





# The Janitor

*A novel by*

Adam Decker

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*For Bruce Taylor, and Bob Shatto, and Ernie Decker. Only the good die young.*

*And for Leon, who taught me more than anyone that things are not always what they seem.*



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## Prologue

Alone in the pool with Sally Richards.

Was this it?

I ripped my trunks off and threw them out the second she suggested the idea of skinny-dipping. *Her* stripping was a little more dramatic. Wasn't everything with women, though? She made me stay in the middle of the pool while she undid her fluorescent pink top, untying the straps around her neck with a deliberate pace, like she was unlocking the mysteries of the universe. She let it fall into the water and float away on the same waves that now bounced her chest up and down on its surface.

And oh, that evil smile.

She pointed down, and immediately I went under water to see the rest of the show. The bottoms came off even more slowly as her dark red fingernails slipped them down her legs inch by savory inch. Now completely naked, she leaned back against the side of the pool, making no effort to hide anything.

Just twenty minutes ago the waves were rocking because of six teenagers playing chicken. Jack and Brunno won, of course. They always won. I had Sally on my shoulders and Johnny had Heather on his. Brunno always had Jack because neither one of them ever had a girlfriend. They pushed the girls off our shoulders with relative ease and were never smart enough to understand that if you played the game right and made it look like it was a struggle, maybe the girls' tops would accidentally get caught around a random finger or hand and just pop off. Brunno would never get that concept. He was a bull and charged through life with no regard for consequence. Jack could've and should've gotten it because he was a couple of wavelengths above Brunno, but to that point he as well never used his imagination.

But it was just me and Sally now. Jack and Brunno probably went for beer. Heather and Johnny went in the house to do whatever it was they did when they were alone. And now I found myself swimming toward the ultimate treasure, thinking all the while what a great way to start off the senior year—doing a girl I'd only dated for the last two weeks of the summer, in Heather Hawthorne's pool of all places.

I reached my destination and stayed under until my lungs made me go up. Before I could gasp for air, her lips were on mine, arms pulling me toward her, chest pressed against mine, nipples poking me. Her entire body was warm under the water, almost hot, and I could feel her breath quicken in my ear.

She pulled back from my lips—the evil smile filling her face again—and disappeared under water. I stood there like the king of the world, wondering what I had done to deserve this great end of the summer surprise. A rustling in the bushes thirty feet from the pool distracted my thoughts. I squinted but saw nothing. The bushes moved again.

“Who's there?”

The rustling stopped, and started again when the laughter burst out. It was Jack and Brunno, getting a peek at the action.

“We just want to watch, Tone,” Jack said still giggling like a first grader. “We’ll be quiet, scout’s honor

“Yeah we just wanna-wanna-watch,” Brunno sputtered.

Sally was still under water, but I knew she would be up for air any second.

“No, goddamn it, you can’t watch. Get the hell out of here!”

Sally rose to the surface and looked around. “Are you talking to someone?”

Before I could say a word, laughter from the bushes erupted again. Jack and Brunno emerged from the shrubbery, Jack holding my trunks on the end of a stick.

“Looks like somebody lost their drawers.”

Sally slithered off like a water moccasin under the waves, collecting both hemispheres of her bikini and dressing herself under water before she came up at the shallow end of the pool. “You’re all a bunch of pigs, you know that?”

Brunno let out an oinking sound, proud of the statement.

Sally threw the towel around her body—the body that was just around mine—and disappeared into the Hawthorne mansion.

I looked at Jack and Brunno who were still both smiling like they got the last ride of the day at an amusement park. “You guys are dumb asses, you know that?”

“We know,” Jack assured me and heaved my trunks through the air.

They landed on my head, completely covering my face. A fitting end to the summer. I stood there with the cold trunks covering my head. They almost sizzled against the heat of my skin and the temperature of my teenage blood.

I wasn’t ready for books and tests and asshole teachers. It seemed like summer just started yesterday. School lay not a day ahead of me, but in that depressing thought there was some hope. We were seniors. I looked forward to the fringe benefits of such status and took comfort in knowing that nine months from now it would all be over.

I knew that a great deal of that time would be spent chasing the girl that had just slipped through my fingers. But what I didn’t know was that in the coming days I would meet the best friend I would ever have. And his tale would take us far from the beat of high school hallways into a world of mystery and danger, where agents from the government didn’t wear plastic ID cards on their suit coats and serial killers weren’t just faces on CNN, where the human mind was as powerful as it was kind, and where the extraordinary gifts of one person were both a blessing and a curse. This is his story.

## Chapter 1 Lunch Geek

### I

The first day of school was always the worst day of the year for me. All of the freedoms of summer were stolen after eight hours of sleep by the looming threat of books and homework. It honestly made me sick to my stomach. There was only one ray of hope through that drab monotony—when we finally got through to the other side of the calendar, when spring finally decided to spread her wings, she brought with her the greatest game that one could ever hope to be a part of.

My name is Tony Falcone and back in those days I was the starting catcher for the Collingston High School Silver Streaks. That first year at the high school I beat out two seniors for the starting spot. They were not happy, let me tell you. I think Coach Demera gave me the job because he liked my work ethic. I had a decent arm as a freshman, but my greatest asset was my bat. I had hit over four hundred for the last three seasons, and if everything went right I'd do it again. No big time colleges were after me for one reason: I was only five ten. If I were four inches taller, I'd be telling *them* where I was going.

Coach Demera had led the Silver Streaks to the state playoffs for the last ten years. He has never won the big one though. Even though he hits the sauce a little too much, he's the best coach I've ever been around. There wasn't anything the man couldn't teach about the game. Only one thing was keeping us from a state title that year—pitching. Don't get me wrong: we've got guys that can throw, but we just don't have that one guy that can really go out on the hill and just shove it up the other team's ass.

My friend Johnny the Killer was our ace. Killer, you say? His last name was really Killman, and the rest will be obvious as the story goes. He threw in the mid-eighties, nice breaking ball, good control. The only problem was—and you can tell this by his name—he doesn't quite have what you call the pitcher mentality. Example. Last year in the first game of the regional, Johnny got thrown out of the game in the first inning for arguing about balls and strikes. I did my best to befriend the umpire and smooth him over, but when a guy says, “fucking bullshit” on the mound, it's hard to defend him. After Johnny we didn't have anybody that stood out. A couple guys threw around eighty, but that's batting practice when you get to the playoffs. Coach Demera had a knack for developing pitchers. I hoped he'd find a diamond in the rough.

Collingston High was a massive structure, taking up two and a half city blocks lengthwise and a half a block widthwise. The outer walls were made of millions of crimson bricks. A clock tower stood above one of the entrances that joined the main part (containing most of the classrooms) to the second part of the building that housed the gym, pool, weight room, field house, and a few technological classrooms like computer drafting and shop.

The floors in the building were a gray marble, shined to perfection nightly by the janitors. I imagine it had been that way since the building was built in the

1930s. There was never any gum or dirt in the hallways, not at the beginning of the day anyway.

The first day of school was the same as it always was. Opening assembly, where we got to hear the new policies of what was and wasn't allowed. No ball caps during school hours, because the junior gangbangers couldn't wear them the right way; girls couldn't have their thongs showing out the back of their jeans because one of us sex-crazed males might decide to rape her; and this one was the best: everyone had to wear a name tag so the prison guards could bust us easier, and somehow it would feel like the *Leave It To Beaver* days, where everybody knew everybody else's name. The nametag thing never went over. I threw mine in the garbage one second after it was issued to me, as did half of the student body. They threatened detentions and suspensions and all that shit. At first they carried through with it; but as time went on, it took up a lot of energy enforcing something that was just plain stupid, so the nametags were scrapped. We inmates finally won a battle.

Was my take on school harsh? You be the judge. My limited understanding of the word "school" was that it was a place where a person went to get educated. To expand his intelligence and to find what he was supposed to do in life. A place to share ideas. The brick building I attended is getting ready to put in metal detectors at the entrances, had two full-time cops present at all times, and a principal that hated teenagers, much less the ideas that fly from their mouths. It had a no-hat policy. It sanctions anyone who shows any kind of physical affection for another. Hats and hugs are deadly these days. It is a place with no religion, no individuality, and no choices. And once you are there, you become part of a system, much like that of another state institution.

## II

The cafeteria was in the basement, under the main part of the building. It was very large, holding up to fifteen hundred students a time. In the past, school dances and even large city meetings were held there.

At lunch I sat with Johnny and some other baseball players. Johnny proceeded to tell us how he banged the bejesus out of Heather the night before. The messed up thing about it was she sat at our table. We would always get there before her, so by the time she sat down, everyone had stupid little grins on their faces. Heather was a real nice girl, and whether Johnny was screwing her or not, she would have been pissed to know he talked about her like that.

Directly caddy-corner from us I noticed a nerd sitting by himself. He didn't have a pocket protector or greased back hair with one wild strand sticking up, but you could tell he was a nerd. He was timid and skinny. He read a book while he ate. Like we didn't do enough of that shit during class! He never looked up from his plate. He never responded to the clutter and noise that filled the cafeteria. He never acknowledged people walking by and never made eye contact with anyone.

I guess I wasn't the only one noticing the new geek. Jack Rollings decided that on his way back from getting a pop, he would pay the new guy a visit. He stopped and said hello. The new guy just looked at him. Jack called him a retard

and took the guy's milk and poured it on his head. Our whole table busted up in laughter except for Heather, of course, who only shook her head in disgust. I watched the guy use his napkins to clean the milk out of his hair. The geek never got angry. He never cried or ran to tell one of the prison guards. His face never turned red out of embarrassment, although it should have. After cleaning his hair and clothing up, he even went and got more napkins to clean the milk that was splattered on the table and floor.

Over the next week I watched as Johnny and the boys would knock his tray off the table, or spit in his food, or blow their noses with his napkin, or take his books and slide them half way across the cafeteria floor. It got to the point where people moved to our side of the lunchroom to see the guy get picked on. People would keep one eye on their food and one eye on the table caddy-corner from us. It became the lunch hour entertainment. Even underclassmen were starting to join in on the antics, young punks that would never have thought about picking on someone. I sat down everyday wishing that this guy would move to the other side of the cafeteria away from us, or better yet, not show up at all. You heard people in class talk about what happened to the lunch geek today. Some people felt sorry for him. Some people thought it was a matter of time before he either exploded against this torture (and believe me, as a teenager the worst thing that can happen to you is have your ego damaged or destroyed), or he would be the guy you always heard about killing himself just before prom or graduation. I'm sure the masses would mourn, but only for a day or so, and then it would be on to someone else.

I'm also not sure what I thought about him. He was just some fragile little book geek. You never saw him out, or anything. I knew he worked after school being a janitor's helper or some shit, but that was it. That was all I knew about him. But there was something about the guy that I couldn't put my finger on. There was something about the way he carried himself. He had what my grandpa would have called "the spark".

The guy would always get the healthy meal—salads, applesauce, fruit, stuff like that. He would always eat one thing at a time before he touched the next. I remember my mom saying something when I was younger about that being a sign of a genius.

The day came in the cafeteria—the day I knew would come—that Johnny and the boys would want me to pitch in with their antics.

"I think you're up, Falcone," Johnny the Killer said.

"Whatta ya mean, I'm up?" I said.

Johnny pointed with his fork as he chewed his food. "The faggot janitor over there. I think you're the only one that hasn't got a piece of the action."

The other guys at our table gave me some words of encouragement, or peer pressure, whichever you want to call it. I picked up my tray and walked over to his table. I watched the crowd as they watched me. They stopped eating and drinking. Some people were pointing, others were already laughing. I looked down at my tray at the lasagna, can of pop, and garlic bread. I felt a little drop of sweat run from my temple down the side of my cheek. I got to his table, right next to him, holding the tray level with the top of his tray. He knew I was there, but didn't look up. I looked at my lasagna again, thinking it would be easy enough to

smash it in the geek's face. I knew everybody in the cafeteria was looking at me, I could feel the stares bearing down on me. The geek continued to eat without acknowledging me. I started for the lasagna with my right hand and then stopped. Something popped into my head, a story we've all heard in one form or another. Mine came in the way of one of those sappy ass emails you get from time to time.

As the story goes, some nerd freshman is carrying home all of his books, walking and struggling with the weight. A popular person (we'll call him the jock) goes and offers to help the poor nerd. The nerd accepts, and the two throughout their high school years become good friends, even though one is a nerd and the other is a jock. At graduation, the nerd has to give a speech because he ends up being Valedictorian. The nerd tells the story of how his good friend the jock helped him carry his books home four years earlier. Only there's a twist. The nerd was taking home his books because he didn't want his mom to have to clean out his locker after he killed himself over the weekend. The moral of the story: We never know just how much our actions will affect someone in the long run. And no matter how untruthful or cheesy I thought the story was, I couldn't get it out of my head.

I looked at the lasagna.

Then at the nerd.

Then at the crowd.

"You mind if I sit down?" I said.

"Go ahead," he said back.

His voice was very soft; not afraid, but soft. Some people when you talk to them have that crack in their voice, like they're so nervous to talk their brain short circuits and messes up their voice. That wasn't the case with this guy. He had a quiet way about him for sure, but he also had a presence. I mean when I walked over to the guy, he had to be thinking the same old shit was coming. But he didn't flinch. His composure didn't change. Either he didn't care or he was that secure.

The first couple of minutes I sat there, there was nothing but silence between us. The crowd's eyes were still anxious, waiting for me to do something. Several minutes passed and when the crowd saw I wasn't going to humiliate the guy, boos began to sprout throughout the cafeteria. Someone even threw an empty milk carton and hit me in the head.

The guy just kept eating, never looking up at me. I started to think this was a bad idea until I saw him do something that I hadn't noticed before. A girl walked by and he looked up. He watched her go all the way to the pop machines and back to her table. Maybe this guy wasn't as abnormal as I thought.

"That's Heather Hawthorne," I said to him. "She's the captain of the cheerleading squad. Real good looking, obviously. She's Johnny the Killer's girlfriend."

"Why do they call him the Killer?" the guy asked as he finally looked up from his plate.

"Because if you so much as look at Heather, Johnny'll kill ya." When I said that, he cracked a smile. We were making progress now. In the days I'd been watching him, I had never seen him smile. He had a good smile. Not that I'm

queer or anything like that, but his smile made other people smile. I was getting ready to give him the old twenty questions when the bell rang.

“Nice talkin’ to ya, man,” I said. “By the way, ya got a name?”

“Roman,” he replied.

I shook his hand. He had a nice firm grip. I heard boos in the background again.

As I watched him walk away, never did I think that that conversation would be the start of something that would change a lot of people’s lives forever.

### III

The next day was no surprise. The same old shit. First hour I had PE. Second hour was Government. Third hour was English and so on. High school was nothing more than repetition. It was a lot like prison in that regard. I guess the only difference was that in high school you got to go home at the end of the day.

When I watched Roman at lunch, this time was no different. Same healthy meal. Never looking up as he ate. Except for when Heather got up to get her pop. The one thing at lunch that day that was different I guess, was that nobody went and picked on him

After school I was having some severe problems getting my car—a nineteen eighty-seven Ford Pinto, painted baby blue—started.

“You stupid piece of shit. God damn this thing. Start, you son of a bitch.” As I slammed my head into the steering wheel, I saw Roman walking down the sidewalk next to the parking lot. All of the sudden my cursing stopped. I just watched him.

“Knock the floorboard out so you can be like Fred Flintstone,” someone yelled as they passed by.

“Screw you, asshole!” I yelled back.

As Roman got closer to me, he started to slow down. He held his head slightly tilted upward. It was a warm day and the wind blew right in his face. It was like he had nothing more to care about than the breeze in his face. That might have been the point at which I started admiring this guy. He was so different from me, yet at the same time I felt I had so much in common with him. Roman got directly beside my car and glanced over at the situation as I spat out a few more choice words for the heap I called a car.

“Turn your lights on,” Roman said.

“Lights?”

“Your headlights; turn them on and then wait a minute or so,” he replied.

I really didn’t know what the hell Roman was trying to do, but I didn’t have anything to lose so I humored him. Of course I didn’t wait a minute. But I guess I waited long enough. When I turned the key, my angel started right up.

“Well I’ll be damned. How the hell’d you do that? That’s outstanding,” I said.

“Turning your lights on will some times get the electricity running through. You probably need a new battery or a new alternator,” he said and then walked away. I pulled up beside him as he got to the end of the parking lot.

“Hey, can I give ya a lift?”

“No thank you.”

I just sat there for a while and watched him walk down Stephenson Street until he got so far away there was nothing left of him but a dot on the horizon. I turned the opposite direction and headed for home.

#### IV

Later that night Roman mopped the floor of the hallway next to a row of lockers as Heather walked by. She politely went around the place where he already mopped. Roman glanced up but did not make eye contact with her. As he got to the row of lockers she went down, his mop started to slow. Roman couldn't help but stare down the long row of pale colored lockers at her.

As she opened her locker, an object fell out and crashed to the floor scattering chaos through the lonesome hallways of the high school. She knelt down and picked up one of the ceramic pieces, rubbing it with her hands. Roman stopped mopping and put his full attention on her. She picked up several of the pieces trying to put them back together, like an infant trying to put a square into the shape of a circle. She stood back up slowly and looked at Roman.

“My grandmother gave me it when I was four years old. It was a Precious Moments cheerleader. They don't even make this one anymore. I never used to bring it to school. But when she passed away I brought it here because it made me feel closer to her. That probably sounds stupid.”

“Not at all,” Roman said.

Johnny the Killer walked up.

“What are you doing? I've been waiting out there for ten minutes,” he said.

“I just broke the cheerleader my grandma gave me,” she answered looking down at the shattered pieces.

Johnny looked down at the mess on the floor. “Well don't worry about it, the janitor will clean it up. I'll buy you a new one; let's go, the Vette is out there running.” Johnny didn't realize that the janitor he spoke of was the one he had been picking on for the last eleven days.

Heather looked at the broken pieces of the cheerleader not wanting to leave them. Another minute went by and she grabbed her jacket out of the locker and slowly shut the door. “I'm sorry for the mess, but he's my only way home.” Roman just nodded and out she went to the silver Corvette.

#### V

Friday. All of the cheerleaders were dressed in their outfits and the football players with their jerseys. Fridays were different than the rest of the week. Especially on game days. Especially when it was the first home game day. People weren't so lethargic. Even the prison guards were in a better mood. It also helped that we were on a shortened schedule because of the first pep rally.

Ten minutes before the first bell rang Heather walked to her locker, unlike her other cheerleader friends who were skipping around the joint. She opened her locker but didn't notice it at first. She reached in to put one of her books on the top shelf of the locker and there it was. She took the book back down and stared in

amazement. The cheerleader she had smashed into a million pieces was standing eye level right in front of her. A tiny string was tied around its waist and the other end of the string was tied to the back of the locker. She undid the string and put the cheerleader in her hand, turning it over and over. The missing little fragments she thought she would see or feel were not to be found. The little statue looked as if it had just come out of the box. A smile brightened her face. And as the bell rang, she wrapped the little string around the cheerleader's waist and stood it gently back in her locker.

By this time I was spending the last half of the lunch period sitting at Roman's table. It was curiosity that kept me coming back. We would talk about numerous things. Actually I did most of the talking, and Roman would comment here or there. He made me feel so stupid sometimes 'cause anything I would bring up, he would know a lot more about it than I did. Sometimes he'd get to talking so far over my head that I couldn't even converse with him. I couldn't really tell if he enjoyed my company or if he was just humoring a dumb ass. He never told me to leave. So I guess that was a good sign.

Anyway, I started that day at lunch as I always did sitting at the table with my friends, caddy-corner from Roman's table. We were already seated and eating when Heather came up. Johnny would always turn his head toward her and make some stupid kissy face. Every time, without fail, Heather would stop briefly and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. It had been that way for as long as I could remember. But not this time. This time she didn't even look at Johnny. She passed him by like he was invisible and went over to Roman's table. The guys at the table looked at each other and then at Johnny. You have to understand that in four years of high school she had sat at this very table every day. So when something as little as this happened everyone was on edge, even maybe a little excited. School is so boring that people just look for something to break the monotony.

As Heather sat down next to Roman, Johnny's face went from kissy-kissy to pissy-pissy. He was obviously not happy. I had seen the stare he was giving Roman all too many times; some blows usually accompanied it to the head and stomach of the person it was aimed at. This was not good. I'd seen Johnny beat the ever-living dog shit out of countless victims in the past. You don't earn the rank of Killer just because your last name is Killman. Nobody ever came close to whippin' him. I can't even remember a time when somebody got a good lick in on him. I started to feel a little bit scared for Roman, but at the same time something told me that he would be all right.

Roman looked at Heather as she took the seat next to him, which was more than he ever did for me. I guess you really couldn't blame the guy; I mean here was a girl that every person in the school with a penis thought about at least ten times a day. She was the real deal. Guys never really talked to her though, on account of what could happen to them if Johnny found out.

"I hope you don't mind if I sit next to you. That was a very nice thing you did for me. It must have taken you hours to put it back together. I don't have the words to thank you. How did you get it back together?"

"I used ceramic glue," Roman said. "It didn't take as long you would think. Besides I like puzzles."

"Why would you do something like that for me?" she asked.

"The look in your eyes when it broke. I know the feeling," Roman replied.

"I finished with my mopping ahead of schedule, and had some time to kill."

"You don't even know me," she said.

"I know you. Your name is Heather," Roman said.

"What's yours?"

"Roman."

"That's it, just Roman?"

"Swivel," he responded.

"That's a very unique name, Roman Swivel."

Johnny watched their conversation for several minutes but finally saw enough and jetted out of his chair on a straight line for Roman's table. He grabbed Heather under her arm and lifted her up out of the chair. His knuckles turned white from grabbing her so hard. Roman looked at The Killer's hand but remained seated. Heather wiggled her way free and WHAP! The cafeteria turned into a morgue. You could have heard a mouse fart on the other side the room. Heather slapped him so hard the gum he was chewing flew out of his mouth and landed on my lap.

"Asshole!" she yelled as she picked her bag up and walked away.

Johnny just stood there staring at Roman. Roman looked back at him but at the same time took a bite of his applesauce. It was almost like Roman dared him to do something. I'll tell you this: if it were any other guy in that chair, he would be cleaning his pants out instead of shoveling applesauce into his mouth.

"I'll deal with you later janitor boy," Johnny said.

With that, the cafeteria turned back into a beehive. I sat there stunned for a second or two and then picked the gum off my crotch. It was like nothing had ever happened when I next talked to Roman. I didn't bring it up and neither did he. I asked him if he was going to the football game. He said he had to work, but told me to go to room 339 if I wanted. That room was on the third floor right behind the football field. I had a feeling that Roman would be watching the game from there.

I sat in the pep rally thinking about how mad Johnny was and how Roman never lost his demeanor when Johnny came over to him. It doesn't sound like a big deal but believe me it was. You just don't fuck with Johnny the Killer. He would get even with Roman. Somebody had to pay for embarrassing him and it wasn't going to be Heather.

## VI

Game night.

The sun had just set about forty-five minutes ago. The air was crisp and clean. If it hadn't been for the bright lights overlooking the field, you could have counted every star in the night sky. I got there about an hour before game time. You had to if you wanted a good seat. I sat where I always did in the front row of the north end zone with the rest of the baseball players. Coach Demera made it

mandatory that we attend all home games and sit together. It had been that way even before I got to high school.

By halftime we were up a touchdown. Johnny and a couple of the other guys went to sip on a whiskey bottle out in the parking lot. I, on the other hand, was going to talk to Roman. I could see a couple of rooms on the third floor of the school had their lights on. Room 339 was one of them I imagined.

When I entered the room I saw Roman on his hands and knees. He wore dingy gray pants and a shirt that matched. There was a nametag on his chest that read: *Roman Student Janitor*. One of the desks was overturned and Roman scraped gum off of the bottom side with a putty knife. He worked fast. Once one desk was done he went directly to the next without hesitation.

“Christ man, do they make you do this kind of work all the time?” I asked.

“When you’re low man on the totem pole you really don’t have a choice. Besides this is great work. You should see some of the toilets I’ve cleaned in the past.”

“Why in the hell don’t you get a job waiting tables or something? This work sucks!”

“The money is good and I like the hours,” Roman responded.

“What are your hours?”

“Seven to midnight.”

To tell you the truth, I don’t think Roman really liked the hours or the pay for that matter. I think he liked what he did. Cleaning things up. Turning chaos into order. Another sign of a genius my mom used to say. Roman was a neat freak, and this kind of work, believe it or not, was a stress reliever for him. Not that Roman ever showed any signs of stress, but that was my take on the situation. Later I would find out that was not the only reason he worked that god-forsaken job.

“Pretty good game huh?” I asked.

“I haven’t been watching but I’ve been listening. It sounds like our defense is playing better than they have been,” Roman said as he continued to scrape.

It kind of surprised me that he said that about the game. If I had guessed, I would have told you that Roman wasn’t into sports. But he was right on the money about our defense. If our “D” played well, we were in every game.

The PA announcer came on during halftime and told the crowd that the cheerleaders would now be performing their routine at mid-field. When Roman heard this, the scraping stopped. He went over to the window and watched.

“You need to forget about her, man,” I said, looking on with Roman.

“Why?” he asked back, still caught up in the routine.

“She’s taken first of all. If Johnny thinks you are after her, he’ll kick your ass up and down that hallway and use your head for a mop. Believe me I know. I’ve been friends with him since first grade and he’s the baddest son of a bitch there is, in this school anyway.”

“I’m not after his girl. I just think she’s nice,” Roman replied.

“Nice? She’s the most popular girl at Collingston High. Every guy wants her and every girl wants to be her. You don’t get that status by being fucking nice, Roman,” I said.

Roman's eyes were still locked on her. "I think it's just fancy wrapping paper."

"Anyway, Scott Jakowski's parents are out of town and he's throwing one hell of a bash after the game."

Roman went back to his scraping.

"You should come. Everybody's going to be there. He'll have food and shit, even a keg if that's your thing."

"I have to work."

I grabbed a pen and paper off the desk in the front of the room. "Only 'til midnight, right? The party will just be getting started. Look, I'll write down his address and you can decide later. He lives on the lake, so you might want to throw on a sweatshirt or something."

I set the piece of paper down next to where Roman was working. He didn't look up, but continued to scrape the gum off another desk. I headed back down to the field to catch the second half.

We ended up winning the game by a touch down and just like Roman said our defense was the reason. They ran two interceptions back for touchdowns.

## VII

When I got to Scotty's house, there were already people there. He had a decent-sized back yard that sloped down toward the lake. At the far end of the yard were stairs that led down to the dock.

By midnight the back yard was packed. There must have been two hundred people and at least half of them were girls. Tonight might be my lucky night. Sally was in attendance—the one I almost had in the pool—and if things went my way, we would finish where we left off.

Scotty was passed out at his own party. Not shocking though, he could never hold his liquor. Most everybody was outside, but there were a few guys in Scotty's kitchen playing the Century Club—a drinking game in which you took a shot of beer every minute for a hundred minutes. It doesn't sound that bad because it's beer you're shooting, but it adds up to almost nine beers in an hour and forty minutes. The majority of people get so wasted they can't finish. Like our friend Billy over there. They were on their seventieth shot, but Billy wasn't going to make it to eighty. He kept cussing at the timekeeper because he couldn't believe the next minute was up. I've been there. After about an hour of playing, what at first seems like a long minute turns into a millisecond between shots.

Billy, on his seventy-seventh shot, fell backward out of his chair and slammed to the kitchen floor. As he went he knocked a bottle of whiskey off the table and needless to say it shattered all over. Billy was out cold. The guys he was playing with laughed so hard they started to cry. Sam Peterman took a pitcher of beer and started to pour it on Billy's head. This really broke up the table, and even I started to laugh.

Outside the music was blaring. People were dancing. Johnny was making some under-classmen do keg stands. Heather was over talking to her friends, ignoring him. Evidently they still had not made up from the incident at lunch. Johnny was more drunk than usual because of it.

Around 2 AM I ran over to the bushes next to the stairs that went down to the dock. The last Jack and Coke I had didn't go down real smooth and I was ralphing it up with what felt like my intestines. I must have been bent over those bushes for a good twenty minutes or so. I could hear people laughing and shit behind me. As I looked up in between vomits, I glanced down at the dock

"I'll be damned."

Roman sat Indian style at the end of the dock with his head tilted back and the September breeze blowing against his face. He was little against the size of the lake and even smaller against the star-filled sky. As I collected myself from puking and wiping my face off with a couple of leaves, I started down the stairs.

There were a lot of those goddamn stairs, and I must have missed the last two because all of a sudden I was hurtling through the air heading face first for the lake. Without breaking his Native American sitting posture Roman stuck out his arm and stopped my fall. I did slam hard against the dock though.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Thanks for grabbing me."

"No problem," Roman replied.

"How long have you been here?" I asked, catching my breath.

"About an hour I suppose," Roman answered.

"Why didn't you come up with everyone else?" I asked back.

"And leave all this?" Roman said as he waved his hand toward the lake.

"No offense to nature Roman, but I've got a piece of ass waiting for me up there. Are you gonna stay down here or what?"

Roman nodded. "Here, you might need this." He pulled out a stick of gum and placed it in my hand.

"Thanks, I'll tell Heather you're down here." I started up the stairs not knowing why I was going to tell Heather that Roman was on the dock. I still thought he should stay away from her, but I guess I felt sorry for him being down there all by himself. Then again it might have just been Jack Daniel's filling my head with stupid ideas.

When I got back up to Scotty's back yard, the party was still going. The music was still blaring, but it didn't have the attention it once did. Some people had left by this time. Others were just passed out in the yard. It was like somebody came through with a machine gun and just leveled half the people at the party. Johnny was passed out too, with a bottle of Jack Daniel's in his hand, and his head using a rock for pillow. Most important though my piece of ass was still coherent. Well maybe not coherent, but she wasn't asleep.

Sally was over talking to Heather and the rest of them. Man was she wasted. Swaying back and forth and shit. I had to hurry before she bit the dust. As I grabbed her arm, she fell to her knees laughing.

"Come on let's go," I said as I picked her up off the ground. Her legs were jello.

"Where we goin'?" she asked as she tried to look at me. You know what I mean? That look drunk people give you. They're looking right at you but their eyes aren't focusing or something. Anyway I told her we were going home (which if home was to Scotty's basement then I guess I was telling the truth). I picked her up over my shoulder and turned to face Heather.

“By the way, Roman’s down on the dock”

“He is?”

I started to carry Sally off but stopped. “Yeah, he’s down there counting stars or some shit.”

Heather immediately headed for the dock. She made it down a little easier than I did. Roman was in his own little world looking up at the stars.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Heather asked as she already started to sit.

“Please,” Roman said as he looked up at her.

She sat down next to him Indian style as well. Her leg lay next to his. Roman continued to look up at the stars. Heather wrapped both of her arms around her chest like she needed a hug to stay warm. Roman noticed, took off his flannel, and put it over her shoulders.

“It’s a little chilly isn’t it?”

“A little, but I’m so warm blooded the cold doesn’t really bother me. You’re only as cold as you tell yourself anyway.”

“Is that so? What are you doing down here by yourself anyway?”

“Trying to look back in time,” Roman said.

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t believe in time travel?”

Heather said nothing, looking more confused.

“The greatest thinker of our time thought it might be possible. Time is relative.”

“You’re losing me, Roman.”

Roman put his arm on her shoulder and pointed with his free hand toward the sky, moving his face close to hers. Heather flinched, surprised at first at the closeness, but then welcomed it when he began to speak.

“You see that star right there? That’s Sirius. It’s the closest star to us besides the sun, which we can see in the northern hemisphere. It’s only fifty-one trillion miles away. How you see that star right this instant is how it existed over eight years ago. How it actually looks now at this very instant we won’t know for another eight years, because that’s how long it takes for light to travel from it. So, relatively that star is on a different time plane than us. If you could travel at speeds approaching the speed of light to that star, you would have traveled eight years into the future.”

“That’s amazing, a little over my head, but amazing nonetheless. It is beautiful, all those stars so bright against the void.” Heather looked over, noticing the new face had not retreated from hers. “I’ve always wanted to see a shooting star but never have.”

“What you’re looking for is a meteor and you’ve come to the right spot,” Roman responded.

“What, you can control the sky as well as magically bring ceramic dolls back to life?”

Roman smiled.

“Most people haven’t seen a shooting star because they haven’t looked up at the sky for more than a couple seconds. They’re too busy driving or talking; too

busy to stop and live their life; instead they run through it. The truth is, if you look for a couple of minutes on a clear night like tonight, chances are you'll see one."

Roman had a way of convincing you of things. I think it was the honesty in his voice. So there they sat for more than ten minutes, looking and waiting. Not saying a word. And sure enough there was a shooting star. And then another. And then several in a row.

"It's like fireworks," Heather said as she continued to watch.

"It's a meteor shower. You just have to be patient," Roman said.

"I should do this more often. It's very peaceful. I can see why you like it so much. How rude of me; do you want something to drink?"

"No thanks, I'm not thirsty."

"I mean do you want something to drink as in liquor?" Heather said back.

"No thanks, I had a bad experience with liquor one time. Where's Johnny?"

"He's up there passed out in the yard like some sort of ape. Isn't the first time and won't be the last I'm sure. I can't remember the last time he and I actually went on a date. By ourselves I mean. He cares more about being with these drunks than he does me," Heather replied.

"Can I ask you something, Heather?"

Heather nodded.

"Why are you with him?"

Heather paused a moment. "He's really not a bad guy. I see a different side of him when it's just us. I've been with him for so long. It's just habit now I guess. I do care for him even though he is an ass a lot of the time."

## VIII

Me and Sally were going at it pretty good down in the laundry room in Scotty's basement. Her kissing was as sloppy as hell, although I didn't mind in my drunken stupor. Besides that, I had just finished puking so I was probably getting the better end of the deal. I had her shirt and bra off and was working my way south when she started to talk.

"Do you have something?" She couldn't even open her eyes.

"Yeah honey of course I do."

"Put it on, I don't need any accidents." I think that's what she said anyway. Her mumbling was getting worse.

I grabbed my pants off the floor next to me and picked them up. Shuffling through the first pocket and then the second, I remembered I left the damn things in my glove box. I threw my jeans on and zipped up making sure not catch myself in the zipper. I raced up the stairs stepping on an arm belonging to one of the passed-out drunks. Bob Franklin maybe, hell I don't know, and neither did he at that point.

"Hurry!" came the voice from down the stairs.

I wasn't used to hearing that from a chic. The sound of it gave me an adrenaline boost as I ran through the kitchen. I was like an Olympic hurdler jumping over bodies and broken bottles, not for a medal but for something much sweeter. Hurry was right.

I got to the Pinto, got the protection, and as quick as I was out, I was back down in the basement. As I turned the corner to the laundry room, the happy smile on both my faces melted away. There she was, fully clothed and fully passed out. The story of my life. Not giving up all hope I gently shook her and said her name. Nothing. It was over and yet another condom goes back in the pocket. Just at that moment I heard some drunk yelling something from outside. I went to check it out.

“Hey janitor boy!” came a yell from the top of the hill. “I thought I told you to stay the hell away from her.”

Roman just looked at Johnny without responding. Heather looked at Roman, then at Johnny, then back at Roman. “We are just talking, Johnny.”

“That ain’t good enough, Heather. I’m going to show this scamp when I say something I mean it,” Johnny garbled as he headed down the steps.

Heather tried to reason with him on his way down, but this made Johnny more enraged. He was very careful on hitting every step on the way down, but it was still apparent he was wasted. When he got to the dock, he jumped toward Roman like a wrestler coming off the ropes. Roman was too quick and moved out of the way. Johnny went flying into the lake. When he hit the water he swallowed a sizable amount. He tried to swim but started coughing and gasping for air. Then there was silence, the helpless splashes stopped, and Johnny’s head disappeared under the water, turning the waves into a smooth mirror again.

“He’s drowning!” Heather screamed.

By this time a crowd of people were at the top of the stairs looking down at the chaos below. Roman dove off the dock into the cold dark water and went under to get him. Twenty seconds passed and up came Roman with Johnny’s arm around his shoulder. He swam carrying the seemingly lifeless corpse with him. Heather helped Roman pull Johnny onto the dock. The crowd including myself was now rushing down the stairs.

“He’s not breathing, Roman!” Heather said.

Roman put his ear to Johnny’s nose and mouth and then felt for his pulse.

“He’s still got a pulse.” Roman said calmly.

Roman tilted Johnny’s head back and squeezed his nostrils shut with the other hand. He blew into Johnny’s mouth, paused and then again. He did this three times and on the fourth Johnny spit up some water and began to cough. The coughing turned into puking. Roman turned him on his side so he wouldn’t choke on his own vomit. The crowd gathered around and as quickly as it started it was finished. Heather was bent down holding Johnny’s head making sure he was all right. The confusion started to diminish and before long Johnny was on his feet. I looked around for Roman, but there was no sign of him. He left the same way he came, without anyone noticing him.

## IX

Dreadful Monday came and as I sat in algebra class I stared into the nowhere that was everywhere but Algebra. I was a senior in high school and should have been in trig or calculus, but instead I was in a class with a bunch of

stupid freshman. Who's the stupid one really? I spent three years of my life doing just enough to get by. Why should I be shocked at the result? The kicker of it all is that I was barely passing the class.  $X$  equals five,  $y$  squared is 16, I don't know what the hell any of it means. Don't care to either. It's my senior year, and I'll be damned if I'm going to worry about anything.

I glanced around the room noticing my other co-genius, Johnny, was nowhere to be found. Not surprising really. He might still be hung over from the party Friday. Or maybe he's still getting his lungs pumped from almost drowning. Probably the best explanation, and we'll never hear the truth from Johnny the Killer, was that he was embarrassed. Embarrassed that Heather slapped him in front of the entire cafeteria. Embarrassed that he charged and missed Roman. Embarrassed that he fell into the water and was too drunk to swim. Most of all though, he was embarrassed that the man he called the geek janitor saved his sorry hide. Most people would be happy to just be alive, but Johnny would rather have drowned in that lake than have to face the crowd and especially the guy who saved him. I'm quite sure that Roman was slowly moving up the long totem pole of Johnny's shit list; in fact I wouldn't be surprised if he was already at the top. The time was coming that I would have to stand up and take a side. My father was always preaching at me from what Jesus said. Something along the lines about a person shouldn't be lukewarm. Eventually I got the drift. A person has to choose one side or the other; there is no such thing as in between.

"Tony," I heard a voice in the room say.

Without hesitation I said, "Sorry, I don't know the answer." That was my standard answer in a classroom and it wasn't a lie; I really didn't know. It probably would have helped though if I were paying attention.

The teacher, Mr. Buttworst, moved on to the next unsuspecting victim without getting in my shit. He knew it was a waste of time. I really liked the guy though; he was a student body favorite probably for several reasons. He was burly with gray hair and an even grayer beard. He always wore a dress shirt and tie but at the same time wore jeans and cowboy boots. His little beer gut hung out over the front of his belt. He had real thick glasses and his breath smelled like an ashtray mixed with coffee grounds. Very nice though, he never raised his voice or gave people detentions for not paying attention. There were pictures of deer and ducks hanging on the wall. Behind his desk toward the ceiling there was a banner that read: *If guns cause crime, then matches cause arson*. He always brought a thermos to school and filled that thing up between every class. The man could drink some coffee.

The best thing about Mr. Buttworst was getting him off the subject. He would give us the first few minutes of every class period to talk about whatever we wanted. He was the mediator and the antagonist at the same time. We would talk about everything from politics to cartoons and a lot of the time the bell would ring before we so much as opened our books. If you got him real fired up, he'd drop a "hell" or "damn" during our discussions. I'm sure the rest of the prison guards wouldn't have approved, but that's the reason students liked him the best. He was real.

It was common knowledge that his wife and daughter were killed in a car wreck some years ago. You couldn't tell it now. I really think he liked what he did and was pretty good at it. He was one of those people that liked to get up in the morning, just the opposite of me I guess.

Roman had Mr. Buttworst for 6th hour. Not for Algebra, but for Calculus. I couldn't even dream of what that would be about, but Roman was really good at it. In fact I found out later that Roman never missed a single question on a quiz or test or final. No one had ever done that in one of Mr. Buttworst's classes and he had been teaching for damn near twenty years. It goes without saying that Roman was definitely one of his favorites. Mr. Buttworst caught up with him one day after class

"Roman?" Mr. Buttworst asked.

"Yes, sir?" Roman replied.

"I just wanted to congratulate you on the fine work you've been doing in this class. Right now you're on pace to be the brightest student I've ever had and there's been some mighty fine young men and women to have come out of here. I was looking over some of your work, and it occurred to me that you haven't missed a single point on any problem. I don't mean to pry, but have you taken a class like this before?"

"No, sir," Roman replied.

"I notice that during class you never open your book or take a single note down. I checked with some of your other teachers and they all say the same thing. Your schedule is as tough as they come but you have straight A's. Do you spend hours studying at home?"

Roman broke eye contact with Mr. Buttworst and stared out the window.

"No sir, I don't. I've got what some people would call a photographic memory."

Mr. Buttworst stared at Roman for a minute and then smiled. "A photographic memory is one thing when you're memorizing vocabulary or spelling but this class is about comprehension, and you also do that very well."

Roman looked back at him, his mouth locking away secrets in his head.

"There's a competition in Chicago next Saturday for the top students in Illinois. It's sort of a scholastic bowl, if you will. The winning school gets the high honor of being named champion. The individual with the highest score gets a five thousand dollar scholarship for college, his or her picture in the paper, and gets to meet the governor. What colleges have you applied to.

Roman took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. "None sir."

Mr. Buttworst took his glasses off and stared again at Roman.

"You don't have to give me an answer today Roman, but I would like you to compete. You should look into applying to some colleges also. The mind is a terrible thing to waste you know."

"Yes sir, I'll let you know tomorrow."

## X

The next day at lunch me and Roman sat at our usual spot. I noticed Johnny was not at lunch for the second day in a row. I went over and asked Sam

Peterman if he had heard from Johnny. Come to find out Johnny had come down with the flu, at least that was what he was telling people. I think it was bullshit.

I brought up the fact that Homecoming was coming up and Roman should ask somebody to go. He informed me that he had to work on the cleanup crew and dancing wasn't his thing anyway. That had to suck. I was taking Sally—the one I had in the basement that night—and this time I was going to finish the deal. At least I hoped.

Heather came over and I knew I was now playing second fiddle. As I listened to them talk I noticed the guys at the table were giving Roman dirty looks. A few fingers pointed in our direction and whispers went in and out of ears. Johnny had probably rallied the troops against Roman. I knew the day wasn't far off when the shit would finally hit the fan.

## XI

Every Friday in Mr. Buttworst's class, the bearded teacher would put problems on the board and the first person to raise their hand and complete the problem would get extra credit points. Basically, although Mr. Buttworst would never have said it, it was a way for dumb asses like myself to not quite redeem ourselves, but we could avoid flunking if we could answer even a few of the problems.

This went on in all of his classes, even the higher calculus class that Roman was in. Roman sat in the front row of the class—probably because no one else would—and watched as Mr. Buttworst drew equations on the board. Mr. Buttworst finished, and the pencils and calculators went to work. Roman looked at the problem a couple seconds and then stared off into space. There was no paper or pencil or calculator in front of him, only the blank desk that he scraped the gum off the night before. His backpack sat on the floor unopened.

Mr. Buttworst looked around the room as the keys of the scientific calculators were pounded over and over, and marks on paper were chiseled down and then erased. People scratched their heads and chewed their gum. Roman stared at the top of his empty desk.

"Has anyone got it yet?" Mr. Buttworst asked.

Roman turned and looked at Kathy a seat next to him. Kathy was bright, and behind Roman the smartest person in the class, but on this occasion she was as lost as the rest of the flock. Sam Peterman snapped his pencil in frustration and quit working on the problem. Mr. Buttworst looked at Sam almost asking if he had got it, but then saw the pencil and thought differently.

Mr. Buttworst looked around the room and saw Roman with his head down.

"Do you have it, Roman?" he asked.

Roman nodded, getting up from his chair. Once at the board, he picked up the chalk and went through the equation without hesitation, circled the answer at the bottom, put the chalk down, and walked back to his seat. Mr. Buttworst looked at Roman's work and then at his own notes, but before he could say it was right, the rest of the class was already copying what Roman had just written. Satisfied

that everyone had copied the solution, Mr. Buttworst erased it and wrote another problem on the board.

Roman looked at it briefly, and then stared at his desk. The calculators began to tap and type and papers rustled again. Mr. Buttworst stared at Roman this time. Roman looked up and made eye contact with him.

"If anyone has the solution please raise your hand as soon as you have it," Mr. Buttworst said, his eyes maintaining contact with the reluctant janitor.

Roman raised his hand.

Roman went to the board and quickly solved the problem. The class started copying before he was finished. Mr. Buttworst checked his notes when Roman was finished and nodded his head. Mr. Buttworst flipped to the back of the class's textbook, as he watched Roman walk back to his seat. He picked out a problem from a chapter that this class would not get to before the end of the school year. He went to the board and wrote it down. The class looked around at each other in bewilderment. The calculators were even silent.

When Mr. Buttworst turned around Roman already had his hand up. The result was the same. The class started to copy the problem

"Wait, wait, there's no need to copy this, we might not get to this by the end of the year, I just wanted to see if... anyone could get it," Mr. Buttworst said.

The bell rang and the class began to file out. Mr. Buttworst grabbed Roman's arm as he passed by.

"Did you get your permission slip signed Roman?"

"I have a little problem with that day, sir. My parents have a trip planned to go see relatives back in Iowa. They want me to go as well," Roman responded, without looking him in the eye.

"That's too bad, Roman. You are a shoo-in for that scholarship and you give our chances as a team an extraordinary edge. Maybe I could talk to your parents and convince them of what a great opportunity this is for you."

Roman hesitated. "I don't think that would be too good of an idea sir. My dad has been planning this trip for a year, and I don't think he can be swayed."

"I see," Mr. Buttworst said. "Let me know if they change their mind."

Roman began to walk toward the hallway.

"Roman," Mr. Buttworst said.

Roman turned and looked at him.

"Nice job on the problems today. Next time I'll let the people that need the credit answer, I just wanted to see if you could answer a problem we have not covered yet," Mr. Buttworst said.

Roman nodded.

"If you don't mind me asking, Roman, how do you know about things we haven't covered in here?"

"I read the book the first day of school, sir," Roman answered. "I have to go."

Mr. Buttworst nodded in disbelief.

## XII

After school I offered Roman a ride home; as usual he declined and started to walk. It was a nice fall day, but I just couldn't believe that someone liked to walk that much. Roman was headed home, but where was home? I decided that I would find out. Instead of starting my car, I waited and watched Roman as he headed down Stephenson Street. When he got a block away from me I got out of the car and started to follow on the opposite side of the street.

Roman was carefree, walking at a steady pace, looking around at the houses he passed and the cars that passed him. I think if Roman would have looked back to see me walking he would have stopped, but he never looked back. He stopped for a moment at a newspaper vending machine and got a paper. He read as he walked, not slowing for the cracks and craters in the sidewalk. It was as if he had the obstacles on the route memorized down to the last step. A woman walking her dog headed toward him but Roman moved politely to the side avoiding a collision, not looking up from his paper.

On Vine Street Roman turned left. I hid behind a tree in someone's yard in case he looked in my direction, but the only thing he looked at was now the third page of the paper. When Roman was safely out of my view I began to jog, making sure not to lose him. When I got to Vine I peeked around the corner. Roman was still walking, heading toward the cemetery. I waited until he went in the entrance and then jogged there myself.

The cemetery was old, filled to capacity with headstones from this age all the way back to the Civil War. Large oaks and maples shaded the sunlight from the tombstones. After the entrance there were two roads paved and well kept that circled the cemetery and met again in the back of it. I looked to my left and then to my right. Roman was on neither of the roads. I squinted and scanned the landscape of the cemetery. I could see the other side and the other entrance. There were people placing flowers on graves, people standing, a young man had his arm around a woman. She was crying. But there was no Roman in sight. I looked frantically again to be sure. Still no Roman. I stood there waiting for him to pop out from behind a tree but it never happened. I wanted to call out his name but didn't. I would've looked like a dick head standing there, babbling excuses of why I was following him. Just like that Roman had walked into a cemetery and vanished like the ghosts that occupied it.

I turned and walked back to my car.



## Chapter 2

### Family Reunion

#### I

Later, it was poker night. Let me rephrase that, every night was poker night back then. It didn't matter if it was Ash Wednesday or Thanksgiving night, there was somebody always in attendance. I played probably four to six nights a week depending on how my luck was runnin' that particular week. I know this sounds strange and is maybe even a little contradictory, but poker and gambling kept me out of a lot of trouble in those days. I could have been spending five hundred dollars a week on shit I put up my nose, or smoked in a pipe, or placed on my tongue, or rolled in a paper. I have no doubt that if I had taken that road it would have been the end of me, not only because of the self-destructive habit itself, but because I had no job. I would have had to steal or deal to keep my habit going, or maybe even worse.

Anyway I'm getting off the subject. Tonight was poker night, and our poker games were always held at Pick Bryant's dad's tavern. Pick had a problem keeping his finger out of his nose during the kindergarten through second grade years, and never could shake the name. It was one of those names hung on people that started off as joke or a way to make fun, but it ended up just being a name. He was Pick to all of us. He even called himself Pick. Anyway the name of the place was simply 'The Tavern'. The name wasn't hung outside the entrance in neon or anything like that. In fact there was no sign anywhere on the building, but I assure you everyone in the city of Collingston knew exactly where The Tavern was. It was located in the East End of town. Not the greatest neighborhood in the world for sure, but it attracted all types—factory workers, police, garbage men, lawyers, doctors, brick layers, bums, babes, you name it. The outside was brick that probably hadn't been powerwashed since the building was built in the early 1900s. I have no proof of this but it is rumored that Al Capone and the boys would stop in the place on their routes from Chicago to St. Louis. There was even a secret trap door that was used to get to the basement if the police should arrive. That door has since been removed and the floor boarded up. A picture hung on the wall behind the bar of a man holding a Tommy gun and dressed to the nines; it was supposed to be one of Al's top guys, but like I said, I have no proof.

Carl Stumot was a regular at The Tavern. In the hundreds of times I'd been there, Carl was there every time. Sometimes I wondered if he ever left the place. Carl sat at the far end of the bar, drinking Miller Lite draft beer in a sixteen-ounce mug for a buck and a quarter. He wore a dirty olive green coat that hung down past his waist, some kind of old beret with earflaps, brown trousers, and big galoshes-style boots that could have waded him through a foot of water. Carl had nappy gray hair sticky out from under his cap and a goatee that was wrapped with some sort of rubber band. He looked like a mix between a Chinaman and an African. I never asked him what race he was, never had any reason to. As much as the man drank I'd never heard him stutter or slur a word. He knew every line of every song on the jukebox and was not afraid to sing aloud if a tune he like played, even though many of those anthems were written well after his prime. The man

didn't sit there and pound beers by any means, but he did drink at a steady pace for a good five hours a night, and who knows how many he had drunk before coming down to the bar.

I made my way to the back room, stopping briefly to say hello to Carl, who was seated in his usual spot at the end of the bar.

"What's up, Carl?" I asked

"Ah, just having a drink. And you?"

"Playing poker here in a minute," I said. "You're here a little early tonight aren't you?"

"Ah, those goddamn crack whores won't leave me alone. They keep banging on my door. I had to come down here to get away from them. I told them before to leave me the hell alone. I don't want anything from them."

I smiled and asked Laura the bartender if she could break my twenty into ones.

"Who's your friend?" I asked, nodding to the guy seated next to Carl.

"Not my friend," he began. "I can talk to anyone about anything, but this man is a babbling fool, not being able to say anything worth listening to."

The man next to him was swaying back and forth on his bar stool with an unlit cigarette stuck to his lip, and using what brain cells he had left to keep his eyes from falling shut. Four pennies and a full mug of beer sat in front of the man. He leaned in toward Carl closing his eyes completely as if this would help him talk.

"Yer buy, I'm need another beer," the man babbled.

Carl picked up the man's already full mug and slammed it back on the counter hard enough to open the man's eyes.

"Okay there you go now," Carl said.

The man snapped his head back in surprise noticing the beer in front of him. He began to talk again in almost English.

"Geez Carl (it sounded like Curl) that was quick, I owes ya," the man said.

"No worries my friend," Carl responded, shaking his head and smiling at me.

"Well Carl, have a good one," I said picking up the ones from the bartender.

"Ah, and you as well sir," Carl said holding up his beer to toast me, even though I had no beer.

I made my way through the pool players and their tables in the second room, thinking about Carl. A smile came to my face. It was well known that Carl, if bothered enough, would give in to the temptations of the crack whores. I guess a five-dollar blowjob doesn't sound too bad to a man of his age. But even in Carl's simple world, five-dollar blowjobs can complicate life.

I entered the third room—the one we played poker in. It wasn't completely finished. The drop ceiling covered only half the room, the walls weren't painted, and the only form of heat was a small propane tank that sat right next to our table. When Pick's dad had a good couple of months he would pay the local dry-wallers and electricians under the table to work on the room. The work was slow and the money slim. That was just fine with us though, the longer it took to finish, the

longer we had a place for our game, and not just anyplace. We were like old-time mobsters hid out from the rest of the crowd. We drank whatever we wanted even though we were all under age. The bartender even came back especially to take our orders. The police knew about our little game, but since one of our regulars was the son of a cop, they didn't throw up any fuss. Al Capone would have been proud.

Johnny the Killer, Pick, and two others sat at the table, already playing.

"I thought you had the flu?" I commented.

Johnny smiled. "I'm feeling a lot better. Needed to get out of the house. Glad you worried about me though."

"Where's Jack and Brunno?" I asked.

Johnny pulled the cigar out of his mouth. "They're running an errand. They'll be here later."

Pick giggled like a little girl at this. I wasn't sure what the joke was but I wasn't in the mood to play twenty questions with Johnny. I put my coat on the back of a chair and sat down.

We played dollar antes. You could bet two, bump two. That way it never got too out of hand, and also the big winner that night couldn't buy the pot by out-betting everybody. We played all different games from five and seven stud to Texas hold 'em to match pot games. When it came your time to deal, you got to call the game. Johnny pushed the cards over to me. Evidently it was my time to deal. I threw in my dollar and the rest of the guys followed. I shuffled the cards, offered Pick a cut (which he took knowing that I didn't cheat, and even if I wanted to I was not smart enough or talented enough to set the deck), and started passing them out.

"Chicago," I said. Maybe because I had mobsters still on the mind.

Chicago was a seven-stud game. First two cards down, next four up, last one down, bet on every card after the first two. The low spade down split half the pot with the winner of highest hand. In theory you could win the entire pot if you had both the low spade and the best hand. I liked the game because you were betting on two different things, and in that confusion sometimes people would give away their hands.

After several rounds of betting and sticking to my guns everyone folded except for Johnny. He was the Killer, you know? I had raised him the only time he bet and bet the max every time. I controlled the game. After several seconds of contemplation the words I wanted to hear came from Johnny's mouth. "Take it," he said.

Johnny would have beaten me with his up cards if he stayed, but I bluffed him by the way I bet and bumped. Johnny should have stayed if for no other reason than he had quite a bit of money in the pot, and if you go that far you should pay to see the other guy's hand. But Johnny's arrogance got the best of him once again. He would rather lose money and fold, than stay and take the risk of losing to me.

"What'd you have?" Johnny asked.

“You’re supposed to pay to see them, Johnny,” I said as I collected the money in the pot. I was just about to mix my cards in with everyone else’s when he grabbed me by the wrist.

“I said what’d you have?” Johnny grabbed my wrist and flipped my cards over.

He looked, trying to see something that wasn’t there.

“The fucking four of spades. That’s all you had. Goddamn, I would have won half the pot.”

As quickly as he got pissed he calmed down and lit another cigar.

“You’re suppose to pay to see them,” I said again.

“What’s your problem lately, Tony? You don’t hang out no more. You eat lunch with some faggot janitor. What’s the deal?” Johnny asked.

“He’s not a faggot janitor. He’s just like me and you.... only smarter.”

“If I didn’t know you, I mean if we didn’t grow up together, if our ma’s didn’t get their nails done together, I’d think you were taking up for him, stabbing me in the back. Whose side are you on anyway?”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to be on a side,” I said back.

Before Johnny could say anything else there was some commotion in the other room and then the door opened. It was Jack and Brunno and they weren’t in good shape. Jack had a huge goose egg over his eye almost to the point of being swelled shut. Brunno had tears running down his face and a bag of ice over his right hand. Dry blood had formed a river from his nostrils, down his lips to the end of his chin. Johnny sat them both down at the table. The two new guys that were playing poker with us looked uneasy.

“I think my fu-fu-fuckin’ hand and nose is broke,” Brunno said, breathing heavy.

Jack grabbed some of the ice from the bag on Brunno’s hand and put it up to his eye.

Johnny looked Jack and Brunno over. His face had the presence of disgust and pity mixed together. “Don’t tell me the two of you got your ass beat by the fucking janitor.”

Jack and Brunno looked at each other and then dropped their heads simultaneously.

“Not exactly,” Jack began.

It seemed the geek janitor had been busy taking out the trash so to speak. Roman somehow beat the tar out of Johnny’s two best men. And according Jack he did it without ever throwing a punch.

## II

I got to school twenty minutes early the next morning. I looked for Roman but was not successful. To be honest I didn’t know where to look. I had no idea where his locker was or what floor it was on for that matter. I did though hear a couple of things from random people in the hallway that morning. Some of them I knew well, some I had never talked to in my life. They were talking about Roman. They were talking about his little run-in with Jack and Brunno. They were talking about him giving Johnny the Killer mouth to mouth. As I walked to

my class I only caught bits and pieces of several different stories but one thing was for sure. The legend of Roman Swivel was growing.

Not hard to believe. Like I said before, people are looking for anything to break up the boredom of school life, the more controversial the better. It's amazing how this story was told to about seven people at the most, and overnight everyone and their brother knew about it. That's how high school was though. Fragments of the story that I heard had been somewhat changed and in some cases over-exaggerated. One account said that Roman picked Jack up over his head and body slammed him head first to the ground. All it took was for one of those new guys to tell one of their girlfriends the story and pretty soon cell phones and pagers would start blowing up like fireworks. For information to travel the fastest, you knew a girl had to be involved. My mom even asked me about the story later that day. Needless to say she had been at the beauty shop.

Lunch finally came. I double-timed it to the cafeteria and beat everybody to the table. Roman came in first with his applesauce, salad, and milk. I looked over at Johnny's table, the table I used to sit at, and nothing but pure hatred radiated from the Killer's eyes. He was staring at Roman. Jack and Brunno were absent. Probably had the flu. Caught it from Johnny maybe.

I decided to play the waiting game and make Roman talk first. Surely the past night's events would get him to say something, anything. I waited. And waited. I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Aren't you going to say something?" I asked.

"What?" Roman replied eating his applesauce.

"What...oh I don't know, you just whooped two of Johnny's toughest thugs, and there isn't a scratch on you."

"I didn't whip anybody. They did that to themselves. You've heard the story already I'm sure," Roman said.

"Yeah, but I want to hear your story," I said back.

"I just gave you my story."

Roman's attention was directed over to Johnny's table. Heather walked by it, ignoring Johnny's kissy face, and came directly over to our table.

"Are you all right?" she asked Roman.

"I'm fine."

Heather sat down between us and looked at Roman for a second.

"This shit is going to stop. I already informed Johnny that if he wants to be with me then he has to leave you alone."

I rolled my eyes.

Heather began again. "He denies he had anything to do with it but I know better. I'm sorry you had to go through it, and I'm quite sure that it won't happen again."

I rolled my eyes again.

Roman smiled and drank some of his milk.

"How come you were following me yesterday, Tony?" he asked.

I stopped in mid-chew. It caught me off guard at first, but then I wondered how the hell he knew I was following him if he never looked back.

"I uh, was just wondering where you lived, since you never let me give you a ride," I said with a full mouth of pizza. I know the answer was lame but it was the truth.

"If you wanted to know where I live, why not just ask me? I live at 25 Kingdom Street," Roman said.

I sat there not saying anything like some kind of dumb ass. I should have just yelled his name in the cemetery. Mostly I was embarrassed, but I was still in shock that he knew I was following him. The bell rang. Heather said her good-byes. Roman stood as she got up from the table.

"I'll see you later Tony," Roman said as he left the table.

### III

Kingdom Street was in the East End of town a couple of miles from The Tavern actually. I drove down it after school that day. I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe I thought Roman would be out in his front yard and I could stop and say hi. Or maybe I did it for the same reason I chose to sit at Roman's table instead of smear lasagna in his face.

Kingdom Street was a short jog more than a real street. It was only a block long. At the north end of the street was a steep hill that I imagine in the winter many cars tried but failed to reach the top of, and beyond that was a huge cemetery—the one I lost Roman in.

The sun was out and it seemed more like summer than early fall. As I drove down the hill the houses I passed were much like I expected. They were trash. The first one I passed had no screen door on it and the grass looked as if it hadn't been mowed since the spring. Some were abandoned although I'm sure when winter came people would have no choice but to call them home. Windows were cracked and shattered, garbage littered the yards. Piles of tires and an old rusted-out car frame lay in one of them. In another a fallen tree branch had smashed against the roof—the people that lived there were either unaware of this or simply did not care. Someone thought it would be a good idea to make a fence surrounding their yard out of old wooden bowling pins. Music blared from one of the houses. Little girls were using a thrown-away television cable to jump rope. Dogs ran through the neighborhood unleashed. I smelled the embers of charcoal and later the sweet scent of barbecue. Two hookers were flirting with a potential client.

