his face.

“Right. I’ll go and search for your off button.” Rosie crawled onto the bus.

“But dude,” Jack said as the bus was put into motion, “what are you thinking about the whole Charlie/Strong Edge situation?”

“Well, I’m going to take Charlie back to Strong Edge and introduce him. He insists on staying at a hotel even though I said he could sleep in my room.”

“He’s really cool, isn’t he?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, he is. I can’t believe he isn’t angry at my parents.”

“He got you back. Maybe that’s all that matters.”

Sal didn’t answer. He just nodded. His mind slipped back to his parents’ conversation in the kitchen. Sal knew they were sorry, but he was still trying to make sense of the situation.

Jack told a story as they drove, about how the long road to Limestone was infamous due to the strange activity occurring at night. This included satanic cults, ghost sightings, and some kind of hellhound. Sal didn't pay much attention. He was still thinking about the task ahead of him. It would be awkward, it would be a pickle, but Sal didn't care. His parents would just have to suck it up.

It might even be good for them.

He was looking forward to seeing Carl. Sal missed him like crazy. He wasn't sure if he should tell Carl about his father and the run-in with the Nazis, though. He supposed he'd eventually probably have to, but for the time being, he'd keep it to himself. Carl seemed to have a nice life going for him. He'd even landed a job as a warehouse team member. The job was in a neighboring town, so he needed a shitty car to get him back and forth. His pay was a joke, but he seemed happy. When he wasn't working, he helped his landlord, Ned, out and spent time with Louise.

Louise had suffered a miscarriage only a few days after her arrival in Limestone. I had probably been for the best, considering who the father had been. It made Sal sick to his stomach to think about it. Ben Adler deserved his brutal fate.

Louise was doing better, but there was still a long way to go.

When they picked Carl up, Sal could tell something was wrong. Carl hugged Rosie and Jack and joked around, but something weighed heavy on him.

Sal closed his eyes, trying to control his mind. Seth's face surfaced. A warm feeling rushed through Sal's body.

Someone shook his arm.

"Hey, Sal, wake up."

Sal opened his eyes to see Carl looking at him funnily.

"What are you doing?" Carl's blue eyes were daunting.

"Hey, Carl." Sal hugged his brother. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Were you sleeping just now?" Carl asked.

“Yeah, I couldn’t sleep last night.” Sal was beside himself. It wasn’t the time to explain about the Nazis and his father, and he didn’t want to talk about Seth.

“Did something happen?” Carl asked again.

“I think it has something to do with his 'friendship' with a certain person,” Jack happily contributed to the conversation. “It has him going absolutely bonkers.”

"I think Phil Collins says it pretty well." Jack started to sing the lyrics to *Easy Lover*, changing the word "she" to "he":

Sal rested his head in his hands, slowly letting his hands slide down over his face. “Okay, can we go now?”

Carl giggled, and Rosie turned to Jack. “I think *you’re* the one who's going bonkers. I think *you* should consider wearing the straitjacket.”

“You'd like that, wouldn't you? All tied down. Rawr.” Jack smirked at Rosie.

“Weird is the new fabulous, I suppose.” Rosie blushed as she retreated into the bus.

Sal did his best not to laugh, and he could tell Carl was doing the same. At least the mood had lifted a little.

As they drove on, Sal’s heart started doing somersaults when they neared Charlie’s RV. He wondered if his mission should have been a solo one. The situation was crazy. He was about to bring his real father back to the parents who had stolen him as a child. Sal wondered if it would be awkward and if Charlie would change his mind about going to Strong Edge.

Sal started to freak out. What if he'd already changed his mind and didn’t want to go?

As soon as they pulled up to the trailer, Sal’s fears whisked away when he saw Charlie waiting outside the RV, holding a trolley bag and wearing a broad smile. His face lit up when Sal jumped out of the bus.

“Charlie,” Sal cheered.

“Sal.” Charlie reached out and hugged Sal tightly.

Sal introduced Charlie to Carl, Rosie, and Jack, and the last of his concerns were put entirely to rest when Charlie clicked with the crew right away, bumping fists with them. He bumped fists with Carl and Jack and said, "The rebel and the rock star—it's a pleasure to meet you."

Charlie took Rosie's hand gently and said, "Rosie, the fairest of maidens, it is an honor to meet you."

"He's just as slick as you, Sal. Like father, like son," Jack declared in amazement.

The ride back to Strong Edge turned out to be a long one for Sal, given that his brother and friends had decided to share every embarrassing childhood story they could think of with Charlie.

"This one time, Sal and I were playing on a jungle gym. Sal would have been about five. On the ground floor was a kid that we didn't know very well. Sal got the genius idea that it would be hilarious to pee. He pulled down his pants, and while laughing, he started to pee on this kid's head.

"When our mother came, he started to cry, claiming that he hadn't been able to hold it in, so she forgave him." Carl shook his head.

"Or when he stole a gift card from a store because he thought they were free," Rosie added.

"How about that time he flirted with that girl at Burger King and when he leaned over, he smashed his hand down onto a package of ketchup and ruined her sweater?" Jack laughed.

"Or when he lost his swim trunks in the lake at Giantsfair but didn't notice until someone had complimented his ass." Carl messed with Sal's hair.

"You were a very outgoing kid, weren't you?" Charlie said, laughing.

"Yeah, he's such a charmer. Just this morning he complimented my physique." Jack winked at Sal.

"Do I want to know?" Carl asked Rosie.

"No, you don't. It was like they were acting out some twisted version of *Romeo and Juliet*," Rosie answered.

Charlie's laughter built softly but eventually exploded.

Sal lost the tightness that had been mounting in his chest in an outburst of laughter spread around the bus.

“What about the Egyptian god? Is there any news?” Charlie asked, carefully getting a couple of sodas from the mini fridge. Sal had followed Charlie up to his hotel room to make sure he was settled.

“No, but I did spend an entire day on the field like a sucker, hoping he'd show up. Maybe Jack's right—maybe I am going bonkers.”

“I'm sorry, Sal. It's not easy being in love, and I know how special he is to you.”

“He's the first one I really cared about. There was Robin, but she disappeared like dew in the sun as soon as Seth showed up. Besides, the others say she doesn't count.”

“I like your friends. They have good hearts. They're never short of a snappy comment, are they?” Charlie smiled.

“They tease you a lot about Seth, don't they?” Charlie continued. Sal rolled his eyes. “That's an understatement.”

Charlie chuckled. “It's just their way of encouraging you not to give up hope.

“I think the Egyptian god just needs to sort out some stuff so he can dedicate himself to you. You know, get rid of all the bullshit in his life. From what you've told me, it seemed like you really hit it off.

“He'll come back. I know he will.” Charlie touched Sal's cheek gently.

“Thank you, Charlie. It means a lot.” Sal gave Charlie a genuine smile. Charlie took a sip of his Coke. He looked like he wanted to say something but didn't know how to.

“What is it?” Sal asked.

Charlie sighed. “Not that it is any of my business, but from what Ned tells me, your brother's in a pretty bad state.” Charlie looked at Sal.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it.”

“No, you're right. I've noticed it, too. I have to talk to him. I think it has something to do with his girl.” Sal felt burdened all of a sudden.

“Go and find him. We can talk in the morning.”

“Will you be okay here?” Sal asked.

“Of course, I will. Go.” Charlie waved him off.

“Let’s go to Serenity Park tomorrow for some basketball, okay?” Sal said halfway through the door.

“Can’t wait to whoop your ass,” Charlie shouted after Sal as he hurried down the corridor.

Sal found Carl out in front of The Diner, smoking. He'd dropped him off there along with Rosie and Jack before driving Charlie to his hotel. Sal had to brace himself for a moment, and he rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He tried to mentally prepare for what was coming next. Sal had to figure out why Carl was so blue, he couldn't bring himself to hack his brother's mind. Still, he had to fight hard not to. The image of Carl helped, but it also left him disheartened. And they still had to go back to the house and deal with their parents. He wondered how many times he could fry their brains before they permanently took on some damage.

Sal woke to the sound of someone knocking on the window. He must've dozed off. When he looked up, he saw Carl pressing his face against the glass, his nose pointed upward so Sal could stare right up his nostrils. He rolled down the window. "Hey," he said, "what's up?" "My panties and they're staying that way." Carl swayed as he laughed. The harsh scent of vodka oozed from him.

"Are you drunk?" How the hell could Carl be drunk already? Sal had only been gone an hour.

"Yes. I drink in silence, hoping the answer lies at the bottom of the glass and then at the bottom of the bottle."

"Where are Rosie and Jack? Weren't you supposed to eat together?" Sal searched around for his phone.

"Looking for this?" Carl held up his phone, dangling it between two fingers.

"You dropped it when you dropped us off. You really need to be more careful. Drop it, drop us." Carl laughed like he was playing the role of some clown. It was creepy.

Sal was at a loss. "How the hell did you get so drunk that fast?" He pushed the car door open nearly knocking Carl over and got out of the bus.

"I ditched them, and then I went for a drink. It's amazing what people will do for you when you're Sal Williams' brother."

"Okay, Carl, I need the phone. I have to call Jack and Rosie and let them know you're here. They're probably looking for you."

"You've always been such a fucking star. Lord knows you've had your fair share of star-fuckers."

"Carl, please." Sal desperately tried to grab the phone, but Carl shoved it down his pants.

"How does it feel, Mr. Popular, when someone's pants are off-limits to you? Mr. Perfect—getting everything right, never getting into trouble..."

Sal felt the tears press behind his eyelids. What the hell had happened to Carl? He didn't recognize him anymore.

"Then someone finally sees you for what you are—a fucking whore—and leaves you behind crying like a little baby."

"Leave Seth out of this." Sal felt anger building up inside of him.

"Or what, Sal? I'm really curious to know what you'll do. Am I going to regret it? Ted certainly did."

Sal suppressed his anger. He had to, or it would force him to say or do things he didn't mean. The alcohol seemed to have opened up every single hatch inside of Carl, and all of his anger and frustration flooded out.