And then there was 25 Kingdom, and the house directly across from it, 26. 26 was well maintained but Roman's house stuck out like a mansion in the middle of the ghetto. His yard was neatly cut, countless flowers remained in bloom, and the sidewalk was edged out against the yard. The house was white with black shutters, freshly painted I thought. There was a porch with a swing on it. A green plant hung in the large window south of the front door. There was a bright green hose neatly wound and hanging against the house. There wasn't a weed to be seen in the flowerbeds or the small cracks in the sidewalk. His small one-car garage was empty except for a mower, a ladder, and some gardening tools all neatly organized in the back corner. Maybe his parent or parents weren't home from

work yet. I had never heard Roman speak of his parents during our conversations at lunch.

I slowed the car down, contemplating stopping it all together. Roman's front door was open and I waited to see if he would come out. He didn't and after waiting longer than I told myself I would, I drove off. If Roman wanted to open up his world to me, to be my friend, then he would ask.

My mind drifted to last night's events with Jack and Brunno. Much like Johnny those two were tough, maybe the toughest behind him. Jack was a wiry son of a bitch and used to take people's lunch money before school and beat them senseless. It eventually got to the point where those poor punks would seek Jack out before school and hand over their money to avoid the beating. Jack wanted whatever Johnny wanted. If Johnny said go shoot the president, Jack would at least attempt it. Jack once drank a small cup of Pennzoil to impress Johnny; luckily he got to the emergency room to get his stomach pumped before he digested the stuff. I would have hated to be the toilet he sat on the next couple of days. Johnny would put Jack up to getting the booze and reefer. He was Johnny's right hand man and loved every minute of it.

Brunno was a wrestler and damn good one; he made a run at the state title last year. Brunno was not his real name, Brian was. His father hung the name Brunno on him before he could even walk, against his wife's wishes I'm sure. I once saw a kid stand up to Brunno at a pick-up baseball game by hitting him with a wooden bat square in the mouth. Brunno was dazed momentarily but when he got up, he just smiled at the kid, and pulled out one of his front teeth that were loosened by the swat of the bat. The kid ran. I wish I could tell you he got away, but that day ended with Brunno repeatedly slamming the kid's head into the ground.

Brunno was fascinated by storms, but instead of watching them from inside the house like everyone else did, Brunno would climb on top of his roof. There was a tornado last year that blew Brunno into the neighbors' yard knocking him unconscious until the next morning. It was also rumored that Brunno was hit by lightning on more than one occasion, but of that I have no proof, except for his sporadic stuttering. His tongue-twisted speech has gotten less over the last year, probably because Brunno preferred shaking his head repeatedly instead of speaking.

#### IV

Heather sat at the dining room table that night, scraping over her food. There were two large candles sitting on the long lavish table. Classical music played softly in the background. Her father ate at a good pace. He missed lunch earlier while performing surgery, repairing an ACL on a football player from the U of I. He was in sports medicine and renowned all over the state for his work. He'd fixed countless tendon tears on everything from shoulders to ankles. The Bulls and Sox even used him from time to time. He had married Gina after graduating from medical school. Both were older parents.

Gina Hawthorne had never worked a day in her life. Not at Seven Eleven as a teenager and not as a teacher even though she had the degree. She was from money and married money, just like her mother and just like her grandmother. She was Dr. Hawthorne's trophy wife and that was fine with her. She lived through Heather: through her grades, her cheerleading, her dances, her friends, and most importantly her looks. She always knew where Heather was and what she was doing and conversations she had and whom those conversations were with. Gina would not let go, not now, not until she had to, not until Heather left for college.

Heather's parents had raised her right. Growing up she took piano lessons, was active in the Girl Scouts and sports, and was in beauty competitions and ballet. She always got straight A's, and was in line to be the valedictorian of Collingston High. Heather was the president of the student council, interested in politics and worldly affairs. She spoke French very well. Heather was aware of the world even though her mother was not.

"Something wrong honey? You haven't touched your food," Gina said from the far end of the table.

"I'm just tired, that's all," Heather responded.

"I heard there's a new boy at school causing some problems. That's what Cynthia said at the country club anyway," Gina said as she patted her lips with a white cloth napkin.

Heather looked up from her plate dropping her fork onto it. "What boy?"

"Some vagrant that works as a janitor during the night shift at the high school," Gina said.

Heather's face reddened. She threw her napkin down on the table hard enough to get Dr. Hawthorne's attention. Her father knew better to say anything though. He had been outnumbered in the house for eighteen years and got his head torn off trying to be peacekeeper with the ruling majority in many a battle. He concentrated on his food.

"First of all he's not a vagrant. He's a student, just like me, and a nice guy at that. He saved Johnny from drowning in the lake and he put back the cheerleader grandma gave me after I accidentally shattered it into a million pieces. He defended himself when Jack and Brunno tried to jump him. That's all," Heather said.

"Cynthia said..."]

Heather interrupted. "Maybe Cynthia should keep her mouth shut if she doesn't know the whole story, and better yet maybe you should not listen to people that have nothing better to do in life than gossip at the club and run down the lives of people they know nothing about.

It sounds like to me the only reason you and the other hags do it is because you have no life of your own."

Heather got up from the table and went up the winding staircase to her bedroom.

"Did I say something wrong dear?" Gina asked.

"No dear, she's just tired, remember?" Dr. Hawthorne replied.

The Saturday came when Collingston sent its best and brightest to compete in the scholastic state tournament. Even with all of Mr. Buttworst's prodding and pleading Roman never turned in that permission slip. Mr. Buttworst even held the bus from leaving an extra ten minutes hoping that Roman would show. When his hope was gone, Mr. Buttworst instructed the driver to go.

I didn't know it at the time but that Saturday would show a glimpse of who Roman really was, of where he came from and where he was going, and how talented he truly was. It is that glimpse that I want to peek into now.

Although Roman wasn't on the yellow school bus that morning, he was on a bus, a Greyhound headed for Iowa just as he had told the bearded teacher. It was a six-hour trip from Collingston. Roman paid for his ticket in cash. He read books the entire way, sitting by himself, minding his own business.

At the Greyhound station in Iowa, Roman threw his duffel bag over his shoulder and began to walk. He stuffed the second half of the round trip ticket into the front pocket of his jeans. He walked through the center of town past the mom-and-pop shops and taverns and flower shops. He ended up at the cemetery. It was a small cemetery and he seemed to be the only visitor. Roman scanned the tombstones and trees trying to remember the exact location. It had been six years since he had been there, and although there were some things that looked familiar, Roman felt like it was his first time. He saw a big oak, the biggest in the cemetery and remembered they were just west of it. He walked to the tombstones and knelt down with duffel bag still over his shoulder.

Sometimes when people lose loved ones and visit their graves, it makes them feel close to the departed. They talk to them like they were sitting at the kitchen table over dinner, and even though no one else can hear their response, the one still here seems to hang on every word. Roman said nothing and heard nothing. The stories he heard of extraordinary things happening in cemeteries, to him were just fairy tales. He felt alone even though he was only six feet above them both. There were no surges of wind to let him know they were there and watching. Birds did not start to chirp. The earth did not move. There were only two gray headstones that were now weathered by time and less glossy than he remembered. The dates on the stones were today's date only six years earlier. Roman reached in his duffel bag and pulled out their gifts. He placed the bouquet of white carnations on his mother's grave and a baseball, brown from use, onto his father's. He wanted to speak but the words would not come. They would understand anyway he thought. Roman sat there the good part of the afternoon not speaking or crying. Crying got old the first few weeks after their deaths. Memories flooded his mind and smiles came to his lips from time to time.

"I thought I might find you here," a voice said from behind.

Roman turned and jumped to his feet. He looked at the giant man behind him and took a few steps back, thinking of running, but holding the urge at bay.

"You've turned into a man Roman, physically I mean of course. You look good," Johnson said.

"Agent Johnson," Roman said with exhaustion, scanning the cemetery for more agents.

“Still blaming yourself for their deaths?” Johnson said with a smile that hid his pity.

“Still trying to kill the enemy and reverse 9/11?” Roman asked.

Johnson’s smile faded. “I have to say I’ve seen a lot in my travels over the years, but your stunt with the trains last time was very impressive.”

Johnson looked at Roman trying to read his thoughts. “I know you want to run, but take this under consideration: the gun in my hand has a dart filled with a tailor-made cocktail that’ll stop a buffalo in his tracks thirty yards away. Besides, aren’t you tired of this? Tired of the running, the hiding?”

Roman said nothing.

“If it’s that business in Colombia you’re worried about rest assured it was a success whether you realize it or not. There’s always going to be some collateral damage, Roman. I’m sure you’ve heard the saying that to make an omelet you have to break a few eggs.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the saying that liars prosper,” Roman said back. “I just want a normal life.”

“That stopped being an option the moment you laid eyes on the Jesup file. What exactly is it that anyway, a normal life? Your country needs you.”

Roman laughed sarcastically. “No, my country thinks I’m a national security risk.”

“I was trying to be cordial. Look, I’m taking you back one way or another. It’ll be the easiest on both of us if you just come on your own accord,” Johnson responded.

Roman stared into his eyes and then looked at the black van parked on the path fifty yards away, then back at the man. With a swift kick to Johnson’s hand the dart gun went flying through the air. Roman took off. Johnson ran to his van, started it, and began after him. Roman ran down one of the car paths in the cemetery, but in a matter of seconds the van had caught up to him. Roman darted to his right hurdling the tombstones. The van circled around and followed from a distance on one of the asphalt paths. Roman stopped on the far side of a mausoleum, out of sight from the van. He waited several minutes hoping the van would turn off and then he would make his escape. If Agent Johnson was on foot Roman had the advantage gun or no gun. The van’s engine continued to run. Roman peeked around the corner but couldn’t see a passenger in the van because of the tinted windows. A twig broke behind him. In that split second a four inch needle on the end of a syringe came at Roman’s neck. Roman grabbed Johnson’s arm and stopped the penetration just centimeters shy of his neck. Johnson’s weight pinned him against the brick wall of the mausoleum. Johnson was at least five inches taller and outweighed Roman by a good seventy pounds. With Roman’s free arm he threw an elbow at Johnson’s temple but Johnson blocked. Another elbow, Johnson blocked again and grabbed onto Roman’s free arm pinning it against the wall as well. The needle was now right against Roman’s throat. Roman kned Johnson in the groin, then again. Johnson’s grip loosened and Roman grabbed his attacker’s ear, pulling it downward just before the point of ripping it. Johnson let out a moan. Roman kicked Johnson in the back of his leg buckling him to the ground on one knee and bent back the wrist of the hand that

held the needle. Johnson let go. Without hesitation Roman jabbed it in the side of Johnson's neck and pushed the concoction from the syringe into the agent's veins. Johnson wrapped his arms tightly around Roman's waist. He looked up at Roman's eyes. Roman sidestepped the wall with Johnson still holding on. The grip got lighter and eventually turned to nothing.

Roman dropped the needle and started running for Johnson's van. He was halfway to the vehicle when he felt a sharp pain in the back of his leg. He reached down and pulled out the dart, but he could already feel the poison taking over. His eyes began to feel heavy and his vision blurred but he managed to turn around and look at Johnson. The agent was still on the ground but had enough strength left to lift his head and squeeze a round off from his heavy hands before he completely passed out.

Roman fell to his knees and began to crawl toward the van, fighting the toxins as best he could. Soon though he was on his back looking at the sun. It was warm on his face. Roman tried hard to smile but his muscles didn't respond. Then darkness.

## VI

Although he couldn't feel it, he could hear the wind blowing, rattling the leaves on the trees in the cemetery and blowing the tips of the grass. At first he thought he was dreaming, but as his senses started to return slowly and nerves began to tingle first in his fingers and then in his toes, Roman knew he was not. His eyes saw only a black void. He tried to open them but the lids were like stones cemented shut. He gave the command to clench his fist, but only his thumb twitched. The neuro pathways in his brain began to signal each other and Roman began to do what he did best. He began to think.

Whatever toxins were in his blood stream were beginning to fade, and soon enough he would be back to full working order. After all Johnson did not want to kill him, only to restrain him for his trip back. Agent Johnson. That was the real problem. He too was frozen on the ground. But for how long? Roman guessed that the needle that Johnson first tried to stick him with was able to hold more of the poison than the dart and that's why Johnson chose it. The dart gun was a last resort used only in a circumstance such as the one that happened earlier. It would have been nice to think that that dart was a last desperate measure from a man falling asleep and thus being lucky. Roman knew better. He had seen Agent Johnson shoot numerous times, and luck had nothing to do with it.

To the business at hand. There was more poison in the needle that Roman put into Johnson, but Johnson was bigger than him, a lot bigger. Roman thought that it was probably a draw on who would be completely mobile first. Now reluctantly, all he could do was wait.

Minutes passed and Roman began to feel his legs, first his calves and then just above his knees. It felt like a million sharp needles stabbing at his muscles, much like the feeling of your hand falling asleep and then finally awakening. Finally his eyes opened. It was now night and Roman had lain there for several hours. There were no stars or comets or the shining moon, only a gray layer of clouds. His head still would not turn. How badly he wanted to raise up and look

to see if Johnson was still lying next to the mausoleum. He would find out soon enough.

Time passed again and now Roman was beginning to move all of his limbs. He still couldn't raise his head but he could turn his body with his legs and aim his head toward the spot where Johnson was. It was dark by the mausoleum but Roman could see him. Still on the ground the way he last remembered. Then there were footsteps walking softly on the brown grass of fall, coming from the opposite direction—several footsteps. At least three people, maybe five Roman thought.

There were four actually and now they stood over him. They were his age or a little older, maybe classmates from long ago, but Roman did not have time for a reunion. One of them bent down and looked at Roman's face.

"You all right buddy?" he asked.

Roman tried but the words were locked in his brain. He still couldn't feel his lips much less use them.

"This dude must be paralyzed or something," the same guy said, not noticing the small dart that lay a couple feet behind Roman.

"We better get some help," another of them said.

"Fuck that, see if he's got any green on him," yet a third one said.

The first guy knelt down again and felt in Roman's pockets. Patting him down like airport security.

"He ain't even got a wallet on him," the guy said.

"Look," the third one said. "There's somebody else laying over by that building. Let's check him out."

The four anti-Samaritans started toward Johnson, except Johnson was beginning to stir, still immobile for the most part, but he was conscious. Seeing this gave Roman the much needed adrenaline boost he was waiting for. He could now feel the cold air on his skin and was able to move, not totally, but he had a minimal control of his whole body. He turned his head toward the van and saw that it was about thirty yards from him. He got to his feet, not dizzy but drunk, like he was looking through water. He took a couple of steps and then fell back down. He used his arms to pull and his legs to push, crawling toward the black van. He didn't look back; any hesitation could cost him his freedom. His stomach was upset and he puked, still crawling and clawing.

The four of them stood around Johnson. One of them nudged him hard with his foot. There was no counterattack. The one that checked Roman's pockets began to do the same to Johnson. He found his wallet in his back pocket. There was no ID but there was plenty of cash.

"Jackpot," he said. "There must be four hundred dollars here not to mention the plastic."

"Let's get out of here and count it later," one of them said.

They all agreed and started to walk off but a couple of steps into their exit a hand grabbed the back of the neck of the guy holding the money. The other three froze as well. Johnson was on his feet.

Roman could hear the engine of the van still running. *Just have enough gas to get me out of this cemetery.* He crawled up the side of the door and propped

himself against it, standing but wobbling. He pulled on the door. He pulled again. It was locked. All the doors were locked. Roman looked toward the mausoleum. There were now four bodies lying next to it, and Johnson was walking toward him. Johnson was swaying back and forth, walking with the uncoordinated stumble of a toddler, but quicker. Roman took off his flannel and wrapped it around his elbow several times. He hit the van window. Then again. The third time it smashed but he felt the glass cut into his elbow. Johnson was twenty feet away and picking up the pace. Roman reached in and unlocked the door still wincing with pain. The door opened and Roman sat down in the driver's seat still dazed from Johnson's concoction. The fuel gauge read empty yet the van was still running. He glanced at the rear view mirror and saw the chains and shackles hanging in the back—devices meant for him.

Roman shifted the van into drive and pushed the pedal to the floorboard, but Johnson's arm was already in the window. He grabbed Roman by the neck. The tires smoked against the asphalt pavement and cried a shrill, high-pitched whine. Johnson let go of Roman's neck and grabbed the unused seat belt hanging from the corner of the van's ceiling. At the same time he jumped onto the van's side panels so his feet would not drag, as if he done the maneuver a million times over. Roman kept the gas pedal down and in several seconds the van was running eighty through the small cemetery. Roman cut the wheel back and forth to the point of almost tipping the van, but Johnson held tight. Roman steered the van off the paved road, onto the actual graves, hitting the tombstones like speed bumps. It was all Roman could do to hold on himself. The van's grill was now in pieces and directly under it was shredded metal. There was nothing left of the bumper and the crashes against the tombstones thudded harder. Roman drove for the big oak just east of his parent's grave. If he could pass it on the right side, maybe he could clip Agent Johnson off; hopefully Johnson would jump first. Roman wove in and out of the tombstones trying to build as much speed as possible. The same instant the van's driver side mirror was clipped off by the big oak, Johnson jumped away. The van scraped against the bark of the tree making the same sound as fingernails on a chalkboard, only deeper. Roman looked in his rearview mirror and saw Johnson hit the ground, turning his fall into a smooth roll. Roman saw the south exit of the cemetery and his anxiety lifted, but that feeling was short lived. The engine sputtered, like a dying person taking his last painful breaths. Then it was dead and empty. The van continued to roll toward the exit on the momentum it had mustered but was slowing rapidly. Johnson rolled to his feet without ever putting his hand on the ground and ran toward the van all in one motion. Roman did not wait for the van to stop completely. He jumped out landing on his feet as well. He looked toward the exit; his heart told him to run, but he did not. Instead he turned and looked at Johnson running toward him. He unwrapped the blood soaked flannel from his elbow and dropped it to the ground.

Agent Johnson's run slowed into a brisk walk. Seconds later he stood in front of Roman with his gray designer suit soiled and torn. He reached in his pocket and pulled out the dart gun, but it was mangled beyond recognition. Johnson threw it to the ground. He shook the pocket out of one of his pant legs and what used to be his cell phone hit the pavement in several shattered pieces.

Johnson gave a deep sigh fulfilling both his need for oxygen and the frustration he felt.

“I’m done running,” Roman said.

“I’m glad you’ve come to your senses,” Johnson said back.

He grabbed Roman by the back of his shirt, not like an enemy or a man that wanted him dead, but like a friend. Like a father. He led Roman down the side of the van looking at the long indentions that the oak inflicted. Johnson reached onto his belt hidden by his suit coat and produced a key chain. He unlocked the double doors at the back of the van. Chains hung from the ceiling with shackles at their ends, five in all, one large one for the neck.

“Get in please,” Johnson said.

Roman held out his hand, the hand that was on his injured arm. Johnson looked at it, his eyes following Roman’s blood from his hand to his elbow. Roman’s gesture was one of surrender. Johnson shook it but did not let go. Instead he raised it to one of the shackles. But before Johnson could close it Roman grabbed his arm and clamped Johnson’s wrist inside. Roman grabbed the key chain and yanked it off Johnson’s belt, throwing the keys as far across the cemetery as he could left-handed.

“I said I was done running. I didn’t say I was going with you.”

Johnson gave a smug grin and shook his head. Roman began to jog toward the exit.

“I will find you, Swivel,” Johnson yelled.

“Maybe.” The voice echoed in the dark Iowa night.

## Chapter 3

### Mickey Mantle and Carl's Green Goop

#### I

No matter how fast I got to my locker and got down to the lunchroom, Roman was already through the line sitting at our table eating. Except this Monday he wasn't. Our table was empty. Maybe he had to stay after class to work on a project. Something didn't feel right though.

I went through the line and got my two slices of pizza, grabbed a Dew at the pop machines, and went to our table to eat, hoping that Roman would show. Half the lunch period had passed and still no Roman. Maybe he was just sick. Maybe I'd misunderstood and his reunion back in Iowa was more than a weekend event. That's what I wanted to believe, but what I really thought was maybe Johnny and his thugs had jumped Roman when he had gotten back or even before school. I'd played cards with Johnny on Friday, won sixty-seven bucks as a matter of fact. Nothing was said. Johnny had ample time to take care of the problem at the top of his shit list over the rest of the weekend though. I looked over at their table trying to get a read on their faces. Johnny was loud and obnoxious, but that was normal. There were no fingers pointing or looks of contentment. Still something didn't feel right.

After lunch I asked a couple of Sally's friends if they had seen Roman. Two of them had Roman in their British Literature class second hour. Roman was not there either.

I decided before the last bell rang that I would drive over to Roman's place after school, but when I got to my car Sally was waiting on me. She looked hot let me tell you, wearing a short mini-skirt and a shirt that was obviously a couple sizes to small.

"I thought you had cheerleading after school?"

The evil smile was back. "I do but I wanted to give you a surprise instead."

"Okay?" I still had no idea where this was going.

"I'm ready," she said still with the grin of Satan's daughter.

"Ready?" I asked.

"My parents aren't home until five or six."

Now I got the idea.

Finally.

"I was going to check on Roman..." I stopped in mid sentence as her smile faded and those naughty eyes were replaced with anger, "...never mind, he's just down with the flu or something."

At her house, we never made it past the living room. She had me naked in a couple of seconds and she was still throwing off her clothes. I knocked over a plant on their coffee table on my way down to the floor.

"Don't you think we should go to your room at least?"

"No, right here," she said in between breaths and kisses.

God she was hot. I'd seen her naked of course several times, but this was different. This was the time. We went on with the fondling and kissing for several minutes. I put the rubber on.

“Go ahead,” she said.

I heard nothing more beautiful in my entire life.

“Oh shit,” she screamed, pushing me off to the side. She started gathering her clothes off the floor and couch.

“What the hell’s wrong?” I said.

“My dad’s home, didn’t you hear him pull up the driveway? We’ve only got a couple of seconds.” With that Sally darted to the bathroom, running with clothes in arms like she had just done a small load of laundry.

Where the hell am I supposed to go, I thought. No time. I started to dress throwing on my boxers even though I still had the condom on. I had one leg in my jeans and went for the other but lost my balance and fell over the coffee table. I heard the back door open. I jumped to my feet sliding my second leg in my jeans. I zipped up and buckled my belt. The plant was still lying sideways on the floor next to the table. Sally’s father was walking through the kitchen. I set the plant back up. *What else?* My shoes were still by the front door. I ran over and forced my feet in without tying them. I scuffed as I walked trying to get the back of the shoe to go over my heel. *There, got it. That’s it right? Your shirt dumb ass.* After I popped my head through the neck hole, I picked up one of the magazines lying on the coffee table and pretended to be in deep thought. Sally’s father walked into the living room.

“Hey there Tony,” Sally’s dad said, happy to see me. “What are you doing here?”

*You mean who am I doing?*

“Sally’s cheerleading practice got canceled so she asked if I wanted to go to the mall with her. She had to come home and change I guess. You know women,” I said with a confident smile.

“What are you reading there?” he asked.

The truth was I didn’t even know. I turned over the cover.

“Cosmopolitan?”

There was a confused look on her father’s face. My confidence was fading.

We continued to small talk. I was barely listening, just enough to respond or nod. I just wanted out of there. I still had that damn condom on and it was slimy and uncomfortable. He continued to talk, telling me about his new golf clubs that he got for a heck of deal. My eyes wandered from his eyes to around the room, to the way Sally ran off for the bathroom. *Did I forget something? The floor!* I looked down and there it was. The condom wrapper. An empty condom wrapper at that. He noticed I wasn’t paying close attention and began to look around the room also. I took a step forward and covered the wrapper with my foot. Sally came back into the room in a different outfit thank God.

I did a pivot turn so I didn’t step off the wrapper. I was sweating now and my stomach hurt. My crotch itched badly. I don’t know which was worse, trying to stay on the wrapper or the discomfort of the condom.

“So, you ready to go to the mall?” I said shooting a stern eyebrow-lifting gesture at her.

*That was stupid. I can’t go anywhere until her father leaves the room because of the fuckin’ wrapper under my foot.*

“Yeah let’s go,” she said.

“Uh, don’t you want to show your father that thing you were talking about?” I opened my eyes widely.

She just stood there. The wheels were turning but nothing was coming out of her mouth. I knew she had gotten an “A” on a paper she wrote for Brit. Lit. Hopefully she had brought it home with her. Hopefully it was in her bag upstairs in the room.

“You know the paper you wrote,” I said.

“Oh, yeah, come upstairs, daddy, I want to show you this.”

Sally’s dad walked by me and patted me on the back. I did my pivot turn once again so I could turn and face him.

“Man, Tony, you’re soaked and your cheeks are flushed. Are you feeling all right?”

*Think quick, dumb ass.*

“I’ve got PE last hour and we got timed in the mile today. I’m just a little out of shape, I guess.”

“You better get after it, baseball’s coming sooner than you think,” he said smiling again.

The two of them walked up the stairs. *Thank Christ.* I picked up the condom wrapper and stuck it in my pocket. I had to get out of there and quick. The condom was driving me nuts. I heard Sally and her father talking about the paper and what a good job she had done. *Home free.* They came back down the stairs.

I opened the door and let Sally go before me. I started out the doorway until her father saw the tag on the back of my shirt.

“You know you have your shirt on inside out, Tony?” This time there was no smile. “Cheeks flushed, sweating, and nervous. I didn’t get off the boat yesterday son. I think it’s better you go on without Sally.”

I nodded—the only thing I could do really—and walked to my car.

## II

I drove off heading for home. I steered the Pinto with one hand and pulled off the troublesome condom with the other. It was no easy task, but well worth it. I rolled down my window and threw the semi-used rubber out. My crotch was still uncomfortable. Not only was the itching sensation getting worse, the condom felt like something cold and dead. The worst part wasn’t the condom though. It was the fact that I had been waiting for this since the middle of the summer, thought about at least three times a day, and when the moment finally arrived and I didn’t finish the deal, it almost hurt. Physically I mean. I’ve heard people refer to it as blue balls. Once you get going and just stop, it can’t be healthy. I wasn’t about to finish the job myself, especially driving the Pinto. But I could’ve and probably should’ve for my physical well-being. I guessed I would just have to suffer through it. Blue balls. Yeah blue balls was right.

Halfway home I turned the Pinto around back south, not to Sally’s, but to Roman’s. In the excitement and then let down, I had forgotten he wasn’t at school

and I was still worried about him. Changing my focus would also help my predicament down below, I supposed.

I pulled up in front of 25 Kingdom. This time I didn't hesitate to walk up to the porch and the front door. I knocked hard. No answer. Rang the doorbell several times. Nothing. No footsteps or movement from the inside. The shades on the front window were up so I looked in, cupping my eyes with my hands to fight the glare. Inside it was dark, too dark to see anything. I knocked again on the door this time saying it was me, Tony. I turned the doorknob but it was locked.

I heard a voice from across the street. "Over here."

The house directly across the street was 26, the one I mentioned earlier, and on its front porch stood Roman, waving his left arm. He held his right arm oddly, in a position like it was in a cast. I walked over.

It was dark inside the house. Very dark at first, but my eyes slowly adjusted to the lighting. The floor was wood, an orange couch sat in front of me, and the walls were wallpapered with some sort of green and brown plant shapes. Going through the front door not only got me into the house, it warped me back to the seventies. I looked around the room for a lamp or even a light bulb on the ceiling, but there was neither. To my left were a couple of lit candles and Roman sat behind them next to somebody else. I could hear a radio, but the volume was turned way down. A talk radio show came from the speakers. The room smelled like vanilla.

"Hey there fella, have a seat if it suits ya," said the person sitting next to Roman.

That voice and choice of words was unmistakable. I had heard it a thousand times at The Tavern.

"Carl?" I asked already knowing the answer. I sat down feeling more comfortable about the situation.

"Carl 'tis," he said back.

"Shit, I didn't know you lived here. I didn't even know you two knew each other."

"Ah yes. Lived here for twenty ought years now I guess. But I always know my neighbors, even the new ones or the ones that are just passing by," Carl said.

A small bowl sat over a flame—almost like some sort of Bunsen burner—directly in front of Roman and Carl. In the bowl boiled a thick green liquid, and from it I could see the fumes rise as smoke. Roman held his right arm over the smoke. I could see the cuts running from his elbow to his forearm. Carl held onto Roman's right hand, both holding Roman's arm up over the boiling green stuff and steadying it so he could dab in some kind of lotion into its cuts. Carl used only his fingertips over the cuts, smooth and soft. Roman still grimaced.

"We're just fixing up your friend here. I borrowed this remedy in Thailand some years ago," Carl said.

"What the hell happened to you anyhow?" I asked.

Roman's teeth gritted tighter every time Carl applied the ointment. He talked with his lips tight like a ventriloquist. "People back home aren't as friendly as they are here Tony."

“You got jumped?” I asked again.

“You could say that.”

“Christ, I thought you were havin’ a tough time of it here with the lunch thing and then the Jack and Brunno incident.”

Roman just smiled.

“Five more minutes’ll do ya fine there,” Carl said continuing to put the goop on Roman’s injuries.

As I watched Carl a couple of things crossed my mind. The immediate thing of course was the scene in front of me. I couldn’t help but reminded of a hog roast with Roman’s arm being hung over a smoke pit, and Carl every few minutes basting it like a concerned chef. The subtle thing was that Carl seemed to know exactly what he was doing, like some ancient medicine man at night using his fire in front of his teepee for light. Except there was no campfire, only candles, and I was somewhat sure that Carl was not a Native American. Not a hundred percent sure, but almost.

Carl put a lid on the Bunsen burner fire and immediately the green liquid quit boiling. He moved the bowl aside and began to wrap Roman’s arm with gauze. After a few turns the deal was over.

“There,” he said. “Good as new in less than a day.

“I appreciate it,” Roman said.

“No worries my friend, you would have done the same for me,” Carl said. “Say Tony, you want a brew?”

“No thanks, Carl.”

Roman stood up and exchanged goodbyes with Carl, thanking him again. I followed Roman across the street to his house. We stopped at the sidewalk just beside the Pinto.

“So you gonna be at school tomorrow?” I asked.

“I’ll be there for sure tomorrow,” Roman responded. “Thanks for worrying about me Tony.”

“I wasn’t really worried, I just knew there had to be a good reason for you not being at school.”

That was bullshit though. I was worried.

I opened my car door and got in. I turned the key but the Pinto made an awful noise like bullets were ricocheting in the engine, and smoke began to roll out from under the hood. I shook my head.

“Shut it down,” Roman said walking over to my door. “Has it done this before?”

“No, unfortunately this is a new one,” I said.

“Help me push it up to the garage.”

So me and Roman pushed the piece of shit up the driveway. The driveway had a slight incline but it wasn’t anything we couldn’t handle even with Roman having only one working arm. The garage was only about fifty feet from the road. We stopped at the garage door.

“Let’s leave it here. I have to move some things out of the way for it to fit,” Roman said.

Roman looked at me with that shit-eatin' grin of his. He was still breathing heavy from pushing the car, but the wheels were turning in his head, I could almost see them behind his eyes, turning a lot faster than mine for sure and probably everyone else's for that matter. Turbo-charged wheels I imagined.

"I'm not going to work tonight. I think I can fix it," Roman said.

"You know how to work on cars?" I said.

Roman was still smiling. "I've never worked on them before but I've read several books on the subject."

"Books huh? What the hell do I have to lose? The next stop for this piece of shit is the junkyard anyway. Besides I gotta drive somethin' and I sure as hell don't have the money for another car."

"Leave it here then. I'll see what I can do later."

"You got a phone? I'll see if Pick can swing by and give me a lift."

"Sure come on in."

We went back down the driveway to the porch and the front door. If I live a thousand years I'll never forget what was inside. The front room was halfway like I imagined. Clean and organized, hardwood floor polished to perfection, not a speck of dust anywhere. To my left was a twin size bed neatly made, not a wrinkle to be found. A couple of large stacks of books lay on the floor stacked as high as I was tall. Although the books were of different sizes, not one edge stuck out further than the rest. No TV. No stereo. Just books, hundreds of 'em.

"I haven't read those yet," Roman said as he gestured for me to come and see the other room.

The bathroom was tiny. It was neat, but it was hard to believe somebody got a toilet, tub, and sink to fit in a space that small. Anyway, he opened a door to another room. It was dark until Roman pulled on a thin chain hanging from the ceiling. This room was small as well but not like the bathroom. There wasn't a lot of room because of what filled it. Six bookcases lined the room, from wall to wall, both length and width wise. They were as high as the ceiling and leaving just enough space between them for one person to walk at a time. Roman had his own personal library. It didn't take me long to notice that the books were in alphabetical order by title. The bookcases were stained a dark maroon-looking color, dusted and polished to the point of being able to see my reflection. The last thing I noticed was the wallpaper, which wasn't wallpaper at all. I went over to look at it closer. It was baseball players side by side. No, it was baseball cards. Each one laminated and stuck to the wall somehow, covering every inch. For the first time in a long time, maybe my entire life, I had nothing to say.

Roman turned out the light and we went back into the main room. The walls were covered with more cards from top to bottom. I then understood why I didn't notice them at first. The trim on the cards was all the same in each room. The front room was black and blue trim; the library was the same maroon as the bookcases.

"These are complete sets aren't they?" I asked in amazement.

"Sixty-six years worth. My grandfather starting putting complete sets together in his twenties. By the time I was born you could buy the complete set and that's what my father did for me, just like his father for him," Roman said.

“It’s amazing. Beautiful I mean. It’s like having the history of baseball everywhere you look.” I walked over to the wall. “These cards are in mint condition aren’t they?”

“I think the majority are.”

I walked into the kitchen. It was done in red trim cards. The bathroom was old-fashioned white edges. A story popped in my head, the one every young boy hears from his dad or grandpa. The one about how “I had Babe Ruth’s rookie, but I put it in my bike spokes so they would make noise when I rode” or “Your grandma used Babe Ruth as kindling for the fire place.” This was the complete opposite of that. Each card cared for and passed down in perfect condition. Besides that, Mickey Mantle’s rookie card stood right in front of me, eye level, about three feet from the bathroom door.

“Do you know that your walls are pretty much made of money Roman?”

“I never really think about it. I could never sell them. They mean more than that to me.”

I looked over at Roman’s bed. “You live here by yourself?”

Roman nodded.

I saw a picture of two people on the nightstand beside his bed. “Where are your parents?”

Roman gave a smile that took an enormous amount of effort it seemed. “They’ve passed on. I went back to Iowa to visit their graves last weekend.”

“I’m sorry,” I said and stopped the conversation. I could see Roman didn’t want to talk about it, and as bad as I wanted to know, I could wait to hear it when he wanted to tell it. Roman changed the subject to how he came to live in the house.

As it turns out, the cards and books weren’t the most amazing thing. The house was. It was scheduled for demolition just a few days after Carl and Roman had met. Carl owned the property and had renters from time to time but nobody ever kept the place up, even though their landlord lived across the street. Carl grew tired of chasing and begging people for their money, so he let the place go empty. The only problem was that like many other houses in the neighborhood, they were occupied, but not with paying tenants. Bums and winos filled the rooms not to mention the crack whores that Carl always spoke of. Needless to say they trashed the place. As time wore on the wood began to rot and the ceiling leak. Carl thought the house was beyond repair and had it scheduled for demolition. That was before he met Roman, of course.

Roman apparently came upon Carl one night on his way home from The Tavern. Carl was passed out on the side of the road, lying in his own vomit, something I thought could never happen to the nightly Tavern patron. Carl invited Roman to his house after the young janitor helped him home, and the two oddly enough seemed to have a lot in common; how much in common I would find out later. Roman talked Carl into letting him fix the place up; fixing things was one of Roman’s ever growing talents. Roman worked for a solid month, first cleaning up the needle-infested house and then getting it in livable order. He put on a new roof, gutted the interior, replaced boards in the floor and sanded and stained them. Carl could see his determination and decided to help. When it was

finished Carl basically gave the house to Roman. In Carl's view it was cheaper to give it to Roman than to pay to have it torn down. Carl liked Roman from the start I think, just like I did.

### III

My Pops dropped me off at school the next morning. Before I could get out of the car he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed at the parking lot. There was the Pinto as baby blue as baby blue could be. Roman obviously had fixed it and drove to school. By the looks of it he had also washed and waxed it. The only time the Pinto usually got washed was when it rained. I ran over to take a closer look.

I got in and noticed all the fast food wrappers that usually lined the floorboard were missing as well as the dirt and pebbles. Although Roman didn't do his janitor's gig last night, he still found a way to clean something.

At homeroom we had to vote for the Homecoming king and queen. Heather and Johnny were on the ballot. I was too, but I never won. Johnny and Heather had been in the Homecoming court every year; this year would be no different. What was different however was that I didn't vote for Johnny as I had the past three years. I voted for Sam Peterman.

At lunch I thanked Roman, and asked if I could pay him for the work. My father paying would have been more accurate, but I asked anyway. Roman, of course, refused. He told me what the problem was. He might as well have been speaking Chinese because I didn't understand a word of it. It sounded complicated and long, but Roman said it wasn't that bad. The bandages I expected to see on Roman's left arm were absent and the scabs were already beginning to heal. Carl's boiling green goop seemed to be working its magic. Heather sat at our table, as did Pick Bryant. Johnny did his usual evil eye routine. Jack and Brunno sat next to him like pit vipers ready to strike at any minute.

It was hard to get a word in with Roman anymore because he and Heather talked the entire lunch period. He hung on her every word, even taking time from his applesauce to look her in the eye. I don't think Heather thought of him as more than a friend, but somewhere inside she was growing closer than that. And who could blame her? The guy listened to her talk about herself for as long as she could speak. Is there anything women like more? Roman liked what was on the inside. That was my take on the situation anyway, and whether it was right, one thing was for sure: Roman and Heather were becoming good friends at the least.

### IV

That night Roman showed up for work twenty minutes early. Roll call was at 6:45. Yes you heard me right, the janitors had roll call like soldiers or policemen. Being a janitor at Collingston High was serious business especially when Boss Chatterling was running the show.

Helen Chatterling was the head janitor and had been for at least thirty years. She was a ginormous woman, six feet two and at least 250 pounds. She was in her mid sixties but looked fortyish. The name "Boss" was partly hung on

her because she was in charge of the janitors. When people think of janitors, they think of skinny old men with no teeth and a gray whiskered face hunched over a mop bucket and a dingy rag hanging out of their back pocket. It might be like that at some places, but at Collingston it was much more. Yes the janitors were the cleaning crew and that took up a lot of their time. But they were also maintenance. When light bulbs broke or the boiler went out or the plumbing failed or a lock couldn't be opened, who do you think took care of it? It sure as hell wasn't the prison guards. Those kinds of things weren't in teaching contracts. Collingston had no security staff, so when fights broke out, (and they did on a daily basis), or when someone brought a weapon to school, the Boss's staff took care of it. She herself broke up too many fights to count over the years, and her reputation was passed down from one generation to the next. It was known that when the Boss broke up a fight she was going to get her licks in too. She came from a different time and seemed to be immune to the ridiculous rules of education that govern us now. The Boss was the boss because she had the power. More than the teachers and the principal. Maybe even more than the school board. She was the only person who had a key to every lock and door in the school. If you crossed her, she would get even. Helen was on the front line, down in the trenches.

At roll call she walked with a clipboard in hand and stopped to inspect each of her janitors one by one, quick but thorough. Roman was first.

"Swivel, is that arm injury going to keep you from doing your duty tonight? Because if it is, you need to let me know. I ran behind schedule all night yesterday because you called in sick and that is not going to happen again tonight. If you can't suck it up and work with a little pain I've got a stack of applications sitting on my desk from students begging to be put to work. You realize you are the only student janitor in this work force and being the only student is a privilege that I'm not sure you've lived up to? Are we clear Swivel?"

Roman knew better than to smile. "Crystal, Boss." Roman also knew that Boss Chatterling was quite sure that he had far exceeded her expectations as a student janitor or just a janitor at all. He could tell the way she talked to him. The way she never interrupted his work. The way that after the first week she never checked up on him. She gave him a list. He did what was on the list more quickly and more meticulously than anyone else. The speech she had just ripped him with was for show, not for her or him, but for the rest of the janitors at roll that day.

Roman had the third floor in the main part of the building like most nights. The other janitors were usually doubled up on parts of the school but Roman was so fast Boss Chatterling assigned only him. Light bulb changing was first because lights were on the ceiling and Roman always worked from the top down. The bulbs were the long fluorescent ones, fragile and awkward, but Roman still managed to fit them on his cart and had yet to hear one shatter on the floor. There were six rooms that had lights either burned out or flickering like strobes. Roman changed them one by one, putting the old ones neatly on his cart. He climbed the stepladder, pushed up the plastic rectangle in the ceiling and moved it on top of one of the other cardboard-like rectangles that made up all the rooms' ceilings. Dust fell out every time.

Midnight was break time for the other janitors on Roman's shift, but it was quitting time for him. He had finished his assignment twice as fast as the others and now it was time for him to go home.

Roman exited the front of the high school at the main part of the building like he did every night. There were three people and a dog—too dark to see who—in the parking lot across the street. Roman paid little attention and turned left toward home. The nights were beginning to cool and Roman had on a black flannel. He pulled out an apple from one of the flannel pockets and began to eat his after-work snack while he walked. The three figures in the parking lot began to follow behind him, a good distance away, with their dog leashed in front of them. They thought they were unnoticed. They were not.

Just before the railroad tracks on Stephenson Street they caught up. Jack Rollings took a swing at Roman but Roman ducked, shifting to one knee with apple still in mouth. He grabbed Jack's arm, which was now directly over the janitor's right shoulder, flipping him completely over, smashing Jack's back to the ground. Brunno charged with his head down and arms outward, but Roman sidestepped him like a matador and clotheslined him at the same time. Brunno did a one-eighty in the air and fell to his back as well. The fight was like a well-choreographed dance routine with Roman reacting to their moves like he knew what was coming. Thirty yards away the dog began to bark. Holding its leash was Johnny the Killer. Johnny seemed to be watching in enjoyment as his cronies fought with Roman, even though it was futile.

Roman took the apple out of his mouth (still chewing the last bite), wrapped the remainder in a handkerchief, and placed it in the pocket of his flannel. Roman finished swallowing as both Jack and Brunno stumbled to their feet. Jack shoved Brunno and made a circular gesture as if to tell him to surround Roman. Brunno complied and was now in back of Roman. Jack's gleamed with contentment at this abrupt plan or maybe to the fact that they had a plan at all. Roman could almost see the drool slide down Brunno's chin in anticipation. Roman stood still with arms to the side, relaxed and waiting. The dog continued to bark in the background.

Stephenson Street was deserted at this hour, being a one-way street running north by the high school. The city buzzed in the streets and blocks away from it, but the moon was the only witness to this event.

Brunno and Jack simultaneously swung, one in front of and one behind Roman. Roman backed up then sidestepped Brunno's arm, grabbing it and using its momentum to carry Brunno to Jack; the two collided with a dull thud. Roman bent down and swept one of Jack's legs from underneath him putting Jack on the ground once again. Brunno threw another punch but Roman blocked and grabbed Brunno's thumb turning it over and bending his elbow the wrong way. Roman continued to hold on as Brunno cursed in pain, and a second later Roman had the brawler's arm behind his back levering him forward and then tripping his feet out from under him. Brunno fell hard this time, cracking his chin against the sidewalk. Jack slapped his hand against the sidewalk in disgust as he stood up and then looked at Johnny who was shaking his head like a disappointed parent.

Johnny motioned for the two and they both walked back, watching Roman as they did.

Johnny bent down and petted his dog, which was snarling and growling.

“I want you to meet my pit bull Apollo, janitor. He’s used to bigger meals than you but you’ll do as an appetizer.”

Johnny whispered something in Apollo’s ear and released the latch on his leash. Apollo charged, not barking but snarling. In a second the dog was in a dead sprint—a seventy-five pound pure muscle locomotive—with teeth exposed and rounded powerful jaws protruding. Roman stood his ground, lifting his arms like he was hung on a cross. The dog jumped shoving its front paws into Roman’s stomach, trying to knock him to the ground, but Roman rolled with the dog’s momentum and deflected it. The dog jumped again but this time with less force. Roman again used the dog’s momentum against it. Apollo snarled, circling Roman like the janitor was wounded prey. Roman stood motionless continuing to hold his arms shoulder high. A few more circles and the snarls began to fade. Soon Apollo was standing directly in front of Roman with head tilted in dismay, trying to make eye contact. Finally Roman looked at the dog.

“Are you hungry, boy?” Roman said with arms still even with his shoulders.

Apollo began to whine as if he knew it was wrong to fraternize with the enemy.

“What the fuck!” Johnny screamed from thirty yards away.

Roman slowly removed the apple from his pocket and unwrapped it. He took a big bite, cutting the apple with his teeth into two smaller pieces. Roman knelt down with the two apple slices in hand and extended them to Apollo.

“Get your ass over here, Apollo. Heel. Now. Heel!”

Apollo looked at Johnny, then at Roman, and then at the apple slices. He ate the slices out of Roman’s hand wagging his stub of a tail. Roman petted him with the other hand.

“Mother fuck,” Johnny began to himself and then got louder. “You don’t even like goddamn apples!”

After Apollo finished he licked Roman’s hands clean of the sticky juice. Roman stood up and gave Apollo one last pat. Roman turned and started south for home but Apollo followed, sniffing the sidewalk behind Roman’s heels.

“What are you, a fuckin’ dog thief too, janitor boy?” Johnny screamed, patting his leg for Apollo to come.

Roman stopped walking and faced Johnny. Apollo turned around as well, following what he thought was his new master’s lead. “I’m not the one with the leash in my hand, am I?”

Roman picked up a decent size stick in a yard by the sidewalk, first swaying it in front of Apollo who was jumping up and down, and then flipping it through the air like a Frisbee toward Johnny and the boys. Apollo chased the stick to Johnny’s feet and was now back in the control of his leash and rightful master. Johnny glared at Roman.

Roman turned and walked home.



## Chapter 4

### Homecoming Torture and The Lady in Red

#### I

On my way to school, I couldn't help but notice how well the Pinto was running. The usual roar from the engine was replaced by a smooth even purr. It never drove this well in the two years I had owned it. Whatever book Roman read on fixing cars must have been a good one. I could never do anything like that—read a book about something so complex and then go out and actually do it. Just when I thought Roman was done with the surprises, it seemed another was always on the horizon. I meant to thank him again for the work on the Pinto.

Heather pulled up in the parking spot next to me, and we walked up to the school together.

"So we're doubling Saturday right?" I asked.

"Yep. Reservations at Santangilo's, seven o'clock."

Heather didn't sound too excited about it and I could feel her pain. She was stuck with Johnny, but I was stuck with Johnny and a girl that I had about a ninety percent chance of not screwing afterwards.

"We going in the Pinto?" I said jokingly.

Heather smiled. "My dad's letting Johnny drive the Escalade. So I hear Sally and you got caught doing it by her father."

"Correction, we got caught almost doing it. It's always almost. I would have gladly run away from Sally's dad wielding a shotgun if I actually got to do it."

Heather laughed. "She'll do it when she's ready. It's different for girls."

"So I've heard about six thousand times. It must be nice being female. All you have to do is drop a line like 'it's different for girls' and that gives you immunity from every conflict that ever comes up."

Heather laughed again

About that time Pick Bryant ran up. "Have you guys seen this yet?" He handed me a piece of paper with a picture on it. Heather looked as well.

"That's disgusting," Heather said.

"No, that's just not right," I said. "Who else's got one of these?"

"Everybody," Pick said.

"Whatta ya mean everybody?" I asked.

"Look around," Pick said back.

Every student I saw walking in that day had the same picture in their hand. Some laughed hysterically, others threw it in the trash out of disgust. A few looked at it as if it were art.

In the main hallway of the school not only did everyone have the paper in hand, but the floor was covered with them, as well as the walls and the lockers. There must have been thousands. The prison guards were already busy ripping them out of the students' hands and cleaning them off the floor. In first hour, the announcement came over the intercom that anyone possessing the lewd photograph

would be suspended indefinitely. By second hour they were all gone or at least I didn't see anymore. But the damage to Roman was done.

A couple of minutes of someone's life were all it took to ruin them. I'd seen it a thousand times. A false rumor. A lie. In Roman's case, a picture of him on the receiving end of a gay sex act. Someone downloaded gay porn off of the Internet and superimposed Roman's head on one of the participants. It was obviously fake, but the sad truth of the matter was that those that knew better would still make a big deal out of it and go along with the lie just to hurt Roman, and the others that weren't smart enough to see it for what it was would follow right along. There was no question that this was the work of Johnny the Killer. Although he wasn't smart enough to do it on his own, Johnny got someone to do the dirty work as usual. Roman was on the bad end of pointing fingers, jeers, and laughter that day. More than anyone should have to go through in a lifetime I suppose.

I still sat at our table that day at lunch. I got my share of looks and laughter as well. Pick went back to Johnny's table. What a fucking coward. At first I thought Heather was going to sit there too and then noticed she was only talking to Johnny.

Johnny and the boys were gleaming like pigs in shit, happier than I'd ever seen my old table

"I swear on my own life Johnny that if you had anything to do with that picture we are through," Heather said.

Johnny put his hand on Heather's backside. "Baby, I promise you that I would never have been present at the janitor's little encounter."

The entire table broke out in laughter.

Heather fumed. "That picture is fake and you know it."

"Well if it is fake, you know I'm no good with computers." Johnny pulled out the chair next to him patting the seat with his hand.

"In your dreams," Heather said as she walked to our table.

Ooos and ahs swelled from the guys at the table, until they were cut down with a glance from the Killer.

Back at our table someone passing by dropped a tube of hemorrhoid medicine next to Roman's plate. "Looks like you could use this," the guy said.

I sprung up from my chair and grabbed the tube, but before I could throw it at the bastard Roman grabbed my arm.

"It's not worth it," Roman said.

"Go fuck yourself!" I yelled, as I sat back down in my seat. "How much more of this shit are you going to take? It's got to bother you."

Roman ate a mouthful of salad and said nothing.

"Say something. Is it impossible for you to get mad?"

Roman finished chewing. "I think Johnny's upset that his dog likes me better than him."

"You've lost me," I said.

"Last night Johnny, Jack, and Brunno tried to jump me, and Johnny brought Apollo along."

"When?"

Roman told me the entire story, never seeming angry or happy. His usual monotone voice spoke the tale.

"No way," I said when he finished. "Apollo? That dog bit the finger off a neighbor girl when we younger and besides that Johnny's dad had him professionally trained. I've never seen that dog disobey Johnny. That is one ugly dog though isn't he?"

Roman smiled finally and said, "That he is."

"I can see you fighting off Jack and Brunno but Apollo? Whatta ya got, some kind of mind control over animals?"

"Animals have always liked me, no mind control," Roman said taking in a spoon full of applesauce.

Heather sat down next to Roman. Heather who was immune to the jokes and jabs. Heather who could give a damn about what people thought about her. Heather who through her entire school life was on a pedestal so high that no one could touch her, because of her looks, because of her smarts, and because of her kindness.

"I'm sorry," she said shaking her head.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. It's not your fault," Roman said.

"I think you should kick the son of a bitch's ass," I said, regretting it as soon as the words left my mouth.

"You were just telling me a week ago that Johnny would kick the snot out of me." Roman shook his head. "If I retaliate, it will just make things worse. There would just be a thousand more pictures in the school tomorrow."

"A week ago I didn't know you were Bruce Lee's second cousin. Sometimes you just gotta stand and fight, win or lose. Johnny doesn't understand all this peaceful shit. He's just going to keep comin' until he thinks he's broken you," I said.

"Johnny won't be doing anything else," Heather said.

"Excuse my French, Heather, but I call bullshit. The act he puts on for you while you're snuggled up on the couch eating popcorn and watching *When a Man Loves a Woman* isn't how he is in real life. That's obviously not how he is with Roman."

"He does have a human side. Maybe the side you see is the act, Tony," Heather replied.

"Fuck that," I almost yelled at her. "I can't believe as smart as you are you can't see it."

"Tony," Roman almost shouted back at me. This time it wasn't with the soft monotone voice. This time it was low and threatening, with some emotion behind it.

"Look, I'm sorry that's just how I feel," I said.

Heather said nothing. I think I hurt her feelings but I really wasn't sorry.

Both of them needed to wake up. The bell rang.

## II

As bad as things were for Roman that day they got even worse as Homecoming week progressed. More pictures were distributed every day and in

more volume. The prison guards were even ordered by Principal Hartman to show up early and try to catch the person handing out the flyers. The only problem was that people got them before school and off school property. By the time the students started pouring in, the pictures were already dispersed for the most part. I won't go into great detail about the contents of the pictures but one had to do with Roman in his janitor's get up.

It didn't stop there. Someone was clogging up the toilets in the third floor boy's bathroom and in some cases wasn't using the toilets at all. On Thursday of that week someone actually shit all over the place, on the walls, the floors, in the sink, and even the mirrors. They made a janitor go in there from time to time during the day to stand guard, but it didn't work. The thing that sucked the worst maybe was that the daytime janitors would just shut down the bathroom and not clean it up. They left that to the night shift. They left it for Roman.

Roman even had to take an alternate route home from school, a route that was a mile out of the way so people wouldn't throw things at him from their cars. I begged for him to let me give him a ride home, but of course, he refused.

For the first time in our conversations at lunch it was me that was right, and my stomach hurt because of it. Roman's turn-the-other-cheek tactics weren't working. He never threw a punch, and yet the pictures were still coming, more and more, and the shit was still flying. It began to wear on him. He wasn't saying much at lunch. He just ate. There were no smiles. No stories about how nice the weather was or factoids like how a bolt of lightning is six times hotter than the surface of the sun or if you were traveling to Mars faster than the speed of light you would actually pass yourself on the way back to earth. Roman was hurting although he never complained. I was hurting watching my friend go through it.

### III

All the things that led up to Homecoming were just dust in the wind compared to what happened at the Homecoming dance itself. We ate at Santangilo's, a high class Italian restaurant. Heather booked the reservations a month in advance. You had to wear a suit to get in which was not a problem for me, on Homecoming anyway. I wore the same tan colored suit I always wore for occasions like weddings or funerals. My shirt was emerald to match Sally's dress and my tie was a mixture of black and emerald. Sally was as beautiful as I had ever seen her. Her hair done up and more make up than I was used to, but very pretty. It looked as though she got a boob job for the occasion, with those heaping mounds almost busting out of the top of her dress, but I remembered that girls had tricks like push-up bras. Her lips were painted with the lipstick. Johnny wore a gray Armani suit—probably one that Heather's parents had paid for—with a black shirt and red tie.

And then there was Heather.

A red dress that fit tightly against the curves of her body, as soft as the skin underneath it. It seemed to be forged in a seamstress's workshop only for Heather. The slit in the dress went on forever up her right leg and eventually her lower thigh. It was strapless stopping just above her chest. Heather needed no

help from the wonder bra. Around her neck was a thick string of diamonds and her earrings matched the necklace. Her lips the exact same shade of red as the dress. Her long golden hair pulled up and styled in twists and turns that I can't even describe. Little swirls of hair came down and stopped on both sides just before her shoulders. Heather was truly a vision.

We were seated a couple of tables away from the piano in the main room. Soft music played as we ate in the candlelight. For anybody else this would have been as good as it gets, but for the four of us it was not. Sally, who was having nothing to do with Johnny, talked to Heather the entire time. I don't recall a spoken word between Johnny and Heather the entire meal, or even in the Escalade to and from. That left me to hear Johnny babble on about meaningless shit. He had already been drinking; I could smell it from across the table. I put my best fake smile on and made the most of it. We all ordered huge meals, because that was the only way Santangilo's did it. At the end of the meal the ladies' plates looked as if there were only a few bites taken. Me and Johnny on the other hand had no problem joining the clean-plate club. In fact, Johnny's plate looked as if it had already been washed, and he even finished a little of Heather's dinner. I got some white sauce on my shirt on several occasions, and each time Sally would pat a thick linen napkin with club soda to the spot. As much as she assured me the stain would come out I could still see dark patches on my emerald shirt. Johnny thought this was the funniest thing of all time and reminded me constantly throughout the night that I had dropped sauce on my shirt. I gave my best smile every time, wishing that I could kick him in the balls underneath the table. I paid with the money Pops had given me. Heather took care of her and Johnny's bill of course.

We arrived at the dance an hour after it started, fashionably late, Sally called it. The fieldhouse was transformed into a sea of draping cloth, soft lights, and music. You would never have known that this was the place of sweat and tears, running and jumping. The DJ was set up next to an enormous stage at the far end. In front of that stage the masses danced and laughed and talked. There were around five hundred people attending I guessed. Homecoming was always packed because unlike Prom, the underclassmen were allowed to attend. Most of the attendees were dressed to perfection, the guys reluctantly in their suits and ties, and the chicks in their 'you think you're getting some later but this is just to tease you' dresses. There were a few dirt legs that wore their everyday jeans and such, but Sally reminded me that maybe they couldn't help it.

Fifteen minutes after we arrived the court was announced. Johnny and Heather were crowned king and queen. Heather gave Johnny the fakest kiss I'd ever seen to seal the deal. The dancing for the court began with only Heather and Johnny and then the rest of the court. "Total Eclipse of the Heart" played like I'm sure it did at a million Homecomings before this and would at a million after it. Heather danced with Johnny but stayed as far away as she could without breaking contact with him.

I danced close with Sally, her pushed up breasts against my chest (I think we were identical in height with her high heels on), and her head laying on my shoulder in contentment. She smelled great. I scanned the area as we danced.

Jack was distracting the prison guard overseeing the punch bowls as Brunno emptied a liter of vodka into them, giggling the entire time. They both came stag.

Off in the corner, far from the dance floor was Roman, standing next to his mop and bucket waiting to be called on to clean up spilled punch or dropped cake. Another janitor stood on the opposite end waiting to do the same. Roman's eyes were fixed on Heather the entire song. He said it didn't bother him to be working during the dance, but I'm not sure I bought that. I wondered if the endless torture would ever stop. At least tonight he was off in the distance away from the crowd, away from the spotlight.

A couple hours into the dance ties were loosened, high heels were discarded, and the majority was half blitzed thanks to Brunno's punch. I danced so hard and long that I was a sweaty mess. Heather stood off talking to her cheerleading friends. Johnny stayed near the punch.

Sheila, Jack's sister, who was waxed out of her mind, went over to Roman and pulled him to the edge of the dance floor. She put her arms around his waist and started kissing him. Roman stood there in shock. Johnny and Jack snuck up behind Roman. Jack had a pitcher of the punch in his hand. I stopped dancing and started to run, yelling Roman's name as I did. The speakers drowned his name out. Sheila had managed to undo Roman's belt in the confusion. A second later Jack poured the punch on Roman's head as Johnny pulled Roman's pants and underwear down. Jack let out a piercing shriek of laughter, loud enough to be heard over the music. The dancing stopped and heads turned toward the laughter.

Roman stood with eyes shut and punch dripping down his face, soaking into his gray janitor shirt. He stood there pantless, naked from the waist down. Laughter erupted throughout the fieldhouse. Everyone was pointing. A few girls covered their mouths in either laughter or awe. Brunno started hopping around in laughter eventually lying on the floor and convulsing in happiness. The laughter continued for an eternity. Roman finally bent down and pulled his pants up and re-buckled his belt.

Mr. Buttworst and another prison guard escorted Johnny and Jack out of the fieldhouse. They didn't fight it; their night was already made.

Instead of leaving or trying to hide, Roman turned and got his mop and bucket. He walked over to the mess on the floor and began to clean it. The laughing stopped. The mass of people just stood and watched as Roman did his work. The DJ got on the mic and announced there were only three songs left. The music began to play and people went back to their dancing. Roman finished mopping and returned to his corner, unmoving, like the guard at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

I started to walk over. I had no words for him this time. My mind was shocked and blank. Heather grabbed my arm.

"Let me talk to him," she said as she passed me by.

Heather stopped in front of Roman giving him a towel she had grabbed off the table. Roman took the towel and wiped his face and hair.

"Thanks, but I'm really not looking for your pity," Roman said.

"I don't pity you Roman, I admire you," Heather said back.

“I think that is difficult to believe considering the current circumstances,” Roman said.

“I admire what you just did. Any other person would have run for the door after something like that and probably never come back.”

“Stupidity is often confused with genius,” Roman said wiping the last of the red vodka punch from his face.

“Well, we both know you’re not stupid. So that only leaves genius.” Heather took Roman’s hand in hers. “I want you to dance with me. The last song is “The Lady in Red”, and tonight I’m the lady in red if you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“And I noticed you watching me dance with Johnny during the Homecoming court song.”

Roman put his head down.

Heather said, “I need someone to dance with and as you can see my date is no longer around.”

“I’m not a good dancer. I’ll get this punch all over you. I...”

Heather stopped him in mid-sentence. “All excuses that in the long run don’t add up to much.”

Roman shook his head. “I’ve got to man my station in case of an accident.”

Mr. Buttworst walked over as though he had heard the entire conversation. “I’ll take care of it, Roman. Go dance would you?”

As the DJ announced that this would be the last song of the night, Heather led a reluctant Roman out to the center of the dance floor. The masses parted in astonishment. People again pointed and nudged each other. Heather and Roman began to dance. She pulled herself close to him. The two moved in unison flowing with the music. Roman led and just like everything else he did it was close to perfection. For at least half the song the crowd just stood and watched. There were even a few claps and cheers. I led Sally out on the floor next to them.

“Good to have ya,” I said.

“Good to be here.” Roman smiled.

One by one the couples began to file onto the floor and soon the entire crowd was dancing to “Lady in Red”.

The song was right about one thing. She was amazing.