"This isn't funny, Carl." Sal tried to plead with him. "Give me the phone," but it only seemed to add fuel to Carl's wrath.

"Does it look like I'm joking?" Carl snarled. "You always had it so fucking easy." He glared at Sal with hatred in his eyes. Now he wasn't just angry—he was about to get nasty.

"We're not even brothers, you and me. My parents simply stole you from some low-life. I think Charlie burned down that house on purpose—he hated you that much—but you just keep on coming back like some unwanted germ." Carl waited for Sal's reaction, but Sal didn't move.

When Carl couldn't detect a reaction, he went in for the kill. "How ironic it is that you finally fall in love, and you get ditched like an old rag doll. Do you know what I think? I think Seth's found someone new, and when they're done laughing at you, they fuck.

"My God, do you think they suck each other? You never got that far, did you?"

Sal stood with his hands hanging limply over his knees. His eyes were red and staring straight in front of him as the insults rained down. This wasn't Carl anymore, but some a stranger he didn't know.

The slap was loud, and it stung his face. "Love fucking hurts, doesn't it, Sal."

They were starting to become the center of attention, now. People gathered around them outside of The Diner to see what was going on.

“Come on—get angry, you big pussy,” Carl screamed.

Sal didn’t let out so much as a gasp of pain. “I won’t take any pleasure in taking you down,” he said quietly.

Carl clenched his fists. The first punch connected with Sal’s jaw. He drew his fist back again, and it plowed into Sal’s stomach, forcing him to double over.

Sal just took the punches as they flew, he didn’t even attempt to block them. He only moved his head a little to avoid the straight ones. His shield which protected him was off.

“Fight back, you whore.” Carl continued his battering until he’d collapsed on the ground.

Sal heard a voice speaking to him from far away. “Sal, can you hear me? Are you all right?” He looked up to stare into Rosie’s face. She helped him to his feet.

“What the hell happened here? And why are all these people just standing around?” Jack’s voice echoed from somewhere.

“It’s called the bystander effect. It’s a phenomenon in which individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present. Or maybe people here are just plain stupid,” Rosie spat.

Jack pulled Carl to a standing position. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Williams?”

Carl looked like he was going to say something, but instead, he doubled over and vomited. It splashed on the pavement, spraying his jeans.

Sal looked in the bus’s side mirror. His lip was swollen, and he had a bloody nose, but other than that, he was fine.

Carl was a different story. He looked pale. All of the blood had drained from his face and a cream-colored liquid spilled from his mouth. He bit down on his lip, trying not to burst into tears. The smell of vomit coming from him was unbearable.

“Sal, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.” Carl started to sob.

“Now, what?” Jack shrieked.

“Just get him the fuck out of here before the cops turn up.” Sal tossed Jack the keys to the bus.

“What about you?” Rosie yelled back.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I just can’t look at him right now.” Rosie and Jack each grabbed one of Carl’s arms and pushed him inside the bus.

“Sal, I’m sorry.” Carl pounded his hands against the windows as the bus backed away from The Diner. “I didn’t mean it.”

Sal watched the bus drive away, and the hurt cut right through him. His brain found it hard to grasp the situation.

His best friend had just attacked him.

People still hung around, looking at him like he was prize cattle, and the sudden urge to beat the shit out of something came over him.

Instead of giving in to the urge, he started to run. His legs were heavy, and there was a rising feeling of nausea in his stomach. Tears began to blind him. Sweat collected on the front of his t-shirt, and his heart beat frantically as he ran to the only place he could think of that would provide him with comfort: the treehouse.

The place where he and Carl had, time and again, watched the world crumble only to save it. There, they had saved each other from monsters, hidden from their parents, and shared the troubles of the world.

Once he’d stopped running, the perspiration lay cool on his skin, and he began to shiver. The grief came in waves, threatening to consume him entirely.

All he could think about was how his phone was still in Carl’s pants.

Sal awoke from a restless sleep to the sound of a lawnmower. Everything was blurry, and for a second he didn't know where he was. Once his brain began to process, he remembered. That awful display in front of The Diner yesterday. He cringed by the very thought of it. Carl's words had been like a bee sting; an injection of venom into his skin. He wondered what time it was and hoped no one was home. He climbed down from the treehouse and like a thief in the night, crept up to the house. The bus wasn't there, so they must've taken Carl somewhere else, and he was happy about that. He was meeting Charlie later that day, and he didn't want his mood spoiled. Sal thought about his poor phone in Carl's pants. He'd have to use the landline in the house to call Charlie. The front door opened and Vickie and the kids came out. He wanted to hide, but it was too late. "Hi, Sal." His sister, Joanne, smiled and waved. "We're going to the pool at Giantsfair—wanna come?" "No, thanks. I have stuff to do, sweetie." "Where's your bus?" "Jack has it." "Where have you been?" His brother, Anthony, joined in. "Probably at some girl's house. Dad says it's because you have so many girlfriends, and it makes it hard to keep up." "Let's go, kids," Aunt Vickie interrupted, slightly embarrassed. "Bye, Sal," the twins yelled and hurried into the car. Sal waved as they drove off. He stood still for a while after the car had left. "It's like Carl said," he told himself, "the world thinks I'm a whore."