#### IV

Me and Sally rode with Heather from the high school. Johnny found another way, probably with Jack and Brunno. The post-Homecoming party was at Scott Jakowski’s, of course. This time there weren’t as many people. It was too cold to be outside, and Scott made it clear that he wanted no more than twenty people over. There were at least forty, but Scott was too nice of a guy to tell anyone to leave. Everyone had changed into more casual apparel except for Heather. She walked into the kitchen in her red dress with high heels in hand and went directly over to the liquor counter. She placed her shoes on it and grabbed a glass and a bottle of champagne. She looked at the glass briefly and then discarded it. Her lips pressed against the champagne bottle and several large gulps went down. When she finished, Heather took the back of her free hand and wiped the

corners of her mouth in a long swipe, like a cowboy finishing his canteen after a long day in the sun. Johnny and the boys were already shit-faced, since they got a head start on everybody. They looked on in surprise. I had never seen Heather drunk, not even a little tipsy for that matter. I could probably count on two hands the number of times I'd even seen her take a drink, much less chug right out of a bottle of champagne. She was definitely stressed or pissed or both. Johnny walked over and tried to put an arm around her but she stopped him. She poured about half the champagne bottle over his head. Everybody in the kitchen and a few people that could see from the living room, including myself, burst into laughter. Johnny grabbed Heather's wrist. The laughter stopped. A second later Johnny's head was snapped to the left by a smack from Heather. In his stupor Johnny just smiled. Heather whispered something in his ear and then grabbed her shoes and came into the living room.

Me and Sally mingled in the living room with the majority of the guests. She held my hand the entire time as we drank and small-talked. Music played soft at first, but the drunker the crowd became the louder the music bumped from the speakers. An hour or so into the party you had to yell in the ear of the person you were talking to. Heather was now on her second bottle and was head banging to the bass of the speakers. I was feeling pretty good myself and after several attempts of begging Sally to go to the basement, she finally accepted. She had two beers in the time we were there and was already getting loopy.

In the basement there were already several couples making out on the couches and floor. Sally pulled on me as if she wanted to go back upstairs. I motioned my head toward the laundry room, and she followed me there. This was the same spot my chances ended the last time, I thought to myself. The room was very well kept for a laundry room and spacious. There was more than enough room on the floor. We began to kiss and undress, but she wasn't hot like at her parents' house. Her lips were cold, and her touch seemed to be miles away. I continued, of course.

"Look we don't have to do this if you're not ready." That sentence came out of pure hope that in hearing it she would continue, not out of respect or anything else. It sounded sincere though.

"I want to," she said back. But her eyes told a different story.

Soon we were on the floor and all the rituals that came before actually doing it were followed. The kissing, and petting, and rubbing, and sucking, and licking all took place. All of this seemed to melt away the idea in her mind that she wasn't ready. At this point I could take a condom out of its wrapper and put it on quicker than anybody in the world. I had more practice than anybody, of that I was sure.

"Let me get on top, it doesn't hurt that way."

I always hated how she associated the word hurt with sex. It was a real mood killer. But I was in no position to bitch. I rolled over on my back. She rolled over as well and lay on top of me. Her boobs hung on my chest. She kissed me. I stroked two fingertips down her back. Another meaningless ritual. Just as we were about to hot dock, the door flung open.

Heather stumbled into the washer as she entered the room, still with her shoes in hand, no bottle this time. Sally jumped off of me and covered herself with a towel. I just lay there, with my best soldier saluting the ceiling. Heather didn't seem to be moved or embarrassed by the scene. It was as if we were meeting in the hallway at school. She braced herself up against the washer.

"I'm just letting you guys know I'm leaving," she said and burped immediately after.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Sally said.

"I just don't feel good, having a shitty time here," Heather slurred back.

I stood up and held a towel over my crotch.

Heather wobbled out of the doorway into the darkness of the basement.

Sally turned to me grabbing her clothes off the floor. "I should go with her. She's too drunk to drive."

*I can't believe this is happening again.*

"You're too drunk to drive," I said back.

"I'm fine." She said starting to put on her clothes. "We'll pick up with this some other time. I promise."

She finished dressing and kissed me.

Déjà vu hit me as I stood in the dark laundry room. The itchy/wet feeling returned to my nether region and I pulled the agitator off in frustration. I swear the bottle of Tide on the washer was laughing at me. After several minutes of wallowing in self-pity, somebody switched the light on. It was Johnny, Jack, and Brunno.

Jack was drinking some high-priced scotch. Everything was always high-priced with Jack. He thought it made him look more sophisticated I suppose, but someone forgot to tell him that you sip scotch, you don't guzzle it. Brunno was double-fisted with two twenty-four ounce cans of Schlitz. Johnny had a Natural Light in hand.

"Shot down huh?" Johnny asked. "Life's a bitch especially if you're dating one. We're getting ready to play the Century Club. You in?"

Johnny in his drunkenness must have forgotten he was pissed at me for befriending the guy he called the faggot janitor. I was so furious with my own situation that my anger toward him seemed minuscule.

I had nothing else to do. *No one else* would be more appropriate.

"Who's timing?" I asked.

"I'm f-f-f-funkin' timing," Brunno responded smiling big with his few missing teeth.

"When the hell did you learn how to tell time Brunno?" I asked.

Jack and Johnny laughed.

"F-f-f-fuck you, Tony."

I put on my clothes and went upstairs.

## V

By the time we all got to the kitchen table, everybody was either passed out, making out, or leaving. It was just the four of us. The way it had been so many times in the past. As much as I hated the guys and what they were doing to

Roman, a part of me would always be their friend. I did grow up with them. We had so many events that intertwined our lives it would be hard to unravel them all. They weren't evil. They weren't even bad guys all of the time. They were just misdirected or immature. Maybe this was a chance to talk some sense to them.

"If Brunno is timing, I'm keeping count of the shots," I said, pulling a pen and paper in front of me.

Everybody agreed and Johnny began to pour the four one-ounce shot glasses full of beer. Brunno immediately threw his down. The rest of us looked at him.

"You didn't start timing yet shithead," Jack said.

Brunno looked down at his watch. "G-g-g-go ahead."

The rest of us drank. I scratched a mark on my paper. On the fifth one I put a slash through the previous four, making it easier to keep track of. On shot eighteen Brunno ripped the loudest, wettest fart I've ever heard. It smelled like rotten eggs and sulfur. I could actually see tears in Johnny's eyes because of it. I grabbed a couple of napkins and made a facemask, but for several shots, the beer tasted like Brunno's ass.

"I've g-g-g-otta shit," he said.

"Leave your watch," Johnny said.

With that, Brunno left.

He did not return.

On shot 48, four beers apiece into it, I noticed Jack had his eyes closed. He was sitting straight up in his chair, but he was definitely hurting. Johnny's eyes had a glazed look about them, and I could never tell if he was looking at or behind me.

Johnny looked down at the watch in front of him with his head swaying like a bobblehead doll's. "Drink."

Me and Johnny slugged back our forty-eighth shot and slammed the empty glasses on the table simultaneously. Johnny looked over at Jack who still had a full shot in front of him. Johnny nudged him and told him to drink. Jack giggled like a little girl but never opened his eyes. Johnny nudged him again. "Drink, I said."

No response from Jack.

Johnny gave a nudge with his shoulder this time, and Jack fell off his chair and hit the kitchen floor. Johnny looked down at Jack who was face down and lifeless. "Fuck him."

We both broke into laughter that went on until the next shot.

On shot 67, the beer went down the wrong pipe and came directly out my nose. After I stopped coughing and regrouped myself, Johnny informed me that it didn't count because it came out my nose. I immediately did another.

The time in between shots was now flying by at an impossible pace. Every time I set the glass down, Johnny was telling me to do another. I could barely get the shot glass filled with beer in time. Johnny was slouched so far down in his chair he could barely reach the table, and by the way his eyes looked it was a miracle he could see the watch. Everyone at the party had either left or passed out by now. It was just me and the Killer.

Between shots 80 and 81, I decided to say something about Roman. We were both drunk off of our asses and Johnny was calmer than I had seen him in years. There wouldn't be a better time to bring it up.

"You think you're about done fuckin' with Roman yet?"

Johnny smiled. "Faggot janitor boy? Why in the fuck should I?" Johnny was trying to balance himself in his chair like it was moving. "The little bastard was hittin' on Heather again tonight after I left. No, I'm not quite done fucking with him yet." Johnny looked at the watch again. "Drink."

I drank and put my glass down again. "You've embarrassed the guy more than anyone in the history of Collingston High, more than humanly imaginable most people would say. What's left?"

Johnny seemed to sober up at that comment, raising up in his seat and pulling it up to the table, trying to get closer to me. He poured his shot glass full. The happy go lucky face he was wearing was now gone.

"I'm going to break him in two." Johnny began to raise his glass and stopped short of his lips. "And anybody else that stands with him."

I shot my beer knowing full well that comment was for me. I didn't respond.

I marked shot 95 down on my sheet and noticed that the neat little marks and rows had steadily gotten bigger and sloppier. "Five left," I slurred out.

Johnny's eyes were now just little slits, and he'd apparently lost the powers of speech. But he did continue to drink every minute.

I remember thinking to myself after shot 99 there was no way in hell I could do the last one. My throat was sore. My stomach was bloated and on the verge of exploding. The sheet of paper looked like it was moving around on the table. I thought about the straw that broke the camel's back. Johnny motioned to drink. We both sat there. Finally I began to lift the glass. It felt like I was curling seventy pounds. Slowly it went up. I opened my mouth and bent my head back, pouring the beer in. I ordered my throat to swallow, but it refused. I bent my head back down and looked at Johnny who was snoring. The beer began to get warm and thicken in my mouth. I tried to swallow again and this time the beer went down in one violent gulp. I let out a loud belch that seemed to relieve the bloating in my stomach.

I had to piss, but there was no way I could make it to the bathroom. I grabbed a half-full Tropicana container off the table. I unzipped and filled it to the top. There was a moment of panic because I thought I was going to overflow it, but I didn't. I lay my head down on the table in front of me, even though it was covered in a pool of beer that either splashed from our shot glasses or never made it in them. It was warm and wet, but I didn't care. If I'd been sober and could see the future I would've known that sleeping in a pool of beer was a bad idea, that as the fermented liquid dried it would mimic the attributes of super glue and that I would in end up having to rip my cheek from the table.

But all was well with the world. I finished the Century Club and Johnny the Killer didn't. I remember being quite happy about that. Johnny slept in the chair across from me. Jack slept on the floor.

## VI

Around one thirty that night, while me and Johnny were getting soused, Roman got off work. He left the high school an hour and a half later than usual because of the mess from the dance. Roman had changed into a clean janitors' outfit although it was the same gray combination and the same red letters that stitched his name.

He threw on his red and black-checked flannel. The hot nights of July and August had been replaced by the cold and black nights of late September. It would dip into the low forties. Roman began to walk, nonetheless. It was a cloudless night and Roman seemed to count the stars as he walked. The sky reminded him of Heather and how they had watched the meteor shower down on Scotty's dock.

About halfway home a black Escalade slowed up next to him, swerving back and forth from the curb to the middle line. It was Heather. Her window was down and she was smoking a cigarette.

"Need a ride, stranger?" The SUV came closer to the curb as she talked.

Roman stopped, hoping that Heather would follow his lead before she came completely over the curb and ran him over.

"I think the question should be, do you need a driver?" Roman said back.

The ash on Heather's cigarette was about halfway to the butt. "Whatta ya sayin', that I shouldn't be drivin'? I'm a better driver than anybody. What, you think you can do better Mr. Swivel?"

"I'm positive I can't do better. But I might be able to do almost as good."

"Get in and show me then." Heather threw the cigarette to the ground and crawled over the console to the passenger seat. The vehicle began to roll because she had failed to put it in park. Roman took a few quick steps and jumped into the driver's seat.

"Where are we going anyway?" Roman asked.

"To your house silly, I told you I'd give ya a ride." Heather punched Roman lightly in the arm and then lit another cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"Oh, how rude of me, ya want one?" Heather stretched the open pack right in front of Roman's face.

"No thanks, I'm trying to quit since I found out those things are laced with the same chemicals they put into rat poison and one of them can paralyze the cilia in your lungs for ten to twelve hours."

Heather coughed on her inhale and then held the cigarette vertical in front of her face, like she was trying to see the rat poison. After several seconds, she pulled out the ashtray and put it out.

Roman pulled up in front of his house and shut off the engine. "We're here."

"Will your parents be mad if I come in?"

"My parents are dead," Roman responded as he got out of the Escalade.

Heather got out and tried to walk in her high heels but after a couple steps started to fall sideways. Roman caught her and stood her back upright.

"Do you mind carrying my shoes?" Heather asked.

Roman put her hand on his shoulder trying to balance her, and took her shoes off one at a time.

"I can't never walk right in these damn things."

"Me neither," Roman said back.

It took a couple of seconds, but Heather finally got it and began to laugh like it was the funniest joke of all time.

Roman opened the door and the two went inside. Heather stumbled to the couch and fell more than sat.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"You got champagne?"

"Sorry, how about a glass of milk?"

"Ooo no, water will be fine."

"Water it is."

While Roman was in the kitchen, Heather's eyes wandered across the room trying to decipher the images she was seeing.

"You really like baseball players, huh?"

Roman put the glass of water in her hand and looked at Stan Musial directly over his couch. "I like baseball. I know it's not exactly how a lady would've decorated, but it suits me."

As if her brain had just registered Roman saying his parents were dead, Heather set the water down on the table and tried to act as sober as she could.

"I'm sorry about your parents Roman, how rude of me."

Roman looked the other way. "That's a story for another time I think."

Even in her stupor, Heather didn't press the issue.

"Do you need to call your parents?" Roman asked.

"They think I'm at Sally's. No need to wake them," Heather said as she yawned. "Excuse me, I'm so tired all of the sudden."

"You're welcome to stay here if you want. You can have the bed, I'll sleep on the couch."

"I can't take your bed."

"It's not a big deal, I don't sleep well anyway. I'll take the couch."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Heather got up and walked over to the bed. Roman lay down on the couch facing away from her. She managed to get her hose off and then tried to unzip her dress.

"Can you help me with this, I can't get this zipper."

Roman's heart jumped but he covered it up with a quick, "Sure."

Heather stood with her back to him. She pulled up hair, lifting the spirals to expose her neck. Her smell filled him immediately. He stared through the diamonds to her neck. His hands were shaking slightly, but still he unzipped her with finesse. The dress fell and Heather turned around with calmness as if she were in the girls' locker room, as if Sally was the one helping her. There was no shame in her eyes. Her bra and panties were the same color red as her dress, only a very thin lace. Roman could have seen every inch of her—like he did in his dreams. Instead he turned away.

“Do you have a hanger for this?” she asked.

Roman opened the only closet in his house and retrieved one. As hard as he tried he couldn't help but take a quick peek at her. He handed her the hanger. Heather began to put the dress on it but tripped over one of her high heels lying next to the bed. Roman caught her around the waist, and she grabbed Roman around the neck.

Heather laughed, “Those damn things'll be the end of me.”

Roman just looked into her eyes and then realized what he was doing and took his arm away from her waist, scratching the top of his head. “If you're cold, I've got more blankets.”

“I'll be fine, thanks.”

With that she slipped into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck. Roman shut the light out and lay down on the couch.

“Roman?”

“Yes.”

“I feel bad kicking you out of your own bed. We can share it if you want. I trust you.”

“That bed's really not the biggest. I'll be fine over here. You need a good night's rest.”

“Okay,” Heather said.

“Goodnight,” Roman said back.

Minutes later Heather was asleep. Roman could hear her soft snores and smiled. He lay with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Sleep was far off.

## VII

Roman was still on the couch reading when Heather awoke. Either he was up already, or he never went bed. It was probably the latter Heather thought. She rubbed her head and let out a quiet moan. Roman went into the kitchen and retrieved a steaming cup.

Roman walked over and handed her the drink. “Did you sleep all right?”

“I slept so well I don't even remember. What time is it?”

“Seven AM,” Roman responded.

Heather took a sip of the smoldering liquid, blowing on it first and then closing her eyes as she swallowed.

“That's awful,” she said, wiping the corner of her mouth and making a sour face.

“I know,” Roman began, “I borrowed it from my neighbor. He brought it back with him from Russia. The Russians swear by it I guess. If anybody knows how to cure a hangover, it would be the Russians.”

Heather pulled the covers to her neck with her free hand as she sat up in the bed, seeming to finally realize that she was wearing next to nothing.

“It tastes like black licorice,” she said still doubting the power of the drink. Reluctantly she took another sip and watched Roman walk back to his book. The more she drank, the better it started to taste, or maybe her taste buds just adjusted and tricked her into thinking it was better. She finished, laid the cup next to the

bed, and put her head back on the pillow. She was still too physically hurting to attempt getting out of bed. Instead she looked at the many uniformed players on the wall, some hitting, some pitching, some just smiling for the picture.

Half an hour later Heather felt recharged. She sat up quickly in surprise. Her head wasn't pounding anymore and her stomach felt as if the champagne had never reached it. She turned toward Roman keeping the comforter over her.

"You know what? I think your friend's tea really works. I feel great."

Roman put down the book and turned around. He noticed her hair was messed up and most of her make up was rubbed off. At first it caught him off guard. The model he had been used to seeing, with the perfect hair and face, was after all human—fancy wrapping paper. Roman smiled.

"Carl's got some crazy ideas sometimes, but it seems the more unlikely the idea, the better it works." Roman walked over to the dresser next to his bed and conjured up

a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. "You probably don't want to wear your dress home. They might be a little big, but they should do for a ride across town."

Heather took the clothes and sat them next to her on the bed. "Look, Roman, I want to apologize for last night. I can only imagine what a mess I must have been and you really took care of me. Thanks."

"It was no trouble at all. I want to thank you for giving a lowly janitor one great moment on the dance floor. I'll never forget it."

Heather blushed a little at that and the two just looked at each other for several seconds, not speaking.

"Do you mind if I use your shower? I just feel so blah."

"Please," Roman said. "Help yourself."

Later in the day Roman would shower himself. He could feel her presence as the beads of water splashed on his body. He wondered what the droplets would feel like if his skin was next to hers.



## Chapter 5

### Fishing with the Human Calculator

#### I

Mr. Buttworst wrote an equation on the board, something that had more letters in it than numbers. Except this wasn't English and x and y together don't spell a damn thing to my knowledge. I could barely keep my eyes open, despite sleeping most of Sunday away. Johnny was face down on his desk, snoring loud enough that I could hear it. I rested the side of my face on my right hand for so long that my hand was falling asleep. "Shooting the shit time" had already taken place earlier in the class, and now the only constant was Mr. Buttworst's voice, deep and scratchy, showing the class with great enthusiasm the mysteries of algebra. The man actually got excited about the subject, and I could tell by some of his bewildered looks that he couldn't understand why everybody didn't share his enthusiasm. The man was as serious about his belief in teaching as his conviction in math. Students respected him for that. Most of the prison guards were there to put in their time and pick up their paychecks.

Near the end of class, Mr. Buttworst handed out our quiz from last Friday. I got a big red flag as was the case most of the time. I put a "u" next to it before throwing it in the garbage. The bell rang and I walked for the door, but Mr. Buttworst stopped me.

"Do you have a second Tony?"

"Sure."

Mr. Buttworst took a sip of coffee. "I talked to Ms. Pertie (she's my guidance counselor) this morning and it turns out you need this class to graduate." I turned my head to the side because of his ashtray-coffee breath.

"I got more than enough credits to graduate," I said.

"That's true, but you need at least four semesters of core math classes."

"But..."

"Business Math doesn't count Tony. Although the name is nice and fancy, it is not considered a core class."

I shook my head looking down at the floor.

Mr. Buttworst began again, putting his hand on my shoulder as we walked to the door. "Look Tony, I'm not trying to be the heavy. I hate this as much as you, and that's why I wanted to talk to you about it. I know how important playing college ball is to you, but if you're going to be *here* next year, it's going to be hard to play *there*."

"Nobody's on me anyhow. They're not interested in a five-ten catcher no matter how many guys he throws out, or what his batting average is."

Mr. Buttworst smiled and wiped his mouth, pushing away the gray strands of hair hanging over his lip. "You're too good of a hitter not to get noticed, Tony. It's all about being in the right place at the right time. I'm confident that place and time will find you. That is, if you take care of your grades first. Why don't you ask Roman to help you out with your studying? I know you two are pretty good friends and believe me, if anyone could explain this stuff to you, it would be him."

I agreed that Roman could help me.

I ran into Scotty at the lockers. He had the one next to me. Before I could slam my backpack down or rip open my door, Scotty started laughing.

“What the fuck is so funny?” I said.

“I was just thinking about Johnny,” Scotty responded.

“What about him?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“No. What? I just had him in class. He didn’t say anything.”

“I wouldn’t say anything if I was him either.”

“Spit it out Jakowski, what the hell?”

“Okay, Sunday morning when I woke up I went down to the kitchen and Johnny was passed out at the table. No big deal, happens all the time, right? But when I woke him up, his jeans were soaking wet from pissing himself.”

I started laughing a little but Scotty could hardly finish the story. He put his hand on my shoulder so he wouldn’t double over from laughing.

“That’s not even the best part,” he started. “After he cleaned himself up and borrowed some clothes, he came back to the kitchen and took a drink from a Tropicana container that somebody was using for screwdrivers the night before. He said, ‘Good, it’s full’ before he started guzzling it. Turns out somebody had pissed in it, and I don’t mean a couple of drops either. This thing was filled to the brim with the yellow stuff. He’d taken several swallows before he noticed it wasn’t orange juice. He spent at least thirty minutes in my bathroom puking after that.”

I laughed hysterically right along with Scotty but didn’t dare tell him who pissed in that container, knowing it would be all over school before fourth hour. And I really didn’t feel like getting my ass beat at lunch by Johnny the Killer. That little story brightened my day though.

I noticed at lunch that our little table was growing. What used to be just me, Roman, and Heather had turned into a table of seven people. Pick Bryant was back. Scotty had joined us for the first time. Sam Peterman, who at first I thought stopped just to give a “what’s up?” spent the entire lunch hour. One of Heather’s cheerleader friends also joined us.

Johnny and the boys’ attempt at embarrassing Roman with one final nail in the coffin at Homecoming had backfired. Three days ago the entire student body was either laughing at Roman or taking part in making him suffer. Today there were no flyers. No finger-pointing. No milk being dumped. People went about their business, awakening slowly from the aftermath of Homecoming and its parties. All of this because one girl had the balls to step up and go against the crowd. I was beginning to understand why he liked her so much.

There weren’t any stares coming from Johnny’s table. Even though they had lost a few of their regular members, they seemed to go about business as usual. I could hear Brunno trying to spit out a story that should have only taken twenty seconds, but it turned out to be a several minute ordeal. I also heard Jack in the high-pitched whine of his making fun of Johnny pissing himself. Johnny gave a firm elbow to his ribs stopping the story dead.

Was Roman's torture over? Was that all it took, for the Homecoming queen to dance with the janitor. Rumor was that Heather had finally dumped the Killer. That sounded great, but I've heard those same words a thousand times over the years. Johnny was quite the laughingstock at school with both of his piss incidents, yet he seemed to be calm. Even more surprising, he actually came to school. I watched Heather and Roman talk. I watched as Roman smiled and even laughed sometimes. This was how it was supposed to be. Or was it just the calm before the storm?

## II

As the days of October rolled by and turned into weeks, the leaves of the trees turned from dark green to light green and then from yellow to bright orange. Roman informed me that the month October wasn't named after a Roman emperor or god, like so many of its counterparts. It was also one of the few months that always had thirty-one days. October didn't have to worry about jealous descendants stealing its days, since it was simply named after the Roman word for eight. I didn't know or much care about emperors and such, but the time between the leaves being yellow and bright orange was an awesome display. There were only a couple of weeks, some years only a couple of days, to enjoy the colors. I wasn't one to stop my car on the side of the road and gawk at a tree with my mouth open or anything like that, but I admit they made the ride to school a little more bearable. My grandfather once said that central Illinois was one of the few places in the world where you had to use your furnace and your air conditioner in the same day. I wasn't sure if that was entirely true, especially the part about being one of the few places in the world, but there was one day that I got in my car and it was in the thirties and I turned on the heat on the way to school. On my way home I turned on the air, and when I passed the digital sign in front of Second National it read eighty-five. October in our neck of the woods was like the purgatory between seasons, the nexus of summer and winter.

During that time I spent at least an hour every day after school over at Roman's. As it happened, Roman's quiet way did not hurt his ability to teach and explain, and even though I was sure that Roman would fit in eating lunch at Harvard with professors and people with numerous letters after their names, he had an uncanny ability to communicate his point to average people, even idiots like myself. He put it in simple terms. The equal sign in an equation is no more than a mirror, what shows up on one side has to show up on the other. "X", "y" and any other letter of the alphabet were just symbols in place of what really existed. Like the three cards buried in the tan envelope in the board game Clue. They were there the entire time, but until you did some deductions and eliminated some things, you didn't know what they were. Mr. Plum in the library with a lead pipe. X equals five, y equals seven, and z equals eight. Plotting positive points on two planes seems to have more in common with a baseball field than I ever imagined. The first base line is the x-axis and the third base line the y. Anything in foul territory would have at least one negative number in it. Second base would be plotted 90, 90 as it was ninety feet down the first base line and ninety feet up the third line,

and if I drew imaginary lines from both first and third they would intersect at second making a diamond, or a square as it's called in geometry.

Soon the one-legged A's on my quizzes started to have two legs. I had never aced anything in the twelve years I'd been attending school. Suddenly with Roman's help and even more important his imagination, I was pulling my grade up from the depths of the ocean, was on dry land and beginning to reach for the clouds.

I knew Roman was special, with a brain that just didn't work like the rest of ours. You could tell that just by spending a few hours with him—but how special I never knew until one day at his house. That day hit me like a baserunner barreling me over at home plate. I was sitting at Roman's kitchen table solving equations. These equations though had square roots in 'em. Some shit huh, just when I finally start to get a handle on something they throw these in.

I was plugging away on my two hundred-dollar calculator (which we were allowed to use, thank Jesus and Mary) that Pops got for me. He was always shelling out the bucks if he thought it would help me in school. Anyway I was working on a square root when my calculator went dead.

"You got any batteries?" I yelled into the other room.

Roman walked in, not looking up from his book, and opened a drawer of the cabinet. Always with the reading, never enough words, never enough time it seemed.

"What's the problem anyway?" he asked.

"Calculator went dead. I need the square root of four eighty-four."

"Twenty-two," Roman said as he placed the batteries beside me, still reading.

*That was quick. Did he have that memorized or something?*

I put the batteries in as he started to walk away. I pushed the square root of four eighty-four in the calculator. Twenty-two appeared. He must have had it memorized. Probably all the geeks in calculus had it memorized.

"Hey wait a second, how about three eighty-nine times six fifty-four?"

Roman looked up from his book. "Two hundred fifty-four thousand, four hundred six." Roman had a look of bewilderment on his face, not from actually doing the math but from me asking him. "Aren't those new batteries working?"

"How about six thousand seven hundred eighty-nine divided by fifty-four?" I responded. At this point I was just letting my fingers type in whatever they wanted.

Roman gazed at the wall for about three seconds. "One hundred twenty-five point seven, two repeating."

My display said the same.

"Are those batteries working or not?" Roman asked.

"They're working fine, I just want to know how in the blue fuck you can do that in your head so quick, or do it at all for that matter?"

Roman put the book down and gave a sigh. "I've always been able to do it. I don't know how or why, but the numbers just pop in my head some how. They look so clear, like they're on a piece of paper, right in front of my face. I add them just like everybody else, just in my head."

“Bullshit like everybody else, that’s fuckin’ amazing, you need to get on Letterman or somethin’.”

Roman smiled. “That’s all right, there’s enough stupid human tricks out there.”

“Hey, don’t forget Thursday I really gotta buckle down, I’ve got a mid-term test over everything we’ve had so far. You’re gonna help me, right?”

“Sure,” Roman responded. “I’ve got just the thing.”

### III

Thursday was one of those days that seemed to prove my grandpa’s theory; it was colder than a witch’s tit on the way to school, but now it was warm. The sun was out, there were no clouds to be seen, and the leaves on the trees seemed to be emitting light of their own. I pulled into Roman’s driveway, and as I got out of the Pinto, he was walking out the front door.

Roman wore a smashed-down hat with a flimsy brim all the way around it. He carried two cane poles in one hand and a tackle box in the other. He stepped down off the porch and motioned with his head for me to follow him up the driveway. We walked around the back of the house to a space of dirt about three feet by three feet. Roman handed me a large Styrofoam cup and grabbed the shovel that was leaning against the back of his house.

“I watered this pretty good about ten minutes ago. Let’s see what we have.” Roman shoved the blade into the moist brown dirt. He turned the scooped pile over like he was afraid of hurting it. What seemed like thousands of night crawlers lay at our feet. I could tell that Roman was pleased by the look in his wide eyes. If I hadn’t seen him with the fishing poles, I might have thought he was looking at dinner. Instead of eating them, Roman placed the worms one by one in my Styrofoam container. When he was pleased with the number, he picked a handful of damp dirt and covered the wigglers with it.

I wanted to ask what the hell we were doing. Had Roman forgotten that my future lay in the balance with this test, or what? He opened the Pinto’s hatch and placed the fishing gear inside. We both got in.

“Am I missing something here?” I asked with the key in the ignition.

“What do you mean?” Roman said.

“I’ve got the test of my life tomorrow. Did you forget?”

“No, I didn’t forget.” Roman sat with his hands in his lap looking straight ahead waiting for me to start the car and back out.

“Hello, what in the hell are we doing?” I asked.

Roman turned with the serious face I had seen so many times before. “This is part of your lesson, maybe the final lesson. Do you want my help or not?”

I shook my head in confusion and started my blue angel.

About halfway to the lake Roman broke the silence. “One more thing, once we get to the lake, there is no conversation unless it’s about fishing. Agreed?”

I nodded a reluctant yes. *What in the name of Christ?* All this time I’ve spent gettin’ my grades up and now I’m gonna flush it down the toilet because Roman wants to go fuckin’ fishing. And now we can’t talk either. *What is this,*

*Kindergarten naptime?* What could I do though? Roman had done so much for me, I had to humor him, but I still wasn't thrilled about the idea.

#### IV

We walked down a path through the woods to a clearing next to the lake. On the bank sat an old picnic table, close enough to the water that you could still fish while sitting, even with the old cane poles Roman had brought. I had learned to fish on this very bank with my father and my father from my grandpa and so on. The picnic table looked as though it been there forever, but it was still sturdy enough for me and Roman to sit on.

Before I had as much as a nibble on my line, Roman had already caught a small blue gill and a decent-size catfish. He threw them both back. I finally got a bite and it was a big one. Roman had to help me pull it in. It was a very nice size fish, but it was only a carp. I got the hook out and began to throw it back.

"Wait," Roman said. "Put that one in the bucket. Carl wants it."

"Carl wants it for what?" I responded. "You can't eat these damn things. They've got a mud vein in them. It'll make ya sick."

"Carl knows how to clean them. Just trust me," Roman said back.

"Let me get this straight, we're throwing away the good size catfish and blue gill, but we're keeping these dirty-ass mud fish?"

"That's right. The lake is overpopulated with them anyway. By catching them we leave more room for your catfish."

I gave a sarcastic "Okay" and threw the carp in the bucket of water.

We sat there silent for hours. I don't remember even speaking another word. It was damn peaceful though. The lake water was becoming calmer every minute it seemed. The big oaks and maples in their orange and yellow attire stood tall and hung out over the top of us. They were there for no other reason than to shield us from the clatter of real life, from algebra. The leaves rustled occasionally, some falling in the water in front of us, and the wind blew slowly, barely touching the tip of my nose. It smelled dry and clean, like a piece of wood just before it was thrown into the fireplace. Even though the sun was beginning to set and with it the warmth of the day, I still felt like I could sit there late into the night.

There wasn't a word spoken. Not while we packed up the fishing gear and the bucket of carp, not on the walk up the hill back to the car, not even on the ride to take Roman home. I finally got it, and wasn't about to be the one that ruined it. Now, there were no hidden algebra meanings in putting a worm on a hook or throwing a line into the lake, but there was a way to relax, a way to escape. Roman knew I had myself all worked up over the test and wouldn't be worth a shit in that kind of state. If Roman had simply told me to chill, it would only have made me more flustered.

It was completely dark by the time we got back to Roman's. I helped him unload the stuff in the driveway. He put the poles on the porch and came back for the bucket and tackle box.

"I was just trying to..." Roman started.

I put my hand up and stopped him in mid sentence. “I know. I get it man. Thanks.”

## V

My stomach was in knots on Monday, the day we got our mid-term back. I’d already visited the throne room twice before I left for school and would have to leave class for it again if I didn’t settle down. It was kinda funny. Roman’s fishing escapade had calmed me down so much that I wasn’t a bit nervous before or during the actual test. I thought I knew every problem, and when I handed it in I would tell you I didn’t miss a single point. But now, now I was shitting bricks as they say, hoping for a “C”.

Mr. Buttworst got right to the point. He walked up and down the aisles of desks, flipping through the papers at each individual’s desk. Mr. Buttworst would give the average student a comment or two as he handed out the graded papers. Students that were your everyday nerds and expected an “A” simply got a smile. People like me and Johnny usually got neither. We were lost causes.

Mr. Buttworst walked over to Johnny’s desk and stood in front of him. The Killer was face down already asleep with a patch of drool running down his chin. Mr. Buttworst picked up a book from another desk and slammed it down next to Johnny’s head. The Killer jumped up like someone had just sent forty-thousand volts through his body. Mr. Buttworst handed him the test and walked on. Johnny looked at it briefly and lay his head back down. You could never tell whether Johnny got an “A” or an “F”; he always had the same expression.

I was usually right there with Johnny, but not this time. I had too much riding on it, including my baseball career. Mr. Buttworst was three desks away. I was sure that one of two things would happen in my anticipation. Either the acid in my belly would eat right through the lining of my stomach wall and kill me, or I would shit myself right there in my seat. Mr. Buttworst got to my desk and held the test up in front of his face. The thick lenses of his glasses peeked up over the paper. I swear the same thickness was used for the windows of the space shuttle. His eyes scanned down the page, checking his own grading one more time. *Come on already.* Satisfied, the burly hunter sat the test on my desk face down.

“Nice work Tony,” Mr. Buttworst said smiling.

Wow. I got the comment and the smile. It must be good. I lifted the paper slightly off the desk and peaked underneath, like something would have escaped if I turned it completely over. Marked on the top of test in red ink was a “B”. On a test like this, a mid-term, a “B” might as well have been an “A”. It meant there was no way I could flunk the class unless I turned in nothing the rest of the semester. I wanted to hold it out the window and yell “B!” as loud as I could. Instead I let out a squeaky high-pitched fart that lasted only a second. My stomach felt better now. Most of the class busted out in laughter, including Mr. Buttworst. The girl in front of me looked up at the ceiling, like she was trying to see a bird overhead.

“Scuse me,” I said, smiling.

## VI

At lunch our table's cast of characters grew again with the addition of two more cheerleaders. Johnny's table was two girls away from becoming a sausage fest. Heather was sitting next to Roman looking at him as he ate.

"You want to go out with us after the game Friday, Roman?"

Roman swallowed hard. "I have to work."

"Yeah, I know, I mean afterwards. A few of us are going over to Scotty's house to hang out. It's not going to be big, just a few of us, like Tony, Sally, Scotty, me and a few others."

"I don't get off until late."

"It's our last regular season game, and it's in Bloomington. We won't be back until after midnight anyway, especially if we get one of the shitty buses. Think about it at least."

I nudged Roman's elbow with my own.

He looked at me and then at Heather. "Maybe."

## VII

"Maybe" wasn't a "no", but it wasn't the answer Heather was looking for. If there was only one word that described our blond friend, it had to be persistent. So much in fact that after school sitting at Roman's kitchen table, trying to stay ahead of the game in algebra, I heard a knock at the door. Heather decided to join our after-school study group. Really, it was me with my two hundred dollar calculator, Heather with her seemingly endless supply of French flash cards, and Roman reading not his homework, but the book of the day.

Heather was flipping through her flash cards, looking busy. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the real reason Heather was there. Roman's "maybe" was just not quite good enough in Heather's book. She probably didn't mind that much if Roman was a no show at Scotty's Friday. What bothered her was the fact that Roman didn't jump at an opportunity to hang out with her. Did she want Roman? I don't think so, but the heart seems to be attracted mostly to the things it cannot have. Roman wasn't trying to play games with her. Yes he was attracted to her—you could see that in his eyes—but it just wasn't Roman's thing to hang out.

Anyway, Heather noticed me staring at her. "Why doesn't he come in here and study instead of sitting by himself?"

"Because he's not studying. He's readin', for entertainment purposes I mean. Haven't you seen that other room? There are about five hundred books in there, stacked to the ceiling on bookshelves. Those are the ones he's read. The ones you saw on the floor when you came in were the ones he's workin' on. He goes through each one in a couple of hours and then on to the next. He's some kind of fuckin' speed-reader. That's all he does is read, not just good stuff either. He reads manuals and shit on how things work. He fixed the engine in the Pinto by some book he read."

"What about his homework?"

"You're not hearin' me sister. A couple of weeks ago he was helpin' me with my algebra. I decided to test him a little bit. I started rattling things off like 'what's five hundred and eighty-two times four hundred and seventy-five' or

‘what’s the square root of seven hundred and eighty-three.’ The man spit out the answers faster than I could get them off the calculator. He’s a genius Heather. Geniuses don’t have homework.”

Heather looked toward the living room, trying to process everything I’d just thrown at her. Roman walked in and poured a glass of water from the tap. He drank it down like a camel at a watering hole. When he finished he turned and walked back toward his book.

“Il est grossier pour ne pas offrir à vos invités quelque chose boire,” Heather said to Roman.

Roman stopped without turning around, matching the dialect with elegance. “Pardonnez-moi, vous aiment le jus d’orange ? Je ne prends aucun champagne.”

I itched the top of my head. “What is this, keep the dumb guy out of the loop?”

Roman turned around. Heather ignored me and continued to look at Roman.

“L’eau sera belle,” she said continuing to manipulate the language of love.

“What the hell are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“Heather just reminded me of what a rude host I’ve been. Would you like something to drink Tony?”

“You got Miller Lite?”

“Sorry. I’m fresh out. I’m sure Carl could help you out. That’s his flavor.”

“I’m just joking,” I said. “Water’ll work.”

## VIII

At Scotty’s we played dirty Jenga. Jenga itself was the game with the little wooden rectangles that you stacked neatly to make a tower that was about a foot and a half tall. When it was your turn, you had to remove any one of the rectangles from the tower and place it on top of the tower anywhere you would like. If you pulled a rectangle and the tower fell, you lost. We added the dirty part by writing little words on the rectangles. My mother would have referred to them as lewd acts. Really they weren’t that bad—things like “suck on someone’s toe” or “French kiss someone.” It wasn’t like we wrote, “tie someone down and have your way with them” on any of the pieces. If you pulled a rectangle out successfully, you got to choose the person you did the act with. If you pulled a piece out and the tower fell, the other players got to choose any one of the acts written on the pieces, and with whom you had to do the act. It was an entertaining game at the worst.

Me, Scotty, and his girl all sat around drinking, waiting on Heather and Sally. By the time they got back from the football game I had drunk at least five beers. It ended up being only couples with the exception of Heather. Twelve forty five came and went and I had pretty much written Roman off for the evening. To my surprise at one o’clock he showed up. He wasn’t wearing his janitor get-up as I thought; instead he was back to the plain T-shirt, jeans, and a flannel.

“Time for dirty Jenga,” I said half-buzzed. We all sat down at the kitchen table except for Roman, who stood by the counter looking for something more

challenging to tweak his brain. The table instantly reminded me of the Century Club and Johnny pissing himself in more ways than one. I chuckled out loud. We sat the tower up and I tried to distinguish where one piece began and the other ended.

Control of motor skills was important in Jenga—the slightest wrong movement could destroy the tower. That’s why drinking made it more fun. I liked the game because I knew me and Sally would be making out several times throughout the night. The girls liked the game—and this is strictly my theory—because it gave them the green light to do things they normally wouldn’t do. If one of the chicks at school heard that they licked whipped cream off another girl’s nipple, and asked why they would do such a thing, the girls would simply reply they were playing dirty Jenga. Jenga made me do it.

The game began. I had to unzip Sally’s jeans without using my hands, which was no easy feat, especially with several beers in me. Scotty and his girl had to wear each other’s underwear for the remainder of the game. I could tell by the look on Scotty’s face that his boys were a little uncomfortable in thong panties. Roman stood at the counter, reading Mrs. Jakowski’s cookbook. Always with the reading that guy was.

Heather pulled one of the rectangles out successfully. She turned it over and read the dirty deed.

“Closet for 15,” she read.

She looked around the room at the four of us seated at the table, then at Roman. The whole scene could’ve been in a kid’s picture game entitled “what doesn’t belong.” Any kindergartner would’ve pointed to Roman in seconds.

“I want you to go with me Roman,” Heather said.

I about choked on my beer, thinking the odds of Roman participating in any act of dirty Jenga were slim to none. Roman lifted his head up from the cookbook, his eyebrows rising like a grandpa interrupted from his Sunday paper by his wife of fifty years.

“I’m sorry?” Roman responded.

“It’s how you play the game,” Heather said. “I drew the piece for the closet. I’ve got to pick somebody to go in there with me for fifteen minutes.”

“And?”

“And, I’m picking you.”

“I did not know I was playing.”

“If you’re in the kitchen honey, you’re playing.” Heather got up, walked over to Roman, grabbed him by the hand, and led him to one of the bedrooms.

I swallowed the last gulp of my beer. “Hold on a second. You’re going to the wrong closet. It’s supposed to be the one in the living room.” The living room closet was three times smaller than any other one in the house.

“There’s a bunch of stuff in that one,” Heather said.

“Don’t worry about it, there’s just a few shoes on the floor and a couple of coats hanging up. Just move whatever you need,” Scotty said as he drew the next piece.

Heather did a U-turn and dragged Roman off to the living room.

After waiting for several turns, and after some minutes of studying the pieces I finally pulled the piece I'd been waiting for all night. It was the sleeping bag one. That meant me and Sally had to undress in the sleeping bag together. I turned the piece and put it front of her face.

Scotty fetched me the sleeping bag. I could tell by his eyes he was pissed I got that piece. The four of us went downstairs. The funny thing was that we really didn't have to go down stairs to do the dirty Jenga deed. Me and Sally could've got in the bag and undressed right there on the kitchen floor. Nobody said anything, it was just understood that there would be more going on than just getting naked.

Scotty and his girl watched as we struggled to get our clothes off inside the sleeping bag. Just the getting naked part took ten minutes in it self. That was supposed to be part of the fun I guess. More rituals. More foreplay. I was careful to grab the miniature raincoat out of my jeans pocket before I tossed them out. Getting our socks off would be every bit of impossible so we left them on. Scotty gathered up our clothes.

"I'll bring 'em back down in fifteen minutes," he said, giving me a wink.

This time there was no Johnny the Killer running down to the dock threatening to dismember the janitor. There weren't any crazed cheerleaders barging in on us. There were no fathers getting home from work early. It was just the two of us. But even with all odds on my side, I still didn't get to finish the deal. As hard as I tried Sally wasn't going to let it happen. Don't get me wrong, there was still the fondling, and such. It just wasn't the real deal.

Scotty threw our clothes down the stairs to us, which I thought was a lot nicer than interrupting. When we returned upstairs Scotty and his girl were kissing at the kitchen table. I felt sorry for him. It was his first date with the chic. She went to the local Catholic school, and although the Catholic girls were a lot wilder than the ones in our neck of the woods, it was their first time out together, and Scotty wasn't known for his game with the ladies. A kiss was as far as Scotty was going to get.

"Where are Roman and Heather?" I asked.

"They're still in the closet," Scotty responded.

"You gotta be shittin' me."

"I'm not. I went up to the door and told 'em their time was up. Heather said okay, but they never came out. That was ten minutes ago," Scotty said.

## IX

Heather pushed the coats to one side and stepped in, smashing the shoes and the rest of the rubble on the floor. Roman followed. The closet was small, giving only a small pocket of space between them. Heather closed the door, darkening the room to the point that Roman thought he was blind. He stood with his arms pressed against his sides, like a corpse in a coffin, partly because of the lack of room, but mostly because he wasn't sure exactly where his hands should be.

Heather moved forward pressing her chest against his. She wiggled a little, moving something from behind her and then somehow managed to wrap her arms

around Roman's neck. Not one arm, like when they danced, but both. "Sorry, I think there was a tennis racket poking me in the ass. There, that's a lot more comfortable."

Roman eyes were useless, but his sense of touch was off the charts because of the breasts smashed into him. He could smell the flowers of her perfume, the watermelon shampoo in her hair, and the cinnamon gum she had chewed at some point earlier in the night. He felt her warm breath on his chin.

"That's all right," Roman said back in his soft monotone voice. The darkness seemed to gobble up the sound of his voice before it left his mouth.

"Have you ever been stuck in a closet with a girl before?"

"No, never."

"Don't worry we're all the same."

"I doubt that very much. I doubt there is anybody quite like you."

After a long silence, Heather moved to kiss him. Roman sensed the movement and pulled back.

"I don't want you to kiss me because some piece in a game told you to," Roman said.

"The piece only told me to go to the closet. It didn't tell me what to do or with whom to do it." Heather moved in to kiss him again.

Roman retreated once more.

"I don't want to be the guy in the closet you tell your friends about five years from now, and you know the story but not the guy's name."

"If we didn't see the meteor shower together, if you didn't save Johnny in the lake, if you weren't such a gentleman, I would still remember your name. I would remember it from the day I met you, the day you saved my grandma's cheerleader. Every story starts somewhere Roman, ours just happens to be in a closet."

Their lips met, barely touching at first. Heather pulled him closer with her arms, running her fingers through his hair. Roman's eyes closed, but there was no difference between the blackness trapped in his eyelids and that which filled the closet. His nervous hand made its way to her butt, careful to stay on the outside of the skirt.

"Time's up," a voice from the other side of the door sounded.

Their kissing only got stronger and their breaths heavier. Heather maneuvered her arm down her side and then behind her, grabbing Roman's hand and putting it up her skirt instead of on it.

They began to talk as well as two people could with their lips still pressed together.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Heather asked.

"No plans," Roman said back

"Want me to come over?" Heather asked.

"How about dinner?" Roman asked back.

"What time?"

"Six o'clock good?"

"Make it five."

## X

We were waiting in the living room when the door finally opened. Heather was flushed and Roman's lips were a shade I wasn't used to seeing. Both were surprised to see us in the living room.

"I've got to go," Roman said. "Thanks Scotty."

Roman gave a brief wave. Before I could ask if he needed a ride, Roman was out the door.

Heather sat down in the chair across from me like she had been hiking in the mountains all day. Her eyes were looking straight across the room, but weren't focusing on any of us.

"Jesus Heather," I began. "What the hell did you do to the poor guy?"

Heather just sat slumped over in the chair, still with the dazed look on her face.

"What'd you do, play the skin flute while you were in there?" I said.

Sally gave me a sharp elbow to the ribs.

Heather spoke as she got up from the chair oblivious to the comment I just made. "I've got to get going too. I'll see you guys later."

## XI

Gina Hawthorne sat on the new ten thousand dollar couch that she bought against her husband's wishes. She had the deliverymen put it in the room just to the right of the foyer and the lavish staircase that sprang from it. The room was her room—the reading-TV-relaxation-gossiping on the phone-room. The room where she went to escape. The room that Heather and Dr. Hawthorne avoided at all costs. It was like avoiding a dark cave in fear of a hibernating bear. It was also the room in which Gina could hear Heather coming and going. The room she could jump up from and in a second stop Heather and peek into her night, with an onslaught of questions. Gina was watching the Soap Network, which was part of the daily routine for her. But tonight she heard Heather coming before she even started down the stairs. She stood in front of the double doors like a bouncer at a nightclub. Heather grabbed her coat from the rack, ignoring the person in front of her. She walked to the door almost bumping her mother, hoping she would pass right through like Gina was nothing more than a ghost.

"Are you going out with the girls tonight, honey?" Gina asked, knowing that was not the answer. She prayed nonetheless.

"No, I'm going over to Roman's for supper."

"Oh, that's nice of his parents."

"His parents are dead, mom."

Unfazed by the fact Gina said, "I'm not sure I want you go over to some strange boy's house with no adults."

Heather's cheeks flushed with anger. "He's not a strange boy. He's a friend from school and you would do well to meet someone as nice."

"What about Johnny?"

"Johnny's an asshole, always has been. Instead of encouraging me all these years you should've been telling me what an idiot I was."

"I just don't know honey, we need to talk about this."

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m eighteen years old and on my way to college. You’re not going to tell me who my friends are. It sure is funny that you never questioned in three years of dating Johnny, if his parents were home. Go watch the soaps on TV instead of trying to star in what you think is your own soap opera.”

Heather nudged Gina out of the way and left.

## XII

On several occasions throughout the day while he was preparing the meal, Roman had a sense of dread come over him, fearing their meeting would be awkward. He had heard stories about good friends who became lovers, failing miserably at the latter. Could a single kiss transport you from one level to the next? Roman thought not, but he was sure that kiss held them somewhere in limbo. Somewhere between lovers and friends. Roman’s anxiety lifted the minute he opened the door.

Heather stood there with her wide smile and her long blond hair let down past her shoulders. She’d been beautiful at Homecoming with her hair up, but Roman much preferred it this way. She held a bottle of what Roman thought was champagne. She stepped through the doorway and hugged him tight enough for Roman to hear his mother’s voice echo in his head about how she loved him so much she could squeeze the stuffing out of him. Roman noticed the Mustang sitting in his driveway.

“Beautiful car by the way,” he said as they backed away from each other.

“It is nice; when your parents have a lot of money and aren’t sure your sure how much they love you, they buy you things. I’ve gotten used to it, although as the years go by, gifts seem to lose their luster. Daddy seems to understand that, so the gifts just get more and more expensive.” Heather held up the bottle she was holding and handed it to Roman. “Don’t panic, it’s not champagne. Sparkling cider.”

Roman smiled.

The blinds were pulled, and the light turned out. Roman’s kitchen table which she was so accustomed to seeing used for studying was now transformed into something out of a fine restaurant. A white lace tablecloth draped over the table, hanging to just before the floor. Two candelabra stood at their respective ends of the table, illuminating the room around them. In the middle were several roses bundled together with careful preparation. Their color mirrored that of the dress Heather had worn to Homecoming. Gold silverware was placed next to their respective plates. Soft music played in the background, although she saw no speakers or radio.

“It’s beautiful Roman,” she said, unable to get rid of the thought that Roman had done in one day what Johnny had failed to even understand in years.

“The real test is how it’s going to taste, I’m afraid. I’ve never really cooked before, not like this anyway. I’m more of a snacker really. An apple here, a banana there, throw in a tuna fish sandwich and you could keep me happy for a month.”

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious, and even if it’s not, the visual effect in this room might trick me into thinking otherwise.”

Roman walked her over to the table, pulled the chair out for her, and when she sat, he tucked her gently against the table. He opened the cider, pouring first her glass and then his own.

Roman served the appetizer—fried calamari with a thick white dipping sauce that was spicy to the taste. The salad was next, the lettuce replaced with leaves of plants unrecognizable to Heather’s eye, topped with tiny raspberries, nuts, and sweet red vinaigrette dressing. Roman served the main course, placing the grilled veal on her plate as well as long green beans and baby carrots, all covered with a sweet mustard sauce. The beans were very bright green, looking like there was more of chance of them being wax than food. There were also crescent rolls with apple jam.

Roman’s brown eyes reflected the candlelight as he maintained eye contact with her the entire meal. He looked because she was beautiful, but also to see any signs in her body language of distaste for the food. He was sure that her words would only tell him what he wanted to hear. His heart was glad when she squirmed with enjoyment, taking slow deliberate bites from the end of her fork. Roman finished before her, though she was not far behind.

“I know you’re probably full, but I made dessert as well. Would you like some?”

“Please,” she responded.

Roman had made it earlier in the day with Carl’s electric ice cream maker. The sauce was made from fresh strawberries. Heather sucked the dessert off her spoon with the end of her lips. A low quiet moan of satisfaction seemed to come from her stomach as the ice cream slid down her throat and reached her belly.

“As much as you are a fruit and snack guy, I’m a dessert gal,” Heather said. “As good as everything else was, you could’ve given me a heaping bowl of this and I would’ve been happy.”

Roman laughed.

“You really shouldn’t hold that back. You’ve got a good laugh,” Heather said.

“So, I’m told. Sometimes there just isn’t that much to laugh about,” Roman responded.

“Never cooked before huh?” Heather asked.

Roman shook his head back and forth.

“It was really good Roman, and I’m not just saying that. Did you make all of this stuff from scratch?”

“The jam, sauces, and rolls I made. I traded the carp Tony and I caught awhile back to Carl for the vegetables and strawberries. I’m sure I got the better end of the deal there. He grows all sorts of things in his back yard and then freezes them. I cheated on the ice cream with an electric maker, but at least it wasn’t from the store.”

“It must have taken you all day. Thank you Roman.”

“Thank Mrs. Jakowski. All this is her recipe.”

“The cookbook you were reading?”

“Yes. After reading several of the recipes I caught on to her little system. She marked her favorites with stars next to the name of the cuisine. There were several four star recipes, but this was the only five star.”

“I didn’t see you write anything down.”

“That’s because I didn’t.”

“I forgot the photographic memory thing.” Heather finished the last lump of ice cream in her parfait bowl.

“Who are you, Roman?”

Roman smiled. “I’m the guy you see sitting right in front of you.”

“There’s got to be more to the story than that.”

Roman’s smile faded as he looked down at his own empty ice cream goblet. He picked up his sparkling cider, swirled it in the glass, and then took a drink. “My story is long and drawn out. I’d much rather talk about you. Not how you got here, I think I know that part. I want to know where you’re going. Who is Heather Hawthorne in five years?”

“In five years she’s a med student. In ten she’s Dr. Hawthorne, married with four kids, living out in the country with a swimming pool and a horse ranch.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all mapped out.”

“I’ve got good enough grades and a high enough ACT to get into Northwestern’s pre-med program. I’ll find out in couple of months if they accept me. I’ve wanted to be a doctor as long as I can remember. It’s in my genes I guess. I really want to get into cancer research.”

“The money’s not bad either.”

Heather smiled. “No, it’s not.”

With that Heather helped Roman clear the table and do the dishes, even though he pled with her to let him do it himself. When they finished, they went into the living room and sat close to each other on the couch. Roman turned out the light. In front of flickering candlelight, they talked into the early hours of the morning.

## Chapter 6

### Halloween in the Hollow

#### I

My algebra grade was still on the rise, coming up from the depths of hell, and was in danger of breaking into above-average territory. Mr. Buttworst knew Roman would help me, but even he was surprised at my recent performance. I was in uncharted waters here. The word “student” was never one I would have used to describe myself and although it felt really good, in the back of my mind I wondered if it was too good to be true.

Johnny sat next to me tapping his foot at a very annoying pace, looking straight ahead with the look of a bull ready to charge. I didn’t even ask. I was more concerned in getting some questions answered at lunch. I hadn’t seen Roman since Friday. Sally hadn’t talked to Heather.

I didn’t get the chance. By the time I got to lunch Heather and Roman were in deep conversation. They were sitting closer than usual. I’d just sat down when the Killer walked up. I knew this wasn’t good news. Johnny skipped the lunch line and came directly to our table. In a second, Johnny picked Roman out of his seat and slammed the slim janitor against the wall. Although Johnny was a good four inches taller than Roman, they were now eye level. The Killer had him propped up, holding Roman up off the ground with his arm sideways across Roman’s neck. I went from sitting to a dead sprint until Brunno grabbed my arms. Heather stood up like a jack in the box but was sat back down by Jack’s hand on her shoulder. The cafeteria went silent. People stood on their chairs to get a view, some walked over to get a ringside seat. Jack and Brunno had their stupid little smiles on. I wondered if their faces would eventually get stuck like that.

At first Johnny was smiling too, his face an inch away from Roman’s, but the more he talked the more the smile faded. Roman just hung there, not wiggling or trying to get free, arms steady against his side, eyes unblinking. Johnny spoke so softly that even in the silence I had to turn my ear to hear.

“I’m not going to do anything to you here. I know that before I could give you the ass whippin’ I’d be happy with, the teachers and your janitor buddies would be all over me. But I’ll have my chance soon enough. I go to bed every night dreaming about it, doze off in class thinking about it. I’m calling you out. I’m calling you out to the Hollow.”

A gasp went through the crowd.

“On Halloween. That’s two days from now in case you don’t know. Two o’clock. That gives you plenty of time to get out there. I know you wouldn’t miss your sorry ass job to fight me. You can wear your janitor outfit or a clown costume for all I care, but know this—you will be there and I will fuck you up.”

The second Johnny finished his sentence the prison guards were on him. As they took him away he held up two fingers and mouthed the words “you’re mine”. I yanked my arm away from Brunno. Roman sat down in his chair like nothing happened. The cafeteria began to swarm again. Our table sat in silence for a good five minutes. Roman didn’t hesitate to start eating his applesauce again. I wanted to say something but was at a loss for words.

Roman finally spoke. "What's the Hollow?" He continued to eat throughout the conversation.

Heather hesitated at first and then said, "Hawthorne Hollow actually. It's a dry riverbed on my great grandpa's old property. We don't own it anymore but people still call it Hawthorne Hollow, the Hollow for short. It's out in the country about five miles northwest of Collingston."

"People go out there to fight," I cut in. "Because it's real secluded and the cops won't be able to break it up in time, even if they did hear about it. People have used it for decades; hell, all our dads and grandpas have stories."

Scotty spoke up, "My granddad said he seen a guy get killed there one time. Big Jim Geoffries threw one punch and killed the poor bastard. It knocked his nose up into his brain. They supposedly buried the guy right there in the Hollow."

I knew the story well. "Big Jim fought the guy because the guy was screwing one of his daughters. The police never did a thing, even though they knew. We could go on for hours with these kinds of stories."

Roman seemed unimpressed.

"Are you gonna go? You gonna fight him?" I asked.

Roman paused staring into nowhere. "No," he said.

The table was silent again. The only one happy to hear that news was Heather.

I broke the silence once again. "I know you don't want to fight him, hell I wouldn't want to either. He's never lost a fight, and most of his victims walked away because he allowed them to. He could have killed every one of 'em if he wanted. But win or lose, you could end this thing once and for all. You could end it in two days."

Roman looked me directly in the eye. "If I go and fight him, he's already won."

## II

Roman ate supper at Carl's that night—the dirty carp we caught. Carl had fixed it up, supposedly cleaning the mud vein out. I would have never eaten that shit, because I heard how bad it was, but also because I thought half of everything that came out of Carl's mouth was bullshit. Roman tried it without hesitation. He trusted Carl, maybe more than he trusted anyone. Later Roman assured me it tasted good. Like cod, he said.

After their meal, Roman and Carl sat in his living room, listening to a call-in program on the radio. Countless callers claimed they had either seen an alien or been abducted. The host of the show agreed with everyone. Carl listened with fascination drinking one beer after another. Roman sat in silence with other things on his mind.

Carl peered through the candlelight at the janitor sensing his young friend was troubled. He turned down the radio and drank again.

"You look as though the bear stole your honey pot. What weighs on your mind fella?"

The prepared mind is not often taken off guard, but Roman snapped out of his trance, surprised by Carl's observation. He wiggled his way up from being slouched over to a more proper sitting position.

Carl took a big swallow of beer and turned the radio completely off, interested in what troubled his young friend. He waited as a patient grandfather would, gray and all.

"Just some silly school stuff that's all."

"A mind such as yours is not pestered by gnats in the night air. I'm sure 'tis not. Some fellas tryin' to get at ya?"

"Yes," Roman responded. "I've taken more mental abuse from this guy than most people take in a life time. After everything I've been through it's actually comical. I've shrugged it off this long and I'm confident I can do it for as long as he keeps it coming. I just think if I fight him I've already lost the battle."

Carl picked up the pipe from the stand next to him, put it in his mouth, and lit it. "A better man than I, you are," he said as the smoke rose in front of his face. "After they shot Jack and LBJ took over, they sent us fellas across the Pacific. I had been over there once with Korea. Three hundred men sat underneath me; some looked like they were only days past the teat. We killed innocent people, and we killed them that were far from it. When we came back, they spat on us. A man asked me at the Tavern one time, was I sorry we fought a war we didn't win? Sorry? No I wasn't sorry we fought. I was sorry the day we left this beautiful land. We lost before we ever landed on that rice cake. But did we fight? Ah, we fought hard. Was there a good reason to fight? No, I say, but sometimes you must stand and fight nonetheless."

### III

The next night, D-day eve, I got in bed around ten and stared at the ceiling for two hours. I wanted to talk to Roman and see what he was thinking. I told Pops I couldn't sleep and was going to do some studying at Roman's.

Heather must have had the insomnia too, because she pulled up the same time I did. Roman was walking down the steep hill toward his house. We waited, not saying a word. The reason was understood why we were both there. The three of us walked up to the porch. Roman got out his key, but before inserting it, noticed the door was ajar. He pushed it open.

The living room looked like the aftermath of a tornado in a small Oklahoma town. The floor was covered with torn out pages of Roman's books to the point you could no longer see the polished hardwood floors. The unread books that were usually neatly stacked in the corner were scattered across the room. The couch was overturned, the bedding twisted in every direction. Heather covered her mouth. I looked at Roman. He was still as calm as the lake at sunset. He looked around the room, slowly taking in the destruction of the place he called home.

In the second room the bookshelves were overturned—dominoes that clung against each other and then the wall. There were a few books hanging for dear life to the edge of the shelves, but the majority lay on the floor.

I don't think any of us noticed at first because we were fixed on the number of papers on the floor, but finally Heather pointed toward the wall where what was

left of Roman's bed lay. Sprayed in black paint over the wall and the baseball cards were the words "faggot janitor." On the wall to the right of the front door were the words "fuck you." Directly in front of us where the couch used to sit, in giant letters spanning the length and width of the wall was the word "tomorrow."

"I can't believe Johnny would do this. It's low even for him," Heather said.

"One person couldn't do this by himself," I said.

"Jack and Brunno," Roman responded.

"They set out to ruin every single card didn't they, Roman?" I said looking at the graffiti.

"They may have set out to ruin them, but they didn't," he answered.

"How could they not be ruined?" Heather asked for both of us.

Roman walked over to the wall with the "tomorrow" and touched it. "Paint is already dry." He pulled one of the cards off the wall. The plastic it was encased in was completely black. He reached in the casing and pulled out the card, which was in another clear plastic sheath. He peeled back the second sheath and held Sandy Koufax in his hand. The card was in the same condition it was the day it came out of the factory. "I triple wrapped them. There's no way the paint seeped through all the layers."

I let out a sigh. Heather didn't seem to be so relieved, but she also didn't know that Roman's walls were made of money.

Roman walked over to the door looking at the splinters on the floor. He rubbed the spot where the doorframe and the doorknob mechanism met.

"How'd they get the door open?" Heather asked.

"Probably pried it with a crow bar or something," I responded.

"No," Roman said. "There was some force behind this. One of them put a shoulder into it several times."

"Mother fuckers," I began. "Really got some balls breaking in the front door don't they?"

"Too often ignorance is mistaken for courage," came a voice from the porch.

Carl walked through the doorway, with his shirt torn across the chest and his green pants smudged with mud at the knees. Dead fall grass hung from his long gray goatee.

"Three of them there were," Carl said, seemingly unharmed. "I saw the bastards leaving and decided to ask them what the hell they were doing. The cowards took off running so I chased them. Caught one I did."

"You caught one. Whadja do with him?" I asked.

"I gave him a few good wallops and then drug him back to the house," Carl responded.

Roman gave a brief smile, like he wasn't surprised at all. "Where is he now?"

"I've got the little prick down in the basement."

"What did he look like?" I asked in disbelief.

"There was a big tall one, a real skinny one, like our friend here." Carl nodded toward Roman. "And a stocky one about your height Tony. He was

slower than the other two. I ran to the side of him and tackled the son of a bitch like one of those line backers.”

The image I got from the story short-circuited my brain. Here was Carl, a man at least in his seventies, fragile looking, lucky to be a buck-fifty soakin’ wet, wearing galoshes, not only chasing down but also taking down a nineteen-year-old kid who just happened to be the state runner-up in wrestling last year. I shook my head hard back and forth trying to come back to reality.

“Let’s have a look at him,” Roman said.

#### IV

Carl opened the basement door and pulled on a chain, illuminating the wooden stairs. “Careful mind ya, these little boogers aren’t the sturdiest.”

The stairs cracked and creaked on a couple of occasions. I felt the weight of my foot press the board below to the point just before it snapped. The basement was a junkyard. Box after box cluttered the floor, and unlike Roman’s books, there seemed to be no sense of order. A rusted bicycle with two flat tires sat in the corner. A stop sign hung from one of the walls, pink instead of red from fading by time. A pile of contraptions lay cluttered with the boxes. The ones I could make out—an antique sewing machine, a typewriter, and a pair of ice skates that Abraham Lincoln himself might have worn. They were all covered with dust and cobwebs. At the far end of the room the junk seemed to recede a bit giving way to a large glass box. Inside the box were smaller wooden boxes with several wire screens inserted vertically into each. I meant to ask what they were, but a sight to this day I’ll never forget caught my eye—Brunno sitting in a chair with his ankles duct taped as well as wrists and mouth, and his hands laying in his lap. Streams of tears washed away the blood that soaked his face in the corners and under his eyes. No sound came from his mouth because it was taped shut, but Brunno was bawling like a little baby. Roman walked up and yanked the tape off his mouth. The sound was like the tearing of thin cloth. Brunno closed his eyes, his chest pumping hard for oxygen.

“Damn, Carl, you worked him over pretty good,” I said.

“A little accident,” Carl began. “I strung him up in the living room and laid him down at the top of the stairs. In my old age I didn’t have a plan to get the son of bitch down to the bottom, so I gave him a brief nudge. He rolled a lot faster than I thought he would.”

“What’s that smell?” Heather asked pinching her fingers against her nose.

I lifted my nose, sniffing in all directions. The rank smell led me to the heap sitting in front of me. “Oh man, the asshole shit his pants. No pun intended.” I smacked Brunno on the back of the head.

“What should we do with him?” Roman asked, looking at Carl.

Carl produced a switchblade from his pocket. A click of the button and the blade was exposed. “I think we should kill the bastard.”

Brunno’s crying increased in volume.

“He’s the same age as us Carl,” Roman said back.

“And old enough to know the difference between right and wrong,” Carl countered.

“Actually,” I butted in. “He’s a year older. Brunno flunked third grade. Right asshole?” I slapped the back of his head again.

Brunno swallowed hard, trying to regain composure. “P-p-p-lease Tony, Roman, don’t let this crazy fu-fu-fu-cker kill me.”

I head-popped Brunno one more time. “Shut up, you big goof.”

Roman bent down so he was eye level with Brunno. His hand lifted Brunno’s baby-faced chin, so he could see Roman’s eyes. “I am going to give you a simple true or false question Brunno. If you answer right, we’ll let you go.”

Brunno didn’t seem to be too thrilled by the idea, but he didn’t have a choice. Let’s face it on the list of things Brunno was good at, answering questions would never even have been on the page. Nonetheless he focused on Roman’s face like he was trying to answer a question on a college entrance exam.

“True or false, Brunno will not be at the Hollow tomorrow night at two AM.”

Brunno cried hard and lowered his head. “True,” he whispered.

Roman nodded toward Carl. As if he read the janitor’s mind, Carl walked up to Brunno, holding the blade outward. Brunno tried to squirm away in a pointless effort, shaking his head back and forth. Carl bent down cutting the tape first on Brunno’s ankles, then on his wrists. Brunno sat in the chair in relief.

“Get the fuck out of here.” I slapped him one more time for good measure.

Brunno shot out of the chair, like a bull being let out of the gates, stumbling over stairs and missing others all together. I could almost hear the shit swishing in his pants.

“Do you need a ride to the Hollow tomorrow?” I asked.

“No,” Roman replied. “Just tell me how to get there.”

I told him.

## V

Halloween at Collingston High was like most schools I imagine. If you wanted to dress in a costume, you could as long as you didn’t break any of the precious school dress codes of course. A couple of dumb asses would always get sent home. Hookers and the like were still frowned upon. There were the usual Freddie’s and Jasons walking the halls. For most students, like myself, it was just another day. Some teachers like Mr. Buttworst gave out candy. Hard to believe that candy at this age of our lives could spice up the day.

There was a little extra vibe in the air, not because of trick-or-treaters, or jack-o-lanterns, but because of what was to happen later that night. The battle lines were drawn, the majority on Johnny’s side, a handful of us loyalists on Roman’s. The only thing left now was time. It was in the hands of fate, and with each tick of the clock we came closer.

I felt pretty good about the situation until I sat down at lunch. Roman wasn’t there. I used the pay phone in the cafeteria to call him. No answer. Our table, the table that over the last month or so had grown into a good group of friends, the table that stole some of the lost souls away from Johnny, was now withered down to two—me and Heather. Sam Peterman, Pick, Scotty, the cheerleaders all jumped ship. So much for the loyalists. I expected Pick to pull his

usual disappearing act, and I guess I wasn't surprised at the rest of them. Everyone wants to be standing with the winner when the smoke clears. The only bright spot was that Brunno wasn't at school. He probably figured it best to stay away all together. He could always tell Johnny that he was sick.

"I guess it's just me and you today, sister," I said with my best fake smile and confident voice.

Heather was a visible wreck, no make up and hair pulled back. She played with her food the entire lunch period, speaking only when spoken to. "I don't want him to go Tony. I know he's good. I know he's smart. But the odds are stacked too high. Johnny's gonna have everybody there teaming up against him."

Heather's words hit home. "He'll be fine. Even if he gets his ass beat, this thing will be over tomorrow. Johnny just wants to stay high on his pedestal that's all. Once he proves himself, he'll be happy. I just hope Roman shows."

"I don't," Heather said.

I fought the temptation to skip the rest of the day and go to Roman's, reminding myself that it was his fight, and he would handle it the best way he knew how. After school the Pinto took me over there. Nobody home at Roman's or Carl's. My stomach began to hurt. It was out of my hands now though.

## VI

The forecast was for rain, but the full moon seemed to pick the Hollow as the only spot on earth it wanted to brighten. It shone overhead, cloudless, as bright as the lights that lit Collingston County Stadium. Maybe even the moon wanted to watch this one.

Dead trees hung over the Hollow at an angle, the long ragged fragile fingers of a thousand skeletons shielding us from the rest of the world, opening up only at the top for the moon. The dry riverbed went on for miles in either direction, its floor like cracking pottery clay. The Hollow widened at one certain point, becoming at least fifty yards wide at the point where the decades of scores were settled. The embankment, steep and high on both sides, created almost a bowl effect, like the Coliseum in ancient Rome. And although there were no lions and tigers tearing the flesh from slaves who wanted only their freedom, there were gladiators tightening their armor and warming their muscles.

The Pinto got me there at one-thirty, a good half-hour before the fight was supposed to begin. I parked a half-mile away. That was just about as close as a vehicle could get, because of the forest. After the longest walk of my life, I stood at the top of the Hollow. The sight below me was something to behold. I thought I was early but at least two hundred people were already in attendance, filling both hills and the north side of the riverbed. On the hills people sat or leaned against the dead trees. At the bottom they stood, bustling about, talking in a theater before the opening credits started to play. Because of the crowd it took me several minutes to get down the hill. Once there, I scanned the crowd getting a read on the situation. Roman was nowhere to be found. Johnny was standing at the front of the crowd. In back of him stood his small army. By the look of it I counted between fifteen and twenty guys that were there for Johnny. That was actually about ten more than I'd thought. Johnny had really rallied the troops this time.

Jack stood to his right. Left of the center, facing Johnny were familiar faces—Heather, Sally, Scotty, Sam, Pick, the rest of the cheerleaders, and a few other seniors that I recognized. My heart was pounding even though all I had to do was watch. I walked over and stood with them at the front of the crowd. I continually looked at the top of the hill on both sides, hoping to see a shadow, a dark figure, anything. Several times I thought I saw Roman. Several times I was wrong. It began to mist.

Johnny stepped out in front of the crowd, his face blue in the moonlight. “Can I have your attention please? Please, let me talk.” Johnny raised his arms up and put them down several times, his palms facing the clay of the riverbed.

Eventually the chitchat and the laughter died down, and the waiting stopped. I could feel the cool breeze blow against the back of my neck. It was in the fifties but felt much colder. A shiver ran down the length of my spine, ending at my toes. I scanned for Roman, again in vain.

“By my watch it’s two o’clock,” Johnny the Killer said.

I looked at my own, finding Johnny was about ten minutes fast.

“The janitor is a coward my friends, he’s as yellow as that fucking bird we used to watch on Sesame Street. I called him here out of respect between two men, giving him a fair chance to prove that there is something between his legs other than a mop stick. But instead he spits in your face as well as mine. He mocks us by not showing. My friends I’m sorry to say the janitor is not coming. He never was.”

The entire crowd, except the group I was standing with, booed. Even though we needed boots on because the shit was getting deep, Johnny’s speech was very well spoken. Ironic that in normal life he was a babbling idiot, but in competition and violence he was a poet. He held his hands up, quieting the crowd once again. He gave Jack a nod and immediately the right-hand man was by my side with several others of Johnny’s soldiers. They grabbed me and took me out to where Johnny was standing. Half way there I broke loose of their grips and walked on my own.

“I’m not one to waste your precious time,” Johnny preached again. “There will be a fight tonight. Tony, who was a good friend to me growing up, has stabbed me in the back. He’s taken up with the piece of shit janitor instead of the brother that stands beside him, and because of it Brunno lays broken in bed at home from an ambush he suffered at Tony’s hands.”

The boos echoed again in the Hollow.

Heather yelled over them, “That’s bullshit and you know it Johnny.”

The Killer ignored her.

The moon still provided light, though the mist was turning to legitimate drops of rain.

Johnny spoke louder to combat the sound of the water. “Friends, I know that Tony will not take the place of the janitor, not even close, but I ask, do you want to see him pay?”

The crowd roared with approval, “Kill him, kick his ass Johnny, do it for Brunno”. The chants went on.

In the pit of my stomach I finally understood how Jesus felt when they let Barabas go. I looked at my watch. Still five minutes until two.

I looked around frantically.

No Roman.

Before Johnny did anything I charged, wrapping my arms around his waist. We fell to the ground. I lifted my fist, but before I could lower the boom, Jack kned me in the back. A second later, Johnny's goons were all over me. They worked me over—kicking and punching—until Johnny got to his feet. I stood up only half the man I was before. My right arm was useless. I threw a left. Johnny leaned back and when he saw I had no right to go with it, the onslaught began. In a matter of seconds I was on my knees in front of Johnny. He held me up by the neck of my shirt, delivering blow after blow to my face. My eye sockets throbbed.

Heather somehow managed to slip through the wall of Johnny's soldiers. She grabbed Johnny's right arm. Without turning he backhanded her with a closed fist, knocking her backward at least three feet. In my daze, I still heard her head thud against the ground. Sally and the other girls pulled her off to the side. Johnny gave her a brief look of regret.

Johnny let me fall to the ground and then the kicks began. Kicks to the stomach, the chest, the legs, one to the chin. At one point I heard him say, "You know, it didn't have to be this way." I was sure one more kick would have ended me. And then there was a voice.

A voice that shouted, but was so far away I could barely hear it.

"I'm disappointed you started without me, Johnny."

I lay in the dirt, which was quickly turning to mud. Between the blood and the raindrops in my eyes my vision blurred, but a hundred yards down the length of the Hollow stood the dark silhouette of the man I had been looking for. Roman stood in the moonlight casting a shadow in front of him. I tried to turn my head toward my watch but only my eyes responded. I shook off the raindrops as best I could. My watch read two o'clock.

"You're not a very good host, telling a person one time, and then starting before," Roman yelled.

"Kill this mother fucker," Johnny said to the boys.

They took off down the Hollow in a dead sprint. The night had cooled considerably and their breath rose in the moonlight and rain. My count from before was off quite a bit. There were at least thirty of them, filling the width of the ravine, stampeding like buffalo over the open range. Johnny and Jack jogged behind like cowboys ushering in the herd. People on the hills filtered down, and the crowd slowly began to follow. Scotty and Pick scooped me off the ground by my armpits, throwing my arms over their respective shoulders. As we moved, my feet dragged in the mud.

Roman stood with his arms loose, hanging at his sides, unmoving. The herd gained momentum. Fifty yards away Roman stood his ground. Rocks and sticks were picked up off the riverbed, as the horizontal wave of soldiers ran closer side by side. Roman stood his ground. At thirty yards the width of the Hollow decreased substantially, reducing the distance between the two sides to about half

of what it had been. The herd adjusted, becoming three horizontal rows, instead of just one. Roman stood his ground.

The attack was close now and looked ready to devour the janitor. Roman stood his ground. Snarls and grunts of anticipation came from the pack. Last minute yells of camaraderie and encouragement could be heard throughout the ravine, like the ancient chants of centurion soldiers. Twenty feet away Roman stood, unmoving. Just before the slaughter reached the point of no return, the legs of the mass were cut out from under them, the front row of soldiers abruptly tripping to the ground, the second row falling on top of the first, and the third row smashing both underneath. Johnny and Jack stopped in confusion, watching their handpicked army crumble in front of them. Stones and dead tree branches flew up in the air at the sudden stop, landing not on Roman, but on Johnny's troops.

Roman had skipped school, not because he was a coward, but to prepare his defense. He had fastened a length of metal cable from one side of the Hollow to the other. Though it was thin and invisible at night—especially to a bunch of sprinting adversaries—the cable was stronger than any rope or string could ever be. Roman had deliberately set it up where the Hollow narrowed, forcing Johnny's thugs into a bottleneck, ensuring that it took out all of them.

And take them out it did. When they hit the cable at the speed they were going, their momentum went from full speed to full stop, much like a car hitting a brick wall. The cable was less than a foot off the ground, positioned to catch the brood between their ankles and their knees. The trampling sound echoed through the Hollow, along with the noise of heads cracking together and primitive weapons thudding against bodies. A couple of guys on the first line were running so fast that when they hit the trip wire their momentum kept them rolling like bowling balls.

Out of the thirty soldiers, not one was left standing. Roman's trip wire had done what it was put in place for. After Johnny's troops awoke from the initial impact, they did several things: some ran as well as they could, for the hills and their escape, others were too injured to continue and crawled off to the side. When the chaos cleared, there were only five of Johnny's members left willing to fight. They charged as well as they could, stumbling mostly. Roman walked into the melee, blocking punches, sweeping legs out from under them, using their force against them, sometimes misdirecting movement by smashing two of them together, other times ducking and weaving in and out, catching arms and flipping the aggressors over his back. When it was over two of the five limped off; three of them crawled. Roman had made quick work of it, never throwing a single punch.

Johnny and Jack walked over to the tripwire. Johnny gave Jack a shove in the back as if to say it was his turn. Jack walked up, still with a smile on his face.

"All right, janitor, it's..." Jack started as he took a step forward.

Those were the only words Jack got out. Roman gave a quick kick to Jack's knee, buckling it instantly. There was a loud pop. Jack's kneecap was now in the back of the leg where the crease is, instead of in the front. He grabbed it, yelling in that high-pitched yelp of his. It was dislocated for sure, if not broken.

The rain was coming down in sheets now, but instead of the crowd leaving, they formed a circle, putting the two fighters in the middle. The chants and cheers

had dropped to silence, everyone's gaze focused toward the center. Only the rain made noise. Roman's head was steaming from the heat he generated. He took off his flannel and dropped it to the mud. His white T-shirt was soaked and stuck to him like painted-on body art.

"I can't think of a more fitting end for you," Johnny said, his face red with anger.

Roman said nothing.

Johnny put both fists up and charged.

His strong right came overhead. Roman moved into it, blocking with his left arm, and returning three quick blows with his right. Blood shot from both of Johnny's nostrils from the first punch. The second punch knocked his wind out. The third smashed his scrotum. Johnny staggered gasping for air, trying to decide between holding his nose, lungs, or nuts. Johnny's four-inch height advantage eclipsed Roman, but it made no difference. Roman backed a couple of steps away, arms at his side. Johnny walked around like an ogre holding himself. When he regained his breath, Johnny charged, throwing another right. A second later Roman had Johnny's arm twisted up behind his own back. He walked Johnny a couple steps forward, and then tripped him. They fell, Johnny smashing against the ground, and Roman on his back. Keeping hold of the arm Roman lifted Johnny's head and repeatedly squashed it into the floor of the muddy Hollow. Roman jumped off to the side. Johnny lay face down for several seconds in the mud. Finally he got to his feet, wiping the mud from his eyes. Roman stood with arms down giving Johnny a chance to give up. The Killer refused. And as if out of ideas and desperate, he ran with both arms outreached, maybe in attempt to strangle the janitor. Roman met him with an upper cut that snapped Johnny's head back so far I swore the top of his head touched the middle of his back. The Killer did not fall though. Roman continued with a tornadic flurry of punches and kicks so quick it would have taken a high-speed camera to capture them all. Each punch and kick was stronger than the last and Johnny was forced from one side of the circle to the other. Roman ended the bombardment with one final upper-cut. Johnny fell on his back and Roman landed on top of him. Both of them were unmoving until Roman crawled up the Killer and straddled his stomach.

Johnny the Killer lay motionless in the mud with his right eye swollen shut. Blood gushed from his nose and showed on his gums above his teeth. His good eye flickered with the rhythm of the raindrops.

"Finish it," he said to Roman. His voice was soft and broken.

Roman clinched his right fist raising it to the sky. Johnny could see the moon behind it.

I still hung between Scotty's and Pick's shoulders, my legs unable to hold my weight. It took all of my energy to speak. "Don't do it Roman. Don't do it."

Whether it was my voice or the tears coming from Johnny's fading eye, Roman unclenched his fist and rolled off of the Killer.

The crowd began to disperse; by the time only a few were left, Johnny was still laying in the mud. Jack was on the ground thirty feet away and he was still writhing in pain, his knee still pointing backwards. Roman walked over to Jack and bent down. Jack tried to wiggle away.

“Hold still,” Roman said. He grasped Jack’s distorted leg by the ankle with his right hand. He put his left hand on Jack’s thigh as if to steady it. “This is going to be painful, but it’s going to fix you. Okay Jack?”

Jack stopped crying, and nodded with fear.

Roman gave a hard yank. A loud pop came from Jack’s knee, the same sound it made when it was dislocated. Jack’s leg was straight again, but he continued to bellow.

Roman turned toward Scotty and Pick. “Heather and I will take care of Tony. Make sure he gets home safely.” Roman pointed toward Johnny, a blood and mud-soaked carcass.

## VII

Roman’s door was already open when we got there. The disaster area I expected to see did not exist. The book pages were all picked up exposing the shine of the hardwood floors. The splintered pieces of the wall were replaced and already painted. Johnny’s artwork was already replaced with new transparent covering, every baseball card still intact and in its respective place. Roman’s anal-retentive nature got the best of him on his day off from school. Not only did he build the perfect ambush at the Hollow, but he also played janitor and maintenance man at home. Most people would have said there weren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish both feats.

Heather stopped me once we were inside the door and propped me up against the wall. She took off my shoes, pulled my shirt over my head, and stripped me down, careful to get mud only in the bare minimal spots of the room. In the end I stood in my boxers and socks. Heather retrieved a warm washcloth from the bathroom. She wiped the grime from my ears, eyes, and mouth.

“You’re still bleeding over your left eye,” she said, looking concerned but unattached, like I was the last patient of the day. “You’ve got a cut on your stomach too.”

She moved the cloth down to my stomach, and dabbed the blood.

“I’m really hurting a little lower than that,” I said smiling and patting my crotch lightly.

Heather opened the palm of my hand and slapped the wet rag on it. “Only a man could think of sex while he’s on his last leg.”

I tried to laugh, but the slightest vibration made my ribs feel like they were going to pop out of my torso. Heather helped me to the couch.

Roman entered, followed by Carl who was carrying a tackle box.

“I know fishing is good for a lot of things, but I don’t think it’s gonna help me this time,” I said looking at Roman.

Carl set the box on the table in front of me and opened it. It was actually a tackle box, but instead of containing the usual hooks and lures, it was filled with thread, needles, and little cans. Carl handed one of the needles and cans to Roman. Roman walked off not asking what to do with them. I heard the stove ignite.

Carl laid me down on the couch and then bent down to his knees. He took the rag out of my hand, and touched up the area directly over my left eyebrow.

“The fuckers got at you pretty good, eh?” Carl asked.

“Eh,” I said back.

“No worries, Carl will fix it,” he said.

Roman returned with a fire hot needle, four aspirin, a small glass, and a bag of frozen peas. He gave me the medicine and the glass. Carl took the needle. Heather got the peas and held them up to her jaw. I swallowed the aspirin and threw back the liquid in the glass, expecting it to be water. The liquid in the glass was warm and tasted awful. I fought off the sensation of gagging. I looked in the glass to see the green tea.

“That’s fucking awful,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” Heather pitched in.

“Drink the rest of it now,” Carl said as he threaded his needle.

“You’re not serious?” I blabbed.

“Just do it,” Roman said in an unsympathetic tone.

“It gets better as you drink it,” Heather said.

“Yeah, because it eats away your taste buds,” I said. “What the hell is this shit anyway?”

“A little of this, a little of that,” Carl answered.

I forced myself to finish it.

“Now this will hurt a bit my friend, don’t move,” Carl said, opening his eyes wide as if to make sure they were working properly.

Heather walked around to the end of the couch, and put both hands on the sides of my head. My left eye was swollen shut, so I didn’t have to close it. Carl began to stitch the gash above it. The needle wasn’t as painful as I expected. With my good eye, I could see sweat forming on the crevices of Carl’s wrinkled forehead. The perspiration was no doubt caused by his unwavering concentration. After the eye, Carl stitched the cut on my stomach.

He put the needle back in the fishing kit, and pulled out two cans and a small bowl. Carl began to pour the contents of the cans into the bowl. Yellow powder flowed from one container and dark blue from the other. Roman bent down to the bowl and splashed a very small amount of water into it. Carl produced a short flat wooden spoon and began to mix the ingredients together. It reminded me of the spoon that came with the chocolate malt ice cream I used to eat at the ballpark when I was a kid. Carl stirred. Roman put in the droplets of water, but only at Carl’s request. The result was a dark green slime, much like the stuff that was put on Roman’s arm. This was thicker though. Carl put a good amount of it on the flat spoon and then spackled it above my eye. The shit burned. Did I just drink that stuff? I think the answer was yes, only a thinner, toned down version of it.

After he was done spackling my eye and stomach, Carl stuck band-aids on both places. He packed up all his tools into the tackle box and stood at the door. He was some warped distortion of a doctor holding his little medical bag, visiting the house in the 1800s.

“No worries,” he said. “Good as new in a day.”

I wondered if that was the standard prognosis for all of his patients.

Roman went to his dresser and grabbed a pair of sweats for me.

“Who the fuck *are* you?” I asked.

Roman looked at me like I was joking.

“I’m serious; who are you?” I needed to know.

“I don’t understand the question?”

“Yeah you do Roman,” I said. “You understand just about everything.

You’re a human calculator. You’re a master mechanic. You’ve got patience that makes Job look like a whining baby. You read by the book, not the page. You speak God knows how many languages. You live by yourself even though you’re only in high school. You never talk about your past. And most important, you made beating the shit out of Johnny the Killer—a guy mind you that has never come close to losing a fight, a guy that is almost a half a foot taller than you and outweighs you by a good seventy pounds—look like a stroll in the fuckin’ park. People don’t just wake up one day and do the things you do. We’re your friends. We deserve some answers.”

The tone in my voice even scared me a little. Roman could see I was serious.

“You’re right,” he said. “People don’t just wake up that way, not in their entirety anyway. Some parts of who I am are best left alone.”

For the first time since meeting him, Roman was visibly shaken. Heather noticed it immediately. She put her free hand in his.

“Look Roman,” Heather said as she took the frozen peas from her face. “Tony’s right. We are your friends. And that means friends through the good and the bad. Friends no matter what. Everybody makes mistakes. Everybody has skeletons.”

“Skeletons.” Roman repeated the word, the look on his face a smile but I’m sure it was meant to be a frown or maybe something worse. “You have no idea. But you are right. We are friends, and in being so, you deserve to know the whole story.”

Roman, still grasping Heather’s hand, led her over to the couch.

Heather sat down next to me; we were two kindergarteners about to be read a story just before naptime. We never took our eyes off the janitor. Roman gazed toward the front window imagining and remembering, like it was being shown to him through old home movies. He began to tell his story.

## Chapter 7

### Roman's Story: Dark Days, Agent Johnson, and the NN

#### I

*My father was the last of four generations of Swivels to farm the Iowa soil. We weren't rich by any means but he made a good living. The farm was sizable and dad employed three men that worked for him year-round. We had a two-story house with a full basement. There was more room than we needed, but I loved the space. The house sat about a hundred yards in front of the cornfields. A paved road ran in front of the house another two hundred yards further away.*

*My father's one true passion was baseball. Before my mother and he met he played Triple-A ball with the Dodgers. He was a catcher and a good one until he had an accident. Evidently an opposing player plowed him over in a bang-bang play at the plate. The force of the impact separated his shoulder. He rehabilitated for about two months, but his arm was never the same. He met my mother during that summer and decided to give baseball up all together.*

*During the summer, fall, and spring—basically anytime it wasn't freezing out—dad and I would play catch. I can remember throwing the ball up in the air to catch it myself thousands of times waiting for him to get back from the field so I could throw to a real person. He knew a lot about pitching, like most catchers do, and showed me the ropes from the time I was five. He would step off the distance and dig his boot into the ground, wearing away the spot where the rubber should be. The plate would always be the hat he was wearing that day.*

*It was late October, and the trees must have been a million different shades of orange and yellow. It was unseasonably warm, reaching into the mid-eighties. My dad and I went hunting.*

*I'll never forget pulling into the driveway we when we got back. We came in the back door that led directly into the kitchen. My father unlaced his boots on the back porch and went in while I threw mine in the corner next to the back door. Right away I knew something was wrong; there was no smell of meat loaf, nothing sizzling in a pan, very unlike my mom to not be at least starting dinner at that hour. I heard my father call out for Joann, but there was no answer. I went into the living room by myself and found everything was in order. The front door was open and the screen door stood in its place unlocked.*

*We'd never had a reason to lock the door.*

*I noticed there were muddy shoe prints on the carpet that led from the front door in the living room over to the dining room on the opposite side of the house from the kitchen. I began to walk, following the brown prints until I found myself at the top of the basement steps. The door was open. I could see the shoe prints went down the stairs, but I heard nothing. By this time my hands were sweating, and my heart felt like it was about to beat out of my chest. I walked down the steps despite my fear. There was blood on the right side of the wall. It looked like someone had dipped the tips of their fingers in ketchup and then dragged their hand down the entire length of the staircase. I made my way down. I could hear someone breathing heavily like they had a rope tied around their neck.*

*The first thing I saw when I stepped onto the basement floor was the color of the carpet. Once-white carpet was a damp pink sea of blood. My eyes started at the west side of the room observing the TV knocked down on the floor, the bookshelf overturned, the cushions on the couch hanging out, and my father standing in the corner with a stranger's arm wrapped around his throat. There was a tattoo of a spider web with a naked woman in the middle of the arm that imprisoned my father. I still see that tattoo every time I shut my eyes.*

*The gasping I'd heard on my way down was now clear. The man had a knife, with the point pressed against my father's chest. It was like a nightmare and just like a nightmare I was frozen. My feet were in concrete and my eyes superglued open. The only sense that worked was my hearing; I could hear and almost feel the wheezing of my father's breath.*

*After what seemed like an eternity, I glanced to the opposite end of the room. There in a heap of red carpet and flesh was what was left of my mother. He had slit her from the waist up. Her insides now took the place of what used to be a stomach and chest. I could not see her head because the dark side of the room shaded it out. I put my hand over my mouth to catch the vomit coming up, but nothing happened.*

*I could feel the adrenaline pour into my veins, turning my fear to rage. Without even having a plan or second thought I took a step toward my father and the terrible strange arm that imprisoned him. Before I could take the second step, my father raised his arm up with his palm flat toward me, halting me in my tracks. At that moment my anger gave way momentarily, long enough for me to think, and thinking was the only thing that would save my father and me.*

*Our pool table was about ten feet caddy-corner behind me. I walked backwards very slowly, never glancing away from the stranger's eyes. They were wide and open, blue as the ocean. He began to walk, forcing my father toward the staircase. I got to the pool table but kept my back toward it, reaching backwards for a ball with my fingers. At first I was unsuccessful but after moving my hand further behind me I held one of the ceramic spheres nestled firmly against my palm. The stranger gave no indication that he knew of my plan. My father on the other hand looked at me and then at the balls on the pool table and then at me again. By this time the two of them were right at the staircase. My father tilted his head subtly to the right.*

*Without further hesitation, I flung the pool ball across the room. My father jerked the opposite way. The stranger ducked and the ball crashed into the wall. Although the ball did not hit the intruder, it was still effective. He dropped the knife, freeing my father.*

*The stranger shot up the staircase and without a second's notice my father was right behind him, me just behind my father. At the top of the stairs they turned right and went through the dining room—dad close behind him. I turned left and ran through the kitchen, knocking over the chairs pushed in beneath the table. I grabbed the shotgun from the closet and headed for the front room, and the front door.*

*When I got there I saw the man running toward the screen door with his back to me. I pointed the shotgun in his direction and squeezed the trigger at the*

same time. My eyes blinked from the crash of the shot going off, and when I opened them I saw my father behind the man. The impact blew him, the intruder, and the screen door completely out of the doorway across the front porch and out onto the steps. By this time it was dark enough that I could not see out of the house. I wish it could have stayed that way. I heard nothing. I went through the doorway holding the shotgun close by my side. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I could see the intruder running across our front yard to the street. I picked up the barrel and fired again, but the man kept running.

As I caught my breath, I looked down at my feet. There, laying face down with his arms reaching out was my father. The back of his skull was lying two steps down. I dropped the shotgun and picked up the back of my father's head. I turned him over and pressed the back of his head to where it should have been. It fit so perfectly almost like a puzzle. I remember thinking that if I held his head together long enough that it would be all right—that he would somehow come back to life. There was no pulse. No breathing. No life.

*That's the way they found me the next morning.*

The intruder stole twenty dollars out of my mom's purse. While he was at it, he thought he might as well rape and murder her. I, on the other hand, had just killed my father, the man who made me who I am. They never caught the stranger. And my troubles, believe it or not, were just beginning.

## II

After the funerals, the house and farm were auctioned off and put into a trust with the rest of my parents' money. I was shipped to an orphanage in Davenport. The only feeling I had was numbness. The whole orphanage scene was gray and glum. I would go days without eating or speaking. My schoolwork was untouched. I was a zombie.

This went on for months I suppose, until one of the social workers in charge of the orphanage notified me that I was being taken into a foster home. The news didn't excite me much. I just nodded and then was told to pack up my things. My belongings consisted of some clothes, my ball glove, and of course, several boxes of baseball cards.

A few days later Mr. and Mrs. Pentoch arrived in an old gray station wagon. I stood in front of the social worker with my life's belongings at my side. Ed Pentoch stepped out, went to the other side of the car, and opened the door for Gale. Ed was in his mid-forties, clean-shaven and wore jeans and a sport coat that must have been two sizes too small. The knot of his tie was huge and the end of it only came down to just above his belly. The brown and green stripes on it reeked of the seventies.

Gale was wearing a sundress patterned in an array of colors and flowers. She was very pretty, brown hair and brown eyes, calves of perfection. Her smile lit up as she stepped from the car. She should have been modeling clothes in a magazine.

We exchanged pleasantries; Gale even hugged me. It was a bit awkward. I really didn't understand how you could hug someone you didn't even know. Ed

only said hello then started loading my stuff into the back of the station wagon. Gale thanked the social worker and we were off to the Windy City.

I turned around in my seat and watched as Davenport got smaller and smaller on the horizon. Ed took off his tie and threw it in the back seat next to me. He also pulled out a pint of Jim Beam and took a hard swig. Gale began to tell me how great my room was and that I could change anything I didn't like. Although she was very sincere and doing her best to make me feel welcome, my mind wandered as she rambled. I kept thinking that this wasn't my life. This wasn't the way it was meant to be. It was all a bad dream.

A ways into the trip Ed's whiskey ran dry, and the bottle went flying out the window. We came to some small town in Illinois and stopped at a gas station that just happened to sell liquor. I went to the bathroom or tried at least, but my stomach was a mess. As I walked out, Ed was getting his own kind of refill for the rest of the way. Gale bought me a coke. There was a semi in the parking lot still running. I thought about trying to get in the back or even underneath it. I thought maybe I should just take off and run until I couldn't run anymore. Instead I got back into the station wagon. That was the biggest mistake I would ever make.

There were two things about the trip that amazed me. The first being that Gale never questioned or even acknowledged Ed's drinking. The second being how well Ed drove while drinking. By the time we got to Chicago Ed was beyond drunk, but he stayed on the road, between the lines, better than some sober drivers.

The house, my new home, was like the rest in that South Side neighborhood. All of them looked alike, no side, front, or backyards. There were no porches, no room to play catch or run around, just house after house jammed in beside each other. The inside was clean but you could tell the green carpet and paint had been there for at least twenty years, much like Ed's tie. There was a decent-sized kitchen with all the usual appliances. The living room had a couch and a recliner, both purchased in another era. A long coffee table ran in front of the couch and a small TV was positioned so you could see it from either seating arrangement. The two bedrooms were right next to each other off the hallway that led from the living room to the bathroom. The air smelled of stale smoke and old booze, like a tavern that had just opened up for the day. Even when the lights were turned on, the place was very dim. The drab green carpet and brown walls didn't help.

The first thing Ed did when he entered my new home was light a cigarette and pour another drink. Only this time the whiskey came out of a half-gallon bottle stationed in the cabinet beside the sink. Gale surprisingly poured herself a drink as well, after reaching in the freezer and pulling out a bottle of Vodka.

"Why don't you get your things out of the car, honey?" she said while taking down a swallow from the glass.

When I got back in the house Ed was in his recliner with cigarette and whiskey in hand, watching a football game. He never spoke or looked up at me. Gale showed me to my room, which was more of a cubicle than anything. The bed took up almost the entire room. There was just enough room to walk on both sides of it and a little more room at the foot. It reminded me instantly of the way my new

home was, jammed in between the two houses beside it. There was no dresser or any other furniture, only a closet that had no door at the foot of the bed r.

"What do you think honey?" she asked.

"It's nice," I responded

"You better get some sleep, you've got a big day at your new school tomorrow," she said as she kissed me on the forehead and hugged me with one arm, making sure not to spill her drink.

The door closed behind me, and I was alone in the dark, alone in a house and city I did not know, a long way from home. I stood there for a minute hearing the football game in the background and the noise of the city in the distance. I flipped the light switch next to me but nothing happened. I flipped it again but still nothing. The light bulb wasn't burned out; there just wasn't any light bulb. I took my clothes off and lay on the bed. My eyes shut but I couldn't sleep.

A couple hours later, while still staring at the ceiling, my wall started to shake, then my bed, and then the entire room. I thought for sure it was an earthquake until I heard Gale's moans from their bedroom. I put my only pillow over my head and pressed as tight as I could over both ears. The noise dulled, but the bed was still thrashing. I switched to the other end of the bed so at least the headboard wouldn't keep pounding my head. The moans stopped eventually and sleep finally came.

I awoke the next day to the smell of bacon and eggs. In the distance I could hear the crackling and snapping of the skillet. Doors were opening and closing, feet shuffled along the kitchen floor. It could have been home, but my eyes told a different story. The light fixture above still had no bulb, and the room was still as small as it had been the night before.

Ed was eating a heaping portion of eggs and bacon. What looked like a half a loaf of bread was toasted and sitting next to his plate. Gale poured his coffee and sat a bowl of cereal in front of me. It looked liked corn flakes but tasted like cardboard shavings. I ate anyway. Ed topped off his coffee with a splash of whiskey and finished what was left on his plate. Ed began to speak.

"We need to get a few things straight here. After school every day you're going to come home and clean this house. That means vacuuming, mopping, dusting, and throwing away the trash. Me and Gale both work ten-hour days and if I'm going to put a roof over your head, you're going to earn your keep. When I get home from work, I watch TV; so don't get any ideas for your own shows. Gale wants you to call her 'mom', but ou can just call me Ed. And one last thing, when you turn seventeen and get all that money form your trust fund, I want half. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, I understand."

"Here's two dollars for your lunch. You better get ready now, the bus'll be here in about twenty minutes."

That day I was very careful to memorize the route the bus took to school. It wasn't far; maybe ten blocks from my new home, but there were several stores and shops on the way. A sign hung in the window of one of them that said "Used Books 25 cents". I spent a dollar at lunch. I used the other dollar at the bookstore on my way home. I wasn't much of a TV guy anyway, but I could get lost in a

*book. School was like any other I suppose. I did my work and kept to myself mostly, the same way I was when you met me.*

### III

*Ed wasn't the cleanest man alive by any means. I found this out by picking up cigarette butts that had overflowed from his ashtray onto the floor. There were napkins and cigarette boxes strung out all over the living room. His empty glass sat on the arm of the recliner, bone dry. Ed worked for a local waste management company—in other words he was a garbage man. His gray shirt had the name Ed stitched in red on it and his boots looked as if they had been actually purchased at the dump. The last time he shaved must have been the day they came to Iowa. When he came home from work he stunk like nothing you would ever smell on a human. Instead of getting in the shower or even changing clothes for that matter, Ed would pour his drink and sit down in the recliner.*

*Gale was very clean. Even in the morning she was dressed very nice, make-up done, and had a refreshing smell that seemed to combat Ed's odor. Gale worked at the social security office in front of a computer all day. Not exactly challenging work but she was good at her job. She took a cab to work everyday, unlike Ed who was picked up by one of his fellow garbage men.*

*I was thirteen at the time and in eighth grade. I made sure every day to spend the least amount of my two dollars as possible. I knew the route from school to home and instead of taking the bus home I walked. I stopped at the shops to look, and to escape. I bought some light bulbs. I visited the used bookstore. I tried to read a book a night and usually did. I came home from school, did my chores which were dirty but not hard, ate my supper, and then it was off to a book and to salvation. Ed was content with me not interrupting his beloved TV, and Gale would be happy if I just talked to her during dinner. There was your occasional earthquake against my headboard. Ed's stench still filled the house. My birthday came and went with no acknowledgment even though they knew. I survived that first year and graduated from eighth grade.*

### IV

*My freshman year things began to get worse. Ed was drinking even more if that was possible and losing his hard-earned money to the local bookies. He lost his entire paycheck the second week of football season but that didn't stop him from continuing his gambling. Gale bought some new shoes for work one Saturday. Ed went ballistic. He degraded her verbally at first and then from my room I could hear the beating begin. I ran out and jumped on his back begging him to quit. He rushed backward with me still hanging on and slammed me into the kitchen wall. The air flew out of my lungs. I gasped but nothing would come in. I panicked because the wind was knocked out of me, fearing I would never breathe again. When I finally caught my breath a fist came at me.*

*I woke up the next morning still on the kitchen floor. Ed was already gone to work and Gale helped me to my feet. It was the first time I had been in a fight and with, of all people, the man who was supposed to take the place of my father. My nose was probably broken although Gale never took me to the hospital. I*

*didn't go back to school until my black eyes and the gash on the back of my head healed.*

*Several weeks went by. I went to school. Did my chores. Read my books. The earthquakes happened from time to time. I wondered how she could bring herself to do it, but then remembered it was probably better for her to take it that way than another.*

*The beatings continued from time to time for both Gale and me. Sometimes it was over a little thing like I missed a crumb when cleaning the floor; sometimes there was no reason at all. About half way through that year Ed got what he thought was a wonderful idea. He gave me the choice between the beatings and being his drinking partner. It sounded like a great idea to me at first also. The only alcohol that I ever had was a few sips of my father's beer on trips back from the refrigerator to the barn. I didn't really like the taste back then but imagined it couldn't be all that bad.*

*Whiskey I soon found out was an entirely different animal. I drank the first glass Ed gave me, gulping it down like it was tea. I about vomited but held it down somehow. Then there was another glass. I drank it slower which might have been worse, tasting every drop on the way down. By the end of that glass I was intoxicated, falling asleep on the couch next to Ed's chair. I woke up vomiting all over the couch and myself. Some of it splattered on Ed. He took me to the bathroom, removed my shirt, and stuck my head in the toilet. I remember thinking that him worrying about my shirt was a nice gesture, but he actually did that so he could whip my bare skin with his belt as I threw up. I had to sleep on my stomach for the next three weeks, and couldn't even let my back hit the back of a chair. Putting on clothing was excruciating.*

*I eventually got used to the whiskey. It seemed to be better than the beatings. I wanted to try out for the baseball team but Ed wouldn't let me. Instead he made me get a job at Giant Burgers as a grill boy. I didn't mind the work but Ed made me hand over half my check every week. It probably went straight to the bookies.*

*I worked as much as I could, trying to protect my body from my home life. Ed would still make me drink as often as he could and throw in an occasional beating. Not even when my parents died had I ever felt as low as I did then. I remember getting out of bed in the mornings trying to think of one good reason to put on my clothes and go to school. I wasn't reading. I wasn't eating. I just wanted it to end. And then one Saturday morning there was a knock at the door. A knock that pounded out salvation. A knock from Agent Johnson.*

## V

At two weeks old Roman was holding his head up and fighting to use the bottle on his own. At four months he was talking. At seven months he was walking. At two years he was reading and could spell numerous words. The training wheels came off his little bike on his third birthday. He was the one percent of one percent of the population who lived and thought on a higher plain, medically unexplainable. The pediatrician called him gifted. She wanted to run tests. The Swivels refused.

In first grade, at the age of six, Roman could write in complete and coherent sentences in cursive, read volumes of manuscript both fiction and non, speak Spanish fluently, and play *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony* on the piano by ear. At the end of the year he tested at a twelfth grade level. His teachers wanted to send him off to the university, where he would encounter intellectual peers. Again the Swivels refused.

Roman also played Little League, striking out batters three years his senior and twice his size. In basketball he drained three-pointers at the percentage most players shot free throws. By the time middle school caught up, Roman read each course's text book the opening day of school, corresponded with professors around the country, and received daily mail from countless mathematicians who wanted him to prove their theorems. The chancellor of MIT flew out and begged the Swivels to let Roman attend his revered institution. They refused. Roman was not a freak as some of the other parents referred to him. He was a kid and he was going to grow up with all of its joys and pitfalls.

## VI

Gale opened the door. The man in the black suit and trench coat was massive; he stood nearly the height of the doorway, his shoulders slightly less than its width, briefcase in hand and introduced himself as Agent Johnson. He produced his credentials from his inside suit pocket, flipping them out in front of the family. Ed took a couple of steps back as he looked at the giant agent, fearing the man had come for him because of his gambling. Roman thought their guest had flashed his badge way too quickly to be an authentic agent of the government. Plus, he never proclaimed which part of the government he worked for. Gale was taken with the man's demeanor.

Johnson shook their hands. He put a hand on Roman's shoulder, noticing the wince from the young man. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Please," Gale responded, moving Ed's ashtray and whiskey glass off the table in front of the couch.

"A fine young man you have here. You must be proud," Johnson remarked as he sat down.

From his recliner Ed said, "He's not really ours. He's a foster kid."

Agent Johnson let the comment bounce off him and opened his brief case. "Let me tell you why I'm here. As I'm sure you know your son is very gifted. Two years ago the government started to monitor the aptitude tests that schools administer."

"All the schools?" Gale asked.

"Every single school in the United States and its territories, Mrs. Pentoch. The reason they monitor these tests is to discover children with exceptional abilities at an early age."

"For what?" Ed snorted.

"To help," Johnson replied. "After 9/11 the government is now aware that we can no longer be in a reactive state. We have to be proactive in our fight against terrorism. We can't afford to make mistakes anymore. Thus, the recruitment of students like Roman."

"I'm sorry, but I think you're lookin' in the wrong place for the next James Bond," Ed said and laughed.

Gale jumped in. "He's only fifteen, you can't expect him to fight those terrorists."

"With all due respect, I think you're missing the point," Johnson began. "We don't expect to send him out on the front lines. We need him here at home. Sometimes the most primitive enemy is the hardest to detect."

"Code breaking," Roman said.

Johnson looked at him. "That's just one of the elements. We refer to it as counter intelligence."

"Well how good was the kid on the test anyhow?" Ed asked.

"I'll try to put it in perspective. A standard IQ test like the one these schools administer are based on a certain scoring system. It's relatively simple. The score is derived by the space between the first question missed and the second question missed and the frequency of missed questions there after. The questions get harder as they progress. A score of one fifty or higher is considered genius."

"And what did Roman score?" Gale asked.

Johnson's stare made Roman feel uneasy. "He didn't score anything."

"I don't get it," Ed said.

"For the subject's IQ to be measured correctly Mr. Pentoch, the subject has to answer a question incorrectly. Roman answered every question correctly, making his IQ impossible to calculate. In short, your son either had all the answers to the test ahead of time, which is virtually impossible, or he's one of the few people in the world that are in the one hundredth percentile for intelligence."

"I'm not sure exactly what all of this means. I don't understand what you want from us," Gale responded.

"What I want is immaterial. What the government wants is your permission and young Roman's of course. Permission for us to train him, to focus his mind, and use its power to help the pursuit of freedom."

Roman thought the statement sounded a bit rehearsed, like the promises of an insurance salesman.

"He's still got to go to school," Gale said.

"The boy's got chores and work. He's got to earn his keep," Ed said, oblivious of Gale.

Johnson saw through Ed and it gave the agent the opportunity he was looking for. "We've taken the proper channels, Mr. Pentoch, and if Roman chooses to comply he will receive the entire amount of his trust fund immediately as well as a substantial salary from the government. You and Mrs. Pentoch will also receive from the government an amount equal to ten percent of Roman's inheritance, payable after the first month of his training."

Johnson sensed Roman was uneasy with the amount of information known about his life.

"Ten percent doesn't seem like that much," Ed said.

"Ten percent is roughly two hundred and fifty thousand dollars Mr. Pentoch. The Swivels' had a very healthy insurance policy. Put that with the value of the estate and you're looking at a good chunk of dough," Johnson replied.

Ed slicked back his hair, took a deep breath, and started searching his pockets for his cigarette and lighter. He lit and pulled hard on the smoke. "Sounds pretty good to me."

Ed looked at Gale who seemed not to share his enthusiasm. Roman felt he had just been sold at an auction.

"Will he live at home still?" Gale asked.

"Roman will live at the training site, but will be able to come home on Sundays if he so chooses," Johnson replied.

The deal had at first seemed too sour, but with each passing moment, Roman realized he could now get the things he longed for. Freedom. Escape. He never had to come back to the hell he'd lived in for the last two years. He never had to smell Ed's pungent odor or drink his whiskey or take his beatings. There would be no more earthquakes preventing him from sleep.

"I want to do it," Roman said. "But can I take anything with me?"

"Anything you want, son," Johnson replied. "I just need all three of your signatures here on this piece of paper."

They signed.

## VII

Johnson helped carry the heavy boxes, regretting his answer to Roman that the teenager could take anything he wanted with him. A small price to pay for such a beautiful mind, and the amount of potential that came with it. He noticed the young man's excitement and apparent lack of sorrow at leaving his home. Johnson knew from the way Roman had flinched that there was a good chance he was being abused.

"So what's in the boxes anyway?" Johnson asked closing the trunk of the car.

"Baseball cards and a few books." Unlike Roman's usual quiet way, he responded fast and positively, with the enthusiasm of a kid on his way to a theme park.

Johnson paused with key in hand, just short of starting the vehicle. He looked at Roman. "Look son, we're going to take good care of you."

"Thanks," Roman responded, just happy to be rid of Ed.

Johnson started the car and Roman watched as his neighborhood passed by outside the window and the cramped houses eventually disappeared. He embraced the unfamiliar feelings of happiness like a long-lost friend. Houses and small apartments eventually turned into office buildings and high-rises. Roman watched as they passed people jogging, people tanning, people skating. Skyscrapers touched heaven, and the deep blue of Lake Michigan went on forever trying to be an ocean, merging into the horizon, smudging the meeting point of sky and water.

The drive continued. The towers shrank back to buildings and then to houses, the water receded to dry land, the cars and people lessened. A green highway sign for Wisconsin loomed above them, pointing straight ahead; Johnson took a left. Soon they were in the country. Barns and ten-mile gaps between homes became a familiar sight. Roman dreamed of Iowa. Johnson turned right on a gravel road. Roman could not see the end of it.

The barn before them lay literally in the middle of nowhere. As far as the eye could see there were only plains. Not a house. Not a forest. Not even a planted cornfield. The barn hadn't been painted in years. Splintered wood hung from it and several bird nests occupied its outer corners. The roof bowed inward. Agent Johnson pressed a button on his steering wheel. The barn door began to rise, creaking and struggling to go up. The inside ended Roman's doubts. The walls were metal. The floor concrete. In front of the car was another door, only this one was cement. Cameras were fixed into all four upper corners of the barn. Johnson flipped on the dome light so he could see Roman's face.

Johnson thought hard before he spoke. "This is the point of no return, Roman. What you see ahead is highly classified. And not the kind of classified you see in movies. This classified gets you killed if you breach it, kid or no. There are only a few hundred people in the world that even know this place exists. I know your story up until coming to Chicago, the entire sad truth of it. I'm fairly certain I've pieced together the rest from the meeting with the Pentochs. I understand that your choices are not the brightest in either direction. I will tell you that this job is thankless. You'll never hear our accomplishments on the evening news. But it is also the most fulfilling line of a work a man can devote himself to. If you want out, I'll shred the paper you signed and take you back home no questions asked. Home or continue?"

*Home.* The word even sounded strange in thought. Roman didn't know what it meant anymore. He looked at the camera to his right.

"Continue," he said.

Agent Johnson patted him on the leg. Roman gave a slight jerk, a reflex that had developed over time. The agent exited the car and walked over to a console on the wall bordering the cement door. He placed his eyes against the scanning device. Unlike the barn door, the cement barrier in front of them disappeared into the floor with ease.

The tunnel was a constant decline of concrete and neon lights. Roman was sure if Johnson wanted to put the car in neutral it would have rolled all the way to the bottom. The steep road went on for several minutes. The speedometer read thirty. When it stopped, it wasn't at the center of the earth as Roman had suspected, but in a small parking garage. There were six spaces in all, one empty for Agent Johnson.

Another console, plus one checking the imprint of a hand, were next to the steel doors of the elevator. Johnson did both acts at the same time. The doors spread apart in lightening-quick fashion. Instead of Spock and Captain Kirk standing on the other side, the elevator was empty. The doors closed with the same speed they had opened.

"Level two," Johnson said.

"Level two," the mechanized voice of the elevator responded.

Before Roman could ask what the handles lining the interior were for, he found out first hand. If the elevator had dropped any faster, Roman and Johnson would be floating in zero gravity.

"Electro-magnetically powered." Johnson said.

"Oh," Roman responded.

The doors opened to a long hall of cement floor and more metal walls, again lighted with neon. The hall was narrow but stretched a good fifty yards away from the elevator. No decorations. No color. Only the metallic surface spanning the walls and ceiling giving way to the doors spaced several yards apart on both sides of the hall. The doors were knobless, each one with an individual iris scan and a series of buttons next to it. This wasn't Wonderland but Roman guessed that he had traveled a little farther down the hole than Alice, passing the land of the Mad Hatter and landing oddly on his feet.

"I've got several questions. May I?" Roman asked.

"Fire away son," Johnson responded, picking up the pace of his walk.

"How far down are we?"

"Right at two kilometers. We refer to these strongholds as bases; we call this one Bravo. There are several. New York, Washington, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco. All of them camouflaged. All of them virtually impenetrable. So far underground we'd be able to survive for years in the event of any known mass destruction attack."

"Who exactly are we working for?"

Johnson glanced at Roman, noticing his slowed pace. He knew Roman would not be satisfied if he simply answered "government" again. "You work for no one. In fact the minute you drove down the tunnel with me, you ceased to exist. The agency was created after 9/11 to combat the war on terror. The FBI with their abundance of talented people is practically useless against an enemy like terrorists because the FBI is reactive in nature. The proactive CIA does outstanding work, but even as proactive as it is, at the end of the day it is still held accountable by the citizens of the world. The NSA with all of its high-tech gadgets and communication devices in the end still answers to somebody. We however answer to no one. We don't put stars on the wall of our offices, because ghosts can't be heroes. The few people that do know our little band of brothers exists refer to it as the NN, because there was no name given to it. An agency can't be held accountable if it doesn't exist. It can't break any laws. It can't violate any peace treaties. It can't murder. We're the guys that do the dirty work."

Johnson stopped at the fifth door. He pressed his face against the machine once again and typed something into the keypad.

"Your turn," he said.

Roman placed his eye over the hole, not feeling the laser beam touch the brown of his iris. Johnson then punched more keys.

"You're all set," he said as the door slid open, disappearing into the wall. "Make yourself at home, I'll be right back."

*Space. A lot of space.* A warm feeling came over Roman at the sight. The room was at least fifty feet wide and about as long. The metallic fixtures and concrete floor Roman had expected were nowhere to be found. The floors were carpeted. A king-sized bed was next to one of the walls with an Indian-style quilt hanging past the edges. A big screen TV hung on the wall opposite the bed. Surround-sound speakers were fixed on the walls. A fireplace jutted out from the wall with candles on the caramel-stained mantle-piece that encased it. A large stereo system sat in a compartment just below the flat-screen television. A

personal computer. A refrigerator. A stove. A kitchen. A bathroom. And windows. Four windows in all, looking out over a beach and then the ocean. Seagulls flew in the distance. Roman could hear the waves splashing. It didn't matter that it was only a hologram. Roman would take it over looking at his neighbor's white siding any day.

Johnson returned pushing a multi-level cart stacked with papers and books. He was a librarian preparing to restock the shelves at the end of the day. *Could this be true? Books delivered by the cartload.* Roman's unspoken question was answered.

"I hope everything is to your liking. You can change the windows to just about any climate and terrain the world has to offer. Even beaches at sunset become monotonous after a while. Your fridge is stocked. All the toiletries should be in place. You get about every music and TV channel on the planet down here believe it or not. If you need anything or want to send anything to your folks, you can place an order on your computer over there. The mailroom will take care of it. I know you're just settling in but I've already got some work for you. Let's see what we have here."

Johnson lifted some bound pages off the cart. "This is a two-hundred page psychological questionnaire. A little late for that."

Johnson threw the manuscript in the trash can next to the door. He flipped through several parchments and some books, discarding most of them.

"Here we go." He sat a box full of papers on Roman's bed. "These documents are all things we've intercepted in one fashion or another. Some were emails, some radio or satellite transmissions, some cell phone conversations; the list goes on. Every document has two copies. One in English and the other in the language it was communicated in. Most from the Middle East or Korea, some from China—any of our enemies. Can you read all those languages?"

Roman nodded, picked up one of the papers, and looked at. "This one only has one copy and its in English."

Johnson walked over and scanned the document. "That's from the UK. Britain."

For once Roman was confused.

"We keep an eye on everybody Roman, even our allies."

"Can't your computers figure out these codes?" Roman asked.

"Our computers," Johnson corrected. "They solve ninety-nine percent of the codes. You're here to confirm or deny the other one percent. As far as technology has come, it still gives us false negatives at times. Computers can only look for patterns in the ways they've been taught. Sometimes the human brain can be light years ahead of it. Especially a brain like your own. Now you better get some sleep. You've got a long day ahead of you tomorrow."

"A long day of what?" Roman asked.

"Your training. The physical part I mean."

Johnson said good night and left.

Even with the starlit sky and the gentle splashing of waves coming through his make shift window, Roman couldn't sleep. He flipped on the screen at the far

end of the room using the remote. Minutes later he was frustrated with boredom. He went to the box now on his floor and rifled through the files.

There were fifty, and Roman read them all. Read was too small of a word. He took in the images first from afar and then one by one. He studied and discarded all but one. His brain turned the letters in the sentences into columns and matrices, flipping them one way, reversing them the next, dissecting them last. He could see the letter “A” in every word stand magnified against the page, as if it left the paper and floated in mid-air. He could see whole words appear vertically, backwards, and upside down in the chaos of everyday rhetoric; evenly spaced in a binary pattern that used letters of the alphabet for numerical values; the words were virtually invisible to the naked eye. Roman circled the letters used in the code. He did a double- take and recalculated. This can’t be right, Roman thought. But the laws of science argued that it could.

## VIII

Agent Johnson entered the room at six A.M. The teenager he had expected to see sleeping with the covers pulled over his head was not there. Instead, Roman sat on the edge of the bed dressed with the new day’s clothes on, reading one of the manuals Johnson had thrown in the trash.

“I told you, you didn’t have to read those.” Johnson said.

“I know. I ran out of things to read. There was only one code imbedded in the files you gave me. It is very irregular,” Roman said.

“The code is irregular?” Johnson asked walking to the bed.

“No, the encoded statement was irregular. Look.” Roman showed the agent what he had copied to another sheet of paper.

Pullman, give your sister my thanks. Last night was great.

Johnson gave a half smile. “God damn Brits.”

“I don’t understand,” Roman said.

“When these genius types run out of work they start screwing with each other. It’s the Brit’s way of telling us they know we’re watching. They devised the code so the computers wouldn’t pick it up.”

“Who’s Pullman?”

“He’s a code breaker, one of ours. Lives in DC.” Johnson looked at the windows. “Still haven’t got sick of the scenery? Give it time, you’ll be through all of those damn holograms before it’s over with. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” Roman answered.

“It’s time to go see Ninja,” Johnson said.

Roman picked up his papers, organizing them neatly in the box. He followed Johnson to the door. “Ninja?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” The two walked down the shiny gray hallway, passing ten doors and then stopped. “Are you going to want to return home on Sunday?”

Johnson already knew the answer.

“No. I’d rather not ever return,” Roman said back.

“I just happen to have two tickets for seats at Wrigley on Sunday. Would you like to go to a game?”

Roman's face lit up. "Yeah, I'd like to go."

Johnson was glad to see Roman smile. Something he hadn't done in a good while, Johnson thought. He looked at the door in front of them. "What lies behind is no easy task. It's the physical part of your training, Roman. At times you'll want to quit. At times you'll want to die. But it's a necessary part of our job and someday it will save your life. Are you ready?"

Roman nodded, unshaken by the statement.

"I'll see you later." Johnson noticed that young Roman did not withdraw when he patted his shoulder this time.

The door slid open, exposing a sea of white, and Roman now knew the meaning of snow blindness. White pads like those under a basketball hoop in a gymnasium covered every wall. The floor was white as well, giving out underneath his footsteps, spongy but resilient. The room was a far cry from the dojos Roman had read about. There were no paper windows or wooden poles supporting the ceiling. There weren't countless weapons and devices holstered to the walls, or headgear and body armor in a special equipment chest. There was no sacred samurai sword adorned beneath the picture of the local sensei. There was only the white. Still Roman sensed he had walked into a world meant solely for combat.