The bus was God knows where, so he had to borrow Carl's old bike. The tires were bald and the brake-pads unevenly worn, but it still moved. He started pedaling as hard as he could, making the bike spin anything but smoothly beneath him. Sal clicked it up a gear and flew down the hill toward the center of town, the wind whipping his hair back.

As he closed in on the hotel, the chain jumped off the bike. The handbrake wasn't of much use, leaving him no choice but to take his feet off the pedals and grind them along the ground in a makeshift, foot-operated brake.

He steered the bike up onto the sidewalk, almost colliding with two panicked pedestrians, and came to a full stop in front of a shopping cart filled with corn, parked in front of a grocery store.

A couple of small children peeked out at him from behind the cart. Children of the Corn, he laughed to himself as he walked in the direction of the hotel.

Jack would have laughed.

"Piece of shit," Sal said as he tossed the bike up against a wall.

"What the hell happened to you?" Charlie asked when he met up with Sal in the hotel lobby. He pointed to the small wound on Sal's lip.

"I crashed on my bike."

"Uh-huh." Charlie wasn't convinced.

"Something went down between Carl and me yesterday, okay?"

"Are you ready to get your ass kicked?" Sal said, trying to evade Charlie's question.

Charlie eyed him for a minute, but he didn't say anything as they walked toward Serenity Park. "

"What happened to the bus?"

"Nothing. Jack has it. He needed a quick getaway."

"Oh. So it's that bad, huh?"

"Are you sure you're not a mind-hacker?" Sal felt tired all of a sudden.

"A what? Son, I think your brother hit you harder than you'd like to admit."

"I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"I'm not a fool, Sal." Charlie's eyes grew dark.

I shouldn't have trusted them. The words flew peacefully through Sal's mind. *I should have kept searching for you.*

"I'm here, now, Charlie." Sal put his hand on Charlie's shoulder. "And I'm thankful for that."

Charlie smiled, but the smile seemed cluttered.

They found an empty basketball court and Charlie threw his sweater on a bench. "Show me what you got, hotshot."

Sal went in with a one-count stop. He positioned the ball up toward his head to give Charlie the impression he was going to take a jump shot.

Charlie lunged toward him, but instead of shooting, Sal crouched down with his legs to gather strength.

With Charlie out of the way, Sal jumped up and shot before Charlie moved in on him.

Goal!

“Charlie, I can’t believe you fell for that old trick.” Sal laughed.

“My turn, smartass.” Charlie picked up the ball. He kept the ball in his hands at waist level and established a proper basketball position before taking a short, hard step toward the Sal, fake dribbling at the same time, bringing the ball down on the outside of his knee.

Charlie watched Sal. He hadn't been fooled.

Sal pulled back to the original position. He faked a jump shot with his arms and ball by bringing the ball up to the level of his head. When Sal was taken in by the fake shot, he moved toward Charlie to block the shot.

Charlie made an explosive drive and went right around him.

Goal!

“Booyah! And I can’t believe you fell for that.” Charlie broke into laughter.

“No more Mr. Nice Guy from now on,” Sal said, a satisfied smile on his face.

They continued to play, laughing and mocking each other’s game. Sal enjoyed the moment, finding a sense of serenity in it.

When they were done, they sat on a park bench resting, drinking water, and eating sandwiches Charlie had brought.

“You aren’t like everyone else, are you?” Charlie asked out of the blue.

“Hmm...no. From what friends tell me, I have different DNA.”

“Friends? What friends?”

“Oh, no—if I tell you you’ll drag me off to the loony bin.”

Charlie laughed. “I seriously doubt that. You can do stuff, stuff I can’t explain with the rational mind. There’s no way in hell you googled yourself to my experience at the hospital. And your parents didn’t tell you, that’s for sure.”

Sal had a guilty conscience. “I didn’t mean to pry, but sometimes I can’t help it.”

“What kind of shirt did I wear that day at the hospital?” Charlie challenged him.

Sal could feel the question rearrange itself inside of Charlie’s brain to reveal the answer. “You wore a black Nike sweatshirt. Underneath it, you wore a white t-shirt which said ‘Husband of the Year’—my mother gave it to you.” Sal didn’t want to cry, so he blinked a few times and looked away.

“No one ever saw the t-shirt that day because the sweater covered it up. True, they could have seen it when I was sleeping after I’d been arrested, but I doubt that.”

“It had a stain,” Sal whispered. “My mother accidentally spilled coffee on it when she leaned in to kiss you. The stain was never removed; you didn’t want it to. You still have a burn mark from the coffee on your chest.”

Charlie went silent for a minute. “That’s something you certainly couldn’t have known. No one does.”

“Charlie, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being different?”

"I think it was Muhammad Ali who said: 'I don't have to be what you want me to be.' It just explains a lot, that's all—how you found me, and why your parents weren't more freaked out.

"What did you do to them?"

It was time to come clean. The truth would have to sink or swim. "I fried their brains," he answered honestly. "I went inside their heads and planted some other idea, removing the possibility of a negative outcome."

"So, it's some kind of *Inception* shit?" Charlie asked with genuine interest.

"I guess. They say I'm a mind-hacker with special DNA."

"Who are *they*? Are you in danger?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know if I should tell you about them. They're powerful."

Sal felt a growing pain in his stomach.

"I have you, mind-hacker. I'm scared of no one. I just don't want to lose you again," Charlie said. Sal moved closer to him.

"They're Giants, I'm a Giant. We have special abilities, known as trades. We have DNA that's not from this world."

"Holy shit," Charlie blurted. "Your special friend—is he a Giant, too?"

Sal nodded. "There's still a lot I don't know about them, but I think we're the same." His mind wandered back to the barn. What on earth had they been hiding in there?

Seth's face appeared before his eyes, wet from the rain, his soft lips gently touching Sal's.

Sal jumped up from the bench.

Charlie looked thrilled at him. "Are you on fire?"

"Yes, I am, and it burns like a living hell."

"Are you all right, Sal? I mean, how are you, really? You've been through a lot."

"It's just that stupid episode yesterday." Sal took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly. "And I miss Seth."

“I can understand that.” Charlie looked at Sal and smiled. Happiness flared in his eyes. Charlie was awesome. He always listened with kind interest, and he always had something wise to say. Charlie was the kind of person that cared about people. He'd had a tough past but had evolved from it.

Sal's face lit up a little, and he started to dribble the basketball; he could dribble with either hand and without looking.

“You're good. Almost as good as me,” Charlie joked.

“Did you ever get any real gameplay experience? Didn't fights break out back when you played?”

“Smart mouth.” Charlie chuckled. “Another thing you definitely got from me.”

Sal dribbled out onto the court. He took a shot, and the ball went straight through the net.

“The other team will never know what hit them.” Charlie's eyes shone.

“I'm proud of you, Sal.”

Sal beamed and a big smile formed on his face. “One more game?”

Sal walked Charlie back to the hotel. They were chatting and laughing loudly. He said goodbye to Charlie outside the hotel and went over to Carl's old bike. The deathtrap was his ride home. He stared at it for a minute or two before he heard Charlie call out to him.

"Yo, Sal, Carl's lurking at the hotel bar and counting the number of Pepsi bottles. He's been there a while."

"Is he stalking me?" Sal didn't have the energy to deal with him.

"He probably figured you'd be with me. Maybe you should go and talk to him...clear the air...you know."

"I don't know. I've had a good day so far. Besides, I need a shower."

Charlie just looked at him.

"Okay, okay." Sal followed Charlie back inside.

He saw Carl sitting by a table, looking awful. Carl's cap sat low on his forehead, covering his eyes. Sal suspected he was struggling to cope with the daylight. A cold sweat glistened on his forehead.

Sal said goodbye to Charlie and walked over to Carl's table. Carl got up from his chair as Sal came over; he couldn't even stand straight.

"Thanks for coming over," Carl said. "If it's any consolation, I feel just as horrible as I look." He laughed nervously. "You want a drink?"

"No." Sal sat down.

"Here 's your phone." Carl pulled it from his pocket and pushed it across the table.

"I hope you wiped it thoroughly with disinfectant gel," Sal responded, a bit frosty.

"Listen, Sal, I understand if you're mad—I would be, too." He slid one of the bottles around on the table. "I didn't mean what I said yesterday."

"So me being the town bike was just a joke," Sal said a bit dismissively.

"The what?" Carl asked.

"You know: everyone gets a ride." Sal chuckled bitterly. "Well, I guess you aren't far off."

Carl closed his eyes and gathered his strength. “I’m sorry for calling you a whore. I’m sorry about a lot of things. I felt like shit, and I took it out on you. I still feel like shit, and it’s not just the because of the hangover.”

Sal softened a little. “What’s going on with you, Carl? When we drove from Limestone, you were joking and in a good mood, and as soon as we hit Strong Edge, you completely turned over—a regular Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“It’s like this: when I first went to Limestone, Louise was happy to see me, and we got along great. I got a job and managed to scrape by, but then she started to get worse, and according to her therapist, it was because I reminded her of everything that used to be bad in her life. Her life in Strong Edge.”

Carl rubbed his eyes before continuing. “Louise agreed. She asked me to stay away.

“I don’t know what to do...I love her.” Carl wore a stern expression on his face.

“Shit, Carl, I’m sorry. I wish I knew what to tell you, but I’m no better at this than you. If you want my advice, I’d say walk away. It seems as if it’ll only hurt you to stay.”

“I know, but it’s so freaking difficult.” Carl studied Sal.

“You can erase stuff from people’s brains, can’t you?”

The question took Sal by surprise. It felt like someone had poured gasoline on him and was standing by with a lighter. Sal’s heart seemed to explode in his chest. His already sweaty skin went clammy. “Please don’t ask me to do that,” he said quietly.

Carl was desperate. “You could make me forget, make everything easier. Take away the headache.”