He thought what hit him was a broom handle. He was mistaken. The weapon was made of ash, an inch in diameter, and it packed a strong wallop. He touched his nose, the nerve receptors only responding in his fingers. He saw a puddle of his bright red blood on the floor next to a brown stain that was no doubt that of the last poor agent in training. The water in his eyes cleared, and he saw the outline of his attacker. It wasn't an ancient Japanese warrior wearing a black pajama-like suit and matching hood, laced with throwing stars or nunchucks. Instead it was a simple bald man in arctic-style fatigues swinging a mutant kendo stick around his body with such velocity that it was hard to distinguish how many of the weapons there were.

"Rule number one," the man said, stopping his swing. "Never walk through a door unless you know what's waiting for you on the other side. I think its safe to surmise you've already mastered the essence of this rule."

He put his hand out to Roman. Roman pulled himself up with it, continuing to pinch his nostrils shut with his free hand.

"In real combat the enemy doesn't wait until you get a tissue out of mommy's purse to stop your nose bleed," the bald man said.

Again the stick swung. A bit more aware Roman backpedaled, but the stick slapped his shoulder its loud crack echoing through the room. Roman fell to the floor. A bruise in the shape of the weapon was already forming as Roman lifted the sleeve of his shirt.

"Rule number two. Never, ever, retreat from an object in motion. It's cowardly and lazy, and gives your enemy a psychological edge. But more importantly, it will get you killed. Stand here."

Roman got to his feet as quickly as he could.

"A whip, a stick, a punch are all acts of force that use leverage to their advantage. It doesn't matter which you use. They are all powerful and all

potentially deadly. But they are also all flawed. There is only one focal point of power on each and it lies at their end point. Think of a bat hitting a ball. You are always going to hit the ball farther with the fat part of the barrel than you are with the handle. The barrel is bigger, yes. But what makes the difference is the kinetic energy built up at the end of the bat as it accelerates. You retreated from my swing, in turn catching the brunt of its force. Why did you try to run when you saw the stick coming?"

"Reflex. My fight or flight response," Roman responded still rubbing his shoulder.

"Exactly. Our goal is to strengthen the fight and eliminate the flight." Roman's instructor dropped the stick to the floor. "I'm going to throw a punch at your temple as hard as I can as if I were trying to kill you. This time I want you to step into me as far as you can and cut down the distance. Remember my arms and legs generate the power of my punch, but it can only be transferred through my fist. All you have to do is avoid the fist. Ready?"

Roman nodded.

The man reared back, Roman stepped forward, entering the instructor's comfort zone. The fist came but only hit the air behind Roman's shoulder. The only force he felt was the bicep of the white-clad instructor on his shoulder.

"Congratulations, Roman. You've just passed your first test."

The man in white held out his hand hoping to shake.

"Thanks," Roman said, grasping his teacher's hand as he smiled.

A second later Roman was on his back. Roman looked up at the combat professor's upside-down face. He held Roman's wrist and now had his knee in the joint of Roman's elbow. If another ounce of pressure was applied, Roman feared his arm would snap in two.

The teacher's lips transformed from their frown posture to a straight line. As close as they could get to a smile, Roman imagined. "Rule number three. Never trust anyone. Enemies don't bow before a fight, nor do they shake hands after." He helped Roman off the mat.

"They call me Ninja. You're going to do fine here."

## IX

Even with the usual wind off the lake on that Sunday afternoon, it was warm for Wrigley in April. They sat in the bleachers and the sun was on them. Johnson drank Strohs in a thin paper cup. Roman noticed the agent only sipped the brew, making it last four innings at a time. He bought Roman popcorn and hot dogs. Roman marveled at how the breeze of stale beer was welcomed by the sensory mechanisms in his nose. Amazing how atmosphere could change everything. They cheered for the pinstripes. They watched as lovers kissed in the outfield bleachers. The drunks fought and were eventually escorted out of the friendly confines of the park. Two balls left the yard. Roman thought the second white projectile was headed right at his head, but the man two rows in front of him snagged it bare-handed. During the seventh inning stretch they listened as the celebrity of the day sang into the microphone of legend. The Northsiders clawed

and scratched but came up short, losing in the ninth to their bitter rivals, the Cardinals.

Roman held onto the program as he and the agent walked back to the car. They parked close; Johnson knew the guy that owned that lot well, and took care of him in return.

"You know I've got twelve of these things now, and not one of them have the Cubs winning in the box score," Roman said, holding up his thin magazine.

"0 and 12 huh? They don't call Cub fans the best in the world for nothing I guess," Johnson responded.

"Just once, I'd like to be present when they win," said Roman.

"Being a Cub fan is a lot like being a patriot I suppose. If war wiped out every person but one, America would live on. It's a hope for something bigger than just a country. It's hope for an idea."

Roman watched as the masses exited the stadium. Kids waving their giant stuffed number one fingers in the air, chewing on cotton candy, remnants of fudgesickles stuck to their cheeks. The littlest ones holding onto their parent's hands in fear of being swept away by the raging current of people.

"The last trip my parents took me on was to Wrigley," Roman said.

Johnson put his hand on the young man's shoulder as they walked to the car.

On the ride back to the barn, as if the last words from Roman's mouth had finally been transformed into coherent language by his brain, Johnson broke the silence. "My family died in the Twin Towers. My wife worked for an insurance company; she chose jumping over burning. Our son was at daycare. My son's body...." Johnson couldn't finish the sentence.

"I'm sorry," Roman responded.

"In all my travels, after all these years, there's only one thing I'm sure of, Roman. The statement that time heals all things is not accurate. A statement I'm sure you've heard from at least one person after your parents' passing. The truth is, time only dulls the pain. I think about my family at least once a day and even the good memories hurt. Everyday the pain gets a little less, but it never disappears altogether. I think the only way time could heal you completely is if you forgot their faces, if you banished them from your memory. I don't know about you, but I'll take the pain rather than not remembering them at all."

"Me too," Roman responded.

"You know Mr. Swivel, it's an odd situation we're in here. The pessimist would say that our similar stories and our meeting were coincidental, mere chance. The optimist would say that all things happen for a reason. I tend to believe the optimist."

"So do I," Roman replied.

The barn door opened and the car rolled down the concrete tunnel, passing under the neon lights as if they were traveling in the Chunnel from France to England. The alien surroundings that had engrossed Roman the first time were now beginning to feel more and more like home.



## Chapter 8

### Roman's Story Continued: "The stunt with the trains"

#### I

Roman found a strange ally in his insomnia. He was putting in eighteen-hour days, training the first half and breaking the never-ending stack of codes the latter half. In the beginning the codes had not been hard, but now they were even easier, becoming like the nighttime word searches of a retiree. The phrases leaped out from the jumbled letters and sentences like the bright bulbs of a Christmas tree. If he finished fifty, there would be sixty waiting the following evening. Still the waves and sand outside his window were his only company.

Ninja schooled him in the art of war. After Roman had mastered the basics from his teacher's one-on-one sessions, opponents were brought in. First one agent. Then two. The first week of live combat Roman lost every fight. Six months into the training Roman was defending six aggressors at a time, his opponents in full pads, Roman in only the clothes he'd put on that morning. There were no lessons on becoming one with the universe or getting in touch with one's inner energy. Ninja reminded him frequently that this was not a dojo and that kung fu masters existed only in the movies. Ninja demonstrated how relatively easy it was to gouge a man's eyes out or rip his ear off. Sometimes part of survival was killing, and Ninja showed Roman how relatively easy it was to snap a man's neck.

Johnson took Roman to the twelfth door down from his room once a week. It was a door Roman never wanted to enter. Paper silhouettes in the shooting gallery hung on their strings at fifty and one hundred yards. The Kimber sat on the shelf in front of him. The dulling over time that Johnson was so convinced would happen had not yet given Roman the courage to pick up the weapon or squeeze its trigger. Johnson did not press the issue.

After months of the weekly visits, Roman grew tired of just staring at the gun. He picked it up and emptied all twelve rounds into the heart and head of his paper attacker with pinpoint accuracy. He finished and set the gun back on the stand. That was the last time Johnson brought him to the gallery.

A year into the training, Johnson watched as Roman defeated the best of Ninja's students from all over the country. In frustration, Ninja would sometimes make them all go against Roman at the same time. Roman was always left standing.

"How's he progressing?" Johnson asked the instructor.

"The kid's a sponge. He picks this stuff up like most people take to riding a bike or roller-skating. Some guys no matter how well you train them are just not good fighters. The only thing you can do for them is pray. Young Swivel is not one of those people. He might be the best I've ever had."

"I thought I was the best you ever had?"

Ninja frowned without replying.

#### II

Sometimes Johnson would be gone days at time. But when Sunday came Johnson made it a point of spending it with his young protégé. Together they would go to church, visit the bowling alley, see a movie, or catch a ball game. Johnson taught Roman to drive, and not on your ordinary student driver courses. Johnson referred to the lessons as evasive maneuvering. Flooring the car to speeds in excess of one hundred miles an hour, power-braking at the drop of a dime, power-sliding one hundred and eighty degrees and spinning to face the opponent who in real life would be chasing you were all things that gave new meaning to the way a car handles. The days spent outside the barn seemed to recharge Roman, completely resting the complicated gray matter between his ears, and nourishing his soul with the much-needed blessings of every day life.

Almost a year to the day after Roman's arrival at the barn, Johnson showed up not with a cartload of documents as usual, but with a single manila envelope in his hand and a stressed look on his face. Roman had never before seen the urgency in his eyes so apparent. Johnson made small talk while trying to conceal his concern.

"Still haven't gotten bored with the view?" Johnson asked, looking out the windows at the same beach.

"I've never been to the ocean in person. I guess I can't get enough."

Johnson unwrapped the brown string holding the envelope closed. "This is a transcript from a video that one of our agents obtained yesterday. The man talking is Somane Kazar, a swingman for just about any terrorist group you can name. Although Kazar himself is uninterested in proving any fundamental points, he does work for the enemy from time to time, as long as they will match his price. He deals in weapons, recruitment, and most importantly information. I guess he's what you'd call a terror pimp. He's got huge drug operations, spanning from Syria to Colombia. He sets up funding for some terrorists groups in these areas by providing them with narcotics at wholesale prices. The CIA has reason to believe Kazar is setting up a big meeting between the local drug lords and some top-ranking terrorists from across the pond. They also believe that his words are coded, providing the date, time, and location of the meeting. We've had our best guys on this, not to mention the computers. They all say there is no visible code. That's where you come in."

Roman turned the envelope upside down, emptying its contents. A two-page manuscript dropped into his hand. Roman's eyes sped through the Arabic writing as he walked over to his desk.

"Take your time," Johnson said. "This might be the toughest one you've ever had. It's also probably the most important."

Roman didn't respond as he sat down at the desk, holding the papers as if they were the Dead Sea scrolls.

The sun had set on the projected paradise outside Roman's window. Light from the moon and the stars hinted at the moving waves of the ocean. The solitary lamp bent over Roman's desk illuminated the transcript. Roman wiped his hand over his face and pushed his fingers through his hair. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd read the document. The letters didn't jump out at him or seem highlighted as before. There was no code. Roman was sure of it. He took a

drink of the water on the desk next to him, not out of thirst, but out of frustration. He glanced at the flat-screen TV at the end of the room. Its glass was blank and black. He had only used it a handful of times. He looked again at the papers in front of him and again back at the screen. He picked up his phone and dialed Agent Johnson's number.

The scratchy voice on the other end answered, "Johnson."

"Do you have a copy of the actual videotape?" Roman asked.

"Yes. Why?" The voice wakening out of the depths of sleep.

"There's no code in these manuscripts in Arabic, Spanish, or any other language. I need to see the video."

"What time is it?"

"Two forty-five," answered Roman.

"I'll be there by four."

### III

Roman half-expected to see Johnson in his pajamas and slippers, but the Agent was groomed and dressed in a suit, as sharp as the day they met. He went over to Roman's VCR and inserted the tape. Roman sat on his bed with the manuscript attached to a clipboard and a pencil in his hand.

"I'm not sure how this is going to help", said Johnson. "The words on your pages match his spoken words exactly. It's been checked and re-checked."

"Just give me a second," Roman said, his voice a thousand miles away as he concentrated on the screen.

On the video, Kazar sat at a wide desk, smiling as he talked about all the schools he had built with his money and about the future donations he would make. He wore a designer suit instead of the turban and robes Roman had expected. He spoke for only four minutes.

"Notice anything strange?" Roman asked.

"I've watched this thing about a thousand times. No, I haven't noticed anything strange." Johnson suddenly felt like he was back in a college lecture hall.

"Our friend Kazar seldom blinks. In fact his eyes only close four times. His blinks are deliberate, always with both eyes. It's so simple it's genius. Play it back for me one more time," Roman said as he readied his pencil.

Johnson rewound the tape and started it again. "I'm lost," he Johnson said.

Kazar started to talk and Roman began to scratch with his pencil on the manuscript, his eyes jumping from the man's blinks to the Arabic words on the paper. Johnson stood over Roman's shoulder. Each time Kazar blinked Roman circled the corresponding word on the transcript. He looked the paper over as the taped ended.

The words circled on Roman's paper were the numbers three, ten, seventy-four, and five. "All numbers," Roman muttered to himself. Then he looked up.

"Do you know what you're looking at?" Roman asked the agent.

"Yeah, four numbers that don't mean a damn thing to me."

"They should," Roman began. "Because these numbers are your meeting place and your date."

Johnson just looked at Roman.

“You have a three and a ten close together on the page, and then a seventy-four and a five close together at the bottom.”

“Okay,” the agent said.

“What if it means “three-ten” as in March 10th? And what if it means “seventy-four and five” as in the coordinates 74 and 5?”

“March 10th, that’s two days from now.” The agent sat down at Roman’s computer, bringing up the NN’s search engine. Johnson typed 5 degrees south and 74 degrees east into the search engine. “That’s somewhere in the ocean.”

“You said there were Colombians involved. Try 5 degrees south and 74 west instead. That should place the location somewhere in South America,” Roman said.

Johnson typed in the coordinates. “It’s in the middle of a goddamn rain forest. No villages. No roads. Too inconvenient, even for our Colombian friends.”

“Try five degrees north then.”

Johnson typed again. This time a picture popped up along with a full description and directions. “Versailles, Colombia. An hour west of Bogotá. High elevation. It’s on some kind of plateau. Lots of fields. The description says the area is sparsely populated, mostly inhabited by horse ranchers.” Johnson looked up from the computer. “You’ve done real well Roman, but let’s celebrate after we catch the bastards. I’ve got to get the cavalry going.”

Johnson rose from his seat and pressed several numbers on his phone. “Yeah, it’s me. Roman figured it out. Do you have something to take this down with?”

#### IV

Days passed without word from Agent Johnson. Even though Roman was confident in his findings, it would have been nice to hear the results of the operation. Johnson wouldn’t be on the front lines, by any means. Neither would any American soldier, ghost or no: Colombian mercenaries under United States control would carry it out. Someone who likely had a grievance with the local drug lord in their backyard. The NN would want to take the terrorists alive, a daunting task for a group of mercenaries that was either in it just for the pay or had vengeance on their minds. Ironic was the fact that drug dealers weren’t the most skilled at violence anymore.

Roman ordered as many books as he could through his computer. Most times they brought five or six a week, a number that Roman could have finished in the first day. He slowed his supersonic eye down to a slow drag and still there weren’t enough books to occupy his mind. The worst thing that could happen to that mind was for it to lie empty and unfilled. He tried reading the books over again, but it wasn’t the same. He stared for hours on end at the ceiling and at his beach hologram. His mind ran at full speed whether it was occupied or not, yet into the vacuum crept images he wanted to forget. Images like Ed’s belt full tilt or the shotgun blowing off the backside of his father’s head. Roman dealt with the boredom, always did, but the voices, no matter how much he begged them to be silent, only became louder.

Tired of it, he grabbed the remote and flipped on the television that was more expensive than a used car. Any other teen would have been in heaven with all that technology at their fingertips, the freedom to sleep as much as they wanted, and no school to get up for. To Roman it was all just some synthetic excuse for a drug, manufactured in a factory, marketed by subliminals—a crude imitation of the lives and adventures that lived first on the written page and then in his mind.

Before Roman could think about the madness and repetition of the infinite number of twenty-four hour news channels, his eyes focused on an image on the screen. A helicopter view of a small village in flames. The caption in white letters beneath it read “near Versailles, Colombia”. Roman turned the volume up, the woman reporter’s voice dispersing through every speaker in his beach house.

“You’re looking at a small village, just outside Bogotá, Colombia. The location of an apparent attack on a meeting between wealthy drug lord Carlos Vega and a group of high-ranking officers from the terrorist group Nuram. Currently no survivors have been found. The attack was made by the local ranching community. An enormous amount of firepower was used, and it is still unclear who struck first. The Colombian government is denying all participation in the attack. Although many of the weapons lying on the ground were clearly property of the United States, the State Department denies any involvement, commenting that the war on terror is a joint effort with not only the countries of the world, but also its citizens. The White House released a similar statement commenting that it would have been nice to bring the terrorists in alive so they could face justice. We’ll keep you up to date as this breaking story unfolds.”

Roman flipped to another news channel, which had a live camera on the ground. The reporter’s voice, which warned that the images about to be seen were of a violent nature and viewer discretion was advised, faded to silence in Roman’s ears as he concentrated on the images displayed on the screen in front of him. Not only was the village on fire but some of the outlying forest was as well. Several horses lay on the ground unmoving. Bodies soaked with blood scattered the fields. A young girl no older than twelve sat on the ground with her arms around an older man wearing a straw hat. She was holding his head up as she hugged him. Roman read the words on her lips. The girl’s mouth moved almost constantly, forming the word “Padre” over and over.

Roman pressed the remote, freezing the images of the faces on the screen before him. Roman stared at the all too familiar sight for several minutes. His stomach rumbled but before he could stand up, vomit splattered on his shoes. His legs felt numb as he walked to the bathroom. He retrieved a washcloth hanging next to the sink, not recognizing the pale face that looked back at him in the mirror. His eyes blurred with tears as he cleaned up the mess he’d made. He stood up and looked at the beach outside his windows. Roman walked to the hologram controls and turned the beach off.

The beatings from Ed had never produced as much as a salty teardrop from his eyes nor had the struggles in Ninja’s combat room. The last time Roman cried had been at his parents’ funeral. He had endured much, facing it head on and surviving. That night everything in his life hit him at once. Roman sobbed for the

two years that had passed. He sobbed for the twelve-year old girl in Versailles, Colombia.

## V

Agent Johnson arrived back at the barn two days later. In his hands he carried two box seat tickets at Wrigley—a toast to Roman, a celebration for the man who'd made the success of the mission possible. Two of Numar's leaders had been killed at the meeting. Sure it wasn't as good as getting them for interrogation first, but security was built on the death of one enemy at a time. Whether it was done by lethal injection or bullet, the result was the same.

Johnson's smile was wiped clean at the sight before him when he entered the room. Roman's windows were blank and black. After a thorough search of the room, Johnson picked up the remote from Roman's bed and turned on the TV. The image of the grieving girl was still frozen on the screen, an image Johnson had seen on the news as well

Johnson checked first in Ninja's room. He went over the security tapes from the night before. Roman never came out of his room. He checked Roman's room log. The last time the door was opened was when the mailroom opened it a day earlier. Johnson resisted the surge of panic that gripped the back of his neck. Roman physically making an escape from the barn was impossible on his own. The only way out was through the elevator and Roman's eye would not open the doors because his iris print was not programmed in. Even if he did get the elevator open it wouldn't go anywhere. The elevator was magnetically powered, so there were no cables to climb. None of the sensors in the ventilation shafts had been tripped and besides, the fan blades at the ends of the shafts were too close together for even Roman's skinny butt to fit through. Johnson reviewed the tapes again.

Roman had vanished into thin air.

After a two-hour search of every square inch of Bravo including the parking garage, everyone at the barn gathered in one of the offices. Johnson paced back and forth. "Somebody say something. The man can't just disappear. He's not on tape. The security system checks out. Think, people. Think!"

The twenty or so people that filled the small room looked at each other with blank stares. Ninja spoke. "This is one of the most secure locations in the world. The security system says he's still here but we know he's not. One of us has got to be wrong."

Johnson shook his head.

"Well it's not us," Agent Shultz popped in from the back of the room. "This place isn't like trying to find someone in the MGM Grand. It's relatively small. We've searched everywhere. The cameras even show he's not here. Maybe the cameras missed something."

"Impossible," Johnson replied.

"Impossible that they missed something, but what if we're looking for the wrong person?" Ninja commented.

"Camouflage?" Johnson asked.

"Yes but not in the normal sense. He obviously didn't steal our clothes. That wouldn't have helped him get past the iris scan anyway," Ninja said.

“I think we’re on the right track though,” Shultz stated.

Johnson’s pacing came to a halt. “Are we missing somebody in here?”

Ninja looked around the room and then at Johnson. Their eyes met and confirmed what they had each figured out.

“We’re missing Pinkston. George Pinkston,” Ninja said.

“It’s his day off,” another agent commented.

Agent Johnson closed his eyes and let out a slow sigh of frustration. His words came even slower. “Unbelievable. The kid really is a genius.”

## VI

George Pinkston wasn’t an agent like his other colleagues. He had retired thirteen years before from the post office. When the NN saw his impeccable record as a post master and his spotless record as a citizen, they tracked him down and offered him a job working a couple hours a day in Bravo’s mail room. Sure there were things George had to learn, like scanning for bombs and biological weapons, but the job was easy as a pie he told his family. The only incoming mail they ever received was from other NN bases. It was the only outfit in the world that never received junk mail. It was hard to solicit a place that never even existed. Bravo had no mailing address, so George’s main job was to drive everyday to the post office, check the unmarked PO Box the NN used, and mail the few items that were being sent out. George knew better than to ask any questions and went about his work like a hobby enthusiast goes about collecting. It was just something to get him out of his apartment and out in the real world, something to knock the stink off him he often said. The agents liked him. He was the one guy they could talk to about things other than their work. He was their one link to the real world.

So when they called him in on his day off, George was a little uneasy, fearing the worst. Had he sent mail to the wrong place? Had he forgotten or missed something at the post office? Heavens, he hoped not. How bad would it look for a former postmaster to misplace a parcel of mail?

Every agent on duty in Bravo was in the room when he arrived. And although he never knew exactly what those agents did all day, he felt that all of them being gathered together in the same room with him in the middle was not a good thing. He was instantly transported back in time to his school days. To the only time he’d had to visit the principal’s office—for kissing Penelope in the coatroom—four days into his first grade year. A few swats on the fanny sounded pretty good right about now.

Johnson was the only agent standing. He looked at George with his arms crossed, much like the principal had on that long-ago fall day. George looked around the room at the people he considered friends. None of them were smiling though. He could feel the ends of his fingers twitching.

“Just relax George. We only want to talk to you for a minute or two,” Johnson said unfolding his arms.

“Am I in trouble? I’m truly sorry if I lost somebody’s mail. I’ve never done anything that stupid in my entire life,” George said, trying to make eye contact with everyone in the room.

“You’re not in trouble, George, and you haven’t misplaced anything. You’re a very good mail guy. Too good maybe.”

“Too good?”

“You know who Roman is right?”

“Yes, I talk to him several times a week. He’s a very nice young lad.”

“Did he mail anything in the last couple of days?”

“Why yes he did. The only reason I remember is that the box he wanted mailed was so heavy. I had to use a courier service because the box was too big for U.S. mail.”

“What was in the box?”

“Several other smaller boxes. He told me the night before he wanted to send all of his baseball cards home and that if he was down at Ninja’s he would leave the address on his desk.”

“And?”

“When I got there the next morning Roman was gone but the box was there, already packed. I picked up a couple of the littler boxes inside the big box and they were heavy, filled with baseball cards just as the lad had said. He left the address on his desk too. I had to tape the big box shut at the top. No big deal, I just figured he didn’t have any tape. Like I said before, I had to get the dolly because of the weight of the box. Did I do something wrong?”

“No George, not on purpose. You were just doing what we told you to do. The only problem is that when you sent that box off, you also sent Roman.”

If George had been in a cartoon a giant light bulb would have appeared over his head. Instead he scratched the whiskers on the end of his chin. “I never thought to look for somebody trying to mail themselves. Never thought to look under the small boxes either. Hell I even scanned it, but only for the usual bomb residue or biological hazard. Our equipment isn’t designed to look for humans. Sorry.”

Johnson ignored the apology, focusing his attention on the other agents. “We’ve got to find him.”

Agent Shultz spoke, “Where do you think he mailed himself to?”

“I’ve got my log right here,” George began. “Let’s see here...”

“It’s irrelevant where he mailed himself,” Johnson interrupted. “He would’ve gotten out of the box the first chance he had.”

“The weight of the box was just as heavy when I took it to the courier service,” George added.

“You think he might have tried to go back home?” Ninja asked.

“His home life was shit. But he might try to contact his foster mother.” Johnson looked at the ceiling as if the answer might be written on it. “If I were Roman where would I go? Where would I go?”

“What about the money?” Shultz asked.

Without responding Johnson flipped open his cell and began pressing numbers. The phone picked up, but there was no voice on the other end. “This is Agent Johnson. Access code five nine eight six three eight nine five tango three.”

“How can I help you, Agent Johnson?” the female voice replied.

“I need a freeze put on a back account.”

“City, state, and bank name?”

“Chicago, Illinois. First Bank of Chicago.”

Johnson heard the keystrokes through his phone.

“Account holder’s name?”

“Last name Swivel, S, W, I, V, E, L. First name Roman.”

“One moment please,” the voice said, accompanied by a flurry of more keystrokes.

“I’m sorry Agent Johnson. That account was closed earlier today by cashier’s check.”

“You can’t freeze the transfer when the check is cashed?”

“I’m sorry. The bank’s computer system shows the account balance as zero. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Shit,” Johnson said still thinking. “Can you tell me who the check was written to?”

“One moment.” More key strokes. “The check was written to a Gale Pentoch in the amount of one million six hundred thousand fifty dollars and forty cents. Can I help with anything else?”

“No. Thanks.” Johnson shut the phone.

## VII

Gale Pentoch exited the shower, grabbing her olive-green robe off the hook next to the mirror. She wrapped her long brown hair in a matching towel; drops of water fell on the floor as she performed the task. Gale grabbed her make-up bag out of the cabinet above the sink and felt the cold air rush in as she opened the bathroom door. Ed lay passed out on the couch, already through his first bottle at ten o’clock on a Saturday morning.

When they’d first been married, Gale did her makeup and hair in the bathroom. Now she preferred the bedroom. The mirror was bigger and there was more room to maneuver. She took her robe off and looked into it. Her body was still the same shape it had been when she went to Prom. The beatings had started probably two years into their marriage. Was it the beatings or was it the drinking? There had been so many occasions of both through the years, it was hard to remember which was first. Never, as a little girl using her mother’s lipstick and fooling with her blush, did she think she would have to use the makeup for more than beauty purposes. Now it was for camouflage. She had mastered the art. Not in several years had she heard anyone ask what the bruises were on her face. The tears that used to fall at first had long since dried. The purple and green marks on her cheeks, arms, and stomach failed to bring any emotion as they were reflected back at her now. The bruises on her stomach used to bother her the most, but now they were just part of the landscape on the path of life. The large mirror was attached to the top of her wide dresser. The two-piece set her grandmother had given her when she was married did a great job of exposing every injury, and likewise aided her in covering them. She’d always had an exquisite sense of fashion. Spending a few extra minutes getting ready seemed like a fair trade for being able to wear the clothes she liked.

The ritual was completed in the time it took most women just to do their hair. Gale gave herself one final look over, twirling around a bit while keeping her head toward the mirror. The movement of the air lifted the bottom of her dress. For a brief moment she was Marilyn Monroe.

Gale walked back through the living room. Ed's snoring was louder now, and his stench clashed against her sweet perfume. She picked up the empty bottle as she entered the kitchen. Gale fetched the orange juice out of the fridge, resisting the urge to grab the Vodka as well. She shut the door and noticed a check taped to it. She put the orange juice on the counter beside the refrigerator and pulled the check off. Her knees weakened as she counted the number of digits in the check for a second time. She glanced back at the living room, then sensed someone behind her. Roman sat at the kitchen table with one finger over his lips. She walked over and hugged him.

"Don't worry, he can't hear over his drunken snores. I missed you," she said.

"You understand my reasons for not visiting, I hope," Roman said.

Gale said nothing.

"I'll get right to the point," Roman began. "I had the bank issue the check in your name because of circumstances beyond my control. I was hoping that we could split it."

"I don't know what to say, Roman."

"You don't have to say anything." Roman took two slim cardboard pieces out of his flannel pocket. "These tickets are to Florida. Panama City. I know your sister doesn't live far from there. You'll have a fresh start and enough money to last the rest of your life if used wisely. The train leaves in an hour."

"What about you? What about working for the government?"

"The government and I had a difference of opinion on some things. I'm taking an early retirement. I'll explain on the way. After we get down there, we'll wire the money to a secure account out of government control. After that I don't know."

Gale looked down at the check again and then back at the living room. After all she'd been through, Ed still had some kind of unexplainable control over her.

"You have to leave him Gale," Roman said.

"I know," she said and regrouped her thoughts. "I've got to get some things out of the bedroom."

"There's no time. If you want to go, we go now."

Before Gale could respond Ed came around the corner. He shuffled his feet along the kitchen tile as if he was to weak to lift one in front of the other. He went to the liquor cabinet and poured another glass. He looked Gale over from head to toe, his demon whiskey eyes in the place of those he was born with.

"You goin' out whorin'? In here preparing your sales pitch or what? You better practice bitch, no man would waste a dime for your whore ass," Ed said and then gulped down the glass in one swallow. He wiped his lips and finally noticed Roman sitting at the kitchen table.

"Well if it isn't the prodgical son."

“It’s prodigal.”

“Oh, mister genius ran off and comes back with a little lip on him, huh?” Ed said and then turned to Gale.

“What, you wantin’ to fuck mister genius now?” Ed placed the glass on the counter and grabbed Gale by the wrist. “I’m puttin’ a stop to your whorin’.”

“Let her go Ed,” Roman said.

“You missed your ass beatings didn’t ya boy?” Ed let go of Gale’s wrist and shuffled towards Roman, grinning out of one side of his mouth.

Roman stood.

Ed’s swing came slower than Roman remembered. He stepped toward the drunk and ducked at the same time. From his knees Roman took Ed’s arm and bent it the wrong way with all his strength. The arm snapped like a dead limb on a tree. Blood spewed across the room hitting the wall in a narrow stream, like shots from a squirt gun. Ed fell to his knees, arm limp and hanging the opposite way it was designed. As pale as he was, Ed still lost color in his face. He reached over with his other arm and felt the jagged edge of the exposed bone.

Gale dropped the check on the floor and covered her mouth. Ed started to shake violently, turning in circles on his back.

“We’ve got to go.” Roman walked over and picked up the check, placing it in his front pocket and putting his arm around Gale’s waist. He walked her past the broken drunk. Ed looked as if he were in the throes of withdrawal.

“I’ve got to help him,” she said.

“We don’t have time. Johnson has surveillance across the street. We have to exit out the back door, run across the alley, and walk through that apartment building on the other side. I’ve got a cab waiting on the street in front of it.” Roman pulled her to the door, but as he opened it, Gale slipped out of his grasp and ran to the phone.

Before he could yell for her to stop, she pressed 9-1-1. Roman ran over and hung up the receiver. Ed’s convulsions continued, his entire shirt now soaked with blood. Roman gripped her chin and directed her eyes toward his.

“He’s in shock that’s all. They’ll send someone out when they trace the call, even if you didn’t say anything. He’ll be all right. Johnson will be in this place in a matter of seconds. I’m going with or without you.”

Roman let go of her face then and ran for the door. Gale looked down at Ed and then followed.

## VIII

Johnson sat in the car across the street from the Pentoch’s. Through his earpiece he heard the dispatch for the 9-1-1 call. Seconds later he was in the house, scanning the living room and then making his way to the kitchen. Johnson was unmoved by the sight on the floor. He sidestepped Ed and looked out the back door. The apartment door across the alley closed. Johnson ran back to his car.

## IX

The taxi drove up to the front entrance of the Amtrak station. Roman led Gale into the station. She was in a kind of shock of her own, silent since they left

the house. Roman looked down at his watch—five minutes until departure time. The speakers in the station announced last call as they boarded the train. Roman led her to their seats. They sat, Gale by the window, Roman on the aisle.

“He’ll be all right. They automatically send somebody when you call. I understand that no matter how much you hate him, you also love him. I promise you this is for the best.”

Gale was silent.

Roman patted his pocket, reassuring himself he still had the check. He looked around at the passengers, scanning for anything out of the ordinary. Roman looked across Gale out the window at the ticket window. Turning toward the train was Agent Johnson, with ticket in hand. The agent walked passed the window and boarded several cars back.

The conductor came over the intercom and went over the usual rules and regulations. The train began to roll. Roman took the check out of his pocket and stared at it. He looked over at Gale who was still in another world, and grabbed her hand. The gesture seemed to snap her back to reality.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Johnson’s on the train. He’s a few cars back. It won’t take him long to find me.” Roman laid the check flat in her palm. “I want you to go to the bathroom and don’t come out for at least twenty minutes. He doesn’t care about the money anyway.”

“Can’t you reason with him?”

“I wish it were that simple.”

Gale looked down at the check. “I can’t take this money Roman.”

“You are going to have to. The check is in your name. Think of it as a reward for the hell you’ve been through. I’ll find you some day.”

Gale hugged him with a firm grip. “I’m sorry Roman. For everything I mean.”

“I know.” Roman got up and walked toward the front of the train.

## X

By the time Johnson had checked all of the cars, the mono was at half speed. His search turned up empty, not surprising considering who he was dealing with. He found Gale in her seat on a second sweep of the train but didn’t even bother to ask where Roman was. The bathrooms were empty. He checked every seat. There was no outgoing mail to hide in this time. *If he’s not in the train then he’s outside it.* Johnson looked at the ceiling.

Johnson climbed the ladder outside the front passenger car and peeked his head over, mindful of an ambush. He looked down the long silver tops of the cars. Roman stood on the very last one, his flannel blowing in the wind like a cape.

Roman watched as Johnson pulled himself up. The agent walked at a good clip with perfect balance. The train increased speed and the cars passed under his feet faster. Johnson walked across the rooftops as if he were on a treadmill, jumping from one car to another. His pace only quickened as he pulled out his cell phone and began to talk. In the distance another train sped in their direction on the adjacent track.

Johnson made his last jump to Roman's car. The agent's feet landed solid, mimicking the dismount of a gymnast. Roman stood at the other end of the car. The wind from the train blew in his face.

"I'm not concerned with anything before this moment," Johnson shouted over the rushing air. "What matters is what happens now."

"I'm done," Roman yelled back.

"That's not an option and you know it." Johnson walked closer.

"You're going to have to kill me."

"I can't do that either. You're too valuable. We're on the same team you and I."

The train's brakes caught, no doubt a direct result of the agent's phone call. Johnson and Roman both held out their arms, balancing with baby steps, trapeze artists on a high wire.

"Every field agent from Bravo will be waiting for you when this train stops. Your best odds are going back in and waiting. We'll get your money returned and go back to Bravo like none of this ever happened. The work you do is invaluable to the safety of this country. You must see that."

Johnson walked closer, closing the gap to a couple of feet. The train on the opposite track sped faster, now just a hundred yards away.

"What I saw was a girl wondering why her father had to die because of something I did."

The slowing Amtrak and the faster cargo train passed each other, going in opposite directions. The air rushed harder between the locomotives. Roman balanced himself again.

"The price of freedom is high," Johnson screamed at two feet away.

"You're right, it is."

And with that Roman jumped. Johnson lunged forward trying to grab him. Roman's flannel ripped as the agent's hand wrapped around it. Roman landed hard on the middle of the last boxcar of the cargo train. His hands searched for something to grab onto. Instead, he slid on his belly toward the end of the car, his nails digging into the slick roof. A second later he was off, in mid-air.

His right hand hit the top of the first rung of the ladder on the back of the car. Roman held tight, the momentum almost pulling his shoulder out of socket. His body slammed against the car; legs dangling in the air. With all his effort he swung his legs over to the ladder.

Johnson watched the distance between trains widening as his train was slowing just before a complete stop. He shook his head in disbelief and flipped his phone open once again.

## XI

Johnson and friends arrived at Roman's stopped train thirty minutes later, scouring the surrounding area. A small patch of blood and another piece of torn flannel snagged on the last car was the only evidence Roman had been there. Johnson rubbed the flannel between his fingertips. Footprints pressed in the mud next to the track and then disappeared into the nearby tree line. Johnson looked out over the horizon. The world looked big against it.

## XII

In a twenty-four hour period I'd seen Roman change before my eyes—from a genius geek janitor to a fearless gladiator—and now as his story ended, I saw him as a man that had lived a lifetime already. My usual ranting and bitching seemed ridiculous up against Roman's struggles. I had the sudden urge to go home and hug my parents and tell them how much I loved them. I thought about how many times I left the house without saying a word to either of them.

Heather was wiping her tears as we sat in the silence. The water works had erupted several times throughout the story. Her eyes were like raccoon eyes, smudged and black. Roman was a monotone speaker throughout his tale, his voice unwavering even during the parts of his parents' deaths and his beatings from Ed. With each passing word Heather drifted further into the story, living the experiences right along with Roman. He continued to look out the window well after the talking stopped, a window now lit by the dawning of the sun. Heather walked up behind Roman and wrapped her arms around his waist.

She laid her head on the back of his shoulder and kissed his cheek. "I'm so sorry,"

"I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off of me," Roman said, then stopped. "I've wanted to tell somebody for so long, but there just wasn't anybody that wanted to listen."

"What about Agent Johnson?" Heather asked.

"I ran across him in Iowa. I went to visit my parents' graves on the anniversary of their death. I figured Johnson would never look there on that date, thinking I was too smart to show up on such an obvious day. I was wrong. I barely escaped. That's how I got this arm injury."

"So you beat his ass?" I asked.

"No, it was more like cat and mouse," Roman answered.

"Does he know where you are now?" Heather asked.

"No, his trail has run cold. He's just sitting and waiting for me to pop up somewhere, to re-enter my old life. He has nowhere to look as far as records go. They turned me into a ghost and it's going to take me coming back to life for them to pick up my scent again."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like going to genius conventions in Chicago with Mr. Buttworst," Heather interjected.

"Exactly," Roman affirmed.

"How come he can't have that chick on the other end of his cell phone use that super computer of hers and find your name in the school records?" I asked.

"She can't just type in my name and search a country-wide data base with every high school student in it. There is no such database. They would have to search each individual school separately. That would take more time and effort than they're willing to give. They've got bigger issues to deal with anyway."

"How'd you enter Collingston High School with no social security number?" Heather asked.

“You’d be surprised what a few letters to the local court house, the social security office, and the state government can accomplish,” Roman said.

Roman turned from the window, as if a hypnotist snapped his fingers and brought him out of his trance. He looked at the clock and then at me on the couch. “School starts in an hour. Are you going to be able to make it?”

*School.* It sounded ridiculous too. “Fuck, I guess,” I said. “I gotta bust ass home and get half-way cleaned up.”

“Me too,” Heather said.

I tried to get up from the couch, but my ribs felt like splintered glass. Roman held out his right hand and pulled me up.

The three of us made our separate ways to the same crimson-brick prison: the catcher who looked more like a horse jockey than a professional ball player, the doctor trapped in the body of a super-model, and the warrior-genius who did the work of a janitor.



## Chapter 9

### Found and Broken Spirits

#### I

At lunch all eyes were on me as I walked to our table. I looked back one-eyed at a few of the faces, but the stares made me uneasy. I could feel them on me the way you feel gnats around you on a summer day. People laughed and whispered; I even heard a few claps. But I was just the under-card, John the Baptist in the desert before the real deal, batting practice before the game.

It happened just as I sat down at the table. First, it was a few seniors next to our table. Then it was their whole table. You could hear the sound of chairs scooting on the concrete floor, one by one. The masses rose throughout the cafeteria like a wave at a baseball game. Only the wave held firm as it reached the far end of our lunchtime confines. The clapping followed and continued for a good five minutes. There were no speeches or half-time buzzer beaters, but still the masses were on their feet giving the man of the hour a standing ovation, the same man they rooted against not hours ago.

I hopped on top of my chair so I could see above the crowd and joined the clapping. In front of the southeast double doors, in front of the stairwell, stood the janitor. He was walking with tray in hand and backpack over his shoulder. He slowed his pace at the cheering and looked to see what the applause was for. His eyes scanned the far end of the room and then moved toward our table. By the time he'd surveyed the cafeteria, it was evident that every smile was for him. Roman stopped in his tracks, balancing the two cartons of milk on the edge of his tray. His cheeks blushed, but the clapping continued to get louder until it was deafening. The prison guards scurried through the crowd searching for a fight and were at a loss when they found nothing. They could only look and wonder. I did, however, see off in the corner Mr. Buttworst clap a few soft claps to himself. In all my years of prison life I'd never seen such a thing.

Roman began his slow walk to our table with his head down in embarrassment. The masses pounded on their tables and shook anything that would make noise. Roman looked for a seat but our table was packed. Sam and Pick scooted an empty table up to ours and connected the two. Heather and a few cheerleaders pulled up the chairs. Roman looked around again wanting the ovation to stop. He put his tray on the table but the noise grew louder. He raised his hand as if to say enough but the applause continued. Not until Roman sat did the crowd sit. And not until he spooned up his applesauce did the hands stop. I patted him on the back. Heather kissed his cheek from the other side.

I looked over at my old table and now realized why we were so packed. There wasn't a soul at Johnny's table. They were all over here. Part of the winning team I guess. For the first time in four years the Killer had a legitimate reason for not being at school. It wasn't because he came down with the flu after another nick in the popularity armor. Johnny for the first time was physically unable to get out of bed. He and Jack could have been roommates at the hospital

for all I knew. One thing was for sure, whatever mind control Johnny used to have over these people was broken.

Roman ate fast, leaving little time for conversation with anybody, wishing the moment would just go away. The rest of our group had permanent smiles glued to their faces. The volume was lower now, almost like a constant hum. The ovation sucked the teenage energy right out of the crowd. For once lunch was peaceful.

Brunno walked up to our tables as fidgety as a crack whore with Tourette's. Before he made it to Roman, Sam Peterman grabbed his arm. He pulled out a box of adult diapers and sat it on Brunno's tray. Brunno squinted reading the labeling on the box over and over. Finally the words registered, and he threw the box on the floor. He stopped behind Roman, rocking side to side like he was barefooted on hot asphalt. He said nothing.

Roman continued to eat until he felt the presence behind him. He turned around with raised eyebrow. Brunno looked down at his tray avoiding eye contact with Roman. The cafeteria went silent.

"Can I help you Brunno?" Roman asked.

Brunno's feet tapped faster and his head went back and forth. In a very soft un-Brunno like voice he said, "I was won-won-wondering if I could sit with you guys?"

Roman stood up from his chair. The cafeteria took a collective inhale. Roman stared at him until Brunno met his eyes. "You don't have to ask me where you can sit. This isn't *my* cafeteria."

"Th-----anks Roman." Brunno started to walk to the less-populated end where Heather had pulled up the chairs.

Roman put his hand on Brunno's shoulder and opened his other out toward the seat where he'd just been sitting. Brunno sat and Roman retrieved one of the empty seats. Smiles lasted the rest of the day.

## II

By the last bell, I could barely keep my good eye open. I looked at the clock, realizing I'd been awake for thirty-two hours straight. The adrenaline rush from the Hollow had kept me going through the day, Roman's tale had fueled me through the night, but now the tank was empty. On the way to the Pinto I swore I was sleepwalking on several occasions. It felt like it was the last few miles hiking up to Pike's Peak. I turned the corner of the prison to find that my car was not alone.

Sally was leaning on the hood with her books up against her chest. The naughty smile had resurfaced. Before I could say a word she dropped her books, wrapped her arms around me, and put her tongue in my mouth.

She pulled away when my kissing wasn't as enthusiastic as hers. "What's wrong? Are you pissed I wasn't there for you after the fight? I got swept away in the crowd and you know I couldn't go over to Roman's on account of my parents."

"I know. I'm not pissed. It just hurts to open my mouth. I think Johnny broke my fucking jaw. The only thing I could eat at lunch was that goddamn lemon jello they always serve."

“I bet I could make it feel better. Plus my mouth is fine,” Sally said as she put my finger her mouth. “My parents aren’t home.”

I took my finger back. “Oh no, I’m not fallin’ for that shit again. Let’s go to my place.”

### III

In my bedroom it was the usual routine. Clothes flew and in seconds we were under my covers. This was it. I was sure of it. She’d never been like this, so aggressive. Just before the eagle had landed...“Oh no.”

I looked out my window next to my bed, making sure Pops wasn’t home. No car. “What now? You can’t do it with an injured guy or what. Here look.” I pulled open the dresser next to my bed and produced a patch. I’d been a pirate for Halloween back in the day and for some reason kept the eye cover. I put it on. “See, now you’re doing it with a pirate, not a hospital patient.”

Sally got out of bed and gathered up her clothes. “My period is starting.”

Before I could speak she was in the bathroom

I was still clinging to the idea I might get something out of this deal. The comment about her mouth working fine kept finding its way back into my mind. I knew the moment she re-entered I could forget about it. I gave it one last pathetic try. “We can still mess around can’t we?”

“I want to go home. I need to get home. You don’t understand. I just feel so dirty.”

I put my clothes on and drove her home with my best happy face. The sad part was I really wasn’t mad. I was slowly getting conditioned to the fact that this is how things went for me. There were no rude comments toward her, and I talked the entire way. I felt like my Pops driving with my mom.

I hit the bed when I got home. Don’t remember one thought after my head hit the pillow. I slept that night from four o’clock until time to go to school the next morning.

### IV

Roman won the no-sleep category. He had been up for forty hours straight. He didn’t have the zombie tendencies that I did. Roman didn’t require a lot of sleep anyway, or was it that he *couldn’t* sleep? Anyway Roman had already finished his assigned cleaning duties and was now looking for extra things to do. He decided to polish all of the brass keyholes on the classroom doors with a new industrial cleaning agent the district had recently purchased. He was instantly reminded of all the late night miracle liquid commercials that graced the small screen. The ones that could bring back an eighty-year-old sink that had been sitting in a junk yard for the last decade and make it look as if it were right out of the store. To his surprise the stuff worked. You had to scrub a little harder than the guys on TV, but at least it worked.

Halfway through the keyholes Roman heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He stopped the polishing expecting to see one of the other janitors. Heather stood

at the end of the hall holding a basket. Roman put his supplies in his cart and made his way down to her.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine. I knew you had a break at ten and thought maybe I could treat you to a snack."

Roman said nothing, continuing to smile like a little boy on his first bike ride without the training wheels. Heather produced a blanket from her picnic basket and spread it on the floor. It had red and white checkers.

"We can go in one of the rooms if you want." Roman said.

"This is a picnic, silly. You have to sit on the ground."

"I'm sorry, how rude of me." Roman sat down Indian style on the quilt as Heather began to pull out the basket's contents. She set the objects in front of Roman and then sat down herself. "What do we have here?"

"Peanut butter and jelly, grapes, lemonade in a can, and a Ho-Ho."

"Outstanding," Roman said.

Heather laughed. "Not quite the French cuisine you prepared at your place."

Roman took a bite of the sandwich, chewed, and struggled to get the peanut butter off the roof of his mouth with his tongue. When he finally swallowed it, he popped the lemonade and drank it down. "There's a time for all foods. You can't eat French food on a picnic. This is perfect."

They ate the remainder of the food, looking into one another's eyes the entire time. Heather lay down on the blanket and stared up at the ceiling. Roman lay next to her, propping himself up with his elbow on the floor so he could still see her face. Roman fought a yawn, but eventually it won.

"You haven't slept yet have you? That's amazing. Maybe I can at least give you a little peace. Close your eyes."

Roman shut his eyes.

"If you try hard enough you can feel the sun on your face. The breeze through your hair. The trees rustling in the distance," Heather said.

"I hear a creek in the background and birds chirping. A bee buzzed by my ear but didn't stop. I'm bare footed and the grass is coming up between my toes because my feet are hanging off the blanket. I can smell lilacs in the wind," Roman said.

Heather smiled. "It's almost winter outside but in here it's spring. I can still taste the grapes in my mouth, and they make my cheeks hurt a little bit from the sweetness. I'm lying next to the gentlest person in the entire world. I've got a warm tingle in my belly because I know he's going to kiss me and I can't wait."

Roman moved his lips to hers. She put her arms around his neck making sure he wouldn't pull away. They went on for several minutes in that imagined spring meadow, with the sun overhead, the only two people on earth. Until a person standing over them cleared her throat.

Roman looked up to the thick lenses and yellow eyes of Boss Chatterling. His first thought was of anger, not at her, but at himself for not hearing her footsteps and for letting his guard down. His second thought was he was going to

be fired, right there, lying down on the job. Boss Chatterling looked at the hallway and then down at Roman.

“Swivel, I don’t have to remind you that you’re on the clock and that every bit of your work better be done before you go on any picnics.”

“No ma’am.”

Chatterling looked at the keyhole on the door closest to her and then the next and then the next. The brass gleamed like it had on her first day on the job all those decades ago.

She looked down at Roman again with her sullen no-nonsense face. A smile tried to break through but she cut it short. “As you were, janitor.”

Roman heard her footsteps turn the corner and retreat down the stairs. Heather pulled him to her again.

Heather pressed her lips to his and spoke. “She was a janitor when my mother went to school here. Why does she work the night shift?”

Roman’s breaths were heavy in-between kissing and talking. “Nobody knows. It’s like she never sleeps. I think she works every shift. She’s like God.”

The answer must have been adequate. Heather slid on top of him. Roman’s back ached, pushed against the marble of the hallway; the thin checkered blanket was no cushion at all. It was a different kind of ache, though, and Roman could never remember feeling so good. His hands made their way under her loose sweatshirt, his fingertips scaled against her smooth back. His lips touched her neck as well as her lips. Their breathing got louder, but before the picnic escalated any further Heather pulled away from his mouth.

She still straddled him in her tight blue jeans, looking directly into his eyes. She wore her hair pulled back but a few wild strands had fought their way free and covered her left eye. She puckered her lips, attempting to blow the pests back to the top of her head. Finally, she balanced herself and brushed them away with her hand. Heather giggled, kissed him, and they continued until Roman’s shift was over.

## V

Johnny the Killer hobbled to his table with the arthritic walk of an eighty-year-old man. His eyes were like a raccoon’s, and he carried his tray with one arm on account of his other arm being in a sling. He was back just two days after the Hollow. He was obviously physically able to come to school. What surprised me is that he was mentally able. Johnny the Killer was not mentally tough—for him to face the crowd after an embarrassment like that was astonishing.

But this was not Johnny the Killer. There were no jubilant smart-ass remarks flying across the cafeteria. There were no head raises to greet his legions of fans. He didn’t point fingers at people or threaten them. He walked with his head down. Worst of all for Johnny the Killer, no one was looking back at him. The little freshman cheerleaders weren’t creaming themselves and the underclass boys weren’t moving heaven and earth to clear an aisle for him. I think I was the only one that even noticed him that day.

As if Johnny’s luck wasn’t running low enough, when he got to his usual table—the table most of us used to sit at—he was cut down even more. The

science club with their two-inch thick glasses and their pocket protectors sat in glory at the most coveted table in the lunchroom. Instead of yelling or using one of the geeks to clear the table, Johnny simply kept his head down, looking at the floor, and walked to the other side of the cafeteria. Jack made his way one crunch at a time behind Johnny, finally sitting at the smallest table in the cafeteria with his master. They sat there, not saying a word, scanning the cafeteria every so often, trying to remember if they had ever sat there before. They were like transfer students from another country on their first day school in the States.

Roman had not only beaten him physically that night in the Hollow. Roman also took his respect, his popularity, and worst of all, Roman took Johnny's desire to get any of them back. For four years in middle school and four more at the prison, Johnny was on top of the food chain, the alpha male. Now he was just one of the inmates. A little bit of me was sad to see it—a man broken down like that. I reminded myself that Johnny probably deserved far worse.

Roman and Johnny both received call slips almost simultaneously. Principal Hartman liked to call you at lunch so it would give him one more thing to bust you for if you happened to be skipping. Roman didn't know what it was for, but I did. The gladiator story had made its way to the warden's ears and Roman and Johnny were now in very deep shit.

## VI

They sat in front of Hartman in the two chairs that were always in front of the principal's enormous oak desk. His office was bigger than any classroom in Collingston High, furnished with paintings and a gold-plated ceiling fan. The window at the far end was stained glass, but you could still see down to two of the three student parking lots. The air was regulated and kept at exactly seventy-two degrees year-round. The floor was carpeted with something you'd find in an upscale hotel.

Hartman sat with his hands folded businesslike on the desk and his head tilted back, looking through the small-rimmed glasses balancing neatly on the end of his nose—an intimidating posture in the mind of a man who was very self-conscious and badly lacking in respect. There wasn't a word spoken for five minutes—another interrogation factor the warden implemented, designed to make you squirm a bit before he put down the hammer.

There would be no squirming today though. Roman, who had been through more bullshit than most people go through in a lifetime, sat upright in the chair looking calmly into the eyes of the man who was about to pass sentence on him. Johnny who had been to the principal's office more times than one cared to count, slouched in his chair with his feet up on the wastebasket as if he were at home watching TV, smacking his chewing gum at high volume.

Hartman pushed the glasses up to their rightful place with his index finger and opened a file on his desk. "So who wants to start?"

Silence.

"I'm well acquainted with Mr. Killman. We have had several meetings in his tenure here at Collingston. I do not, however, know much about you Mr. Swivel, and that's why I had my secretary pull your file. Most impressive. A

perfect four on our scale. It says your past school's transcripts weren't available. Very odd. Why wouldn't your school have your transcripts available, Mr. Swivel?"

"My last school didn't keep track of grades, Mr. Hartman. Is that the reason I was called up here?"

Johnny stopped smacking his gum long enough to let out a chuckle. Hartman's face reddened as he leaned forward in his chair and turned his attention to Johnny.

"You know the rules about gum in my office Johnny. Pitch it."

Johnny smiled and blew a bubble.

Hartman took out his pen and two form papers and began writing. "The penalty for physical violence against anyone at this school is indefinite expulsion. I as principal can lessen the penalty, but since the two of you fail to cooperate or show any remorse, I'm afraid I'm going to go with what the school guidelines recommend. That means no graduation for either of you. That means no baseball for you Mr. Killman and no more custodial work for you, Mr. Swivel."

Roman got up and left without saying a word. Johnny had no intention of going so quietly. Johnny rose like a rusty hinge on the door of an abandoned house. He leaned over Hartman's desk and looked at the smug face atop the gray three-piece suit.

"Pitch it huh?"

Hartman smiled.

Johnny blew with all the force he could build in his lungs. The gum flew the short distance across the desk and stuck to the lens over Hartman's left eye. Two dribbles of spit slid down the principal's cheek.

"You're a fucking joke, Hartman," Johnny said as he too walked toward the door.

Hartman reached into the pocket of his suit jacket for his handkerchief. As fast as his fingers would work, he took off his glasses, first wiping the side of his cheek and then scooping Johnny's gum off his lens. The smug look remained on his face, the image of a man who was overcome with satisfaction.

Johnny stopped short of the doorway. "You know it's too bad old assholes in your position never look at the big picture. Me and the janitor's little scuffle was the right thing to do. We didn't go through the halls shooting mini-Uzis. We settled it the old-fashioned way. Maybe if you would've ever stood up for yourself in school, you wouldn't have to get your rocks off by expelling good people."

"Say what you will, because this will be the last time you ever say anything in this school. Not surprising though that our definitions of 'good people' are not similar. I'll take great satisfaction in the thought that every time I drive through a McDonald's, you might be fulfilling your life's ambition flipping burgers."

Johnny shook his head and walked into the hallway.

## VII

Heather stormed into the house, slamming the double doors behind her. When her book bag fell to the floor, she kicked it hard. Her calculus text slid across the tan waxed floor, bouncing off the staircase and racing toward the

kitchen like the disk used in a curling match. Gina emerged from her relaxation room holding a vase full of flowers.

“What’s wrong sweetie?”

“Roman got expelled from school today. You know he’s only on pace to be the smartest student ever to graduate from Collingston? He hasn’t missed a single question in Buttworst’s class. Do you know how impossible that is? What a bastard that Hartman is.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry honey. Maybe he can find work at one of the factories or go to another school.”

“Find work in a factory? Are you hearing me mother? He’s a genius and you want him to go shovel shit at a factory. You *are* clueless.”

Gina glanced down at the flowers and pressed her nose to the tops of them, taking a deep breath. She looked back up with a smile. “Maybe these will make you feel better. They came right before you got home.”

Heather looked the flowers over briefly and sat the vase on the table next to the door. What she really wanted was the small envelope in her mother’s hand. There was no need to rip it open; Gina had already taken care of that. Heather shot her a look of disgust—one that a parent would normally aim at her misbehaved child. She didn’t bother scolding her mother. Instead she grabbed the envelope without saying thank you.

Her eyes lit up at the sight of the long perfect cursive letters, all slanting at the same angle, light and swift like the brush strokes of a painter. Unmistakably Roman’s prose. The small card read: *I’ve never been on a picnic with a beautiful woman before, by a gurgling meadow, with the sun on my face, the trees swaying overhead, and the birds singing. I barely noticed any of it because of the face looking back at me. It didn’t matter that it was in a drab school hallway on hard marble floor. I’ll never forget it. Roman*

Heather read it three times before she looked up. Her heart couldn’t decide if it wanted to cry or rejoice. The last time she got flowers was from Johnny when they were freshmen, the day before Homecoming. It wasn’t the flowers that got to her though. It was the card. She couldn’t ever imagine his words getting old.

“Were they from Johnny?”

“You obviously read the card mother. Does this sound like something Johnny would say?”

“I don’t know. He probably missed you. You two have been an item for four years. It’s hard for people to make a clean break. He’s still got feelings.”

“Well he’ll have plenty of time to get over me now,” Heather said as she put the card in her pocket, picked up the vase, and retrieved her book bag.

“Why?”

“Johnny got expelled too.”

“Oh that can’t be right. Why would Mr. Hartman expel Johnny? That...that janitor is the one that beat him up. You must have heard wrong.”

Heather closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to hold down the violent words. “Is your sense of reality really that warped? Johnny’s the one that started all this, Roman was just defending himself and me. Johnny hit *me* remember? Mistake or not, he hit your daughter.”

“I just don’t believe it.”

“I’m not going to stand here and argue with you mother. You’re like talking to a brick wall. I’ve got a paper to write and I have to use your computer because the word processor on mine is the 1976 version.”

Gina watched as Heather walked up the winding staircase. She put off her loving mother routine, and the manipulative synapses in her brain began to fire once again. Her daughter was not going to be with some vagrant janitor. Especially since he lived by himself and could talk her into sex any time he wanted. Something had to be done. It would come to her eventually. It always did.

## VIII

Heather sat down at her mom’s computer, stationed in the computer room two doors down from her own. It was already on. Heather hit the space bar and the screen saver of Heather’s first dance recital disappeared. Gina’s email was open. At first Heather pointed the mouse at the X in the top right corner, but something stopped her. It was a word, no, a name, on her mother’s email page. She wasn’t in the habit of snooping through other people’s personal things—a sort of hereditary trait that she vowed not to pass on to children of her own. But this was different. In the sent items menu the named that appeared was Lyle Hartman. It wasn’t hard to pick up, since her mother was technologically deficient, and very rarely used email. It was one of two names that were entered. The other name was one of Gina’s sorority sisters that now lived in South Carolina.

Heather’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Hartman’s name. The little birdie that had told Hartman the story lived right here with her. Anger, not curiosity, got the best of her as she clicked on Lyle Hartman.

*Dear Mr. Hartman,*

*I would like to bring something to your attention if it has not already been. One of your new students, Roman Swivel, violently attacked Johnny Killman on Halloween night. Johnny was beaten so severely that he did not attend school the following day and should have been hospitalized. My daughter was also injured in the attack, as well as others. I know you that you find violence deplorable and I would hope that you will address the situation immediately before it becomes public. Collingston High needs to take a strong stand against outsiders who ultimately are no more than troublemakers. I hope you agree.*

*Thanks for your attention,*

*Gina Hawthorne*

Although Heather’s mouth hung open while she read her mother’s email, it didn’t shock her. Four years ago she wouldn’t have thought her mother was capable of such devious activities, but living with the woman during her own adolescence was like being on a daily roller coaster ride of manipulation and lies. Likewise, in her earlier more naive years, Heather would’ve charged down the

stairs with printed email in hand, ready to take her mother to war. But now she simply printed the email, folded it, and tucked it away in her backpack. Ammunition for a rainy day, she thought.

## IX

We sat in Carl's time-warped living room. The orange flowered walls and the pea green sofa and matching chair didn't help fight the grayness outside or the darkness that came only an hour and a half after last bell. One thing that did help, however, was the Old Milwaukee. Not only did the beer go down smooth but also the white cans seemed to brighten the atmosphere a touch. Okay, going down smooth was probably a stretch, but beer is beer to a broke teenager. Carl always started on the cheap stuff—you could buy a case of the shit for the price you could buy a twelve pack of the more popular brands. I'm sure once he made it down to the Tavern he would've continued with it if they had it in stock.

Carl gulped down the last fourth of the can, crushed it in his hand, shot it into the garbage can at the edge of the kitchen, and popped another open all in one fluid motion—a routine undoubtedly mastered by years of practice. “How's the premium treatin' ya there, guy?”

I raised my left thumb as I chugged the rest of my can, trying to keep up with our host.

“Tis what beer is supposed to taste like. Not this fucking shit they sell now by having some pretty little cunny dance around in her skimpies in the commercials.”

“I thought you didn't watch TV, Carl?”

“Ah, they have it on down at the watering hole. Almost impossible not to watch it some, it is.”