“Fuck, Carl, is that why you came here? To have me make all the bad shit go away?”

Carl’s eyes went cold. “You do it all the time. What’s so special about this time?”

Sal's black eyes deepened, and he watched Carl for a while. "I love you too much to sneak inside your head and manipulate your mind. I've done it for personal gain, I admit that. I did it to Mom and Dad out of spite. I did it to Vickie, or else Ted would have killed her. I'm a bad person, Carl. You don't want me inside your head." He squeezed Carl's arm.

"Please, learn from this experience and do what's best for *you*."

Carl sat with an expression on his face which didn't adequately reflect the feelings going on inside of him.

Sal pushed his chair back. He was disappointed by the shift the conversation had taken.

"Can I come with you?" Carl's face was a perfect picture of misery. He was like a little boy, left alone on the sidewalk, looking left and right for a familiar face in the crowd.

"Of course, you can." Sal chuckled. "But you have to put the chain back on the bike," he added.

Sal drove the bike through town with Carl sitting on the handlebars, his legs dangling in the air. They both laughed as Carl pretended to kill zombies. It was as if they were kids again.

It was game day, time to bring home the championship. The atmosphere had been weird during the days leading up to the game, and Charlie decided to stay clear of Sal's parents. He said he didn't want to make things worse for them. Sal wasn't exactly sure that was the case, but he'd left matters alone. Charlie had watched Sal practice, and they'd eaten together at The Diner.

Carl lived in the basement, barely coming out, but he was excited about the game. Their parents had gone about the days in a strange, artificial sort of way. They hadn't questioned anything. They didn't even wonder where Carl had gotten to—he was eighteen, after all. Their behavior was odd, but Sal figured it was a side effect of having their brains hacked. Something in there was broken, like a scratch on the surface people pretended not to see.

Jack and Rosie were the only people who weren't moping or acting strangely.

The game tended to bring people together, the anticipation seeming to melt away all bad feelings, leaving nothing but excitement and cheer behind. It provided people with a common goal.

People complimented Sal's parents, saying how cool he was.

Sal went to the arena before everyone else to meet up with the coach and his teammates to prepare for the game.

He rode Carl's old bike to the arena. It was stupid, but it provided him with a weird sense of security.

Carl drove the bus, picking up Rosie, Jack, and Charlie along the way.

Sal stood in the locker room, listening to the noise coming from the arena which appeared to grow louder by the minute. He felt calm even though the adrenaline spurted through his body.

The crowd cheered as the team ran out onto the court to warm up.

Arm and legs stomped, and people kept pouring into the arena. The audience held up signs, cheering the team on.

Sal spotted Charlie next to Rosie.

He listened to the music during warm-ups which helped pump him up, and as he flirted with the cheerleaders, he felt on top again.

The players performed their carefully choreographed chest bumps during the pre-game introduction. Pep bands and loud soundtracks helped to energize the crowd. The announcers added their twists to the action, but after that, he completely tuned out the crowd. From then on, all he'd hear was the bleat of a referee's whistle, the reliable thud of the ball, and the squeaking of sneakers on polished maple.

The game kicked off.

Sal played center because he was the tallest player. His coach positioned him near the basket, as he had to reach as high as possible for rebounds. He was also required to be physically domineering and show more physical strength and overall athleticism. His goal was to find an opening for a pass and then shoot. Sal was required to block defenders and open other players up for driving to the basket for a goal. He was also expected to get some offensive rebounds and put-backs. Sal was good at making quick jump shots, hook shots, and using the backboard. On defense, his main responsibility was to keep opponents from shooting by blocking shots and passes in the key. He was also expected to get more rebounds because he was taller. Sal played hard; he played good.

He sprinted up and down the court from offense to defense, which allowed him to set up his defensive work early. It also put pressure on the defense to guard him, potentially leaving one of his teammates open. There was no place in the game for lazy running.

Sal stayed in an athletic stance while in the defensive possession and for most of the time when on the offensive so he could react, anticipate, and do his job more efficiently without wasted movement. He cut the driving defender off with his chest, boxed someone out, screened the players as they attacked, and battled to keep the ball out of the post. Basketball was a contact sport. There were plenty of opportunities to use his body intelligently to free a teammate.

Sal sacrificed himself for his team. He'd dive on a loose ball or take a charge, holding his screen a second longer if it meant freeing a teammate. Sal sacrificed his body by pressuring the ball full-court, knowing it would be uncomfortable and wear him out completely. He wasn't just playing hard, but he was also being a great teammate, clapping for them when he was excited after a great play. Sal never showed his frustration on the court despite missed shots, when they were scored on, or when the referee made a bad call. Through it all, he never showed that he was tired.

It paid off when they won by four points, earning the championship in the school's cup.

He was, of course, elected best player of the match. As he received his trophy for best player, he looked upon the spectators. Charlie looked so proud. His eyes shone, and he cheered like crazy.

Sal made his way through the crowd to hand the trophy to Charlie. "I want you to have this. I love you, Charlie," he said before returning to the court where he danced with his teammates, handing out high-fives, taking selfies, and hugging his family and friends.