I popped another beer, conceding the fact that I would never be able to keep up with him. I drank the first sip slower this time and looked over at Roman. He had a ginger ale in hand and rocked back and forth in his chair listening to AM music on the radio. Roman was unfazed by his dismissal from Collingston. There was no sign of sadness in his face and no sense that he would fight to come back. Just the same old Roman. Quiet. Calm. He would have the same expression whether he hit the lottery or had a terminal illness with only days to live.

The host on the call-in radio program was wrapping up a segment on the Loch Ness Monster and moving on to Big Foot. His in-studio guest was a Big Foot expert—a man who had tracked the beast for the better part of thirty years but of course had no tangible evidence. Sure, he offered his website address so you could look at footage of blotched images of something moving through the bushes. But what was it? Thirty years and all the man had to show for it was footage of a bear eating some berries at night.

The radio host's switchboard must have been lit up, because caller after caller came on. There was everything from eyewitness accounts of seeing the creature to people actually being attacked by it. Of course, none of the callers had any photos or videos to back up their stories. The host and the guest just kept egging the callers on, gobbling up every bit of it. Carl wasn't far behind them, shaking his head in agreement once in a while after a swig of beer. Roman was in

his own mind somewhere, staring through the wall on the other side of the room. Probably trying to come up with an equation disproving that any such Sasquatch really existed.

Carl took another hard swallow, but almost spit it out when the next segment of the radio program came on—alien abduction. He leaned over to the old radio and turned the volume dial up. He stayed hunkered over it, his eyes wide and his left ear to the speaker, stroking the rubber band that tied the whiskers of his goatee.

Again with the endless callers, claiming this time to be kidnapped by aliens in some fashion or other.

I took a drink and shook my head. “You don’t really believe this shit do you?”

Carl said nothing, still entranced with the stories of people not remembering several hours out of their day, or waking up in a totally different place than they fell asleep, or having strange items in their bodies show up on an x-ray.

Carl sat back in his chair seeming to be upset with the show. He lit his pipe and scratched the top of his head. “Not a one of ’em like mine.”

“Whatta ya mean like yours?” I asked.

“Like the ones that tried to get me.”

Where Carl had failed to spit out his beer, I succeeded, spraying every last drop in a mist that covered the room. Roman looked over and smiled as I wiped my chin dry with my hand.

“You think you were abducted?” I said, trying my hardest not to laugh.

“No. I wasn’t taken.”

A relief came over me until...

“But the bastards did try.”

“So what, these aliens pulled you out of bed with their tractor beam or what?”

Carl turned the radio completely off and took a hard drag off his pipe. He looked at me with his eyes squinted for several seconds, almost offended I’d questioned him. “I was asleep under a palm tree. It was the rainy season in Nam, and when the rain started, it didn’t stop for a month of Sundays I tell ya. It didn’t stop those sons of bitches though, they couldn’t stay away from it, no matter what the circumstances.”

“Stay away from what?”

“Violence. Conflict. They were addicted to it. Not to take part, no, but to observe. It fascinated them. These visits had been going on for years. Clear back to Biblical times. Anytime there was a war, you could bet your sweet ass they’d be there. Waiting. Watching.”

I looked at Roman, who was of course unmoved by Carl’s remarks. Leaning over the edge of the sofa, I sat my beer on the floor. Carl had my full attention. I’d heard countless tales from the man, and every time I went into them the same way—thinking there’s no chance in hell of one bit of truth in them. I don’t know if it was the way he told the story, his sincerity, or what, but I always listened to the end. “So the little green guys came at you underneath a palm tree?”

“Not little nor green. But I was asleep under that tree, trying to get a little shelter from that goddamn rain. I was coming about, just a little before my alarm went off.”

“Hold on a second. You had an alarm clock with you?”

Before Carl could explain Roman took over. “Soldiers drink an excessive amount of water before they go to sleep so their bladders wake them up in a couple hours. That way they never get into a really deep sleep.”

“Ah, your friend is right on the money. Nature’s alarm clock it is, unless you’ve drunk too much of the brew that is. Probably didn’t need it though. Sleeping in the rain is never easy. Those goddamn drops flicking your skull like mama used to, only over and over. And if you covered your face with your helmet the rain just got louder. It wasn’t the piss that woke me though. It was one of those things you sense. I kept hearing voices in my head telling me to get up, many voices all at the same time, not a one of ’em my own. Before I even opened my eyes I would’ve bet ya a buffalo nickel the Commie bastards were standing right over me. I gripped the trigger on my gun. One more little squeeze and I would be cutting through ’em. But I opened my eyes instead and knew exactly what was telling me to get up. Directly over me was a long oval-shaped head with the biggest teardrop eyes you’d ever see. Black as coal they were. Took up about half of the thing’s face I guess. All at once the voices told me to stand up again. I obliged the motherfucker, squeezing the trigger as I did. Before even one round left the chamber, my gun was sucked out of my hands and flew off to my right. I knew now why there was more than one voice. There was a bunch of ’em. Had me surrounded they did. All of ’em seven feet tall if an inch. Colorless. Slimy-looking like a gray frog. Long fingernails, same black as their eyes. I don’t remember seeing any mouths or noses. *We wish no violence* the voices said together again. *Come with us*. I of course told ’em to go fuck each other. *No expletives please. Come with us*. It was like I had to agree to be taken. I don’t know if it was their morals or what have you. I told them this time to expletive each other. The one in front of me tilted his head, like he didn’t understand. There was a long pause. I could feel all those black-hole eyes on me, all over me. And then it happened. The one in front of, or all of em, I’m not positive, started to choke me. They weren’t using their hands either I tell ya. They were using the same power they sucked my weapon out of my hand with. I had one thought in my brain. If I’m goin’ down I’m taking these lizard bastards with me. I pulled a grenade from my vest. The pin snapped off automatically in those days. They knew exactly what it was. The moment I jerked it, they tried to suck it out of my hand. This time though, I held with all my strength. I could feel my windpipe still choking and that awful pull trying to ungrasp my fingers. I guess they got frustrated and the one in front of me backhanded my arm and ripped my chest with those long razor fingernails. The grenade flew out of my hand a good distance. I took about three steps and dove on the ground. The grenade blew in mid air, knocking the head clean off one of the bastards. That same second the rest of them evaporated into thin air, leaving a vapor trail, like a mirage you see in the distance on a hot day. And then there was just me holding my chest.”

Roman gave a brief smile. I'm not sure if it was because he liked the story, or because he scoffed at its likelihood. I took my half drunk can and wiped my forehead, not because I was hot, but more like my brain was overloading from the tall tale. Carl simply turned the radio back up and sat back in his chair, enjoying his pipe once again. He didn't look at the expressions on our faces. He didn't care. He told us what he thought had happened and could give a shit if we believed him or not. We all sat in silence for the rest of our visit.

Walking back across to Roman's I remarked, "There's no way that story happened." Roman said nothing. I wanted a response. "You don't believe in aliens do ya?"

"The chance of there being intelligent life out there is greater than of it not being."

Typical Roman response.

## X

Johnny the Killer sat at the bar in The Tavern. There were at least two empty bar stools on either side of him. His only friend was the shot glass in front of him. Johnny's five o'clock shadow was in full force making him look in his thirties. The crowd kept its distance, like there was an imaginary shield of hate around him. His credit card sat on the cash register—collateral for the tab. The bartender filled his glass with the Old No. 7 Brand as quick as the Killer could drink it.

No telling how long Johnny had been drinking. His shoulders were slouched over the shot glass, his elbows on the bar. The only real way to tell if he'd had his limit was if someone's head got smashed into one of the poker machines. As of yet, the machines were all still operational. There had been more than one occasion where Johnny was asked to leave after beating up some drunk twice his age. He was eighteen and had never been whipped in a bar fight. Never been whipped anywhere except one time, on Halloween, down in the Hollow.

I imagine Johnny started his drinking career about the same time most kids started riding their bikes around the neighborhood. He was always the first one of our group to cross the line into uncharted waters. The first to steal a candy bar from the market. The first to borrow one of our fathers' dirty magazines. The first to go down a girl's pants. The first to smoke a cigarette. Johnny did all these things without getting in trouble. His Pop was a big time salesman, always on the road. His Ma worked in an office, a nice enough lady. In the end Johnny's antics proved too much for her to handle, and instead of punishing him, she chose to look the other way.

Johnny had just beaten the shit out of me, not a week ago, whipped me to within an edge of my life, betrayed our friendship—but somehow I felt sorry for him. Deep down I still thought of him as a friend. I was worried about what the future held in store for Johnny now. All the things that fate put in place to restrain the Killer, like school, baseball, and Heather, had disappeared overnight. I decided to test the waters.

"So you playin' tonight?" I asked, pulling my money out for a draft.

Johnny continued to look at his shot glass. "Drinking. Just drinking."

“Your dad gonna go to the school board over this suspension shit or what?”

“Haven’t seen him in two months.”

The bartender filled his glass again.

“Long business trip huh?”

A smile filled Johnny’s face. He looked at me, holding the shot glass.

“Yeah that’s it. Business. I guess if screwing some little blond in Indianapolis is business.”

“No shit. I’m sorry man. Does your Ma know?”

“I found some love letters from his girlfriend when I was cleaning out his Jag one day. Mom doesn’t know.” Johnny threw back the whiskey once again. I could see I was not helping matters with my conversation selection. I opted to grab my beer and head for the back room.

Pick was dealing blackjack. I always hated when the guys got a wild hair up their ass for blackjack. Not that I hated blackjack; I’d play it once in awhile.

Six guys sat in front of Pick as he dealt. By the looks of it, he was using three maybe four decks. To his left sat a stack of green, a good amount of which had belonged to the players that sat in front of him now. Sam Peterman still had a fair wad of money in front of him. Scotty and the others were not as fortunate. A good time to suggest a game change maybe.

“What’s up boys?” I said as I sat smack-dab in the middle of the table. That spot was no-man’s land. If you’re going to play blackjack, you should always sit at either third or first base. If you’re at first, nobody can fuck up your cards by taking stupid hits or the lack thereof because you always go first. If you’re at third, you can get a read on how the cards are going and make a better guess on if you should hit or stay because everyone has already gone before you. “So who voted for Pick to be the big winner tonight anyway?”

“Whattaya mean?” Peterman asked.

“Blackjack is a house game. And right now Pick is the house,” I said.

“I’m up, house or no house,” Peterman responded.

“Give it some time, Sam. Give it some time,” I said back.

“Nobody wanted to play poker,” Pick chimed in as he raked more money in. “Everybody’s burned out on poker. We needed a change of scenery.”

Pick. What a fucking coward. He sure as hell wouldn’t be playing if he weren’t the dealer. I can tell you that for sure. Seeing my suggestion was getting nowhere, I took out my money and laid it in front of me. A hundred and forty bucks. My winnings from the last two weeks.

“What’s the limit anyway?” I asked.

“How much you got?” Pick responded. His winnings had definitely brought out the cockiness in him.

“I want to bet sixty.”

The other players at the table were betting five’s and ten. Pick wasn’t phased by my gesture though.

“That’s it?” he said.

There have always been two cardinal rules for the house, whether it was in the back room of a broken down tavern in Collingston, Illinois, or at the high-rollers table at Caesar’s Palace: keep them happy, and keep them playing.

I was about to shoot the cardinal rules to shit. A sixty-dollar bet would give me enough to double down with if I got the right hand of course, and would also allow me to leave with twenty dollars in my pocket and a shred of dignity if I lost. I was playing one hand, win or lose.

The money was bet, the cards dealt. I had a six and a five. Pick showed a six. This was the best possible scenario for a blackjack player. The two guys before me had thirteen and fourteen and both stayed like they were supposed to. I immediately doubled down. Pick itched his right eyebrow. The hundred and twenty I had on the table made the son of bitch sweat, even though he had three times that much beside him. Pick flipped my card—seven of hearts. That gave me eighteen. In a perfect world it would've been a face card, but eighteen wasn't bad against his six showing. Scotty had twenty and stood. The guy next to him stood on seventeen. Everybody had played their hand right so far.

And then there was Sam Peterman at third base.

Sam had sixteen, which in normal circumstances was the worst hand you could get. But Pick had a six up, which to your seasoned blackjack player means he's got sixteen as well. There was more of chance of him having a ten down than any other single value. It was cut and dry. Stay and let the dealer bust. Sam hesitated though, as if he was confused.

"Stay," I said. "He's got sixteen."

Sam squinted at his cards. "I have a feeling he doesn't have a ten down."

"So fuckin' what, you've got sixteen, you can't take his bust card."

Sam looked at Pick's six and then back at his own cards. "Nope. Go ahead and hit me"

Without hesitation Pick flipped the card. Before the card hit the table I knew what it was, and so did my blood pressure. The queen of spades. Busted. Pick was now a pig in shit, grinning from ear to ear, the nervousness from my bet long gone. The cocky body language from ten minutes ago was back with a vengeance. Pick dealt his card—the five of diamonds. The table erupted in cursing. Pick extended his arm and pushed the money from one side of the table, scraping up everyone's bets like a snowplow, all the while smiling.

The twenty in my wallet gave a brief flicker, wanting to be let out to play. *Just one more hand.* I got up from the table, crushing any urge to lose my last miserable twenty. I told myself I was there for one hand, win or lose, and that's what I was going to do. I learned along time ago that it was better to leave with a penny in your pocket, rather than just the lint.

"That's it, one hand," Pick said smiling as he shuffled.

"There's always tomorrow, Pick. Always tomorrow."

Sam followed me to the bar. I wanted to get one more beer before I headed for home. He looked like the guy that just missed the game-winning free throw with no time left on the clock. I didn't want to talk to him, but he still leaned against the bar just next of me.

"I'm sorry Tony. That was stupid. I guess it wouldn't be such a big deal if you hadn't had all that money on the table."

"It didn't matter how much money I had out there Sam. That's just dumb card playing. You always have to assume the dealer's got a face down. Always."

“I just had a feeling. I don’t know. A voice inside told me to hit.”

I put my hand on his shoulder like an older brother. “The next time you hear that voice deep inside ya, tell him to go to hell and never come back.”

I actually ended up buying Sam a beer, a gesture for no hard feelings. I told him he should buy the other guys at the table a beer. He did.

I looked up from my freshly poured beer and glanced around. Carl was now in attendance talking to some young guy. It was a deep conversation. Carl was probably trying to convince him that the earth really didn’t circle the sun or some shit. The DA sat at a table with his lawyer types. The same old faces sat on stools in front of the poker machines. Johnny was facing away from the bar talking to some local thugs, some of Freddy Flowers’s crew. Two low-lifes named Bobby Dukes and Boochie Anderson. They were always picking fights and shit. Or tryin’ to pimp hookers outside in the parking lot. Johnny was really living it up with ’em though, like they were long-lost friends. Bobby Dukes put something in Johnny’s hand. They tried to make it look like they were shaking hands.

I swallowed my last gulp of beer as Johnny got up and walked to the bathroom. I stopped to take a piss on my way out as well. Johnny washed his hands and looked in the mirror above the sink, making an awful sound like he was trying to suck snot from his nostrils into his throat. His eyes were red and watering. I stood at the urinal.

“You snortin’, Johnny?”

“What are you my fuckin’ dad now? Mind your own goddamn business.”

“No. I’m your friend.” I had to talk a little louder because of the noise of the urinal.

Johnny gave a sarcastic laugh. “*Were.*”

“Come again?” I said.

“*Were* my friend,” Johnny said as he stumbled out of the restroom door.

I stood looking at my reflection in the mirror. The word “friend” echoed first in my head and then off the glass over the sink, bouncing off the reflection of my eye. An eye that was now fully open, but still a greenish-yellow.

## XI

Principal Hartman ate as he drove to his castle, seeing the same skeleton landscape that his students saw on their way. November had finally won the battle, strangling the last colorful life out of the trees, turning the grass to brown, leaving the skies overcast even on a so-called nice day, and blowing its cold breath as a warning that worse was yet to come. It meant the smell of old furnaces, heavy coats, scraping frost off windshields, and worst of all—total darkness by five o’clock.

Hartman hated November as well—but not for the same reasons. That season for him meant time off, for students as well as faculty. It meant anxious inmates ready to break for freedom on that Wednesday before Thanksgiving. It meant his guards and prisoners alike eating and laughing with loved ones. For him it was just another Thursday with Mom and Dad. It meant that the holidays would soon be in full swing and his subjects would be free, away from school and out on

their own for at least a week, maybe more. Hartman was at his best when he was working, when he had his control.

He opened the door to his office. The lights were on sensors, and came on when he entered. Hartman set his briefcase where his desk should have been and jumped in fright when it hit the ground. He took his glasses off, looking the room over with his own eyes. The lenses weren't playing tricks on him—the room was bare. His desk was gone. His computer gone. File cabinet—gone. Not even the two hundred dollar fake tree he had placed in the corner remained. He wanted to call somebody but his phone was also missing.

“Chatterling,” he cursed to himself.

As quick as her name rolled off his lips Hartman turned and started for the hallway. Hartman took one step and hit a wall. Not a brick wall, but a soft mushy one. Still that wall was unmoving, blocking the width of the doorway.

“You rang?” Boss Chatterling said, towering over the warden.

Hartman either bounced off of the janitor or shot back because of his own fear. He put his glasses back on and adjusted his tie, trying to compose himself. “What’s the meaning of this? Where is all of my stuff?”

“What stuff?” the boss responded, giving a brief sympathetic frown.

“What do you mean, what stuff?” The lips on Hartman’s ‘S’s’ were coming out stronger now in his agitated state. “My desk, computer, files. All of it. Where is it?”

“Oh that stuff. We’re doing a thorough cleaning of your office. Shampooing the carpets, washing down the walls, spraying for pests. All the routine things. We took your office and set it up down by the boiler room in the basement. Right next to my office actually.”

Harman looked around his empty office again, noticing that the ceiling fan had even been removed. “Boiler room? How long is all this going to take?”

“A week. Two tops.”

“What! Two weeks. I can’t be out of my office for two weeks. I demand you bring my office back. This is outrageous.”

“Sorry. I’ve already got my men preparing the carpet cleaner and disinfectants. I can’t change the plan of attack now. Besides, I told you we set your office up down in the boiler room, right next to mine.”

Hartman took a step back and tried to read the Boss’s face. Then it hit him.

“This is about that student janitor I suspended, isn’t it?”

“You mean the best worker I’ve had in thirty years. The one that does the work of three janitors. The one who doesn’t take his break at the scheduled time because he’s obsessed with getting his work done. That student janitor?”

Hartman swallowed hard. “Yes, I suppose that one.”

“Are you implying that I’m trying to make your life a living hell because you’ve made mine one? Are you implying that I’d use my leverage to somehow change your mind on a discipline issue? Perish the thought.”

Hartman scratched the top of his head. “The problem is I expelled another student as well. If I let one come back, I have to allow the other. The other one spat at me and used foul language.”

The Boss gave another sympathetic frown and patted Hartman with a stiff tap on the shoulder that almost knocked the small man over. "Well, it sure will be nice having you right next door for a couple of weeks."

Chatterling turned to exit.

"Wait. Wait. I'm going to look like a fool if I let a student spit on me and come back to school the next day."

"You already look like a fool, Lyle. But it's better to be a fool with an office, than a fool without. Don't you agree? We'll get to work cleaning up here and as soon as I see my janitor skipping through the halls, I bet we can get your office back together lickity-split. I'm sure you'll do the right thing."

## XII

Heather sat next to me at our table, skipping her meal and pretending to look over her notes for a test she had next hour. Her eyes wandered the page, trying to find something that wasn't there. The usual jubilant smile that could light up a room was nothing more than two lips pressed together.

Jack had joined our table, having no other choice really. Johnny was gone and the thought of eating alone was more than Jack could bear. Even the cruelest of souls needed some kind of companionship I guess. Jack's eyes were nervous, looking at the faces around the table, like the faces were new. Jack spent his whole life being a right-hand man and now that the boss was gone he was no longer needed.

The electricity that had filled our table and the whole cafeteria with Roman's standing ovation was gone. Today was just another day. Sam and Scotty picked at their food. Pick had no snide remarks for me or the rest of the gamblers. There was no stuttering from Brunno, although he did manage to wolf down four pieces of pizza in record time.

"So have ya talked to Roman since he was expelled?" I asked Heather.

The words didn't register at first. She continued to look over her notes. Finally she said, "No. He sent some flowers with a note, but I haven't heard from him otherwise."

"Flowers huh? That guy's turnin' into a real Casanova I tell ya. First romancing ya in the closet, then the candlelight dinner, now flowers. So what's the story with you two anyway?"

She didn't respond, but as hard as she tried to fight it her smile finally broke through. I hadn't seen her look that way in years, probably since she and Johnny first started dating.

"Ya think Roman'll stay around now that he's been suspended? I mean he can't do the janitor thing any more. Why the hell would a guy as smart him stay in Collingston, Illinois? The cold winters and shit. If I were him, I'd find a nice beach to call home, like the one in his room that he told us about. Besides he can't stay in one place too long, on account of that Johnson character finding him."

Heather looked up from her paper with a sudden sense of urgency. She had known Roman only three months, had lived a lifetime before him, but now couldn't imagine a life without him. "He won't," she said to reassure herself. "This is home. People care about him here."

“The thing to do is to get your parents to throw a fit with the school board. They’ll cave to anybody. Hartman’s got to do what they say. The only problem is, Roman obviously doesn’t have any parents to throw a fit for him.”

“I think none of that will be necessary,” Roman said standing behind Heather with lunch tray in hand.

“Well I’ll kiss a sick dog’s ass. How the hell?” I said.

Roman scooted a chair up to the table and sat down between us. “It was the strangest thing. Principal Hartman’s secretary called and said that he had made a mistake. She said Johnny and I were reinstated immediately. So I walked up here just in time for lunch.”

“Glad you’re back. Thanks for the flowers,” Heather said.

“Somebody went to bat for ya. Any ideas?” I asked.

Roman shook his head.

“Mr. Buttworst maybe?” Heather said.

“Nah, Hartman hates Buttworst. Probably because all the students like him. It had to be somebody with a little pull. Somebody who had a little power over the warden. It couldn’t have been the school board. They wouldn’t have met yet. I bet it was the Boss.”

“I bet that’s exactly who it was,” Heather stated. “I’m a student helper second hour for Mrs. Petway. All of the call slips were coming out of the basement. They moved Hartman’s office down there because they were cleaning his real office.”

“You doing more than just cleaning for Chatterling or what?” I said with a laugh.

Roman smiled. “Just the cleaning, Tony.”

The little table Johnny had been sitting at recently was empty. No Killer. Under normal circumstances Johnny would probably get reinstatement from Hartman’s office and just decide to skip the rest of the day. There was something more though this time. I had a feeling Johnny wasn’t coming back.

“Not that you two give a shit, but I saw Johnny last night at the Tavern snortin’ the nose candy,” I told them.

“You’re right. I don’t give a shit,” Heather responded.

“Something’s wrong with him, I mean more that just being embarrassed about the fight. It’s like his spirit is broken or something. He was down there last night shooting whiskey, which isn’t odd I guess, but he was doing it by himself. Didn’t talk to anybody the whole night, except for some of Freddy Flowers’s guys.”

“Who’s Freddy Flowers?” Roman asked before slurping the applesauce off his spoon.

“That’s what bothers me. Freddy is bad news. He’s the biggest thug in three counties. Got his hands in about everything you can think of. Drugs, bookmaking, prostitution—you name it. He runs a string of flower shops all over Central Illinois, so he can launder the money from his real businesses. Johnny’s gonna be looking through the wrong side of iron bars if he keeps hanging with those bastards.”

“Good. He deserves it,” Heather said.

“Maybe he will come out of it,” Roman said, seeing I was genuinely concerned.

### XIII

Roman didn't go for his cart after the janitor assignments were handed out at roll call. Instead he remained standing in the same spot, like a soldier waiting to be spoken to by his commanding officer.

“Something on your mind, Swivel?” The Boss asked.

“I just wanted to let you know that I can work late tonight and I wanted to thank...”

Chattering held up her hand stopping Roman in mid-sentence.

“The best appreciation you can show me Swivel is to just do the same kind of work you've done since the day you walked in here. You know I'm not one for mushy thank you's. Besides that, when given a chance to put the screws to that little pip squeak, I usually jump at it.”

Out of respect Roman stood at attention until she had left the room. He grabbed his cart and made his way to the elevator. On the third floor he began the routine, thinking all the while about Heather. He mopped the floor and thought of their picnic. He emptied the trash and thought of the note he'd written with the flowers; if it was too sappy Heather had made no indication at lunch. The note said how he truly felt. He scraped the gum off of the chairs and thought of her lips on his. He sprayed down the windows, and every time he wiped one of the panes, he wished her green eyes were in the reflection, looking from behind at him again.

Roman started the walk home promptly at midnight. As he made the turn down the big hill on the north side of Kingdom Street, he saw that all his wishes had come true. Heather sat in her Mustang, waiting. Roman sped up down the incline turning his walk into a jog, and by the time he reached the house he found himself running.

Heather got out of the car. It always surprised him when her face turned out more beautiful than the way he last remembered it, even if only hours had passed since their last encounter. “I know we didn't have plans, but I had to...”

Roman stopped her short. “You don't ever need an invitation, Heather.”

Heather sat on the couch as Roman changed out of his gray janitor suit. She looked away because that was what a nice young lady did. Because that's what would please her mother. But she looked at Roman's reflection in the window at the far end of the living room because that's what she wanted to do. He changed quickly, but there was a time when he was in nothing more than underwear. She saw the definition in his biceps, the six-pack of his abdomen, and sadly the scars on his back—a permanent gift from Ed Pentoch.

Heather was snapped back into real time by a fully-clothed Roman standing in front of her. “There's a late movie playing at the dollar theater. I thought we might go.”

“What's the movie?” Heather asked as if it mattered.

“*Rocky*,” Roman responded with a grin.

“I don't know, *boxing*? It wouldn't be my first choice.”

Roman sat down on the couch and took her hand in his. "You've never seen it? Because if you had seen it, you would know that it's not about boxing. It is a love story, the original one was anyway. I will make you a deal. If you don't like it, you can pick the movies from now on."

"A love story huh? All right. But I hope you can take a steady diet of Susan Sarandon crying her eyes out from now on if I'm not impressed."

"Deal." Roman thought he would seal the deal with a quick handshake.

Heather had a different idea, which lasted several minutes.

#### XIV

They had to park what seemed like a mile away. They held hands while they wove in and out of the rows of cars, laughing and talking. "Jeez, all these people here to see a guy get his brains beat out when they could rent it and watch it at home," said Heather.

"It's not the same as the theater," Roman responded.

Heather opened her purse at the ticket window, but Roman clamped it shut a second later. "Even a janitor can afford the dollar show Heather: tickets, popcorn, the works."

The theater was packed, mostly with people in their thirties and forties, mostly men who assured their wives that they would like the flick, mostly die-hard fans. Heather and Roman sat two rows from the back. Heather tried to lead him to the middle of the row but Roman stopped her at the first two seats, so he could sit on the aisle. A position in the theater where he could make a quick escape, not having to trample over feet, popcorn, and drinks. A position Heather thought came now by instinct, engraved in his mind by the years of running.

At one point in the movie Heather had raised the armrest between them, taken Roman's arm, and put it around her. She laid her head on his shoulder. It might have been when Rocky told Adrian that his father wanted him to develop his body because he didn't have much of a brain and Adrian told Rocky her mother told her just the opposite. It might have been when Rocky told Adrian that it really *did* bother him that the press was out to make him a fool. Or when Rocky took off Adrian's glasses for the first time in his apartment. Whenever it was, Heather wanted to be close to Roman. Either to share the moment or to ensure that he wouldn't run, at least not tonight.

They walked back to the car with their arms around each other, as the crowd rushed by. The people even at this late hour were in a hurry to be somewhere else. Heather and Roman were in slow motion, trying to get nowhere at all. Before long they were the only two left in the parking lot, taking baby steps back to the Mustang.

"So, am I in for a lifetime of tear-jerkers?" Roman asked.

"I really liked it. Two lonely souls finding each other in your not-so-average circumstances is a concept I like. It's funny how your expectations play a big role in your perception of a movie. I went into it thinking the worst. So anything worthwhile in the movie made it really good. I don't see why you liked it though, as a man I mean. After all he went through, all that training and abuse, he still lost in the end."

“The movie would have been terrible if he had won. The point was that a so-called bum off the street went the distance with the greatest fighter in the world just because of his heart.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t.”

Heather laughed.

The Mustang pulled up in front of Roman’s. Heather walked with him up to the porch. Their eyes were close to each other. “My mother wants to have you over for dinner on Sunday. It makes me sick to my stomach. She’ll be a saint to your face. The only reason I agreed is maybe if she meets you in person, she’ll get off my back and see what I see.”

“I’d love to,” Roman responded.

“My father will like you. He’s a really good guy, just misled sometimes by his wife.”

All of it was conversation for what they both really wanted to say, all a distraction from Roman inviting her in, from Heather accepting, a detour to keep her from spending the night and sleeping in his bed. As much as Roman wanted it, deep down he knew it wasn’t time. In the end Heather got back in her car and drove home.

## Chapter 10

### Yin and Yang at the Tavern

#### I

The Hawthorne's dining room table was as long as the space it inhabited. A monstrous piece of hand-carved solid oak, with a surface polished to the point of reflecting light better than most mirrors. A small army could have sat at it comfortably lengthwise and it had probably taken that same small army to move the table into the house. Roman thought the mansion might have been built around the table, viewing no visible entrance to fit such a large object through.

The chandelier hung a good distance overhead, streaming soft light from its crystal glass onto the emeralds that sat across from him. Could he ever get tired of those green eyes?

Dr. Hawthorne could not see his wife's eyes, as they each sat far apart, at opposite ends of the table. Roman imagined the good doctor using an intercom or megaphone to talk with his significant other from that distance. Instead he read a medical journal as he ate—the act of eating seeming to be more of a nuisance than anything else. Even on a Sunday evening the man was dressed in a three-piece suit.

Gina wore a silk blouse, skirt, and high heels the likes of which were not purchased at the Collingston mall. She swirled the gold fork on her plate more than she used it to pick up anything to put in her mouth. A middle-aged woman like Gina didn't keep her tight figure by being a proud member of the clean-plate club. Every once in a while Roman could see the pearls under her lips when she spoke or maybe smiled, but her eyes stayed back in the distance, hidden from the light of the chandelier. He could feel them though—on his face and clothes, studying and watching, like two hidden surveillance cameras of the NN. The hair on his neck stood up in quills, and suddenly Roman felt uncomfortable in the one of two pair of jeans he had to his name. He squirmed a little against the high back of his chair.

The Hawthorne estate was equipped with a full kitchen staff. Not only did they unfold the silk napkins and place them properly on your lap, and help to serve the five-course meal with sharp deliberate movements, but they also stood waiting at attention behind each of the family member's chairs. The fellow behind Roman was as still as a likeness in a wax museum, but Roman was sure that if even one morsel fell from his plate, the servant would grab it out of mid-air in lightning quick fashion before it hit the floor.

All of it was a far cry from the little kitchen table in an Iowa farmhouse. The table back home had one uneven leg that dad was always fixing. His father ate when he finally came in from the fields, wearing that day's denim overalls. His mother delivered the casserole with his grandmother's hand-me-down oven mitts on, and her dull blue apron tied loosely behind her back. The leftovers were given to the dogs.

The French cuisine Roman had prepared might not have been as impressive as he had once imagined. Heather probably ate better for a midnight snack.

Roman's anxiety lifted as he watched her though. Heather wolfed down her food with the speed and determination unrivaled by any mere mortal. Where did it all go? Heather had told him she was a runner—up at six AM five days a week. Roman wondered if she was a runner because of her eating, or an eater because of her running.

Dr. Hawthorne closed the magazine, set it aside, and patted his mouth with all the finesse of a rich kid who'd just graduated from etiquette classes. He took his glasses off and rubbed the indentions where they'd sat on his nose. "So, Heather tells us that you're a genius, Roman."

Roman sat with his back straight, arms to his sides, trying to maintain his own etiquette, resisting the urge to wipe his brow. He blushed anyway. "I don't know about that sir. I'm not sure you can put a number on intelligence."

"Neither am I young man, but Heather says you do things that border on the unimaginable."

"Daddy," Heather began. "I'm sure Roman didn't come over here to be put to the test like some circus side show"

"It's fine Heather," Roman said and then looked back at Dr. Hawthorne. "I see the same things most people do, I just process the information a little differently maybe."

"For instance?" The good doctor was now leaning on the table, rubbing his chin.

"Daddy!" Heather said again.

"It's perfectly fine." Roman calmed her. "I see numbers in everything, that's all." Roman's answer was not specific enough for the doctor. He took a deep breath. "For instance, when I walked in your front door the first thing I noticed was the staircase in the foyer. It has twenty-six steps. The tops of the fourteenth and the twentieth steps are off a couple degrees; they're not perfectly perpendicular to the steps before them. I didn't count them or study them, all of that just popped into my head when I looked at them."

"I see," Dr. Hawthorne said, still hungry for more.

"The little glass pieces on your chandelier." All three Hawthornes looked up as Roman pointed. "There are exactly three hundred and thirty-nine of them. They are all exactly the same size except for one, which is about an inch and quarter smaller than the rest."

Dr. Hawthorne scratched the top of his head, losing count of the pieces around ten or eleven. "That's amazing."

"It gets to be a nuisance. I've learned to just tune it out, the way someone with color blindness or a walking defect, does."

"Make no mistake about it Roman, what you have is a gift not a handicap."

"Thank you sir."

"And with a powerful gift like that you should be able to write your own ticket, Roman," Gina's voice chimed in finally from the end of the table. "I mean you could do or be anything you wanted. What are your plans for the future?"

"It's not that simple, mother," Heather started to answer for him.

Roman cut her off, sensing the onset of world war three. "I guess, Mrs. Hawthorne, the problem is I just don't know what I want to be or do."

“You’re going to college though right?” Dr. Hawthorne asked.

“Not as of yet sir, no.”

“That’s just a shame Roman.” Gina voice was not particularly kind. “In this world to be somebody, to be anybody, you have to get that degree. Nowadays maybe even two or three.” Gina dug in again.

“It’s a waste of time for him mother.”

“I’m sure something will come up, Mrs. Hawthorne. But thank you for your concern.”

“Let’s go out on the balcony and look at the stars Roman,” Heather said.

“It’s overcast.” Roman responded.

“Let’s go look at them anyway.”

“It’s a little cold for the balcony isn’t it?” Gina said rhetorically.

Heather shot Gina a look of disgust Roman would have thought was impossible on a face as beautiful as hers. Roman’s personal butler pulled the chair back as he stood, and Dr. Hawthorne gave Roman a firm handshake.

“Thanks for having me sir.”

“The pleasure was all mine, young man.”

Gina continued to sit in her chair.

## II

They stood on the balcony outside Heather’s room. Roman leaned against the railing looking out over the vast Hawthorne estate. The Olympic-size pool directly below was drained for the season. The Jacuzzi sat to its left bubbling and gurgling, steam escaping its soft brown cover. On the opposite side of the concrete pond stood the pool house, a structure that Roman believed his own house could easily fit inside of. In the distance was the maintenance shed and servant’s quarters, both draped in the same beige color as the mansion itself. Beyond that were the tennis court and the gazebo, and on the horizon where the grass ended the forest began. The forest went on for as far as the eye could see, and miles away where Dr. Hawthorne’s property ended, the Hollow began.

Heather put her arm through Roman’s, laying her head on his shoulder for more than just warmth. She looked up at the night sky just in case Roman was wrong about the clouds. But it was gray and thick, matching the mood of the forest, which now nothing more than bare sticks and branches. The threat of winter seemed very weak next to Roman. She could have stood there with him forever just watching and waiting.

“You have a beautiful home, Heather. I’ve only been to places like this in books.”

“Thanks. It was a great place to grow up. So much room to run and play, to swim every day in the summer. All of it comes with a price though. I would have gladly traded this for life on the farm like yours, if it meant not having to deal with my mother.”

“She just cares about you.”

“She does care about me but it goes too far. She forgets that we’re two different people. I’m not her and never will be.”

“Your father seems very nice.”

“He is, but did you catch him reading during dinner? He does that every night. Don’t think for a minute he’s catching up on some new medical procedure. It’s his way of escaping my mother, so he doesn’t have to listen to her nag me. The only one true flaw my father has is not standing up to her. I guess I don’t have it so bad though, huh? At least I still have them around.”

“There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my parents. What I wouldn’t give to just talk to them, even if it was for ten minutes. To hug my mom one more time, to play catch with dad. There’s never a day that I don’t see their faces somewhere.”

“They say time heals all things.”

“Agent Johnson wouldn’t agree. And he’s right in a way. I’ve spent that last six years of my life trying not to think about them, about it, because it hurts. But now I’m to the point that I force myself to, just so I can remember what they look like, or how they sounded when they laughed.”

“Do you ever think about him? Johnson I mean.”

“Some days more than others. If he really wanted to, he would have found me by now. He’s probably got bigger fish to fry at the moment. He’ll get around to me eventually I suppose.”

“What will you do?”

“If you’d asked me that three months ago the answer would have been simple—run. After I left Bravo I always imagined myself drifting from place to place every few months. I never thought the first place I came to would be the hardest to leave. But now everything is different. Collingston feels like home, as odd as that might sound. When you come down to it, there’s really only two options: avoid the problem by running or solve the problem by fighting.”

“I don’t want you to run.”

“And I don’t want to leave you.”

“Can you beat him? The way you fought Johnny that day, I can’t imagine anyone being able to beat you.”

“We’re talking about two very different people. Johnny’s a bruiser fueled by rage. Johnson’s a trained killer, a master at every kind of warfare. Besides, I have a feeling it won’t be just him next time.”

“I thought you said the NN agents always work alone?”

“They do for the most part, to stay invisible. I’m sure the cemetery incident has him thinking. They’ll risk their cover to complete an objective if they have to.” Roman looked into her eyes and smiled. “Let’s talk about good things. Who knows, maybe Johnson has decided to let me be.”

For the first time Heather could hear hesitation in his voice, a lack of confidence in the statement. She brushed it off just as Roman did and kissed him, wanting also to think only about good things.

### III

As Roman opened the door to his house, the pain in the back of his neck was unmistakable a familiar pain that dissipated almost as quickly as its inception, its effects first numbing his fingers and toes and then immobilizing his limbs.

This time was different though. His eyes were not heavy and his vision was still intact. Roman lay flat on his back looking at his own ceiling, unable to turn his head to see his attacker. It must have been a slightly different cocktail—not taking him all the way to unconsciousness.

The monstrous agent scooped the fragile janitor off the polished hardwood with little effort despite the dead weight of Roman's arms and legs. Roman imagined himself swinging and kicking but the poison in his blood had different ideas; even his power of speech was gone. Johnson propped his paralyzed protégé in the rocking chair facing away from his bed, careful to prop the janitor's head so that Roman could see him. As his weight shifted on the wooden chair Roman heard a small creak and was surprised his ears were still working.

Satisfied with the positioning, the agent walked backwards eyeing the incapacitated teenager in front of him. Johnson reached into his suit coat, producing a case of cigars and plucked one out of the silver case. The flame from his lighter was like that of a blowtorch, stretching at least six inches into the air. Johnson puffed several times, a thick cloud of smoke billowing around his face; and when the end of the cigar glowed red, he pulled it from his mouth and smiled.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that during our time together you've never seen me smoke a cigar, much less carry them on my person. You know something's not right here but you can't quite put your finger on it. And you'd be correct in your assumption, but I'm not going to give anything away. You're a smart guy right? A so-called genius. I'm confident that you'll figure it out, probably even within the next ten minutes."

Roman's eyes wandered away from the agent as he spoke, and focused on the couch next to the agent. On it was a gray blanket that covered two heaps, bodies maybe.

Johnson took a drag from the cigar and smiled again.

"On to business then. I've brought you a little going away present, a memento of things past, if you will."

Johnson ripped back the gray covering exposing the lifeless corpses beneath. His father's skull was stapled back together with what looked like industrial grade steel and his mother's torso was sewn shut from her midsection to her neck, mimicking the look of a zipper. Both with the same frozen looks they died with.

Roman closed his eyes tight and could hear the air blow out of his nose in faster intervals.

"I brought mommy and daddy along to help me prove a point, Roman. You see, the world is full of great injustices, like the ones that killed them. Like the ones that killed my wife and son. The problem is that it seems I haven't gotten through to you quite yet. Either you're part of the solution or you're part of the problem. Either you're trying to stop the injustices of the world, or you are part of those injustices."

Johnson looked at Roman's parents on the couch and sucked on his cigar again, this time savoring every ounce of the smoke. He squinted through the fog in front of his face and replaced the gray tarp over the corpses. Johnson threw the half-smoked cigar to the floor and stomped it a second later with the heel of his

shoe. He walked over to Roman, leaned over the young man and smiled. The presence of the agent's torso and shoulders covered Roman with a shadow, blocking out any light from the lamp on the stand next to his door. Roman's right eye blurred and burned from a drop of sweat from his own forehead.

Johnson's smile vanished now as he was right in Roman's face, spit flying and teeth gnashing. "Don't you see? You have a power to stop evil in the world. To prevent things like this from happening." Johnson nodded to the couch. "But instead of that you run and hide like a coward, uncaring or unwilling to help. I'm here to change all that. You will become an agent and fight for the freedom of those who can't fight for themselves, or everything and everyone around you will be destroyed."

Johnson's voice quieted to a pleasant tone, like that of father to his child. "And oh yes, I know about your new friends. Your cafeteria buddy that thinks you're the best thing since sliced bread and the oh-so beautiful blond that you can't wait to stick your humper handle into. They'll be the first to go."

Roman tried to cry out, but his lips didn't move.

Johnson stepped back, calming completely to the demeanor Roman had seen in their days at Bravo. "Besides, you saw the Jesup File. Whether it was on purpose or not is immaterial. You saw it. In fact every bit of it is probably filed away in that computer brain of yours. You can't be allowed to walk the streets with that knowledge, Roman. You can't be on the loose with information about something so powerful. You haven't told them about it, have you?"

Roman tried to shake his head no, but it was useless.

"I didn't think so," Johnson said as if he heard the answer in Roman's head.

"Time. What an awful concept. I know we've touched on it before in our conversations. What a dilemma you're in. Time, which is supposed to heal all things. But in your case it never lets you forget—it can't fast-forward quickly enough through your life to wash away the past. You're still right there in Iowa, standing on the porch holding that smoking shotgun, aren't you? On the flip side of the coin time is running too fast. Every day you spend here with your friends could be your last. But you can't slow it down, can you? It just picks up momentum like that train you jumped from. It's burning you from both ends, laughing at you."

Roman shut his eyes. A lone tear escaped down his cheek. His self-pity was stopped short by commotion on the front porch. There were several knocks on the door.

"You in there, Roman?" Tony asked.

"Is everything all right?" Heather's voice was worried.

Johnson pulled the Kimber from the holster inside his suit coat.

"It seems time is not done playing tricks on you, my friend. What are the chances of your friends showing up at this exact instance? The sad part of the story, and the end of the story mind you, is that when you fail to answer they're going to turn the knob and walk right into the room. All because when you got home you failed to realize what was on the other side of your own door. It's not locked you know. I hit you with the dart before you got a chance."

Johnson gripped the gun with both hands, bent his knees slightly and aimed at the door.

“You’re either with us or against us, Roman. Last chance.”

Roman’s will seemed to overtake the effects of the paralyzing agent in his blood stream. His lips began to move. *I’ll go. I’ll go with you.* What were yells in his head came out only in puffs of gibberish.

“If you can’t decide, I’ll have to decide for you.”

The door opened.

The silenced shots of the Kimber flicked through the air.

Roman willed his head finally to turn, just in time to see the blood from the back of Tony’s head splatter the lampshade and send a crimson cast through the room.

Heather stood alone now in the doorway, paralyzed as well, not from the poison in a dart, but from fear.

Johnson aimed at her and pulled the trigger.

An instant before the bullet tore through her, Roman’s power of speech returned enough for him to shout.

“No!”

It was too late; Heather’s body lay sprawled in the doorway, her legs on the porch, her once-blonde hair spread out on the living room carpet.

#### IV

A 1989 Caprice Classic sat parked in the back lot of the Tavern. The car was paintless, primed in gray, with sand marks in several areas around its base and door as evidence of the freshly removed rust. A few scattered cars littered the parking lot but the busy time had passed, and with it the random foot traffic that made its way into the watering hole.

Bobby Dukes sat in the passenger seat of the Caprice and smoked yet another cigarette. His eyes were fixed on the back door of the Tavern. Sensing he was down to the butt, he pulled another white stick from the top of his ear, poked it into his mouth without seeming to open his lips, and lit it from the glowing end. His fingers worked on their own, trained by repetition, not needing to see to perform the task. He took his attention off the door briefly to peek at his watch. He pulled the collar of his black leather coat up around his neck, cold even though the back window was steamed up.

Boochie Anderson sat in the driver’s seat with sweat dripping down the sides of his face. The perspiration almost seemed to flow from the tattoo on his bald head—a green image that looked like the wild branches of a thorn bush stretching out in every direction. His huge stomach pressed against the steering wheel and his lungs pulled hard for oxygen as he struggled to reach for a handkerchief in his back pocket. He grabbed the steering wheel with his free hand, leveraging himself to pick his wide bottom off the car seat. After finally wiping the sides of his face, Boochie let out a horrid mucous-filled sigh, a sound that might have come after an average-sized person had been running wind sprints. A few more deep breaths and his air recovered. He reached for the console and flipped off the heat.

Bobby crossed his arms in front of himself trying to stay warm, but never lost his concentration on the back of the brick building. The ash from his cigarette crumbled to his lap.

“He’s late,” Bobby said keeping his mouth closed tight like a ventriloquist.

“Which one?” Boochie replied.

“Johnny the Killer.”

“He’ll be here.” Boochie’s gaze drifted away, discovering a king-sized package of Kit-Kats snuggled between the dash and the windshield. The candy had somehow eluded the black hole between his lips for the last day and a half.

“Can you turn the fuckin’ heat back on? Christ. It’s twenty degrees out. My body’s not used to this cold yet. Not even December and it’s freezing. I swear the first chance I get I’m goin’ to Miami.”

Boochie picked up the Kit-Kats, noticing the softness of the once-hard candy. “Hey, you think these would still be all right to eat? The heater melted ‘em.”

“Since when do ya discriminate between solid and liquid type food? Just turn the goddamn heat back on.”

Boochie flicked the heat back on, his pierced tongue licking the dark mushy chocolate from its wrapper. Boochie’s face could have set off any metal detector within a mile radius—not only did metal occupy his tongue—but his top lip was pierced in several places, and his eye lids, his chin, and both ears dawned an array of silver. Boochie wiped his mouth after consuming the melted chocolate, paying careful attention to the rings that decorated his face.

A silver Corvette entered the parking lot and pulled up next to Bobby Duke’s side of the Chevy. Johnny the Killer rolled down the window.

“You’re late,” Bobby said.

“I had a couple last minute sales. Sorry.”

Bobby reached in his coat pocket, producing a thick wad of money folded in half and held together by a rubber band. He tossed it through both windows onto Johnny’s lap.

“Not a bad week kid. Freddy likes your progress. Keep up the good work.”

“Is that it?” Johnny said trying to imagine how much money he was holding without actually counting it.

“No, that’s not it kid. The Flower wants to make sure you’re on the up and up, so he wants you to hang around and help us with a little problem we got here.”

“Problem?”

“Yeah kid, a fuckin’ problem. Like this guy sitting in the Tavern. He owes The Flower some jack.”

The back door of the Tavern opened and out came the last patron of the night, wheeling himself down the newly constructed handicapped ramp.

“That’s our man.”

Johnny and Bobby exited their cars. Boochie followed at a snail’s pace, trying several times with no success to pull his pants up over his barrel gut. The man in the wheelchair was at his van, putting the key in his door, but was stopped just short of unlocking it.

“Joe. How’s it goin’ Joe?”

Joe swallowed hard, eyes big. Johnny had seen that look on freshmen at the high school. But this was an instance he did not welcome the sight.

“Look Bobby,” Joe blurted. “I told Freddy I’d have the money by Monday. He knows I’m good for it.”

“Being good for it ain’t the problem,” Boochie Anderson said, still winded from the short walk.

“No that ain’t the problem,” said Bobby. “The problem is you’re late. Two days late. Monday makes you five days late. You’re a fuckin’ computer programmer or some shit aren’t you? And you don’t have the fuckin’ money?”

“Software designer. I design interactive CD-ROMs for kids.”

Johnny looked down at the ground and shook his head, wishing himself somewhere else.

“You hear that Boochie?” Bobby asked.

“I hear it.”

“Mr. Computer Man wants sympathy ’cause he makes kids happy. Boo fuckin’ hoo. Guess what Joe? We’re fresh out of sympathy. But I will make you a deal. If you can walk to that light pole and back we’ll forget the whole thing.”

The man in the wheel chair looked down at his abnormally short legs and shook his head. “Bobby please. You know I can’t.”

“Boochie,” Bobby said lighting another cigarette.

Boochie grabbed the limp man out of the chair and held him so his stubs touched the ground.

“Now walk cock sucker,” Bobby said.

Boochie let go and Joe fell to the ground like a normal person faints, catching himself with his hands against the gravel parking lot. Joe began to crawl only with his arms.

“That don’t look like walkin’ to me Joe. Does it to you Boochie?”

“Nope”

“Take care of him, Johnny.”

Johnny stood still.

“I said beat his ass Johnny. This guy might not be able to use his legs but there ain’t a fuckin’ thing wrong with his head. In fact he uses his head all the time to bet on football. Lost twelve large last week alone. You shouldn’t feel sorry for this asshole. Nobody’s holding a gun to his head making him bet.”

Johnny walked over and stopped just short of the man’s head.

“Go ahead Johnny,” Boochie encouraged.

Johnny looked at Boochie and then at Bobby. Then at the man.

“I can’t do it Bobby.”

Bobby took the cigarette out of his mouth, and brushed Johnny off to the side. “Let me show you how it’s done kid.”

An onslaught of kicks ensued, blood splattered over the gravel and Bobby’s boots. At the end of it the crippled man picked one of his teeth out of the rocks, and begged for his life. Bobby pulled the gun out of the back of his jeans and lifted the man’s head up. He shoved the gun in Joe’s mouth and pulled back the hammer.

“Come Monday Joe, there ain’t gonna be no walkin’ contests.”

With that Bobby let the man’s head fall back into the gravel. He turned and looked at Johnny. “It’s alright kid. Nobody can do it the first time. It’ll come eventually. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Johnny followed Boochie and Bobby to the vehicles, looking back at the man who lay almost lifeless on the ground. Johnny’s legs were jello and his stomach rested in his throat. Johnny exited the parking lot behind them, but when they were out of sight he drove the Corvette back to the Tavern lot and helped Joe get into his van.

Joe refused an ambulance.

## V

“No!”

The scream itself jolted Roman up into a sitting position. His sheets were soaked and sweat ran down his face like he had been trapped in a coffin for hours. Roman thought for sure his heart would beat out of his chest in another couple of pumps. Adrenaline filled his body and made the tips of his fingers and toes tingle. Roman took a full swing but hit nothing except air.

For five years Roman had never slept more than two hours at time. At times he was still waiting for his eyes to close only to find that the sun was up and school awaited him. As a young child he had problems with sleep as well, but in those days a quick read from part of a story usually eased him into sleep. Sometimes a powerful mind was a curse as much as it was a blessing. The insomnia intensified after his parent’s death, of course, a mixture of grief, self-pity, and the coming of age of a super-charged mind that evidently had no off-switch.

The sleeplessness began to let up when he got to Collingston. A new start. A normal life. Roman found himself at first sleeping for three hours and then four hours at a time. And when he started spending time with Heather it even became five hours. The last two nights he’d found himself waking only because of the alarm clock. An event that Roman had thought would never happen in his entire life.

But now this nightmare barged in at a time in his life that was probably the happiest, stirring up old feelings and injecting fresh fear into his thoughts of the future. Roman closed his eyes and tried to wish the dream away, only to open his eyes five minutes later. Was it really a nightmare keeping him from rest? He was eighteen years old, mommy shouldn’t have to pat his tummy and give him a drink for him to be able to go back to sleep. There’s always truth in dreams though. Roman had read books on the subject of course, and believed—as many believed—that dreams are just buried feelings coming to the surface. Was it really Agent Johnson threatening him and killing Heather and Tony? Or was every character in his dream either some manifestation of himself, or a feeling hidden somewhere in his head. Was it really cowardliness that kept him from joining the NN? Roman knew it wasn’t, but maybe somewhere deep inside part of him did want to use his abilities to help people. Would Agent Johnson really kill his friends given the chance? Only if it kept him from his objective of obtaining Roman. It wasn’t a nightmare at all, more like a blast of reality. He was putting

people in danger by being here, by loving them. It wasn't just about him anymore. The thought made the hairs on his neck stand up. He looked at the picture of Heather on the stand next to his bed, and then at the baseball cards covering the walls of his living room.

One of the cards caught his eye. The one he could never make it through the day without looking at. The one he kept right above the headboard of his bed. It was a very limited series and yet not worth a penny to a serious card collector. It had been given out at a minor league ballpark some thirty years ago, to the first fifty fans in attendance. The player on the card was a catcher named Henry Swivel.

Roman pulled the card from the wall and looked at like it was the first time he had seen it. The picture was taken a month before his career-ending collision at home plate. His father had never seemed angry at his misfortune, never had a problem talking about baseball, or recalling old stories about his teammates.

"Doesn't it bother you? Being so close to the show and having it taken away because some guy mauled you over at the plate," Roman recalled asking him as they played catch.

"Things happen for a reason, son. I could've rehabbed and gotten back in the game if I really wanted. But I got a better offer—your mother and you."

*Things happen for a reason.*

Roman wasn't completely sold on this theory. All too often it seemed that things happened for no reason, or even worse, they happened to spite you. Before turning on his side Roman flipped his pillow, searching for a cooler comfort, something that would lull him back to sleep. Instead, the pillow only kept his head eye-level with the picture next to his bed. Sleep eluded him, because of the girl in the frame.

## VI

"Babe Ruth was the best ball player there was or will ever be. End of story," Sam Peterman said chewing a mouthful of his chicken sandwich.

"You're off your fuckin' rocker," Pick Bryant started. "The only thing Babe Ruth could do for a current major league ball club is drive the shuttle bus from the hotel to the airport, and only then if he was sober."

Here we go. This argument had happened at least once a year at our lunch table for the duration of our incarceration. Nobody ever won the argument; I guess that's why it kept popping up from time to time. It was Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving and the first real break from school. Students were ready to let go, set the books aside, and relax. But the anticipation of freedom also caused a few tempers to flare, probably because that Wednesday seemed to stretch into endlessness, almost as if God was playing a cruel trick on us. Sam and Pick currently going at each other was a perfect example.

"I'm going to say one more thing to shut you up once and for all, Bryant," Peterman flared up again. "The Babe hit 714 home runs in his career, 60 in one season. Led the American League in home runs eight times, led RBI's 6 times, led the slugging percentage 13 times, and basically built the game on his back."

“He swung a 45- inch bat,” Pick responded.

“So what?” Sam countered.

“Do you see anybody swinging a bat that long today? Hell no you don’t. You know why? Because nobody would ever hit the ball swingin’ a tree trunk like that. Ruth got away with it because they didn’t throw as hard as they do now. Those assholes out there pitching two ends of a double-header in some cases. They couldn’t do that if they threw as hard as they do today. Their goddamn arms would fall off. Plus those first two statistics you mentioned have both been broken. The 60 home runs in one season is a joke now. Just like that fat ass himself.”

Sam stood up red-faced and grabbed Pick by the collar of his shirt. “That’s you little pencil dick.” Sam raised his fist.

“Whoa. Whoa. Fellas. Can you hear yourselves?” I said. “You’re about to fight over a guy that’s been dead since before your dads were born. You think it’s really worth it?”

Peterman released Pick’s shirt and sat back down. “My bad Pick.”

“No problem buddy, but I still think...”

“Pick,” I interrupted.

“Yeah?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Roman showed up at the end of the conversation, bypassing his usual seat next to Heather and sitting between me and Brunno. Heather was aware of it right away—all women have the super power of sensing bad karma. Roman sat down, worried only about the fruit on his tray, and didn’t seem to have that spark that so often inspired the rest of us. His eyes were red and brown stubble covered his face. Heather shot me a glance as if I could read the janitor’s mind.

“You look like shit,” I said, expecting at least a grin.

Roman nodded. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“You missed a good argument between Peterman and Bryant. One thinks Babe Ruth was Jesus and the other thinks his picture is next to ‘degenerate’ in the dictionary.”

Roman didn’t acknowledge.

I shrugged my shoulders at Heather.

She began to speak, confident that she could talk to Roman. “Do you want to come over to the house for Thanksgiving dinner? My parents said you could.”

“I’ve got plans.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Heather shot back.

“Nothing. I’m just tired.”

Heather let it drop against her better judgment. She watched as Roman ate his lunch, knowing there was something more to it. Tired didn’t make him sit across the table from her. Tired didn’t make her invisible. After watching for several minutes Heather left the table without a goodbye.

Women always read more into shit than is really necessary. I mean give the guy a break, he’s tired. He’s entitled—more than anybody probably—to have an off day or two. That’s the difference between guys and chicks. I could give a rat’s ass if Roman wasn’t exactly doing cartwheels down the hallways. I don’t

even care if he's not his charming self every once in awhile. He didn't owe me any apologies. Let the man be. But with women, with Heather, I had a feeling Roman was going to be explaining himself for awhile, apologizing his ass off, and it wouldn't stop until Heather was satisfied. See that's the thing, "Sorry" is not enough. You've got to go through the whole "why you're sorry" part as well.

Roman helped Bruno with some of his business math homework. Business math is a fancy name for "math for dumb asses" at Collingston High. At least I made it to Algebra. A smile came to my face watching Bruno try to comprehend the explanations from a guy that was light years ahead of him intelligence-wise. It was like a cockroach trying to understand Einstein.

My thoughts drifted toward the evening's events. As I probably mentioned earlier, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving is the biggest night of the year at the Tavern. They would take the table and chairs out, and still it was impossible to get from one end of the bar to the other on account of the crowd. That was the one night of the year we couldn't have our regular game in the back room. Don't get me wrong; there was still a game, but Pick's dad was running it. The Tavern ran its own blackjack table, and Pick dealt. The poor suckers would stand in line to get a seat at the table unknowingly begging to be kicked in the nuts. It was a perfect situation for Pick: he didn't have to put up his own money, but he still got a percentage of the house winnings. I felt a plan coming to the surface as I watched Roman write down numbers and then answers in Bruno's notebook. He wrote the numbers just for Bruno's benefit; the answers were already there, flashing in Roman's head like numbers on a computer screen. Blackjack—the only game that the enlightened player has a mathematical edge over the house in. And I had a human calculator sitting right in front of me.

I grabbed Roman as the bell rang, before he could leave the table. "Whatta ya doin' tonight? You gotta work?"

"No."

"How about comin' down to the Tavern with me and helping me out with something? I know the Tavern isn't really your scene but I could really use ya."

"I don't know, Tony. I was planning on catching up on some reading."

"Take a night off for God's sakes. Last time I checked, the pages of those books don't change if not read in a certain amount of time. Don't you ever just want to have some fun?"

"Reading *is* fun to me."

"Look, what I've got in store for ya is mental work, so don't worry about being able to rest that brain of yours. Besides you know if ya stay home Heather'll be on your doorstep before ya get through your first book. And then you'll be playin' twenty questions all night."

"I don't know. Won't there be a big crowd there? I can't stand the smoke." Roman paused analyzing even this simple situation.

My only hope was to play the friendship card. "Look I know this isn't really your scene. I wouldn't even ask if I didn't really need your help. If you absolutely hate it, I'll never ask you to go back there again."

Roman gave a sigh. "Fine. What do you have in mind?"

I put my hand on his shoulder as we walked up the stairs. “You ever counted cards before?”

## VII

Since there was no school on Friday, Mr. Buttworst’s sixth hour Calculus class was having their extra credit day in advance. The bearded teacher had resigned himself to the fact that he was the second-smartest person in the room. So now Roman graded papers during the class. He sat at Mr. Buttworst’s desk with red pen in hand, marking not only that class’s papers but every class’s of Mr. Buttworst’s, speeding through the students’ problems with the same velocity as when he read books. The answer key sat on the desk off to the side, unneeded and unused.

The bell rang, the last bell of the day, releasing the inmates out into the world for their extended weekend furloughs of eating, drinking, and partying. They would go with freedom before them and savor every minute, forgetting their troubles and deadlines and prison guards, and live to the minute, until that minute turned into Dreadful Monday.

Roman sat in the empty room, still working on the last of Buttworst’s papers, not noticing the mass exodus, and not running for the doors as his peers did. His mind was ultra-focused in another world called mathematics, and that mind did not unlock from its focus easily.

Mr. Buttworst poured another cup of coffee from his thermos, looking over Roman’s shoulder at the papers on the desk. As many times as he encountered it, Buttworst could never get over the speed of Roman’s grading, twice as fast as his own.

“Forget the rest of those, I’ll do them over the weekend,” Mr. Buttworst said.

“Are you sure? I’ve only got fifth hour left.”

“I’m sure. Go and enjoy yourself this weekend.” Buttworst threw the ungraded papers into his brief case and clicked the latches shut. “Say, what do you have planned for the holiday? Are you going with Tony or to Heather’s?”

“Actually I’m going across the street to my neighbor’s house. He doesn’t have any family around so...” Roman stopped short, cut off by the picture of Mr. Buttworst’s wife and daughter staring back at him from atop the desk, and realized what the teacher was getting at. “...What are your plans?”

“Ah, I don’t know. Just another Thursday for me really. I know I’ll do some hunting in the morning but other than that? There’s football on. I’ll throw a couple deer steaks on the grill, drink a few beers.”