When the arena started to empty, it was time to take the party elsewhere. Sal followed the others to the locker room where he noticed a pair of bright eyes glowing in shadows.

Seth.

Sal broke into a run. Even though he was exhausted, it was easy, and there was joy in every step. If he didn't touch Seth soon, his body might dissolve.

He jumped at Seth, almost knocking him over. When he wrapped his arms around him, he felt Seth's hands fold around Sal's back pulling him closer. Sal felt Seth's strong body, and the heart beating in his chest.

"Are you really here?" Sal whispered.

Seth pushed Sal gently back, ran a hand through his hair, and placed a hand on his cheek. "I'm here. I'm proud of you. I missed you." His lips formed into a soft smile, and he leaned slowly in. The kiss was sweet and gentle. Seth pulled Sal closer and deepened the kiss, making it more passionate.

The maniac driver was losing his marbles. He had dark circles under his brown eyes and small cuts on his face. He didn't care about his previous drunk driving convictions. All he wanted was to fix his life and get his girlfriend back, so he climbed into his truck and unleashed his despair at the crossroads of the world.

The vehicle came painstakingly close to other motorists as it switched across multiple lanes.

The driver took his eyes repeatedly off busy roads as he drove his heavy truck, looking at his phone. He munched sandwiches and chocolate bars behind the wheel as well as trying to Skype-call his ex-girlfriend during the journey.

He was juggling the phone in one hand and eating a sandwich with the other, leaving him with a total of no hands available to steer his truck. So far it had been a miracle that no one had been injured yet; he was an accident waiting to happen.

Sal hopped from one foot to the other like a little kid, and he wasn't one bit ashamed. He was deliriously happy. It was as if every fiber of his body was vibrating.

Seth was back.

A boyish grin spread onto his cheeks as he burst out of the arena.

Sal was hopeful. He had a good feeling that day, like nothing that felt so right could ever go wrong. It just couldn't.

In his euphoria, he'd forgotten to dry his hair after his shower, so water dripped down onto his t-shirt.

When Sal stepped outside, flecks of golden sunshine mingled with the few wispy clouds in the sky. He was met with applause, cheering, whooping, hollering, clapping, and a buzzing excitement.

He shook a few hands, handed out hugs. Everyone seemed to want his undivided attention.

Sal's eyes wandered through the crowd.

Where was Seth?

He felt heat rise to his cheeks, and his brain went into overdrive. Panic built inside of him like a rolling, unstoppable snowball.

Had Seth left again?

God, he had abandonment issues.

He heard a soft voice that sounded within him, wrapping itself around him, vibrating with power and command:

Other side of the building. I want you for myself.

Without any further goodbyes, Sal pulled the door open and hurried back inside the arena, heart throbbing inside his chest.

He dashed through the arena, searching for a back entrance. When he finally found an emergency exit door, he slammed it open, stepped out, and searched frantically around.

The area seemed deserted. Sal felt the panic build up again. Tension grew in his face and limbs, but his muscles relaxed when Seth stepped from the shadow of the building.

“You're dripping wet,” he said. He flashed his trademark charming smile, which made Sal go weak at the knees.

Seth traced Sal's lips lightly with the tip of his finger.

“It's like that time we danced in the rain.” Sal reached for Seth's hand and interlocked it with his own.

Seth bowed his head. “I'm sorry, Sal, for the way I left. I've been thinking about you every day.”

“You take my breath away,” Sal said, completely dazzled.

Seth led Sal's hand up to his heart. “This is what you do to me.”

Sal felt Seth's heart beating so hard, he feared it might fly out of his chest. He pressed his lips against Seth's with passion, love, and affection, and felt Seth's body press in, soft and warm as their bodies tangled together.

“You're buzzing,” Seth said, pulling them apart.

“Yeah. You're here.” Sal leaned back in. He had no wish for the kiss to end.

“No, you're literally buzzing.” Seth smiled with the kind of smile that made Sal feel happy to be alive.

“Shit. It's my phone. One sec.” Sal reluctantly pulled the phone from his pocket.

“Hey, Carl. Sorry, I got held up.”

He felt a few delicate touches of Seth's warm lips on his neck, and he nearly dropped the phone.

“I'll be out in a minute,” he said muffled into the phone. To Seth, he said, “You're in so much trouble,” with a grin on his face.

“I like trouble,” Seth said, his eyes burning seductively. “Trouble's my middle name.”

Sal jumped onto Seth's back, and Seth gave him a piggyback ride to the front of the building where Jack, Rosie, and Carl met them. Their curious eyes fixed on Seth.

“Hi, guys. Meet Seth,” Sal said, jumping down from Seth's back, his face stretched into a gaping grin.

It took second or two for the new information to sink in. When it did, Jack blurted, “*You’re* Seth? Wow, you’re pretty saucy. Sal wasn’t kidding.”

“You can say that again,” Rosie said, sounding impressed.

“By the way, I’m Rosie, and that’s Jack.” Jack waved from behind her.

“But you can call us whatever you want.”

“So, you’re the knight in shining armor that has my brother going all Norman Bates,” Carl concluded briskly.