Roman grabbed his backpack off the floor and followed Mr. Buttworst into the hallway. Not until the teacher locked the door did Roman realize the emptiness of the hallways. Only ten minutes had passed and the school was deserted by teachers and students alike.

“It’s always like this on Thanksgiving,” Buttworst said, sensing Roman’s surprise. “First break of the year is always a long time coming. Have a good holiday, Roman.”

The two started in opposite directions down the hall. Roman stopped on his third step and turned back to him. “Mr. Buttworst? How much of that venison do you have anyway?”

“Enough to last a year. Why?” Buttworst said, stopping to face the janitor.

“I don’t know. It seems like the three of us might have a better time enjoying each other’s company. That is if you don’t mind...”

“Two o’clock, my place. All you need is your appetites.”

Roman changed directions, and started on the same route out of the building as the pot-bellied teacher, even though it was a longer route for him. “I’ve got to warn you, Mr. Buttworst, my buddy Carl is a little on the eccentric side.”

“A friend of yours is a friend of mine Roman. Besides I’ve lived long enough that not much of anything surprises me these days.” Mr. Buttworst put his arm on Roman’s shoulder as they descended the stairs. “I owe you anyway, for grading the papers. How pissed off do you think the rest of these teachers would be if they knew I hadn’t graded a single homework assignment in a month?”

Roman smiled.

## VIII

With all of its threats and glimmers of sunshine of certain days, the few stubborn leaves that refused to let go of their branches, and people out walking in the evenings, your occasional football being thrown around in the backyard—the worst of seasons had failed to conquer. But now, on this night, there was only one thing in charge, one force to reckoned with. He was an old grouchy man, rocking back and forth on a rickety rotten chair, with a white beard down to the floor and no sympathy for even the most righteous of souls, indiscriminate with his wrath. His last name was Winter.

The sky was clear, every star in its grip accounted for. The same as it looked on hot summer nights; the same as it looked on fall evenings by the lake. But somehow it was different. It wasn’t the contents of the heavens that had changed, but what lay beneath them. Now there were frozen ponds and streams. Smoke could be seen from every exhaust on the street. People wore earmuffs and stocking caps, and blew on their hands even after entering a warm building. Smokestacks shot their fog into the air in every neighborhood residence. Lights turned out early. The absence of young kids’ kickball games was deafening.

There was no snow, not yet anyway. I parked the Pinto on a side street a half-mile away from the Tavern, the closest I could get. I left my winter coat in the car and braved the walk without it because I knew there was nowhere to put it once inside, and I knew that as cold as it was out, it was just that hot in. Roman wore a flannel, the attire he seemed to wear in all seasons and for all occasions. My constant warning of how hot it would be in the Tavern did not detour the janitor.

I held my hands against my mouth, blowing on them as we walked, trying not to lose feeling in my fingertips. Roman walked with his face turned up to the stars, letting his arms dangle like he was strolling home from school the way I watched him earlier in the year. Temperature was not high on his list of concerns.

Even the cold wasn't enough to dampen my spirits though. I'd already won the battle. If Roman didn't win my money back I'd still succeeded in at least getting him out of the house. I was anxious to see my friend in a new environment. I was glad he thought enough of me to come.

"You know that counting cards is not a for sure way to win? It only gives you an idea of what's coming next. Even if I know exactly what cards have been played there's no way of telling what exact card is coming next."

"I know. I just want you to give it a shot. It's not like were trying to cheat someone out of a million dollars or anything. I just want back what I lost to Pick the last time."

"How much was that?"

"A hundred and twenty." I took my hands away from the warm air of my mouth, reached into my pocket, pulled out sixty dollars, and put it in Roman's hand. "If you lose that we're done."

"And if I don't lose? Where do you want me stop?"

"Like I said, I'm not greedy." I pondered the question for a moment. "I don't know, if you get up two-twenty or so, that would be good. That makes me a hundred. Severance pay for losing last time."

We walked up the ramp to the Tavern's back door. Amazing how you couldn't hear anything. The only barrier between three hundred people, blaring music, and us was only a single layer of brick wall.

"What about an ID?" Roman said following behind me.

"Don't worry. I know everybody in here. It won't be a problem. You're with Tony Falcone, man! Have I ever led you astray before?"

Roman didn't answer.

My face was instantly defrosted as I opened the back door. In a rush of heat and noise, I went from chattering teeth to sweat forming on my forehead. I couldn't make out one single person in the bar. The floor was wall-to-wall bodies—a beast with a hundred different heads. Each individual movement set in motion a wave through the crowd, a never-ending circle of action and reaction.

The doorman fought for space as well, smashed between the entrance and the restroom line. Only after winning a struggle to maintain his own legroom did I see who it was. It's amazing that a stream of people hadn't poured out when I opened the door.

Larry was a good friend of Pick's dad. "What's up, Tony?" he said giving me the wink that let me know I was cool.

I started past him, looking for familiar faces and smacking my lips for beer, and then realized I couldn't feel anybody behind me. Roman was still standing in the doorway, like a kid who was nervous to jump in the water at his first day of swim lessons. Larry put his arm in front of my chest halting me before the amoeba occupying the floor absorbed me.

"Who's this?" Larry squinted through the smoke and dim lights, sizing Roman up.

"He's with me. He's cool."

"Yeah, well he doesn't look cool. He looks twelve. We've already got a bunch of under-agers in here as it is. It's my ass if something goes bad."

“I’m tellin’ ya he’s cool.” A line had started to form behind Roman. If he stood there much longer the thirsty patrons would trample him. “He doesn’t even drink. He’s here for the cards. He won’t be a problem. I’m lucky to get three fuckin’ words out of him myself, and I’m his best friend.”

I swore Larry had one eye peering at me and the other focused on Roman. “Get him in here then. Let’s go fella you’re holding me up. You’re either staying or leaving.”

Roman walked in, his reluctant steps seeming never to catch up to mine. I navigated us through the crowd, dodging beers held above heads, breaking up conversations, and rubbing up against a few tits in the process, the last being an accident of course.

Roman followed like a running back behind his blocker, careful to avoid contact with anyone. We made it the length of the bar, just short of making a right toward the back room when I hit a wall. The person in front of me was walking the opposite direction and I bounced off him like I just hit a trampoline, back peddling until I was stopped by Roman.

At the turn, it was gridlock, two masses of people trying to go in different directions, locked at a standstill in a three-foot space between the corner of the bar and the front door. I had an idea of who it was in front of me just by bumping his belly. If being in good physical shape meant a man had a six-pack for a stomach, Boochie Anderson had a keg, maybe two. My suspicion was confirmed by the light glimmering off the metal from twenty different places on his face and the tattoo that covered much of his bald head.

Behind the giant marshmallow stood Bobby Dukes and Johnny the Killer. There was an awkward exchange of glances between me and Johnny. Boochie decided it was time to untie our mangled knot. He pushed me to the side and made a path through the crowd with no more effort than just his normal walk.

“Excuse you,” I said after the fat man had passed.

“Whadyou say?” Bobby Dukes asked as he passed on my left.

“I said, enjoy yourself.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bobby said, shifting his glance from me to Roman. He shot a smile at the janitor, something that happened only when bad thoughts traveled through his head. A smile that had a story behind it, like he knew all about the Hollow.

Johnny walked to our left as well, looking away as he came to Roman.

Carl sat in *his* chair at the end of the bar, talking to two girls that seemed to be hanging on his every word. There couldn’t have been a stranger sight. A guy who was probably forty years older than anyone in the bar, sitting on a bar stool that would certainly have his name engraved on it when he finally passed, wearing that lime green army jacket or whatever it was, his ears covered by the flaps on his hat, talking to two twenty-ish hot bodies that thought he was Socrates himself.

“I’ll go to hell. Got the son of a bitch out the books for one night huh?” Carl said pointing at Roman.

“It wasn’t easy, let me tell ya. How’s it goin’ anyway?”

Carl looked at the girls’ chests in front of him, took a long drink of his beer, and smiled. “Havin’ a good time. A good night to you fellas as well.”

The pool tables had been removed from the second room, hanging lights anchored by chains over the tables had been pulled close to the ceiling so no one would hit their head, and the usual tables for lounging were absent as well. It didn't make any difference. This room was worse than the first. Not only were the people jammed into the sardine can—this room was rocking. The girls grinding on their men and on each other. Beer spilled from cups and there was a steady thumping from people hitting the floor, knocked off their own feet by the shifting monster they helped to make up. I navigated us through, like Han Solo dodging the ever-changing direction of huge rocks in an asteroid belt.

I saw Sally from the corner of my eye, reminding myself that at some point during the next day, she was one obstacle I couldn't maneuver around. Way back at Halloween I asked her to go with my family to my grandparents' house for Thanksgiving. I knew when the words came out of my mouth I'd regret it. I liked her sure, but December 1st meant it was time to get ready for baseball. And there was no time to chase pussy if you were serious about chasing your dream. Thanksgiving would be more like our last supper I guess. My throat was sand paper. I needed a beer.

The third room was cooler, there weren't any bodies gyrating, just eight players seated for cards and three rows deep of people watching. The damage was already done however; I was thoroughly soaked from my shirt to my underwear. I pulled the bottom of my shirt up and wiped the salty sweat dripping from my forehead into my eyes.

Roman still had his flannel on, standing next to me without a drop of sweat to be found, watching the cards on the table. His brain was already focused and calculating faster than Pick could flip the slick sturdy cards.

Pick had a pile of money behind him already and a permanent smile filled his face, like a kid opening Christmas presents. He wore a towel around his neck, and sipped his beer through a long straw making sure that his hands were occupied only with dealing and collecting. *Keep them playing.*

The last of the six-card deck were dealt. "All right boys, we're gonna take a five minute break so I can drain the dew from the lily."

The man next to Pick scrounged through the pile of money, separating the tens and fives into stacks, and took out the twenties, securing them in a lockbox. He stood like a secret service agent.

In the back bathroom, I hit my face with a cold splash of water, something usually only reserved for summers at the ball field. Pick let out a moan standing in front of the urinal next to me as if he were doing something more than peeing.

"Jesus, I feel better. Haven't took a piss since I got here at five."

I wiped my face with the brown paper towels and looked in the mirror, still not used to the sight of my eye being normal, half expecting to see the purple or green raccoon circle that'd graced it for the good part of a month.

"I need a favor, Pick."

"Let me guess, you want me to let you cut in front of everyone waiting for the next seat when somebody gets up."

"Close, but no. I want you to give that seat to Roman."

Pick started for the door.

“Aren’t you going to wash your hands? You are dealing. Other people touch those cards.”

“Oh, shit yeah. I was just in a hurry to get back in there. So why Swivel?” Pick turned on the water and looked at me in the reflection in the mirror.

“Roman loves blackjack, but can’t ever play because he’s always got the janitor’s gig at night. Ya know he’s been through a lot of shit over the last couple of months. I know it would really make his day if you gave him a seat.”

Pick shook his head back and forth weighing the decision as he grabbed a paper towel. “What about you. You not playing or what?”

“I’m broke. You cleaned me out last time.”

Pick smiled, proud of his accomplishment. “Okay. I’ll let him sit. But if he runs out that’s it. I’m not letting him reload. The guys’ll be pissed off enough that I let him cut in the first place.”

## IX

Sam Peterman hit his sixteen against the dealers six and busted, screwing the table once again, and bankrupting himself. Some people never learn. Adding to the insult was the fact the Pick was the dealer and there was more than money involved, there was the honor of Babe Ruth from earlier that day.

Pick stopped the man trying to grab the seat Sam departed from. “Hold on buddy. That’s not your seat. I’ve had someone waiting longer than anybody.” Pick motioned for Roman.

“That’s bullshit,” the man said, watching as Roman took the seat.

“No it’s not bullshit. He’s been waiting since six. He just keeps getting pushed to the back of the line by you fat asses.”

There was rumbling through the crowd but it died off in a matter of seconds.

“All right Swivel, whatta ya got?” Pick said winking at Roman.

Roman pulled the three twenties out of the breast pocket of his flannel and sat them on the table. “Can you break that first twenty into fives please?”

“Not a problem. Everybody’s got to start somewhere right?”

Roman smiled.

“Alright gentlemen place your bets, cards coming out.”

On his first five-dollar bet Roman got blackjack.

I left the room to get a beer.

## X

Fate has a strange way of placing you in situations you don’t want to be in. I ended up after taking a twenty-minute swim through two rooms of people, pressed against the edge of the bar next to none other than Johnny the Killer.

There were five bartenders working, but the average wait was still fifteen minutes for a drink. I ordered two, trading the waiting for the inconvenience of drinking a warm beer.

“Four shots of Wild Turkey,” Johnny said after I got my beers.

Just thinking about whiskey made my stomach turn. Too many nights of puking and too many days of headaches. Besides that it tastes like shit, like

something that should go in an engine for fuel. In the movies and TV they always drink the stuff down like it was sweet, savoring every last drop. It only took me one time drinking it to figure out those actors were drinking tea or diluted pop. Nothing goes down worse. Nothing.

Johnny slid two of the shots in front of me after he paid the bartender. “Drink up Tony.” Johnny raised his glass for cheers.

“Fuck that. I’m not shootin’ whiskey.”

“What happened to you man? We used to drink this stuff by the fifth back in the day. Remember the time you got all fucked up and my ma found you laying in her bushes with puke all over yourself the next morning?”

“You drank it by the fifth. I just took a swig from time to time. And yes I do remember lying in the bushes. That’s exactly why I want no part of it. I remember a lot of times. A lot of good times.”

“To the good times,” Johnny said, raising his glass once again.

Reluctantly I lifted my own and hit it against the Killer’s. Johnny slammed one and then the other, followed by a huge burp that blew right in my face. The smell was unmistakable and made my whole body convulse in a shiver.

“Wild Turkey of all things?”

“It’s not that bad,” the Killer still cringing.

“To good times. I’m such a dumb ass.” I lifted the first shot and poured it down, careful not to touch my tongue. Before I took a breath I shot the other. This one splashed around in my mouth a little more, forcing me to taste it. When they were down, I coughed hard and then tried to wash the taste away with beer. It must have been a male thing—the shots I mean—It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out nothing good ever came from doing them. When your buddy bought you a shot, it was an unwritten rule that you took it. Not a good rule but still a rule.

Johnny stood next to me, a dark shadow of his old self. The Ralph Lauren sweaters and designer jeans traded in for black T-shirts, a complimenting thick leather coat with numerous silver zippers, and steel-toed boots. For the life of me, I had never seen Johnny in boots until that night. His hair was greased back and the pupils of his eyes danced on their irises like the chromed sphere that bounces repeatedly between the bumpers in a pinball machine.

There was something else on his jacket too, almost invisible if you weren’t looking for it, something the size of an eraser on the end of a pencil. I squinted trying not to be too obvious. It was pink...a pink... rose. The mark of Freddy Flowers. It was stitched with care into the thick leather, wanting to be seen, but at the same time hiding in plain view. A reflection of Freddy’s own psyche—he loved the power and respect he had on the street, but he didn’t exactly want to advertise it.

Me and Johnny stood in silence with our backs pressed against the bar, watching the scene in front of us. The speakers pounded Marilyn Manson’s “Beautiful People”, turning normal conversations in the bar into yells between mouths and ears that were already only inches apart. Individuals with their Jack and Cokes, gin and tonics, and beers, all formed a bigger solitary unit: college students back for the break, sisters visiting brothers, lovers starting their evening,

loners watching, dancers and friends. The once dingy green floor of the Tavern was alive.

Boochie and Bobby were at the video slot machines that were usually only ten steps away but now seemed like a mile. Johnny drank another shot. It went down easy for him now, each drink softening the blow of the next.

“What the hell are you *doing*? What’s all this?” I said waving my hand at Johnny’s new attire. “You look like you’re extra in the movie *Grease*.”

“You know how much money I made last week, Tony?”

“Do you know how long you’re going to spend in jail, Johnny?”

“It’ll never happen. The Flower is too tied in, too many of the pigs in his pocket. He’s squeaky clean.”

“Exactly *he’s* squeaky clean. Who do you think goes away when he does get pinched. It isn’t gonna be Freddy Flowers. It’ll be you or one of those other degenerates over there like Bobby Dukes.”

“I’d watch who you are callin’ a degenerate.”

“Look man, I’m not trying to ruffle anybody’s feathers. I’m just shootin’ ya straight. What about baseball? We need you if we’re going to win state. What about graduating?”

“Fuck all that. Why put myself through it? I’m not going anywhere in baseball. Maybe some junior college in the middle of a cornfield somewhere. And graduating? I’m making more money now than I would at any piss poor job in this town.”

“That’s just it. If you decide to go to college, you can go anywhere. You don’t have to stay here your whole life. I’m just tryin’ to talk to you as a friend.”

“Just like you were being my friend that night in the Hollow.”

“If I remember right, it was you who kicked the shit out of me, not vice versa.”

I’m not sure if it was the cold breeze blowing in as the door opened or the hundred-degree heat escaping, but the temperature dropped for a few seconds, a welcome relief to the stickiness that covered me. I could see them barely, those unmistakable long blond curls in the line to get in, stuck in the doorway behind the people in front of her. Johnny saw her as well.

“Ask the janitor how my sloppy seconds taste would ya? Remind him every time that he’s down there, it’s the same spot where the best part of me was first.”

Johnny walked off, absorbed by the forest of people.

“I’ll be sure not to tell him that,” I said, talking to myself.

Heather wasn’t a frequenter of bars and I don’t believe she had ever been in the Tavern. She still had that undeniable confidence, walking by Larry like she owned the joint. The only action the doorman could muster was his tongue hanging out of his mouth, like a dog outside without shade in August. Heather didn’t need a fake ID or somebody to get her in. Sure she could have passed for twenty-five with the make up and all, but Heather had the single greatest passport of all—beauty.

It took our blond friend twenty minutes to go twenty feet, and although she scanned the crowd looking for Roman, by the time Heather was directly in front of me she had no idea I was there. I decided to have some fun with her.

She whipped around with a shocked look on her face after I pinched her ass. She gave me a friendly slap on the cheek in return. Heather wore a silky black shirt, the top two buttons of which were undone. She knew how to work the system, a trait unknowingly passed down to her from Gina I imagine.

I heard some commotion in the back room—clapping actually. That was a good sign. It meant the house wasn't doing well. Hopefully, Roman was reaping the benefits.

“Is Roman here?”

“Nope haven't seen him.”

Heather started to dart off from the way she came before I grabbed her arm.

“Damn woman, chill. He's here. He's making me some money in the blackjack room.” I swallowed a couple mouthfuls of beer. “You're not going to bust his balls in there are ya? This isn't the time or place for it. Like I said he's making me some money. So if you're...”

“I get it. I get it. God, are you drunk already?”

“I'm not God. But I may be a little drunk. Come on.”

I took her by the hand, leading her through the other drunks, starting on our long journey of two hundred feet.

Sweating profusely did not describe Pick Bryant accurately enough—sweat was pouring down, one towel already soaked to the point of uselessness. The other he rubbed on his head and hair, with the motion of a cat cleaning its face with its paws. He picked up a full draft and chugged down the amber liquid like it was Gatorade. He may have been thirsty, but that wasn't what was on his mind at the moment. Pick stared across the table at three evenly stacked skyscrapers of money. What used to be the other players' money, and what was briefly Mr. Bryant's money, now sat in front of the lone surviving player at the table. The green mounds sat in front of Roman.

Pick handed his empty glass to his bodyguard—the one that formerly organized and kept an eye on the house's money—and in turn the man handed Pick back a full draft. Pick drank it in two long swallows.

Roman sat motionless, arms to both sides of the money, still with the flannel on but without a drop of sweat. I got as close as I could, zigzagging through the taller crowd until there was nowhere left to zag. I tried to count the money stacked in front of my friend. It would've been a cinch if it were chips, but the bills were too much, blurring together at their edges. I was starting to wish I hadn't shot the Wild Turkey. Whiskey was a slippery fellow. After getting over the initial bad taste of it, people thought they were home free. But as time passed the brown liquid infected your brain like some kind of sleeper cell. I managed though to refocus and at least see the cards that were lying on the table. The crowd was silent like someone was teeing off at a golf tournament.

Pick had a face card up. Roman had a five. Normally this was cut and dry—Roman should take a hit. But this wasn't your everyday blackjack game, and

it wasn't your ordinary player. The deck was down to the last fifteen or so cards and Roman had a fair amount bet.

Pick patted his head with his towel again. "Are you going to hit or what? It's real simple, you win this hand and the game's over cause there's no fucking money left."

"I understand," Roman said. "I'm going to stay."

"Unfucking-beliveable." Pick flipped his hole card—a five as well. I've never seen somebody guess right as many times as you have tonight, Swivel."

Pick took a card—the queen of clubs.

Busted.

The crowd burst into applause.

Pick put his head face-down on the table and threw the towel over it. The blackjack fans poured out of the room on to find some other spectacle.

Me and Heather walked over to Roman. Heather seemed nervous and Roman didn't have so much as a glance for her.

"I know we did well, but how well?" I said, rubbing my hands together and looking at the folded green in front of Roman.

"My dad is going to kill me," Pick mumbled from underneath his towel.

"Hold on a second," Roman said to me.

He walked over to Pick, lifted the towel up and whispered something in Pick's ear.

Pick jumped out of his seat like he'd been ejected out of an airplane cockpit, wrapped his arms around Roman, and kissed him on the cheek. Roman shuffled through the money, counting it as fast as he could flip it, and gave the majority to Pick.

"Hold on. What the hell?" I said, watching Pick run out of the room with my money.

"Relax," Roman said.

"I don't want to fuckin' relax, that's my money."

Before Roman could respond a voice came over the speakers. "Attention Tavern patrons, everyone has two free drinks coming, courtesy of the big winner at the blackjack table tonight."

The bar erupted in cheers—the loudest I've ever heard the Tavern.

Roman took the remaining twenties and placed them in my hand. "How much is this?"

"Two-twenty."

"And how much did you give Pick?"

"I don't know, eighteen hundred maybe."

"Eighteen hundred. Are you nuts?"

"No I'm not nuts." Roman started picking up empty beer bottles and plastic cups, throwing them into the garbage. I stood there in disbelief. "You said earlier you didn't want to be greedy. You said you'd be happy with two-twenty. You said that would be enough severance pay for the last time, if I remember correctly."

I wanted to rebut, but no words would come to mind. "I need alcohol."

I put the measly two-twenty in my pocket and left the room.

Roman continued with his trash collecting. Even after a couple hours of counting cards—something that would make a normal person’s head ache—Roman could not just stand still. He had to be moving, working, organizing.

Heather saw that she was being ignored and began helping him pick up the empty receptacles, following his every move and tracing his path until she was on his heels. Roman literally worked himself into a corner and Heather stood in front of him.

“What did I do to you?” she asked.

Roman lifted the bottle he was holding and shot it at the wastebasket. The bottle tumbled through the air over Heather’s head and the blackjack table and landed in the receptacle, making a loud ting, but not breaking. Roman had run out of garbage to throw away and now there was only Heather.

“You haven’t done anything to me.”

Heather waited for more but there was nothing. “So what, you just ignore me now? You act like you don’t even know me. I think it’s a little rude if nothing else. How does something turn from so good to so bad overnight? I think you at least owe me some kind of explanation.”

Heather stared directly at Roman, forcing him to look her in the eyes.

“I think we should stop seeing each other,” he said.

“Stop seeing each other? Is that what you call this? Like some switch you can just turn off?”

Roman brushed her to the side, freeing himself from the corner and from her eyes. He stopped after a couple steps but kept his back to her. “I don’t know what I think anymore. I don’t know who I am or where I’m going. It’s not fair to you, to drag you through this mess.”

Heather sped in front of him again. “So what? Who does know exactly where they’re going or who they are. I want to be a doctor but that doesn’t mean I will be. Isn’t that what life’s about? Isn’t it about the small moments, the little pieces, rather than the whole? You said yourself you were happier now than you have been in years. Doesn’t love count for anything?”

Roman focused on the floor, unable to look at the green eyes in front of him. He said in a descending voice, “Let me tell you about love. It’s cruel. Everything I’ve ever come in contact with and cared about is either taken away from me or destroyed. After the smoke clears, the only thing love leaves you with is pain.”

“So you’re going to go through your whole life not loving anything, because you’re afraid of losing it. Why even live?”

“I’ve been asking myself that same question for some time now.”

“You’re full of shit, Roman Swivel. You enjoy life more than anybody I’ve ever met. You walk to school every day just to feel the wind in your face. You read fiction by the truckload, which deals with nothing but people’s lives. You care enough about your friend to spend a night at this dump playing a game you don’t even like. You know what this really is about? It’s about you not being able to forgive yourself for what happened to your parents.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

Roman tried to walk off again, but Heather grabbed him, clenching his flannel in both her fists.

“It wasn’t your fault Roman and never will be. Some mad man broke in your house and because of him your parents are dead. Not because of you.”

Roman broke Heather’s grasp, swiping her arms away with a firm windmill of his arm and walked to the doorway. Roman stopped when Heather spoke again.

“Say you don’t love me and I’ll never bother you again.” Heather chewed the ends of her fingernails—a nervous childhood habit she could never shake. “Say it.”

Roman walked through the doorway, disappearing into the crowd without saying it.



## Chapter 11

### The Spark of Life

#### I

Many of my peers had failed a fundamental human task over our years at Collingston—to get out of bed and walk to a toilet before lying in a puddle of their own urine. I came close that morning to being added to the list. My bladder at first told my brain to get up and then three hours later my bladder issued a red alert, blaring sirens and screams up my spine to the stubborn boss in my head. I could hear the warning—barely. The loud shrieks in my head were no more than a whisper in the distant void below.

But it was enough—even after only three hours of sleep—to bring me out of my drunken coma. I pulled myself out of bed, using muscles I didn't even know I had, my eyelids lifting only to a small slit, my stomach holding up a *do not enter* sign, my head throbbing like it had been in a vice overnight. I stumbled my way along the short trek through the hallway to the bathroom, stubbing my toe on the staircase pole along the way. The pain didn't register.

I sat on the pot like a woman, unable to keep my balance long enough to maintain a male stance. I fell asleep there and my father woke me by accidentally ramming the bathroom door into my legs. I pulled up my shorts, running first into the sink and then continuing my zombie stagger into the cabinet.

Pops stood in the doorway smiling, holding in his hand the folded black and white newspaper that accompanied him daily to his morning ritual. “Rough night last night huh? Oh, that's right, Thanksgiving weekend. It's been a rough one for years. You better get cleaned up, Ma is already on her way to pick up Sally.”

“Sally. How long?” I'm sure the words didn't come out in English.

“She'll be back anytime. We're leaving in thirty minutes. You better not make us late. You know how she is about being on time.”

I dressed myself and emptied out a few items from each of my dresser drawers into a duffel bag. Was I still drunk? *No* a voice came from inside my head. *You never feel this bad when you're drunk.* It was Thanksgiving and the thought of food made my throat contract, yielding no vomit, just a loud mucousy noise like the sound of an alligator choking. My mouth tasted like I'd been licking a dog's ass all night.

Sally sat on the couch downstairs, her hair and makeup done, but the camouflage was not good enough to fool me. Maybe it was her eyes that gave it away. Under that glowing skin and mascara was an individual as hurt as myself. I got ready with the belief that I would be able to sleep a little before our departure, but Ma hurried us out the door before I could even say good morning.

It was a two-hour drive to Indianapolis, and I slept at least one hour and fifty minutes of it, hearing Ma comment on my snoring as I drifted in and out of consciousness. I awoke in my grandparents' driveway, already smelling the aroma of the holiday before anyone opened a door. My stomach did a flip, still holding up the *do not enter* sign. The sleep had done some good though. My head only felt like someone used it as a jackhammer now, a vast improvement from the vice.

"I hope you're ready for this," I said to Sally as we got out of the car.

## II

Roman Swivel and Carl Stumot sat in the yellow cab. The taxi made a left off of Illinois Route One onto a small gravel road that wound through the forest and eventually came to an opening. Buttworst's house was a cabin, a spacious two-story building made of light mahogany logs. Only an acre of actual lawn sat around it. A freshly killed deer hung by its neck from the rafters of the barn directly west of the house. A long three-car garage graced the east side of the house. The rest of the property was untouched by the woodsman.

Carl had already had a few nips off the flask on their journey north. I was informed on numerous occasions at the Tavern that the only one hundred percent effective way to cure a hangover was to start drinking again. There will be people that tell you its dehydration or a lack of Vitamin B in your system, and maybe it is a little of those things, but more than anything it's because of withdrawal. You're literally going through the shakes.

Carl was not hungover however. The man never got drunk in the first place. Carl drank because he liked to drink, not because he had to. And more importantly he drank because he could. There wasn't an office desk waiting for him Monday mornings or a bitchy wife telling him to go clean the gutters.

Roman exited the taxi on the driver's side, but was stopped short of paying the man by Carl. He never let Roman pay for anything when he was present.

"Goodness, what a hell of a place," Carl said as the cab pulled away.

"You wouldn't mind living in a place like this would you? Away from the city and all the noise."

"Hell yes I'd live here. Those goddamn crack whores couldn't track me down this far out sure as shit. Say, you think he built this place by himself like the pioneers?"

"I doubt it. I think it's only a log cabin on the outside. I bet the inside is furnished pretty well."

"It's a goddamn log cabin it is."

"I know but...never mind."

Mr. Buttworst greeted the pair of unlikely friends on the front porch, genuinely happy to see them. Buttworst still had on his fatigues with the occasional orange band around his arm or leg. The green tones he wore were eerily similar to that of Carl's clothing.

Buttworst shook Roman's hand. "How are you, Roman?"

"I'm good sir. And you?"

"Can't complain, snagged me an eight-pointer just before sun up. Can't remember a more beautiful moment."

"Killed the bastard, huh? Did the fella run off when ya shot him?" Carl said still marveling at the house.

"Actually he only got about fifty yards; I got him pretty clean. You must be Carl." Buttworst shook Carl's hand.

"Ah, yes indeed. Many thanks for having us over to such a fine home. My apologies, but I forgot your name."

“Call me Bill.”

“Say Bill, did you build this house yourself?”

“No, but I did help. My brother builds houses for a living so he gave me a pretty good deal on this one. Come on in, let me give you guys the dime tour.”

### III

Me and Sally sat in the dining room at the main table. It had so much food on it there was hardly any room for a plate in front of you. You had to be somebody to sit at this table. I had a suspicion that my status was only elevated because I brought a guest. Until now I always had to sit at one of the other tables that were scattered through every room in the house. It had to be that way. There were probably fifty people present, seated in the different rooms of the house by rank. The main criteria was age. You had the three or four kiddy tables, the teenage table which I should have been at, the twenty-through-thirty table, the middle-aged table where my parents ate, and then our table—the table reserved for the elders of the family: my great-grandma, my grandparents, and a host of great aunts and uncles.

A barrage of kisses and hugs greeted us earlier. If you were lucky you got the “one on each cheek” kiss, the same kind the Mafia does in the movies. There was always someone that got ya right on the smacker though. I didn’t get the cheek kiss and was still wiping the slobber off my mouth from Granny—my ninety-four-year old great-grandmother.

At a Falcone Thanksgiving the food selection was a little different than the norm. Sure we still had the turkey and dressing and all that shit, and yes everybody ate at least a little of it, but all that was just show, a way for the old-timers to remind themselves that they weren’t living in the old country any more. They lived in America now. The real meal was all the homemade Italian stuff—the spaghetti, linguini, sausages, the alfredo and parmesans, the scallops and clams, you name it.

Granddad sat directly across the table from me, stuffing his face, seemingly unaware that the food would never run out, and the entire time staring at Sally to my left. He hadn’t taken his eyes off her since the moment we walked through the door. He was sure to give her a long, tight hug too. Granddad was in constant trouble from Grandma for sneaking in dirty magazines, something she referred to as “that porno”. As in “I caught your father trying to sneak in some of that porno again the other day.” My father thought it was a riot and so did I. Granddad wasn’t a pervert or anything. You have to remember it wasn’t everyday that he saw someone as young and good-looking as Sally, in person anyway. He didn’t mean any harm by it. And as he often said, “I might be old, but I’m not dead.”

Granny sat next to me on the right, slouched down in her chair almost unable to see over the table. I swear every year she shrank a little more. She bit off a sausage, removing not only the fork from her mouth but also the top row of her false teeth. Unfazed by the event, she removed and separated the fake ivories from the remaining meat, and set them politely next to her plate. She looked at me and laughed.

“Oops.” She twirled her fork in some spaghetti. “I can eat without those damn things anyway.”

I nodded my head in agreement.

“You don’t look right.” Granny studied me from head to toe. “You’re all bones. You know if you catch pneumonia the doctors won’t be able to bring you back on account of you losing so much weight.”

I don’t know if Granny was a few marbles short, or she just thought I was thin in comparison to everyone else in the house. I was five ten and a hundred seventy pounds—not exactly skin and bones. Short maybe but not thin. I humored her anyway.

“Why would I catch pneumonia Granny?”

“Well I don’t know, people still can catch it can’t they?”

Granddad spoke to me out of nowhere. You were always carrying on multiple conversations at the same time in this family.

“So when you gonna make an honest women out of Ms. Richards here.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“When you getting hitched?”

“I’m not even graduated from high school yet Granddad.”

Just what I needed. I’m getting ready to dump her and he’s shoving us down the aisle.

Sally blushed even though she knew there was no way. Surely she didn’t think I was going to marry her. The thought couldn’t have been further from my mind.

“She’s not even Italian,” Granny chimed in.

“How do you know, Ma?” Granddad asked. “Just because her name doesn’t end in a vowel doesn’t mean she’s not Italian. Remember Silvy Donaldson that owned the meat shop on Fifth Street. He was Italian.”

“He was an Irishman,” Granny rebutted. “He only lived in an Italian neighborhood.”

“We’re not getting married,” I said trying to kill the conversation.

“Anthony’s getting married?” my aunt Norma cried from the end of the table.

“Which Anthony?” my aunt Fran demanded.

“No Anthonys are getting married,” I said loud enough to hopefully squash the confusion.

“Mussel?” Granny held the half shell right under my nose. It took everything I had not to gag. Spaghetti, maybe even some turkey, but not the slimy mussel. I would never eat that thing even when I wasn’t hungover.

“No thanks, Granny.”

“You need to eat before you shrink to nothing,” she said back.

Granddad pointed at me with his fork. He always did that during conversations at the dinner table. “You have a beautiful young bride here is what I’m trying to tell you.” Granddad thought he was whispering but he wasn’t. “They don’t always keep those nice firm breasts and tight little asses.” He motioned his head toward Grandma. “You gotta get ’em while they’re hot.”

Grandma slapped him hard enough to knock the food out of his mouth. “Watch your mouth at the table. You’re just a dirty old man.”

“Leave me alone woman, I’m trying to give the boy some good advice.”

Granny returned to the conversation. “The Good Book says you aren’t to marry across races. Good way to go to hell, breeding with not your own kind.”

Sally covered her mouth trying to hide her laughter.

Granny changed gears on us. “Did I ever tell you all about the time I was in New York on the Ferry? Well, the boat had a leak, hit a rock maybe I don’t know, and before we knew it we were all up to our waists in water. Every last one of us gals started our period right then and there. I guess it was because of the panic. I don’t know for sure.”

On and on it went.

#### IV

Carl tore through the first deer steak in a matter of seconds, eating like he had been fasting for weeks. When there was nothing left, he picked up his fork and stabbed another steak out of the tray in the middle of the table. Buttworst was a meat and potatoes kind of guy and that’s exactly what you got at his house. There wasn’t a big selection, but there was enough steak and baked potatoes to last the three of them at least a week. Buttworst and Carl both drank beer with their meal. The host offered Roman one, but he insisted on water.

The number of windows in the room and the glass doors that led out to the back deck eliminated the need for artificial light. Deer and moose heads looked down from their permanent home in the wall as luminous red logs cracked and snapped in the fireplace. A sweet burning smell resonated through the spaciousness of the room, a fragrance that brought you home no matter where you lived. Mr. Buttworst looked up from his plate from time to time, checking his guests’ body language, making sure they were comfortable. He smiled while he ate—a feat that not everybody could do.

Somehow it was still Thanksgiving here.

Roman dabbled with his food, taking slow, deliberate bites not because it tasted bad—in fact it was very good—but because he just wasn’t hungry.

“You don’t like it Roman?” Buttworst said.

“It’s great sir. I just don’t have much of an appetite for some reason.”

“Good,” Carl said. “We ain’t lettin’ it go to the dogs.”

Carl stabbed Roman’s steak, swiped it onto his own plate, and cut it with his knife all in one motion.

“What do you call this anyway?” Carl asked.

“Deer,” Roman said sarcastically.

“Always a wise guy in the bunch let me tell ya. I mean the fancy name.”

“Venison,” Buttworst answered.

“No tish’n’t.”

“He’s right, Carl. Venison.”

“Damn it, we called it something else back then. What was it? Ah to hell with it.”

Buttworst watched as the pace of Carl's jaws started to slow; eventually hitting a wall, he was unable to finish the last three bites of his steak. The teacher hopped up expecting to collect all three of their plates and the two trays for the meat and potatoes, but Carl and Roman pitched in. Between the three of them they were able to clear the table in one trip.

They all stood at the sink: Roman washed, Carl dried, and Buttworst replaced the plates and utensils in their proper resting spots. Afterwards Carl smoked his pipe. Buttworst resisted the urge to light a cigarette. He conditioned himself to smoke only outside; not that he minded what the smell did to his house, but he thought he would break the habit if he inconvenienced himself with a trip outdoors. That was fifteen years ago. He still went through a half a pack a day, come rain or shine.

"Say Bill, ya ever run into anything out there, in your travels through the forest? They love vegetation, they do."

Buttworst looked at Roman with wide eyes. "I'm not sure I understand the question Carl. I run into plenty of squirrels, deer, even the occasional wolf."

"He means aliens," Roman said.

"Like ET you mean?"

"Much bigger than ET. Much bigger."

"Nope. Never saw anything like that out there," Buttworst answered, still unsure if he was going to be the butt of some kind of joke.

The small talk eventually moved away from aliens. Buttworst learned that Carl was a career service man, retired for more than twenty years. Carl learned that Buttworst taught at the high school, teaching his students a math called calculus and algebra. The man who had the most to tell stayed silent, listening to two opposite souls, marveling that the more diverse their lives were, the more they seemed to have in common.

## V

I'd fully intended on breaking up with Sally come Monday, but right now I was busy feeling every inch of her naked body on top of mine. The kisses on my neck and the places her hands touched made me feel guilty—but only for a second. The testosterone in my blood stream always had a neat way of washing away feelings of blame.

We were alone in one of the spare bedrooms—the room my father grew up in when he was kid—on the floor, wedged between the bed and the window. A spot like that seemed to come natural for us given our prior history of interruptions. Everyone else was either gone, already asleep, or talking downstairs over a nightcap of decaffeinated coffee. The huge Falcone family wouldn't miss two of their number. Besides, what I had in mind would take no more than fifteen minutes tops.

Sally had whispered little comments in my ear throughout the day, comments that would make a hooker blush. It was like a slow torture for me, hearing promises of what the night would bring. Each time she hinted at something new to look forward to, I would go through my mind searching for a place in the house where we could be alone, and every time those places were

packed to the walls with relatives. I would look at the clock wishing for night to come—an eternity seemed to pass—but the hands would only move minutes from the last time I'd checked.

Whether it was her body or just any good-looking female form, I wasn't sure. But I was sure I would never get tired of this, not in a thousand life times; the smooth skin, the hair dangling in my face, the hard nipples on soft breasts, the curves of the hips, the wet warmth between legs, the undeniable smell of a woman. And this was it. Break up or no, love or not, we were finally going to do it.

The door opened ushering in two pairs of soft footsteps on the carpet. They were slow and staggering, but there were definitely two people heading in our direction. Sheer terror showed in Sally's eyes. She pulled a shirt over us, as if that would cover our presence. I was panicked yes, but also surprised at how good I was beginning to handle this all-too-familiar situation. I covered Sally's mouth with my hand, and reassured her with my eyes that everything was going to be okay.

The bed creaked as the two people lay down, the mattress bowing and the box springs compressing. Maybe we could wait it out. We'd wait until they were asleep, grab our clothes, and crawl out of the room. The bathroom lay just outside the door. There was a series of snorts and odd sounds that only old people make before sleep. They were old. That still didn't narrow down who it could be.

"What do you think you're doing?"

It was the unmistakable voice of my Grandma, but was she talking to us? There were still no eyes peeking down at us from the corner of the bed.

"Tryin' to relive my youth, woman. What does it feel like?"

"Oh, Vigo," my grandmother answered with a pleasurable moan.

A series of slobbering kisses and gurgled breaths progressed from atop the bed, and just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, granddad's underwear came flying off and landed on Sally's head. I pressed my hand as tightly as I could over her mouth, thinking if I let up at all her scream would ring through the house.

I had managed to slowly kill the stomachache from my hangover throughout that day, even forced down a little spaghetti and turkey, but what filled my belly now was much, much worse. Trapped in a room with two people about to do it was one thing. Hearing every moan of your seventy-something grandparents and watching every thrust indent into the mattress beside you was another. There was no doubt about it. I was going to puke.

A deep breath. Then another. Cool heads had to prevail here for the love of everything sacred. *Get to the door. Get to the door.* I moved Sally off to the side, careful not to make a noise. I took two fingers and pointed them at my eyes, instructing her to watch me, and then got on all fours and gathered my clothes up quietly. I looked at Sally and motioned my hand flat to the ground, hoping she would stay low. We turned the corner of the bed, crawling like naked babies on the floor.

"Did you hear that?" my grandmother asked.

The motion in the bed stopped.

Me and Sally froze in out tracks.

“Of course I heard it woman, I’m the one making it.”

The urge to puke returned at once. Sally had heard enough and passed me on the left, double-timing her crawl to the door. Her cute ass bounced as her knees scooted across the carpet. I followed her through the door, making a right into the bathroom and shut the door slowly. I never thought I could feel such freedom in such a small room.

Needless to say Sally threw on her clothes right away, despite her trembling.

We slept in opposite rooms of the house.

## VI

December was supposed to be a good month. With all of its lights, the energy at the malls, cookies baking in the oven, eggnog, kids held in such suspense you were sure they were going to pass out from anticipation or exhaustion, peace on earth, good will toward men, the long-haired guy ringing the bell outside Wal-Mart, baby Jesus and the rest of it.

Collingston High used to be that way—garland dangled in the hallways, classrooms had Christmas trees, the choir and band performed pieces about the hope of the world wrapped in a little baby, students exchanged gifts, teachers gave out candy canes, and even the big pine by the clock tower was draped in gold and shimmered with light—but not anymore.

This was prison now. The only thing that graced our halls was abstract art—most of it a bunch of blobs and smears unrecognizable to the eye—that Principal Hartman said was supposed to invoke thought. It invoked boredom. Just another control to keep the inmates subdued and dreaming about something other than freedom.

The holiday cheer was squashed way before I made it to Collingston High. It took three sets of parents a few times of bitching about their kids’ rights to eliminate Christmas altogether. Their kids weren’t Christian, or Jewish, or Arabic. They weren’t anything. They had no religion, yet Saint Nick intimidated them. Principal Hartman never even let it go to the school board. He obliged the minority opinion and gladly halted all the festive proceedings, returning the cheer of the season to the same drab landscape it was every other month of the year.

Now the name of Christ was a swear word. People were written up for praying. Inmates routinely omitted one line in the pledge of allegiance, often praised by administration for doing so. The word Xmas was not even allowed because of the resemblance between the first letter of the word and the shape of the cross. Teachers went through the school day focused on the curriculum, oblivious to the holiday season outside. By refusing to acknowledge it, the institution could prevent Christmas from happening. At least that’s what they thought.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, especially during Christmas. Especially if her name was Heather Hawthorne and the guy she wanted had successfully ignored her for the duration of a weekend, not answering the phone, or the knock at his door, or responding to the notes she slipped into his mailbox. She was in unfamiliar territory with this one. Heather got what she wanted the majority of the time and with men she’d gotten it one hundred percent of the time—until

now. It took a skinny kid that spent his nights as a janitor and started out as a geek in the corner of the lunchroom, to end Heather's flawless streak.

Gone were the graceful days of Heather walking to the pop machines with her hips swaying back and forth, making her ass dance to the beautiful rhythm of her footsteps, turning every male gaze into fantasy land. Now she walked to her destination with small steps, barely lifting her feet off the ground, scooting along with the sex appeal of a turtle. She slammed her tray on the table, taking the seat next to me. She'd given up trying to sit by Roman.

Heather blew the straggles of hair out of her face so she could see me. Her eyes looked me over with piercing accuracy. If she were capable of heat vision, I would've been on fire. She shook her head in disgust at me, unable to put into words her anger. She popped open her Mountain Dew and drank it down with such force, it seemed she was trying to inflict pain on the yellow liquid. I knew better than to even ask. It could be a number of things. More than likely it was Roman. I pretended to ignore her. That might have not been the best route to take.

Roman sat unaware of the radioactivity floating from her body, reading a book, and eating a small bowl of spinach. He knew the only way he could escape her—the way he always escaped dire situations—was through the doorway of a book. It still amazed me how fast he read. Every fifteen seconds or so the page turned.

Heather had enough of my indifference. She turned and looked at me, opening her mouth then pausing briefly. "Are you just going to sit there and not say anything?"

I looked at her, hoping it would be Roman the question was aimed at. No such luck. "I didn't know you wanted me to talk. You never said anything."

"You broke up with Sally?" she said the words like it was a trick question or like it was more of a statement. Before I could respond she started again. "You know she was up crying the entire night and didn't even come to school today. You broke her heart."

"We were never that big a deal," I said.

"Not that big a deal, huh? Maybe that's why she raved the whole weekend about how much fun she had with your family, and how good it felt to be there with you, and what a great time the two of you had. Why would you break up with her?"

"I've gotta start getting ready for baseball."

"So you can't have a girlfriend and play baseball at the same time? That's the stupidest thing I ever heard."

Heather's volume level ascended with every word she spoke. No one paid much mind. They had all heard the tirade before. She did, after all, spend three years at the table with Johnny the Killer. The only virgin ears were Roman's. I saw his brown eyes peek over the pages of his book from time to time, too scared to lower the book from his face, but too interested not to watch.

"Yeah that's right, I can't train and put up with her Mickey Mouse shit at the same time. I lose my focus. Besides she'll get over it. It's not like she was in love or anything."

Heather's eyes squinted and her upper lip curled like a Rottweiler about to snarl. The pretty face we all knew and loved was gone. "You're nothing more than a male chauvinist. You know that? You think women are no more than two breasts and a vagina, put on earth to keep your penis happy."

"Damn she told you Tony," Pick Bryant said.

The rest of the table was watching now.

"No, Heather, I think there's a lot more to women besides boobs and a vagina. Their asses for instance. I've always considered myself to be an ass-man," I said.

All the guys laughed, and an uncertain smile made its way to my face.

Heather stood up and slapped my face all in one motion, an act she seemed to be perfecting. It wasn't a love tap like the one at The Tavern; this one knocked my head sideways, sending a sharp pain down my neck. I laughed trying to mask the pain.

She looked at Roman who still sat with the book in front of his face. She raised her voice and talked to me but what she said was for the janitor. "You wouldn't know love if it kicked you square in the nuts."

I lowered my hands down over my crotch, just in case Heather got the urge to do any further bodily harm toward me. In the end though she sat down and started in on her salad. The snarls melted away, returning the glow to her face as if none of it had ever happened.

Two tables over the prison guards interrogated a Junior. The student did not go quietly and got the attention of our table as well as most others. One of the teachers grabbed him by the arm, the other tore off his Santa Claus cap. The student lunged for the cap but was held back by the one who had his arm. The perpetrator finally conceded to leaving the table after several more of Hartman's henchmen surrounded him.

"What the hell was that about?" I asked the table in general.

"Can't wear Santa Claus hats no more," Sam Peterman responded.

"Yeah, Hartman's really cracking down on this Christmas thing on account of the atheist's rights being violated," Pick Bryant added.

"Wh-wh-wh-what's the atheists got against S-s-s-santa Claus?" Bruno stuttered.

"That's just it," Heather began. "They don't have anything against it. All this is because some parents bitched at Hartman a few years back. They just wanted their fifteen minutes of fame that's all. They sure don't have a problem taking days off school for holidays though do they? And what about my rights. What about my right to celebrate Christmas?"

"Hartman will never let it happen. Christmas is dead at Collingston High School," Sam Peterman responded.

"Maybe it's time to resurrect it," Heather said.

"Oh boy here we go," I said.

"What do you have in mind?" Pick rubbed his hands together, and smiled, always jumping at a chance to be an agitator.

Roman lowered his book down. "You'll never win. Separation of Church and State," he said to Heather.

“We’ll see,” Heather replied.

## VII

My after-school trips to Roman’s had stopped. He had gotten steadily more distant not only from Heather, but also myself, closing himself off from everybody that cared about him. The fascinating but useless information he spouted—facts like two rats mating could lead to 15,000 rodent offspring in a two-month time frame—came to a stop. Eventually during that December, Roman stopped coming to lunch, opting for the solitary confines of the janitors’ breakroom. I’d see him from time to time in the corners, hidden in the shadows, watching as his life passed him by. I’d talk to him only briefly, trying not to push him further away. I was a firm believer that sometimes a person just had to work shit out on their own. Who knew what demons lurked in a brain like his and what ghosts haunted his dreams? Roman had lost what my grandfather referred to as the spark of life. And Roman was the only one that would be able to find it.

I had a task of my own to worry about. My after-school activities were limited because of my training. I hit the weight room after the last bell everyday, ran at least a mile and sprinted ten sixty-yard dashes in the fieldhouse. Guys like Pick and Sam would do the same, but only for a couple of days. After that they would show up from time to time, and then eventually not at all. I enjoyed any company I could get.

Such training wasn’t for everybody. And while it was hard for me to focus on the activities of everyday life, it somehow wasn’t hard to focus on baseball. Sure I made sacrifices for it. Early nights, heading to bed on account of being tired cut down my social life and poker games. Sore legs made the usual quick ascent up the stairs of Collingston High feel like the quest of climbing Everest. The bench pressing and tricep work made the simple act of washing my hair a daily torture session in the shower. And there was definitely no more drinking beer with friends until two in the morning.

The sunset of my high school days was closing in; it was my senior year and I had no college offers on the table. If a college was interested in you, they talked to you during your Junior year. I couldn’t prove much more on the field: I led the conference in hitting, threw out ninety percent of base stealers, and got down the line in close to four seconds. One of the games this year could very well be the last time I stepped onto a baseball field as a player, or strapped on the catching gear, or felt the bat in my hands. I’d play until they told me I couldn’t anymore and that was okay because at least it was *them* not wanting me, instead of me not wanting the game. I’d go out and play my hardest and do the things I always did. And when the dust finally settled and there was no baseball for me in college, then at least deep down I would know that I gave it my best shot.

Heather was climbing her own mountains. I’m not sure if it was actually the idea of Christmas being attacked that drove her, or just the fact that she had a lot of anger toward Roman to redirect. Whichever the case, Heather was more than focused on her new goal. She began to rally the troops.

Most students, myself included, really could give a damn about whether Christmas was or wasn’t recognized at Collingston High. And if it was any other

person leading the insurrection, I'm sure it would have never got off the ground. But this was Heather Hawthorne, the student body president, the captain of the cheerleading squad, the captain of the debate team, an Illinois State Scholar, a girl who somehow had no enemies, a face that everyone knew, a rich girl that related to people in all walks of life.

The first order of business was the petition. Our table signed their names without a second thought, then our entire lunch hour, then every student in each of Heather's classes, then all the athletic teams. A week into the drive Heather had over a thousand signatures, a little fewer than half the student body.

Revolting against the system was an idea that wasn't hard to talk us inmates into. So when Heather brought up wearing Santa hats to the lunch table, we obliged. And every last one of us served a detention. On the following day, the table next to us joined in and served detentions as well. By the end of the week there were more red and white Santa Claus stocking caps bouncing through the halls than there were normal heads of hair. The number of detentions clogged up the administration's daily routine and eventually the reprimands stopped. Elf costumes started showing up, along with white beards, wise men, and a few angels.

At Heather's insistence, Mr. Buttworst brought in a real tree and let the class decorate it. Soon fake trees were sprouting up all over the place, some big, some small. Even a few miniature mangers made their way into our confines. Candy canes, holiday fudge, and cookies in the shape of snowmen and reindeer were consumed during class. Mistletoe hung in entranceways. Hot chocolate and eggnog were drunk out of thermoses. People cut snowflakes out of folded paper. Red and green garland and paper chains hung in the hallways. Silver glitter was scattered on the floors. Presents were wrapped and exchanged. Even the prison guards were receiving gifts

Heather paid for five hundred dollars worth of decorations, and paid just as much to a tree trimming service to decorate the big pine tree in front of the clock tower. The choir and other students met nightly in front of the tree, singing their Jingle Bells and Silent Night songs. Traffic stopped on Stephenson Street, admiring the glimmering lights and silver bells of the evergreen.

Two nights before Christmas break Heather organized the mother of all caroling sessions. She called the papers and the radio. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, relatives visiting for the holiday—they all bundled up on that cold night and stood a thousand deep around the tree. The police had to cordon off Stephenson Street.

I think every person I knew in town was in attendance. Roman stood far above, looking at the crowd from the clock tower windows, leaning against his mop. Johnny, Bobby Dukes, and Boochie Anderson sat atop a car in the parking lot across the street. Carl stood and smoked his pipe, never taking his eyes off the tree. Mr. Buttworst handed out hot chocolate and coffee. Steam drifted from Brunno's shirtless body and the words "Christmas Rules" were painted on his chest and stomach. Sally managed to find her way through the massive crowd. She stood next to me and grabbed my hand. For some reason I didn't pull it away. Ma and Pops even made it out, wrapped in what looked like Eskimo attire.

Heather couldn't keep the smile from her face even while she sang. The crowd exceeded her expectations.

That night, in that cold central-Illinois city, in front of its only high school, a swarm of people converged on a giant evergreen tree that was full of shimmers and hope. Candles and lighters were raised in the air. The voices of many united as one. Somehow there was truly peace on earth.

And then the lights went out.

The singing stopped, followed by a murmur running through the crowd.

The clock tower doors opened and out came principal Hartman with a megaphone in hand. "You can all go home now. The party is over. Anyone not making an effort to vacate will be arrested for trespassing." Several police officers followed Hartman out of the doors.

The crowd began to disperse immediately.

"Don't leave. He can turn out the tree, but he can't stop Christmas," Heather shouted at the top of her lungs.

The crowd continued to dwindle. Heather looked all around thinking maybe she could stop every person individually. Seeing her efforts were futile, she ran toward Hartman. I grabbed her in a bear hug, but her kicking and screaming of obscenities at the warden continued. After Hartman went back inside, she regained control of herself and I let go.

"It was the neatest thing I've ever seen in this town. You did good Heather."

"Thanks." She walked to her car. Her voice had failure in it.

Just before I opened the door to the Pinto, I looked back to see if there was anyone left. The lot was empty that quick, not a soul to be found. My eyes drifted to the top of the clock tower.

In the window stood the silhouette of a man leaning against his mop.

## VIII

For seventeen straight days Heather had been escorted to the dean's office, written up for insubordination, and threatened repeatedly that if her course of action did not change she would be suspended. Heather taped each of the detention slips to the front of her locker, transforming the simple metal door into a mosaic of her crimes. It seemed she used her sessions to brainstorm for the next day's high jinx.

She arrived that day at our lunch table in a better mood than when I had last left her. After a night of reflection Heather was proud of herself despite Hartman crashing the party. Whatever fate awaited her at the end of the day was minuscule compared to what she had accomplished.

"So what's on the agenda today boss?" I asked.

Heather opened her mouth and then stopped short of the words coming out. "I don't know. I'm out of ideas. Maybe we've done all there is to do. I'm happy just knowing that Christmas will be alive until we go on break."

"Regardless it's been one hell of a ride. I would've never believed we could have pulled something like this off. You did real good Heather," I said, patting her on the back.

“Strength in numbers,” Pick commented.

“What do you think Hartman’s thinking right now?” Sam asked. “You think he’s beating his secretary?”

“Hell no, his secretary could kick his scrawny ass,” I answered back.

That got a good chuckle.

“No, I guarantee he’s thinking long and hard on what my punishment is going to be,” Heather said.

“You haven’t even done anything wrong,” Pick protested. “What’s he got on you really, that you made people celebrate Christmas? I didn’t see you holding a gun to anybody’s head. That’ll never stick.”

“I’m sure seventeen detentions is grounds for suspension,” Heather said.

“Tomorrow’s the last day before break right? I think we should go out with a bang. There’s gotta be somethin’ we can do,” Pick said.

“W-w-w-we should have a c-c-c-concert,” Brunno said and then began to sing. “J-j-j-ingle Bells, Jingles Bells, j-j-j-jingle all the way.”

I would have hated to see how long it would take him to finish the song. But before anyone could comment on the idea, two of Hartman’s henchmen stepped behind Heather. It was two vice-principals. Hartman had skipped the usual call note or even the lowly prison guards, and gone straight to his lieutenants.

Heather stood without a word from her arresters, gathering up her back pack, careful not to bite in two the gingerbread man that hung for dear life between her front teeth. One of the guards walked in front of her, opening the door to the stairwell; the other beside her, like an imperial guard protecting an ambush from the flank.

## IX

Hartman sat quietly at his desk, his face pale with and emotionless. But underneath his eyes Heather saw the anger, maybe more than she wanted to see. Hartman dealt with just about every kind of prank and school violation one could imagine. This time was different. This time the protest had been against the very policy that Hartman had imposed. The protest was against him.

The one thing Hartman cherished more than anything else was the squeaky clean image he portrayed to the school board. In the eyes of the board, whether the students agreed or not, they still obeyed him. He had accomplished many things at the high school, at a job he’d thought would be a quick steppingstone to superintendent of the district. He got rid of open lunches, virtually cutting the absentee rate of the last two hours of school down to nothing. He implemented the SSS, or Saturday Supervised Study, which was basically detention on Saturday mornings for those who committed medium offenses. He suspended more people in his eight years than any principal in the history of Collingston High and saw the violent acts committed drop by eighty percent over his tenure. He also stopped Christmas.

Heather sat across from the Warden’s desk, calm, with the poise of a high-priced defense attorney. She looked him straight in the eye, unblinking. She took her Santa Claus cap off and laid it neatly on her lap, but the elf ears remained.

“Miss Hawthorne,” (despite his efforts the blood vessels in his cheeks opened and they flared red for a moment), “you’ve had seventeen detentions over the last seventeen days, you’ve been warned repeatedly to stop your misbehavior—more than any other student would have been warned mind you—and yet you continue this insurgence. This is very unlike you Miss Hawthorne. I went through the records; you have never even had a detention in your four years here until this month. You make straight A’s, you’re the student government president, and you’re well respected among your peers. This isn’t the kind of behavior a leader of the people exhibits. Have you anything to say for your actions?”

“It’s exactly the kind of behavior a leader of the people exhibits,” Heather stated. “If you’re looking for an apology, you’re not going to get it. I have every right to celebrate Christmas, a right guaranteed to me in the First Amendment.”

“You’re correct, you do have the right of freedom of speech and religion, but not at the cost of stepping on other peoples’ rights in the process. The Supreme Court has made this abundantly clear.”

“I haven’t imposed on anybody’s rights. In fact,” Heather unzipped her backpack producing a folder, and out of the folder pulled a stack of about fifty papers, “I’ve got signatures from every student at Collingston expressing their wishes to be able to celebrate Christmas.”

Heather shoved the stack across the desk. Hartman flipped through the pages briefly, uninterested in the names.

“How many signatures did you say there were?” The principal faking an impressed look.

“Two thousand and seventy-six,” Heather responded.

“There are only two thousand and seventy-four students enrolled currently at Collingston.”

“I know, two teachers also signed. That’s two of your faculty.”

Hartman slid the papers back across the desk “It matters not. The rules do not change because of your petition.”

“So you’re basically saying the students aren’t smart enough to make decisions on their own? That somebody else has to tell them what’s in their best interests? You know, in the not-so-distant past, there was a rule stating that women couldn’t vote, and that men could own slaves. Thank God people didn’t stand by and let people like you make decisions for them.”

“I didn’t bring you in here to debate politics, Miss Hawthorne. I’m giving you the chance to apologize and make all of this go away. If you cannot see the error of your ways, you will be removed from your presidency of the student government, and suspended from this institution.”

Heather sat in silence.

“Come out into the hallway and let me show you something,” the warden said, rising from his seat.

Hartman put his hand on her back as they walked to the door, a peace gesture he thought.

“If your hand is still touching my back when we pass through this doorway,” Heather said, “I’m going to slam the door on it and make sure you never touch anything again.”

Hartman took the hand away.

In the hallway, the day shift janitors were busy. They stood on ladders taking down the garland. They ripped pictures off the wall. They swept up the silver glitter. Garbage bags full of Santa caps stood against the wall as if awaiting their execution.

“You see, Miss Hawthorne, with or without you, all of this is over. When your classmates arrive tomorrow the only thing they’ll be able to gawk at outside the clock tower, is a plain green pine tree. The way nature intended it. Christmas at Collingston High is over.”

“This isn’t about Christmas or the Bill of Rights,” Heather began. “This is about you suffering from little-man disease. You’ve spent your whole career aspiring to be the best at what you do, to supposedly lead and educate people. The only problem is that your job requires you to deal with people on a daily basis, and you’re not very good at it because you’re not very good at being a person. You think the way to deal with people is to lay sanctions on them and throw your power around until they submit. You’ve got your Ph.D., you’re articulate, smart, but none of it matters. Because when you walk out of these walls every night into the world, you’re just a sad little man with the same cracking voice you had as a teenager, unwilling to enjoy what really matters in life.”