“It’s been that bad, huh?” Seth sniggered. “I’m sorry.”

“It was really quite refreshing to watch him squirm a little.” Carl smiled and winked at Sal.

“Here’s an idea: maybe we should share all the of Sal’s childhood stories with Seth like we did with Charlie.” Carl gave Sal another sticky smile.

Sal glared at Carl. “Cheeky bastard.”

“Where is Charlie, by the way?” Sal asked when a truck pulled past them, going high speed.

The jaw-dropping moment in which he heard the crash almost stopped his heart. The impact sent a man flying across the car’s windshield as the truck plowed into the sidewalk at sixty-five miles per hour, forcing another driver off the road. For a heart-sinking moment, the man disappeared behind the truck.

Sal’s eyelids fluttered. The violent bang of metal was deafening.

It was then the awful truth hit him like a knife in the chest: it had been Charlie who was knocked to the pavement. He lay there, disoriented and bleeding.

Sal made his way to the accident. Someone tried to hold him back, to calm him, but he was too strong, too wild.

His breathing grew ragged. He gasped, and the strength left his legs. Sal sank to his knees and rested next to the bloody mess that had been a perfectly ordinary person only moments before. He pressed his forehead against the bloody body in front of him, and the sobs punched through, seeming to rip free from his body.

Sal felt his chest tighten into a knot and a quiet rage built inside. The world turned into a blur, and so did all the sounds. Everything darkened into nothingness—he was losing his mind again.

The darkness spread inside of him like poison. It took him beyond all reason, beyond all natural methods of calming.

His need for revenge was like his need for oxygen, and a part of him craved it. His hands clenched into shaking fists.

“I will fucking kill you, you son of a bitch,” Sal screamed as he got to his feet and approached the truck. He picked up a huge piece of metal and forcefully attacked the driver’s window, splintering it into what seemed to be millions of pieces.

Sal grabbed the driver by the hair and neck and tried to pull him out of the vehicle, only the seatbelt was in the way. Instead, Sal beat on the man's terrified face until his knuckles bled.

As the blue-red light from the police cars flashed brightly behind him and the accompanying sirens sounded, someone strong pulled on him from behind, dragging him, kicking and screaming, away from the truck.

The truck driver sat there with a bloody face, his nose smashed, and eyes almost shut with swelling. He leaned against the steering wheel with his arms wrapped around his guts like he was holding them in. “If you kill him, it'll mean I'll have to put in overtime.” Seth’s voice was like liquid sunshine, and Sal stopped fighting.

He brushed Sal's hair back and kissed him gently.

Sal sunk into the warmth of Seth's side. His touch made the horror around him melt away for a second.

Amidst the menace, madness, and confusion, Sal heard his brother’s voice say, “You've got to get him out of here. The bus—it's on the other side. Come on”

Seth took Sal by the arm. “They won’t see us. Let’s go.”

Sal clung to Seth like a kid clinging to a doll. He was numb, yet somehow in agony. They slipped away as the police closed off the area around the arena where the driver had crashed.

Carl jumped into the driver's seat while Seth sat on the floor in the back with Sal. "Where to?" Carl yelled back at Seth.

"A place called Giant Hill." Seth hugged Sal tightly. There was no other way.

Officer Green looked up as the tall guy appeared. He moved slowly down the stuffy corridor and the cheap prints on the wall. The nurses and doctors hurried from room to room; there had been an accident. The stranger moved unnoticed—there was something hypnotizing about him.

Somewhere in a van on the street, someone shut down the security cameras.

Money quickly shifted hands.

Officer Green smiled. The guy was creepy, but he sure as hell paid well. He'd soon be able to buy that boat.

The room had as much personality as the rest of the hospital. The floor was grey and the walls dull to look at.

A patient was cuffed to the bed. He'd been badly beaten.

The tall guy smiled. He even appeared to be proud. He gave Officer Green the sign to release the patient from his cuffs.

“Run,” his voice rumbled into the patient's ear. “Run, or I'll fucking kill you on the spot.”

The patient crawled out of the bed. He tried to scream, but he lacked the ability to produce a sound. His eyes were swollen, and it was hard to see anything. His thinking was distorted. The last thing he remembered was driving his truck.

He staggered out into the hallway.

The tall guy brought a fist to the officer's face, leaving him unconscious on the hospital bed. He followed the scrawny human patiently down the bleak corridor. If anyone interfered, he'd make them regret it.

He shoved the bewildered idiot into an elevator and ushered him out of the hospital and into the street. The patient looked drunk as he wobbled down the sidewalk.

A dark van pulled up next to him, hitting him with the side mirror. He fell forward and lay there in the dirt, still as a corpse.

Pathetic, the tall guy thought as he picked the body up and tossed it into the van.

“Where are you taking me?” the patients asked with a trembling voice. The tall guy played with the patient’s hair. A little rise at the corner of his mouth created a sinister smirk. “The barn,” he said.

Breaking News:

“POLICE are searching for a man who escaped from Strong Edge Hospital following his arrest over reckless driving, causing one person’s death...”

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