“That’s just your opinion,” Hartman’s efforts to contain his lips only made the words worse.

“I don’t have an opinion remember? Not in your world anyway.”

Heather walked down the hall and left through the front door.

The janitors had already moved their demolition to another hallway.

Hartman stood alone outside his office door.

## X

I decided to skip my after-school workout and put myself through a different torture. I ran to Roman’s house. It was all downhill for the most part—a four-mile journey—but by mile two I was holding my side and the cold air felt like razor blades on my lungs. By mile three I found myself walking, gasping for oxygen, and thinking of the warm fieldhouse and weight room. By the time I eventually got to Roman’s door my legs had been stumbling on sidewalk cracks, and I now found my hands on my knees as I tried to lift my carcass up his porch stairs. It had taken me over an hour to get there, and the only thought that kept playing in my mind was how great it was to be a baseball player instead of long-distance runner.

Roman opened the door with book in hand, not looking up from the pages, and not with so much as a hello. The house was immaculate as always. I walked toward the kitchen for some water, realizing I could see my reflection on the hard wood floors. Even the tiny Christmas tree on the table next to his bed was obsessive, the rows of lights evenly spaced, the star on top pointed exactly toward the ceiling. Roman had way too much time on his hands. Just once I’d like to open the door and see a cushion hanging off the couch, or some dust on the coffee table, or his bed unmade.

I guzzled down three glasses of tap water before returning to the living room with a fourth. Roman sat on the couch, transported through paper and ink to another time and place. I sat down on the opposite end of the couch, not letting my back touch it on account of my sweat.

“How’s it going anyway?” I said.

Roman didn’t acknowledge the question. He wasn’t being rude—that was the last thing Roman wanted to be—he honestly didn’t hear me because of that goddamn book.

I spoke a little louder this time. “So I had Ms. Petway bent over one of those stools in the Chemistry classroom. She’d been given me the bedroom eyes for at least a month. Anyway I’m just poundin’ it, slapping her on the…”

Roman raised his head from the book, at first looking straight ahead like it took him a second to escape the story’s grasp, and then turned to me with his eyebrows raised. “What?” he asked.

“I’m just pullin’ your leg man, trying to get you to respond.”

“Oh.”

“It’s good to see you too.”

“I’m sorry. How are you?” Roman got up and went into the bathroom, retrieved a towel for me, and placed it against the couch.

“I’m good except for my fuckin’ legs and lungs. I thought it would be a good idea to run over here. I’m an idiot.”

Roman didn’t argue.

“So what’s your story, you just fadin’ into the sunset or what?”

“I don’t understand,” Roman said.

“You know. Cashed in your chips, bit the bullet, took the dirt nap.”

“I am still alive.”

“You’re alive all right. You’re just not livin’. I wish you could’ve met my grandfather, the one on my mother’s side. He thought he was some great philosopher always talking about the meaning of life and shit. Grandpa said that everybody in life was on this train, travelin’ from one coast to the other. The train stopped every so often but at unfamiliar places. The places were beautiful though, gorgeous scenery, mountain ranges and canyons. Half the people got off at every stop because they just had to get a better look, but not all of them always made it back. The other half never got off because they were scared of what happened to the people that got off, thought they might have been killed or some shit, even though it might have been that they just chose to stay instead of getting back on the train. What no one ever realized was that eventually that train was either going to run out of fuel or rail. The train can’t go on forever.”

Roman looked at the wall. I got up and walked toward the door. There was no need for me to explain grandpa’s parable to a person who understood better than I did.

“By the way, Heather’s waist deep in shit. Hartman revoked her title of class president. Suspended her indefinitely. And he’s stripping the big pine too, probably tonight sometime. Had the janitors tear down all the Christmas decorations and shit. And can you believe this one? Of all people, Bruno said

today at lunch we should have a concert of Christmas songs. Funny how ambition rubs off on people. Thought you might care.”

Roman just sat there though; he either didn't care or was too far gone to hear me. I turned the doorknob, but was stopped short by the voice of the janitor, now standing behind me.

“I dreamed that Agent Johnson showed up here with my parents' bodies. He shot you and Heather, killing you both. I couldn't stop him because he'd hit me with a tranquilizer dart.”

“All this is over a goddamn dream? For a genius you're pretty fuckin' stupid.”

“It's not just a dream.”

I turned to Roman and got right in his face. “You're right. That dart Johnson shot you with did tranquilize you...completely out of your own life. You're still frozen. But only because you wanna be. Whether you're gonna be one of those people that just sits on the train and watches the scenery go by instead of gettin' off and enjoying it makes no difference to me. Either way I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror, because I at least made an attempt to bring you out of whatever funk it is that you're in. But I am *not* gonna spend the rest of my Senior year watching you waste yours.”

I stood there looking in his eyes for several minutes, trying to see behind them, but with Roman it was never easy. Maybe because I just didn't know what to look for with him. Eventually I walked out, only to find myself re-entering the house a second after I'd closed the door.

“Damn. You mind if I borrow your bike? There's no way I'll make it home.”

Roman nodded.

## XI

Roman walked to work, cutting a path through the harsh December air. He kept his hands in the pockets of his flannel, and turned the collar up against his neck. The cemetery was more dead and cold than he remembered. Most house lights were already out on Stephenson Street, and not one single car passed him on the road.

He took an extra minute to look at the big pine before entering, admiring the decorations and also the headstrong girl who made it happen. At the top of the tree sat an angel. Roman could've counted every bulb on the nights before, but now it was dark, and the tree looked more black than green. He knew the feeling that gripped him all too well. It was the boney fingers of regret wrapping around his chest, trying to suffocate him.

## XII

Boss Chatterling whistled, “Joy to the World” at the end of roll call, something Roman thought he would never witness.

“You better get going Swivel, you've got a long night ahead of you,” she said.

“Yes, ma'am.” Roman grabbed his cart and started out the door.

“Before you go, I thought you might be interested to know that all your girlfriend’s stuff is boxed up down by the boiler room. Hartman wants it pitched.”

“I understand,” Roman replied softly.

“No, janitor I don’t think you do.” Chatterling walked over and put her hand on his shoulder, looking down at him from under the rims of her glasses. “I had two of the first shift guys that needed the overtime stay over and take care of your floor. I thought you might have something else to make right here tonight.”

“Thank you ma’am,” Roman said with a smile.

“Don’t get all mushy on me now, Swivel. Just make sure I don’t see any of that stuff come January.”

“Not a problem ma’am.”

### XIII

Bob’s Tree Service arrived at 10:00 that night to un-decorate the tree they’d decorated three weeks before. The crane of the truck was extended toward the angel when Roman jogged out of the clock tower doors and stopped at the driver’s door. The driver looked at the red stitching on Roman’s shirt.

“You’re a little young to be a janitor aren’t you son?”

“Maybe sir,” he said, emptying all the money out of his wallet and placing it in the man’s hand.

“What’s this for? We’ve already been paid in advance.”

“Think of it as your Christmas bonus. Keep the other money too. But leave the tree alone. There has been a change of plans.”

Roman watched as the crane descended and the truck pulled away. He could hardly hold a thought in his head.

There was a brief spark as he plugged the cord into the outlet; in the same instant the light from Heather’s tree was alive and everywhere.

### XIV

The phone was ringing. I’d hit the button on my alarm clock four or five times before I knew what it was and then picked up the receiver. I looked up at the time, thinking I might be dreaming.

“Yeah.”

“Tony, are you awake?”

I looked at the clock again. “Roman?”

“Yes.”

“Are you all right?” I asked him.

“I’ve never been better.”

“Hell no I’m not awake. It’s two thirty in the morning. What in Christ’s name’s goin’ on?”

“I need you to do me a favor.”

### XV

Hartman didn’t notice the tree as he drove by it on up Stephenson the next morning. He didn’t notice it when he parked, though he was facing it. He didn’t

notice it after making half his walk through the lot. But he froze all at once, a terrible sense of dread overtaking him, almost demanding that he look.

He took his glasses off, stared up the big pine, and rubbed his eyes as if he was seeing things. The lights were there, bright as the night of the massive caroling, and it seemed as if they were laughing at him. Had there been a miscommunication between him and the tree service? Maybe they thought it was tonight they were supposed to tear down the decorations. But what about the lights? Who'd plugged them in? A tactical error made by Chatterling's staff maybe?

His heart sank even further as he entered the main hallway. There in all of their splendor were the hundreds of decorations he'd seen torn down not twenty-four hours ago. And there was something else. A giant banner hung overhead, its large letters hand-cut out of red poster board spelling the words *Merry Christmas*. Hartman looked to his right, down the hallway next to the first floor lockers. Glitter covered the floor, the lockers were strung with green fluffy garland, light from Christmas trees glared through classroom doors, and candy canes hung from the knobs. Every last bit of it was restored, plus some.

Hartman started toward his office at a brisk pace, as fast as a suit like him could travel without degrading himself by running.

"Chatterling!" he shouted.

"Chatterling!" he yelled again.

The name echoed through the empty hallways in front of him to no avail. He went up the first flight of stairs, and on the second floor found the landscape had sprouted with the spirit of Christmas even more. Mangers, wise men, Frosty, Rudolph, mistletoe, Santa Claus—they all looked on and seemed to smile.

"Chatterling!"

Just before reaching the third floor, at the top of the stairs, stood a paper sign. It read: *North Pole* and an arrow pointed to the right. Hartman dropped his brief case, grabbed the artwork, and shredded it into strips and then again, until there were no pieces left to shred. They floated down the stairwell like snowflakes falling to earth.

"Chatterling!" He screamed this time.

Hartman stopped in front of his office door, scrambled through his keys and then dropped them. He snatched them up off the floor, mumbling to himself. When he finally inserted the key, his eyes focused on the picture on his door.

It was the Grinch, teeth showing, grinning from ear to ear.

## XVI

"Tell me one more time what the hell is going on," Heather said, slouched down in the passenger seat of the Pinto, biting her fingernails.

"I honestly don't know. Roman called me at two thirty last night and asked if I would help him out with something." I pushed the gas to the floor. It wasn't the first time I'd been late for school, but it was a little more than that today.

"And?"

“And nothing. Roman said to make sure I went and picked you up for school. He said don’t worry; it wouldn’t be hard to get you in. Jesus, listen to us, we’re actually going to smuggle someone into school. That’s whattaya call it... you know?”

“Ironic?”

“Yeah ironic. That’s it.”

“He had to say something. Did he mention anything yesterday during school?”

“I’m tellin’ ya, I’m as much in the dark here as you are. I haven’t *really* talked to him since Thanksgiving. I did go over there last night though and bust his balls a little about what a fuck he’s been lately. I also mentioned that you were in some trouble, but that was it. He just sat there listening and didn’t respond.”

We were on Stephenson now and I could tell something was up. Heather’s tree was still decorated, and it was lit. I think that would have been enough in itself to please her, but it was only the beginning.

We entered through the clock tower doors. We both stopped and marveled at the hallway’s decorations.

“He put them all back up,” Heather said, entranced.

“Yeah. But what’s missing?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. What?”

“People”, she said. “Where is everybody?”

We started up the hallway, passing classroom doorways. Every one of them dark, the occasional tree inside their only illumination.

“It must have taken him all night,” Heather said.

“Don’t get mushy just yet. There’s not even any teachers here. What in the blue hell is going on?” I asked.

“Shush. Do you hear that? It’s real faint.”

“Yeah. Comin’ from the other side of the building.”

“The auditorium?”

“Yeah, the auditorium. It all makes sense now.”

## XVII

Principal Hartman sat leaning over his desk, his hand propping up his heavy forehead, his eyes closed. Chatterling would have heard him yell. She’d have been at school before him too, always was. Didn’t respond to his pages or the intercom either. This is a conspiracy, he thought, and a lot of people were going to pay. Chatterling was first on his list.

Hartman jumped out of his chair, jolted out of his thought like the boogiemani himself had just goosed him. He pushed a button on his phone.

“Miss Penny, do you hear that?”

“Hear what sir?”

Hartman refrained from answering, listening to the distant sound.

“It sounds like singing, sir.”

Hartman *ran* for the auditorium.

## XVIII

The last chorus of “Frosty the Snowman” finished as we opened up the double doors to the auditorium. A sea of red and white Santa stocking caps sat before us, following the slight decline of the floor. The spotlights were focused toward the stage. The broadcast journalism class had at least four cameras rolling. The place was filled to capacity, not an empty seat, not even in the balcony. Teachers stood, as well as a few students.

On stage sat a black baby grand piano and on top of it a microphone. Roman sat on the bench in front of the white and black keys. He looked towards where we stood, squinting through the high beams of the spotlight. He was a flannelled Ray Charles, holding court in the local club, unable to see us for sure, but he knew we were there.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the lady of the hour, Heather Hawthorne.”

The heads turned in unison, a thousand pairs of eyes looking up the aisle.

“Come on down guys, Mr. Buttworst has got two seats saved for you down here in the front row.”

They clapped and cheered for Heather as we walked down. The only thing she could do was smile. I was in a fog, amazed that Roman was playing the piano in front of the entire school.

“All right. What’s next?” Roman asked.

“Something for Heather,” a voice suggested from the back.

“‘Oh Christmas Tree’,” another voice echoed.

Roman touched the keys, fingers dancing lightly across the ivories. Despite the bad voices and people not knowing the words, some how harmony won out. The students and teachers of Collingston had one voice, and sang one song.

“Stop playing.” A voice thundered over the speakers.

Hartman had his own microphone and walked with it down the center aisle.

“You stop right now,” he repeated. “You are in violation of this school’s code of ethics.”

But the sound of the piano did not cease, nor did the singing.

“I demand that you stop this instant and walk away from the piano.”

The celebration continued.

“You pompous son of a bitch, who do you think you are?” the principal shouted at Roman.

The voices in the crowd fell silent, but the notes of the piano still pounded out.

“Teachers, I want you to physically remove Mr. Swivel from the piano. Now.”

Not one of them moved. The music played on.

Hartman’s tie had worked its way undone and the hair covering his bald spot now spread out wildly on all sides.

“I will see that every last one of you incompetent imbeciles are fired if you don’t get that insurgent off the piano. Mark my words.” The principal uttered the last part in a threatening tone.

Nobody moved.

Roman started a new song, one chosen especially for Hartman, and this time everyone joined in singing “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.”

“None of you are going to pass,” the principal shouted in anger. “You’re all suspended, every last one of you.”

Hartman turned at the end of the aisle, heading for the steps at the far end of the stage. He passed by me and I couldn’t resist. He tripped over my leg and hit face first. His microphone sent out a deep bass thud. A few chuckles mixed in with the singing. Hartman rose to his feet, his face a dark almost purple-red, one of his lenses broken in its frame. He huffed his way to the stairs only to be stopped by the person standing in front of them.

“Move out of my way you goddamn Amazon,” he said to Boss Chatterling.

She only continued to sing. “He knows when you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake.”

“Have it your way, you fat bitch.”

The principal took two small steps back and then charged. He hit the big janitor with his head down, elbows out like an offensive lineman, feet rotating almost continuously on the ground, like he was on a treadmill.

The Boss didn’t budge. At most Hartman was an annoying gnat. His feet flailed against the auditorium carpet. His legs moved back and forth in the same place like the Tasmanian Devil on a sheet of ice. Hartman went nowhere. Finally, like a matador holding her cape, Chatterling stepped quickly aside. Hartman hit the steps head first, breaking the remainder of his glasses and bloodying his nose. He scrambled up the stairs and almost waddled onto the stage, cupping his nose in his hand.

Once on his feet, his eyes flickered from side to side, searching for something, anything, to stop the music. He ran to the wall by the stage and pulled off the fire extinguisher, the color of the device a bit brighter than the blood on his shirt. He held the red canister over his head and staggered rapidly toward Roman. Roman’s hands moved away just before the red cylinder crashed against the keys, striking an intrusive chord in the holiday song. The ivories fell in layers to the floor like the broken teeth of a boxer.

“I’m in charge here,” he roared at Roman. “You’ll be gone. They’ll all be gone. But I’ll still be here. I *am* Collingston High School!”

Hartman hoisted the extinguisher once again and swung it at Roman.

Roman ducked.

Again.

Roman ducked.

After missing the third time, Hartman let the canister fall to the ground. His arms burned with exhaustion, and his rapid breathing lifted up his weathered suit coat up and down. He put his hands on his knees searching for air and looked into the crowd.

Hartman looked at our faces, at the teachers, and then at the cameras that were still rolling, like he’d just awoken from a bad dream, like someone else had been in charge of his body over the last five minutes. Hartman stood up, adjusted his tie, sucked the crimson snot back up his nose and combed the long wild hairs of his head back over the bald spot with his fingers.

Hartman lowered himself off the front of the stage, threw his shoulders back in their correct posture, walked up the aisle and out the auditorium doors.

The shock hovered over us for several seconds, and then a voice from somewhere in the crowd started to sing "Joy to the World." Then another voice. And another.

Heather walked up on stage as the singing continued. The crowd began to file out one by one, like a church procession without the organ. Roman still stood in the center of the stage. Heather ran to the middle and hugged him.

"All this for me?" she asked.

"For both of us," he said.

"Why? What changed your mind?"

"The advice of one friend and the strength of another." Roman paused. "I love you."

They kissed.

Alone in the spotlight.

## XIX

Roman sat in his living room with a book in hand. Reading by candlelight, he flipped pages of the book as fast as most people would read through a couple of paragraphs. His index finger ran from line to line down the dusty white pages stopping only to go back to the beginning of the next. Eyes wide, following his fingertip, Roman seldom blinked. The finger scrolled, the eyes followed, the pages curved, and in a matter of minutes Sun Tzu's Art of War was finished.

Roman lifted up from his seat, grabbing a cup full of water from the table next to him. He walked to the window, taking a sip. His eyes scanned the landscape in front of him, the smooth white sea of snow that blanketed his yard and the neighbors' yards as well, the white fluffy clouds on both sides of the walk that he'd created as he shoveled earlier in the day, Carl's house dark and empty except for the single candle on the window sill of his bedroom, and the crystal-looking trees that in summer shaded the neighborhood, but ice-covered now, only reflected light from the street lamps.

A snowplow lumbered down the street, scraping with its metal blade and sending showers of snow off to the side. The perfect snow-sea before Roman was now tainted with brown slush and black mud. Roman frowned but continued to look. Christmas Day was only a couple of hours from being over now and with it the hope of being in the company of loved ones. Just before Roman turned his gaze away from the window Heather's Mustang pulled up.

She popped out of the car wearing a long beige trench coat, something Roman was not accustomed to seeing her in. Heather slipped in the back seat to grab something. Roman put on his boots leaving them untied and went to help her.

Heather handed him a round covered tray and a clothing bag. Balancing the tray on one forearm, Roman threw the clothing bag over the same shoulder, then gently grasped her with his other arm. They walked together to the porch.

Before he opened the door Heather said, "Are there any vacancies at the inn tonight?"

Roman smiled and opened the door.

“Can I take your coat?” Roman asked.

“No thanks, I need to warm up for a while,” Heather said. “I brought you some food, leftovers from my parents’ house. Are you hungry?”

Roman took the wrapping off the tray.

“There’s enough here to feed an army,” Roman said. “Do you want some?”

“That’s okay, all I’ve been doing is eating all day. I’m stuffed. The plate should still be warm. I nuked it before I left home.”

Roman grabbed a fork from the kitchen and plowed into the food. The plate was full of turkey, mashed potatoes, dressing, chicken and noodles, and deviled eggs. Heather smiled as she watched him eat.

Roman swallowed hard. “I don’t remember the last time I had a meal this good, especially on a holiday.”

Heather pressed her lips together tightly. “Does it make you think of your parents, Roman?”

Roman continued to chew although his jaws slowed.

“It does,” he said and swallowed again. “But not bad times, only the good times, like Christmas, like now.”

As quickly as Roman dove into the food he was full, leaving half of it uneaten on the tray. Heather walked over and wrapped the plate back up and took it to the fridge. She came back in and noticed the pile of books stacked neatly on the floor against the end of Roman’s bed.

“Been doing some reading?” Heather asked.

“All day,” Roman said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

Heather shook her head in delight and started to walk toward Roman who was now seated on the edge of his bed. “I don’t know if I could ever get tired of all that knowledge in your head.”

“Give it some time,” Roman said.

Heather stood in front of him, her lips full of anticipation, like the cat that ate the canary. “I want to give you your Christmas present.”

“Hold on. Yours first,” Roman said and grabbed the small package off his nightstand.

“You shouldn’t have. I thought the auditorium was more than enough.”

“It’s nothing spectacular, but I thought of you when I saw it. Go ahead. Open it.”

Heather pulled the gold ribbon off the box and tore into the purple paper. She removed a small object snuggled in tissue paper. She unrolled the gift out of its wrappings and turned it over in her hand. The ceramic figure was cloaked in a long coat, carried a clipboard in hand, and wore a stethoscope around her neck.

“She’s beautiful, Roman. Thank you.”

“Just don’t leave it in your locker.”

Heather sat the doctor statue down. Her smile shifted to an expression of seriousness and concentration. She stood in front of the naive genius.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered into his ear.

Her soft command shut Roman’s eyes, his heart beating nervously. Heather untied the belt around her waist and dropped the beige trench coat to the floor.

Heather took Roman's right hand and put it firmly on her left breast. She leaned in and kissed him, slow and soft at first, and then mouth opened with aggressive grace. Roman's hand trembled on her chest, nervous and unsure. Heather took off Roman's shirt and kissed his lips again, then his neck. Roman quivered with a mixture of fear and anticipation. Heather unbuckled his belt, tearing off the remainder of his clothing.

"I've never done this before," Roman's voice cracked as he fell backwards to the mattress. The courageous warrior was defenseless, the brain that knew too much, completely empty.

Heather straddled him now, grabbing him with her hand, sliding on slowly until he was completely inside of her. A quiet moan filled his ears, sending a shiver down his arms and legs.

"Do you love me, Roman?"

"Of course."

"Then that's all that matters," Heather said.

She leaned forward laying her chest on his and began to kiss him again. Roman's fingers found their way down the long golden curls of her hair, descending to the arch of her back until they found her bottom. The trembling was gone now; his hands were firm and sure, holding her as they embarked on the bumpy but welcome journey.

There was no foreplay. It had been going on for months now anyway, since the time Roman had seen her face light up at finding that her grandma's precious cheerleader had risen from the dead; when they sat on the dock at Sam Peterman's and watched God's fireworks display; when he saved Tony in the Hollow; when she danced with him despite the popular status quo; when they watched each other eat over soft candle light in his kitchen; since the first time their lips had met in Scott Jakowski's closet; when they kissed in the spotlight in the auditorium.

Roman thought of none of this now though. He only saw her, the way she smelled, the way she looked moving on top of him, her soft smooth skin, and the slick warmth inside of her. Roman held on as long as he could. He released against his will, clenching the bed sheets in his hands. Sharp cramps started to seize the muscles in his calves, but Roman fought back, wiggling his toes.

Heather slid over to lay beside him, bodies naked, breathing hard. Roman looked in her eyes. She smiled back, but Roman knew she was not content.

"I can go again," he said.

Heather pulled him on top of her. This time there was no trembling, no fear, only the two of them. And as the white winter night went on and the coldness kept the city streets silent, Roman and Heather tossed and rolled in the bed, their friction warming the small house. Between sessions there was talking and laughing and hugging. Roman went to get a drink of water for both of them at one point. Under the covers, Roman laid his arm under her neck, resting her head just below his. She ran her fingertips gently across his chest. Roman's eyes were wide open staring at the ceiling, unbelieving the prior events. Heather closed her eyes.

"Will it always be like this, Roman?" she asked as she drifted between consciousness and dream.

Before Roman could answer, quiet snores came from her nose, her exhales tickling his ear. Christmas had finally found him. It had traveled across time, dodging the wrath of Ed Pentoch, escaping the cellars of Bravo, triumphing over the bleak odds at school. It had washed him clean; his guilt floated away in the distance.

But to answer her question, to say that it would always be like this, the two of them together, was a question Roman knew the answer to: no matter how much he wished he could tell her yes, he knew that the answer was no. No, because the day would come when Agent Johnson would track him down, pursue and eventually catch him, stuffing him in the back of some car or van with tinted black windows and government plates. In everyone's life at one point or another time is the enemy, but for Roman time hung always on the horizon, dark and black, like a storm ready to unleash its fury.

For now, though, a peaceful calm filled him. He scoffed at the looming threat. Johnson was somewhere in the darkness, searching, planning, the imminent tide of fate. Eventually that tide would come in, that wave would crash against Roman. Then there would be no more hiding, there would be no more running. Roman would stand and fight, win or lose. *So be it. Let it all come.*

*Let him come.*



## Chapter 12

### The Flower

#### I

Washington, DC

Agent Johnson pulled his face away from the eye pieces of the iris scan and stood in front of the chrome door, waiting. Over the years the fancy gadgets and procedures of the NN had become a part of everyday life for him—no different than brushing his teeth, or washing his hair—minor inconveniences that were forgotten with repetition.

“Palm print please,” a voice not quite female said from the speaker just above the eye scanner. Johnson slid his hand into the space-age mold, his large fingers almost overflowing the indentations. Even after years of the routine he still got a chuckle: the first line of NN palm-scanners had to be replaced after Johnson was recruited, because of the size of his hands.

“Verbal confirmation please,” the woman/computer voice said from the speaker.

“Agent Johnson.”

Two seconds passed and the silver door slid sideways into the wall panel at what seemed to be speed of light. “Thank you Agent Johnson. Have a nice day.”

The room was dome-shaped, the walls, floors, and ceiling all one piece. The entire room was made of one material, like that of a theater screen, only much more durable. The room was completely bright white yet there was not a light fixture to be seen. In the middle of the room was a small crystal podium and now Johnson walked to it, pushing a number of buttons on its display, and then laying his hand in another analysis scanning mold.

The light from the room dimmed to black, the whiteness evaporated, and in seconds Johnson was surrounded by the dark walls of what seemed to be a different room. Brown was the color of this room. To both sides of him were several people seated in bench rows behind a wooden partition, like a jury. In front, at a raised desk something like a judge would sit in, was a man he knew well, a man he spoke to weekly, a man who had no name. There was only enough light to see the people’s mouths—darkness covered their eyes like veils. The hologram was so good that Johnson often felt like he was before judge and jury. But in this court there was no Lady Justice holding her scales, no lawyers, no doorways: only a meeting of people who were the first line of defense against evil in the world. They knew each other not, but trusted each other completely. The people in the jury boxes never spoke, only observed. They weren’t really there anyway—they were just agents scattered across the country in different buildings and rooms all projected there by one hand touching an analysis mold.

The speaking and orders were left to the “Voice,” the man sitting in the elevated wooden podium in the foreground. He leaned away from the edge of the light, so that even his mouth receded into the darkness. Was he looking at something? Maybe a computer screen?

Finally he spoke and his voice thundered down, surrounding Agent Johnson, penetrating him, the loud bass vibrating throughout the room and echoing long after it left the leader's lips. Surely it wasn't his real voice. Johnson had never heard something so low and inhuman, something so threatening, but so full of truth. Just another cruel trick of technology.

"Agents have confirmed the location of Kazar in a small village in Syria," The Voice boomed. "The interrogation of several of Numar's agents leads us to believe that there is a large-scale attack planned on U.S. soil. Specifics have not yet been compromised; we lost several good agents acquiring this information."

A three-dimensional picture popped up in front of Agent Johnson. Floating in mid-air was an image of Kazar, his rap sheet, and a map of Syria.

"There is good intelligence that leads us to believe that Kazar has the entire plan on paper, either on his person or one of his men," The Voice continued. "You are to retrieve these documents. Kazar's meddling has elevated him from petty information dealer to a genuine terrorist threat. You are also to eliminate him."

"I understand," Johnson replied, his voice small in the emotionless room. These conversations were never long or friendly and Johnson started to pull his hand from the podium, but stopped short when The Voice spoke again.

"What of Dr. Sebastian Jesup?" The Voice boomed.

"We have been unable to locate him," Johnson replied.

"He must be acquired. If he falls into the wrong hands, it could mean the end of the NN, the end of the world, the end of everything. He still possesses half of the plans for the device?"

"Yes, in his head," Johnson answered. "He only blueprinted the first half. Our psychological profile on him leads us to believe he would never put the other half on paper. He fled in fear of his own invention after completing only half of the layout. He has become very paranoid and is convinced it should never be built. He also claims that angels came down from heaven and gave him the idea for the device. Even if we don't know where he is, nobody else does either."

The Voice was silent. Johnson started to pull his hand away again.

"What of the one called Swivel?" the Voice thundered.

"He's out there somewhere. I haven't made him a priority. I imagine he's just trying to blend in, trying to be a normal teenager. Personally I don't think he is a threat to anyone. He's had a rough way to go."

"But he's not just a normal teenager, is he?"

Johnson chose his words carefully. "He's quite exceptional sir."

"And what of your last dealing with him?"

"I was unable to acquire him. That was in September I believe. I took him too lightly."

The Voice was silent, but Johnson could feel it thinking, digesting his statements.

"The NN doesn't take anyone lightly, least of all you Agent Johnson. Could it be that this Roman Swivel has become more powerful than you once thought?"

Johnson inhaled a reluctant breath but said nothing. His mind flipped through memories from Bravo.

“Agent?” The Voice was louder now.

“Possibly, sir. Possibly.”

“Then you have your orders. Eliminate Kazar and stop whatever threat he has devised. Then acquire this Roman Swivel. He was one of us before and will be again. He would be a puissant ally indeed.”

“And if he refuses? I mean if I can’t physically bring him in?”

A long silence.

“Eliminate him as well. God be with you on your journeys, Agent Johnson.”

With that the dark courtroom melted away and Johnson stood alone at the crystal podium once again, in a cloud of white, still with his hand on the scanner. He exited the room, remembering times he had felt better about his orders.

## II

January’s one good attribute was that it gave birth to a new year. And even that, to some, could be a bad thing. The month had a stone-cold heart, showering the area with its deceptive tricks: fluffy white bits of heaven purifying the earth, only to turn brown and slick over a day’s time; the fervent traffic of the mall, reduced to a faint shuffle of occasional feet; Christmas trees, once the center of hope and joy, massacred to their last rotting places; ponds, frozen for a duck’s eternity; the stead blow of pins and needles out of the northwest; nights requiring several thick blankets; days of thermometers struggling to make it past twenty. Back to the institution, to the days of boredom and repetition. Graduation floated millions of miles away, like Venus in the springtime telescope.

The red Mustang sat on Roman’s curb for almost two weeks, leaving only for the occasional change of clothes or makeup refill. But as the new school year prepared to take its spot at the starting block, Heather and Roman’s long nights began to shorten like the flames of a dying campfire. Soon Heather would be sleeping in her own bed and Roman would be mopping hallways in the midnight silence.

I now understood why Roman had been so hesitant to be with Heather. Love, with all of its smiles and gifts, in the end left you defenseless. It took away a bit of your logic and reason, replacing those attributes with dreams and selflessness. For the first time, Roman was vulnerable. For the first time you could see right through him.

And while my first thoughts of this were of regret, and my stomach hurt from watching their public smooching sessions, I more often than not found myself smiling at his happiness and cheering somewhere inside for it.

I showed up on Roman’s doorstep on the Saturday after break ended and school had started up again. Heather’s Mustang sat in the driveway; their sessions were being caught up on the weekend. I entered without knocking.

Roman sat on the couch in only his underwear. Heather sat on the bed, covering herself with the bedspread before I could get a good look. She picked up her clothes with one hand, keeping herself wrapped with the other.

“Damn it,” I said snapping my fingers.

“Nice try pervert,” Heather said as she walked over and kissed Roman, and then went into the bathroom.

“Why is it that if I want to see her naked I’m a pervert, but if you want to you’re romantic?” I asked him.

“She’s funny like that.” Roman stopped and thought. “It’s only romantic if she actually *wants* that person—the one that wants to see her naked—to see her naked.”

“Oh,” I said.

“What brings you out so early?”

“I’m on my way down to *On Deck*.”

“*On Deck*?”

“Batting cages. It’s pretty tight. I can only hit off those fuckin’ machines so much though. I need to see some live pitching.”

“You want me to throw to you?” Roman laughed out loud. “Do you know how long it’s been since I picked up a baseball?”

“I’m not asking ya to go out and throw for the Yankees. Just throw a little BP for me.”

Roman lifted up his right arm, making slow deliberate circles with his shoulder, like he was trying to resurrect a piece of antique farm equipment. Heather emerged from the bathroom brushing her teeth, hair and body wrapped in towels.

“You should go. You don’t have anything else to do today,” she said.

“I’m glad you know my schedule so well. Fine.” Roman stood up. “Let me get dressed.”

Heather kissed Roman on the cheek leaving a white lip print of toothpaste. I had to point to my own cheek before he knew it was there.

### III

“Do you have a hole in your muffler?” Roman about yelled the words.

“Fuck I don’t know. I tried to go through a snow bank the other day, and I think maybe I ripped the whole damn muffler off,” I said blowing on my hands. “The noise doesn’t bother me, it’s this goddamn heater.”

“Thermostat.” Roman responded. “We’ll take a look when we get back.”

“So, uh, how is it anyway?”

“How is what?”

“You know.” I pulled my hands away from the steering wheel long enough to make a circle with my thumb and index finger, and stuck my other index finger in and out.

Roman shook his head.

“Come on man. Guys talk about this shit. That’s what we do. Ya gotta give me somethin’.”

Roman looked out of the corner of his eye, lost in deep thought, like he was trying to solve a calculus problem. “It’s changed me. I don’t know quite how, but it has.”

“It’s changed ya alright, it’s turned that brain of yours into mush. With all your kissy face and sentimental shit. It makes my nuts hurt.”

“Maybe, but it’s worth it.”  
I looked over to see if Roman was joking.  
He wasn’t.

#### IV

*On Deck* was actually a steel sports training complex, one hundred and eighty feet long on all four sides and sixty feet high. The floor was a green multi-purpose material like rubber. The batting cages hung on cables and could be automatically lifted, transforming the arena into any sports terrain: full-size basketball courts, volleyball courts, or a football, soccer or baseball field.

For the most part, whatever sport was coming up next was the one that *On Deck’s* training catered to. Football was over and basketball was in full swing so baseball was now the primary focus, except for that day. Somehow the grass fairies were in control of the entire building, running around in their little shin guards with their shirts off, chasing the zebra-colored ball around.

“I forgot they had soccer league here on Saturday mornings,” I said as we stood in the entranceway. “They should be done in twenty minutes. There’s room over there on the side to play catch. You wanna throw a little bit?”

“Okay,” Roman said. “Do I need to pay anything?”

Roman motioned to the guy standing behind the cash register.

“I’ve got a year’s membership here. I can bring in a guest once a month at no charge. Here, take this glove.” I pulled out my catcher’s mitt and another glove out of my bat bag.

Roman put the glove on, first opening the palm and holding it to his face so he could smell the leather, then running his fingers over the rawhide and pounding his fist into it. For a moment I saw that small boy waiting to throw to his father by an Iowa cornfield.

I did a series of stretches—starting with toe touches, torso twists, and pulling my elbow as far behind my head as possible for my triceps. Roman stood sixty feet away still looking at the glove and periodically giving it a fist. His arms swayed and his legs relaxed. He watched the soccer players, but his mind was excited for the ball with seams.

I threw him the ball—soft with an arch—and he caught it two-handed. He turned the white sphere over in his hand and smiled. A second later he threw it through the air, and it popped in my mitt a lot louder than it had in his. Back and forth the white pill went. With each catch, we backed up and soon we were one hundred and twenty feet apart. Roman was still putting the ball on a line, like a frozen rope through time.

I caught the ball and looked at him for a moment. With all of his surprises, his mind, his fight, his heart, and even his Little League superstar status back in Iowa—I was still at a loss for what I was seeing. I expected the weak rainbow arc of an untrained arm and the mechanics of a six-year-old girl. What I was seeing was quite the opposite—Roman’s leg raising waist high with perfect balance, followed by the pendulum motion of his long arms, and the whip of the ball into my mitt with seemingly little effort. Roman punched his leather palm twice, calling for the ball, hungry to throw it again.

The grass fairies finally fluttered away, leaving their game scoreless, something which happened far too often considering the running they did. The batting cage made its slow descent from the ceiling, and when it reached us we pulled the net from its resting place above the metal pipes, starting at opposite ends and working around towards the middle. I dragged the L-screen over. Roman carried the bucket of balls.

He stood behind the screen, sixty feet away—a distance I would have told him earlier was too far for his ability—but now I had seen him play catch. The look in Roman’s eye was the same as on that night in the Hollow, the same as when he told the story of Agent Johnson, a look not of a friend ready to serve up home runs, but of a warrior on the mound ready to strike me out.

I gripped the wooden bat lightly in my hands and swung at the air a few times, touched the end of it to the outside part of the plate, then rested it just above my right shoulder. Roman threw. The first pitch was right down the middle. I was late but hit the ball hard to the right side. The next pitch I did the same. The third pitch ran in on my hands. I tried to get around on it but the ball hit the handle and dribbled lazily back to the L-screen. The sound was awful, the sound that every hitter has heard more times than they wanted to admit. And now I held in my hands a broken bat, splintered from where my hands gripped it to halfway up the barrel. It was a composite bat that I had owned for over a year. Composite bats weren’t supposed to break like that.

“Sorry about that,” Roman said. “My control is a little off.”

“It’s not your control. I’m just late. You’re throwing pretty fuckin’ hard though, ya know that?”

“Really? No.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re chucking it up there pretty good. You puttin’ everything you got into it or what?”

“No. I’m just throwing.”

“You need to come out for baseball,” I told him. “We need pitching bad.”

“Yeah right. I haven’t thrown in years, since Little League.”

I grabbed my aluminum bat out of my bag and took my stance again. “Give me your best stuff.”

Roman fired away. His pitches got on me quickly, the likes of which I’d only seen from a mechanical arm. Some I hit. Some I missed.

I batted nowhere near .400 that day.

## V

Freddy Flowers wore a suit only at night. During the day he wore jeans and a T-shirt, often mud-covered from countless hours in his many green houses. He made several stops during his workday, the three local flower shops, sometimes the two in Champaign, and often the one in Decatur.

The name of his company was *The Lone Rose*. He didn’t come up with the name himself; the previous owner Stan Williams had done that. Freddy had worked for Stan, delivering flowers since his high school days. Eventually Stan retired and sold the business to Freddy for a curious one-fourth of what it was

worth. Three days after the transaction was completed, Stan died after an unfortunate roofing accident at his own house.

Under Freddy's ownership, *The Lone Rose* systematically undercut the price of its competitors, running every flower shop within a fifty-mile radius of Collingston out of business. And it became the major supplier for landscaping companies in the area, making profits in excess of two hundred thousand per year, which was about a third of Freddy's income.

Collingston enjoyed the fruits of Freddy's reign. The Flower employed over a thousand people, a large number of them from the local rehabilitation center, workers who'd been injured on their old jobs and were unable to return. He was a financier of the local Boys and Girls Club, built a new conference center for the library, was the biggest contributor to the Police Benevolent Association, and provided the yearly budget needs of two soup kitchens.

His major farm and offices were ten miles north of Collingston. It covered over thirty acres of land, giving life to a sod farm, a tree nursery, and twenty large-scale greenhouses. Freddy pulled into the parking lot behind the wheel of his Dodge Ram 3500 extended cab, fully loaded, fully *pink* pick-up truck. At night he drove a pink Mercedes.

The workers knew it was inspection day as soon as Freddy bypassed his office and went straight to Greenhouse One. There was anxiety in the air, the nervous heartbeats of greenhouse keepers. The pace of gardeners accelerated at the sight of their master.

Freddy entered Greenhouse One, walking down the aisle with arms extended, fingers caressing the greenery as he passed, his eyes inspecting every plant. Esteban Ramirez stood in the corner, swaying back and forth in place, saying Hail Marys repeatedly, and watching his job hang in the balance.

Freddy stopped on occasion to smell certain flowers, or to feel the texture of certain leaves. He smiled at the lavender fragrances and the beauty of the plants—the beauty of his children. He made his way up the second aisle, but his smile inverted to a frown in front of a row of orchids. He rubbed his temples, retrieved his inhaler, and squirted a long spray of mist into his mouth.

"Esteban!" Freddy said with the sound of a grieving father.

Esteban made the sign of the cross and hurried to his employer.

Freddy hung his head, shaking it back and forth, leaning against the flower counter. Upon arrival Esteban stood at attention, moving his eyes up and down the group of plants trying to find the reason for his boss's despair.

"I've had such a good morning Esteban, but now my entire day is ruined. Do you understand that my day is ruined?"

"Señor, I don't know..."

"Silence." Freddy lifted his head up and grabbed one of the orchids off the table, petting it like it was a cat. "This plant is suffering, Esteban. Do you see the brown edges of its leaves? Do you see the way its once strong stem sags like the scrotum of an old man? This plant is in pain. My child is dying."

"Señor, a thousand apologies, maybe I got the fertilizer amount wrong."

"So what you're telling me is that you're starving this beautiful life form."

“Please Señor, I’m sorry. There are thousands of plants in here. That is the only one that is not perfect. Please Señor.”

“Oh, oh. So just because you fouled up one that’s okay, is it? How many children do you have at home Esteban?”

“Seven, Señor.”

“So if you feed six of your children, and one dies then you feel you’ve been a good parent?”

Esteban hung his head.

“I’m going to give you a chance to save this plant. If it dies, you will no longer have a job here and if anything else even looks like it’s sick, I’m going to turn you into fertilizer.”

“Muchas gracias, Señor. Muchas gracias. I get to work on it right away.”

Freddy brought the orchid to his face, took a deep breath, and kissed it. He handed it to Esteban and walked out of the greenhouse.

Esteban again made the sign of the cross.

## VI

Johnny the Killer sat in the back seat of the Caprice Classic with a roll of duct tape on his lap. He stared out the window watching as the dead trees January stood frozen in the darkness. He dreamed of sitting at his old school lunch table with his friends. He dreamed of baseball.

Boochie drove, eating a hoagie sandwich, the mustard and mayonnaise escaping from the buns and sticking to his fat cheeks. Next to him Bobby smoked a cigarette and slouched in the seat like they were on vacation. Boochie’s lips smacked and Bobby’s lungs wheezed—the back and forth sound of some very wrong orchestra.

After the first couple of drives, Johnny never asked where they were going. He really didn’t care to know. But as they pulled up to *this* house his stomach began to hurt. The front porch was adorned with a handicap ramp and the van that sat in the driveway was all too familiar.

Bobby knocked hard on the front door yelling Joe’s name. Both of Johnny’s new friends had their guns drawn and urged him to do the same. Johnny refused though, citing that it wouldn’t be necessary.

They heard Joe wheel to the door, which opened immediately. He smiled as he welcomed his guests in, trying to small-talk them. His injuries were healed but Johnny thought it odd that he showed no fear. Maybe the smile and talking was a diversion; or worse, maybe it was a way of pretending.

“Let’s cut the shit, Joe. You’re down big again. A week late with no returned phone calls. The Flower is not happy. What gives?”

The greeting charisma had now left Joe all together. “Look fellas. I’ve checked myself into G.A. I’m doing real well too. I know I have a debt to pay and I will, but I’ve got to get myself straight first. Freddy’ll get his money.”

Bobby reared back and punched Joe in the face so hard it knocked the cripple backwards out of his chair. Bobby pounced on the man, straddling him with his gun aimed at Joe’s forehead.

“Look you little invalid, I’m sick and fucking tired of monkeyin’ around with your sorry ass. You’re gonna pay one way or the other...now.”

“Bobby, I swear I’m dead broke. Every last dime has gone to Freddy. I need some time. Please, I beg you.”

Bobby looked at Boochie who leaned against the wall and shrugged his shoulders. Boochie looked around the room at the big screen TV and other expensive fixtures in the room. Bobby shook his head, reading the fat man’s thoughts.

“Johnny get this stump to the car,” Bobby said.

“What’s that?” Johnny responded.

“Tape this fucker’s mouth shut and carry his ass to the car.”

Johnny complied.

Boochie and Bobby ransacked the house taking anything worth value that would fit in the trunk. They’d be back later for the big stuff and the van.

The Caprice pulled into *The Lone Rose* green house entrance, bypassing the office and the glass houses, stopping a good mile down the cold gravel road just short of the giant wood chipper and the fertilizer piles.

Bobby exited first, and opened Joe’s door. He dragged the legless man out of the car by one arm, dropping him in the snow and walking toward the wood chipper. Joe lay in the cold snow, crying. Bobby waved Boochie and Johnny over. Steam rose from all three of their heads.

The wood chipper was a monstrous structure with an arm that traveled fifty feet into the air like a crane, and the blower hung directly toward the ground off of it. Underneath the blower laid a pile of what was the first stage of fertilizer. The compost had a reddish tint to it. At the bottom, where Freddy’s men stood was the actual mechanism, several blades that chopped up what was supposed to be organic plant material. The large funnel-shaped mouth was big enough in circumference to shred an entire tree into sawdust in a matter of minutes.

It was below freezing, but somehow Johnny was hot. Boochie stood with no coat on, like he was on a beach. Bobby sucked hard on his cigarette, stepping back and forth for warmth.

“Let’s go, Joe. If I have to come over there and carry your ass, I’m going to make you suffer before all this ends.”

“I’ll go help him,” Johnny said as he started back to the car.

Bobby stuck his arm out. “Let him come on his own kid.”

Joe began to scoot, sinking his fingers into the snow-covered ground, pulling himself with his arms, his legs useless. The sobs of the man were loud like that of an infant and as they went on they became garbled from his tears and snot.

Boochie dragged him through the snow for the last ten feet, after Joe stopped of exhaustion. The fat man stood Joe up on his stump legs and held him by the hair. Bobby pulled out his gun and held it to Joe’s forehead.

Rivers of tears had trailed down Joe’s face, but now it seemed that the well was dry, or maybe just frozen. Joe begged repeatedly for his life, saying he would get a second mortgage on his house and sell his van. It was too late though. Bobby had made up his mind.

“You want me to shoot ya in the head first, Joe, or ya just wanna go straight into the blades?”

“Kill me now. Just shoot.”

Bobby tucked the gun into the back of his jeans and smiled.

“What are you doin’?” Johnny asked.

“See kid, he wants to go out like a little bitch, like a coward. So we’re gonna put him in there nice and slow, stumps first, so he can feel it.”

Johnny wished he could wake up from the nightmare. But his breath filled the air reminding him of the harsh reality. How had his life come to this? “Maybe we should just let the guy have one more chance, Bobby. He’s got a good job. He’ll come up with the money.”

Boochie Anderson laughed out loud, a deep bellow from the rolls of his belly.

“Yeah he’d be able to pay, but when? When we’re all in fuckin’ wheelchairs? He’s had enough fucking chances. Turn it on, Boochie.”

The wood chipper struggled to start, firing and then stopping, like a car with water in the gas line. Johnny thanked God, but then it started—blades turning slowly at first and then spinning so fast the eye couldn’t see them.

Bobby grabbed Joe under the armpits and hoisted him toward the funnel. Joe’s sobbing turned into something Johnny had never heard before—a man seconds from his death, a painful death at that, screaming for his life. The sound seemed to go straight to Johnny’s stomach.

Joe flailed what legs he had, twisting and turning in Bobby’s grip. Bobby smiled as he inched his way closer.

Johnny wasn’t sure if it was the terrible screams or the joy that Bobby got out of it, but something made him do it.

Something made him draw his gun.

“Hold it. Just hold it,” the Killer yelled.

Bobby turned once and then did a double-take. The gun was aimed at him.

Johnny had held the gun in his hand several times before, feeling its heavy weight and admiring its potential. He’d pointed it in his dreams, but every time his hand shook with fear.

There was no shiver now though. His aim was steady, empty of fear.

“What the fuck are you doin’ kid?”

Boochie shut off the chipper.

“Throw your guns off to the side,” Johnny said.

“Look kid if you don’t wanna watch, go back to the car. But there ain’t been to many people that pointed a gun at me and lived to talk about it.”

“Don’t do this, Johnny,” Boochie said.

Joe’s screams had stopped, but by the look on his face it was from exhaustion, not relief.

“I said throw ’em down,” Johnny ordered.

Boochie moved his arm as if he was going for the gun tucked in the fat between his belt and back.

Johnny fired a shot, missing the fat man’s foot by less than an inch. Johnny quickly brought the barrel back up, targeting Bobby.

“Okay kid. Okay.” Bobby backed up, dropping Joe to the ground, and then flung his gun a good twenty yards into the darkness. Boochie did the same.

Johnny walked over to the legless man, keeping the gun on the other two. “I can’t carry you and keep these guys honest at the same time Joe. Can you hold onto my coat and I’ll drag you back to the car?”

Joe nodded.

Joe dug his fingers into the black leather of Johnny’s coat, a grip that was stronger than any he could remember. Johnny started walking backwards, dragging the cripple through the snow, and keeping his gun aimed on Bobby. Joe’s hands did not release their grip even once although the muscles in his forearms burned like lava.

Johnny opened the back door of the Caprice and did his best to help Joe into the back with his free arm.

“Ya know, Johnny, The Flower ain’t gonna like this,” Bobby screamed.

Johnny was silent as he entered the driver side door.

“You’re a fuckin’ dead man,” Boochie yelled.

The Caprice drove off.

## VII

Principal Hartman did not wait for the broadcast journalism class’s tape of his disgrace to reach the school board. He resigned over Christmas break citing personal problems—though everyone knew the truth. Copies were duplicated and those copies were in turn duplicated until almost every student at Collingston had a copy of the tape. The school board accepted his resignation without a single question.

Principal Greemore now sat at the helm, a level-headed man with two of his own kids in the school district. Greemore had previously served as Principal of the JFK Middle School on the east end of town and the powers-that-be had decided it was time for his shot at the big time.

It was still prison. Students however seemed to ease into the New Year with Greemore as the warden, instead of charging full steam ahead as they did with Hartman. Amazing what a little respect could do.

In the cafeteria, the guards lined the usual walls, but even their eyes seemed not as acute, allowing the once-punishable misdemeanors of lunchtime go by the wayside. We sat at the table, enjoying our lunch, but more than that, enjoying the break of midday. The conversation jumped around the table, bouncing off one person and changing all together with the next, like the ever-changing direction of a racquetball when it hit the wall.

Our table now held a lot of the old faces that occupied my table at the beginning of the year. But at the same time those faces had changed quite a bit—becoming better for the most part. Jack Rollins’s volume level had diminished significantly over the last five months. He had no leader to follow, but he decided to stay in school and stand on his own two feet. Bruno had also transformed himself from the bullish henchman of Johnny the Killer, calming down to the point where he would go days without his excited stuttering. You could see glimmers of individuality breaking through. The guys weren’t afraid of what people thought

anymore. Sam Peterman traded his stone black hair for a head full of blond. Scott Jakowski—the party man—had started to draw pictures, comic book sketches of mostly the mundane creatures of the night that dripped blood from their fangs. But I tell you they were beautiful. Even Pick Bryant, with his lukewarm loyalty and subtly manipulative behavior, had started to take singing lessons and wasn't ashamed to belt out in the middle of lunch if the mood struck him right.

I took a little credit for our renaissance somewhere deep down inside, where words wouldn't do it justice. I'd gotten the ball rolling by sitting down to talk to the janitor, instead of waging war against him. I had changed a little too I guess. My grades were almost up to a B average. The alarm clock ringing in my ears every morning sounded a lot better than it used to. Sometimes I was up before it went off at all. And while I knew that breaking up with Sally was the best thing for me, a part of me began to miss her.

I was awakened from my gushy thinking not by noise, but by the lack of. The cafeteria had quieted to whispers. Every person at the table already had their eyes on what was going on. I followed their gaze to a table in the middle of the cafeteria.

There, Johnny the Killer sat by himself at the end of a large table over by the north wall. He looked somewhat like the Killer of old, his black leather and boots turned back to Abercrombie and Fitch attire, the grease for his hair left untouched in the medicine cabinet at home. He didn't look up from his tray. He knew the eyes were on him. You always knew. And even though he had been gone a couple of months Johnny knew the audio level in the cafeteria was far from normal. Had Johnny the Killer come to his senses?

I was glad he was back. I was glad that he actually decided the path he was going down was the wrong one. I was glad that our baseball team might have their star pitcher back. It was also sad, the once most popular guy at the school now sat alone. The leader of so many left now with no one to lead.

Roman stood up from our table with his tray. Heather grabbed his shirt, trying to encourage him not to do whatever it was he was thinking. Roman looked at her. That's all it took these days. She let go and the janitor walked toward Johnny's table crushing the soft chatter of the cafeteria into complete silence.

Roman sat down in the chair next to the Killer.

Johnny continued to look down at his plate. Redness flooded his face as the silent moments passed. "I don't want your fuckin' pity janitor."

"It's starting to get a little stuffy over there. I'm not much for crowds," Roman said.

"Me and you are never gonna be friends. Not now; not ever," Johnny said back.

"That's fine," Roman said. "But just because we are not friends doesn't mean we have to be enemies."

Johnny didn't respond. The two sat the rest of the lunch period in silence. The bell rang.

## VIII

At Roman's, the red Mustang was in the driveway, but several knocks at the door produced no answer. *Even if they were doing it they would stop to let me in, wouldn't they?* Several lights were on across the street. More lights than usual. *Carl should be at the Tavern.*

I made my way across the street, shuffling my feet so I wouldn't slip on the hard ice. The door was ajar and I pushed it open.

Carl's house must have been a hundred degrees. The heat and small space instantly reminded me of the Tavern on Thanksgiving Eve. Carl lay on the couch with a knitted afghan covering him all the way to the neck. His eyes were closed and he shivered like someone with Parkinson's. Roman knelt on both knees in front of the couch. Next to him sat a bucket of vomit and blood. Heather was at the head of the couch, wiping Carl's face with a wet rag.

"More company we've got?" Carl said without opening his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't know, I'll go..."

"Sit down would ya guy? 'Tis Carl the only one causing everyone problems."

"You need to go to the hospital, Carl. You've got a high fever. You need medical treatment," Heather said.

"Fuck the doctors. A bunch of useless bastards they are. They'd only have me lay in the waiting room for hours like some sort of scoundrel. Just mix me some more of the tea lad," Carl said, his eyes just slits, looking at Roman.

I gave Heather a shoulder shrug to ask what was wrong. The future doctor returned the same gesture in bewilderment.

Roman returned with the tea and knelt down again, putting the hot green liquid to Carl's lips. Carl spoke between sips. His eyes never opened.

"It was those goddamn creatures that did this to me. They cursed me with some other-world poison. These spells I've had since my meeting with them in the jungle. Happens every other full moon, it does. I went to the doctors before I was discharged from the service, but they had no insight into it."

Heather hadn't heard the story before but knew better than to question him at a time like this. I looked at Roman who was ambivalent to Carl's words.

"This spell will pass as well. The tea always brings me back." Carl took Roman's free hand and gripped it tightly, pulling Roman's ear close to his mouth as if his words might not get there otherwise. "I owe ya a debt of thanks, my young friend."

"You would do the same for me. The same for us," Roman said.

"For this I thank ya sure, but 'tis not what I mean. That night ya found me laying in the road, I was ready to cash out."

"You would've done the same for me," Roman said again.

"Maybe, maybe not, for I did not come to know ya yet. But 'tis still not what I mean. I had the spell again. It came over me before I ever left for the watering hole. I decided not to drink the tea. I thought it was time for me to pass on. I'd seen enough I had, of the world going down the wrong path. All its wars and suffering. Carl had enough. But watching you work as ya did, rebuilding that house with your heart, gave me hope. Hope for the world, it did."

I could see a thin glaze of tears come over Roman's eyes. "You say these things like this is the last time we'll talk."

"Ha! I ain't going nowhere just yet, guy. But now ya must leave me be. I need my rest."

"I don't want to..." Roman started.

"Leave me I say. Carl will see ya tomorrow, strong like before."

He patted Roman on the cheek and with his own hands took the glass and drank the rest of the tea.

## IX

Johnny the Killer thought it was a dream. His eyes only saw black. But wait, he wasn't laying down, he hadn't even gone to bed yet. And why did the back of his head hurt so bad? Had he fallen off the chair and bumped his head? No that wasn't it. He was walking down the driveway, never made it to the house. Somebody'd clubbed him from behind. Maybe with a bat? His eyes opened, still blurred, but the answers became clear in his mind. Through the waves in his vision Johnny could see the blotch of a person in front of him. The man wore a bright green suit. What started out as a dream or nightmare had turned into something far, far worse.

There were several aromas in the room. Johnny could smell the sweet fragrance of flowers in front of him, their names he was not sure of. Behind him though, the odor of stale smoke mixed with bologna, hung in the air like a gray fog. He now knew the identities of his attackers without a visible confirmation.

Freddy Flowers sat on the other side of the desk. His long thin face and jet-black hair pulled back in a ponytail slowly came into focus. Suddenly, Johnny's stomach hurt worse than the back of his head. Freddy stood up, spraying the leaves of the plants on the shelf behind his desk with a squirt bottle.

"Do you know why I'm in the flower business, Johnny?"

"To cover up your real businesses?"

"Incorrect. I do it because it brings peace to the world. Flowers are God's artwork. It brings smiles to the faces of even the most ungrateful souls. It gives hope to the sick in hospitals, gives reassurance between lovers, and ties the bond between parents and children. Do you agree?"

"Sure."

"But there's something else. Plants and vegetation are on a higher plane than most of the monkeys running around this world. They aren't violent. They don't cause problems. They mate indiscriminately. They don't hate. They're here for one reason, to give us joy and oxygen. Plants my young friend, don't muck things up. They leave that for the two-legged humanoids. What do you think?"

"I think you're more fucking psycho than they give you credit for."

Freddy's face was emotionless.

"Not psycho, Johnny, enlightened," The Flower responded.

Freddy motioned toward the back of the room. Boochie left the room. Bobby came to the front holding a plastic bag in one hand, and a zip tie in the other. Johnny could hear a soft whimpering behind him, from down the hall

maybe. As the whining got closer it was apparent that the sound was not from a human.”

“Do you recognize it?” Freddy said. “Listen closely.”

Johnny knitted his eyebrows in confusion, but before the animal was in front of him he knew. Johnny had a strong urge to vomit.

“Please no, not Apollo. He hasn’t done anything to you.”

Boochie walked Apollo in on a leash. The dog jumped up on Johnny’s lap trying to lick his master, but was yanked back by the chain around his neck. Bobby Dukes laughed.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Johnny” Freddy stated. “This dog was put on earth to do to one thing, destroy. His aggression was apparent before he was even conceived. It’s in his breeding you see. A genetic bundle of violence.”

“He’s not violent. He’s a coward. Please leave him out of this.”

“For his sake let’s hope his breeding doesn’t fail him. He’s in the spotlight tomorrow night, competing against some of the most vicious of his peers from all over the state. You won’t be here to see it of course.”

Johnny’s head hung down toward his chest.

“The thought of your dog being torn to shreds is an awful one, I know. But take comfort in something. After we put you through the shredder, your imperfect flesh will eventually be used to give nourishment to the beauty of nature.”

Freddy laughed.

“You’ll be reborn. Where you failed as a human, your remains will be perfect in the cells of a plant. Ironic isn’t it? How the worst of creatures make the best of fertilizers. Enough discussion.”

Freddy motioned. Bobby put the plastic bag over the Killer’s head. Johnny tried to free himself, grabbing the bag where it met his neck. It was too late though; the zip tie was already pulled. Johnny fought for air only to feel the plastic suck against his face. Boochie and Bobby bent his wrists behind his back and tied them as well.

Apollo barked in the distance, unable to get close enough to help his master because of the chain around his own neck.

Johnny’s feet dragged in the snow, his arms now limp in the grasp of Bobby and Boochie. The trunk popped and Freddy’s men hoisted the dead weight into the empty blackness. The trunk door closed and with it all light from the outside world.

## X

San Diego, CA

Max Sheehan was a drifter, always had been. His parents died before he graduated from college, and there was no reason to stay around home. He traveled the country from one ocean to the next and back again, never staying too long in one spot. There was no reason to. No girlfriends, no pals to drink beer with, no relatives. Bouncing from job to job was his choice not his employers’. He had been everything from a car salesman to a lab tech. Right now he was a carpenter.

*Classic Design* specialized in hand-made wood fixtures—everything from small night stands to dining room tables. Like most of his jobs, Max picked up on

the wood working very quickly and six months into it had mastered the craft. Orders for cabinets and armoires poured in daily, especially since the company had gone online. He had a certain number of orders to fill weekly. The freedom of no set hours had kept him around longer than he would have expected.

Max was an animal of routine. Although by mandate he had no set schedule, he still awoke at six, breakfasted right after, arrived at work at seven, ate lunch at noon, and was back home by four. The orders came in and Max carved away at them, often ahead of schedule.

It was a warm day and Max stopped at *Cream Delight* on his way home to pick up a double scoop of lemon ice cream in a cone.

“Beautiful day isn’t it?” the man in the window asked.

“It’s always beautiful here,” Max said and then licked the pale yellow ice cream.

On his street he stopped the car abruptly so a kid could run out and get his ball. He was still eating as he opened the door to his home. He flipped on *Oprah* and sat on the couch hearing stories of gradeschool heroes and their parents. The lemon ice cream was good. He wished he’d gotten three scoops.

He had bought the house cheap, because of all the inadequacies with it. He’d fixed it up with new siding, a roof, and windows, and doubled the value. He gutted the interior and started over. He enjoyed redoing all of those things, but his prize accomplishment was the basement. He looked to the living room wall where the hidden door was and marveled. With his fine craftsmanship not even he could see the edges. *The basement*. The thought more than excited him.

He made his way to the kitchen first though, and wiped the sticky lemon remains from the corner of his mouth and the tips of his fingers. He washed his mouth out with water from the tap and dried himself. He went to his room removing his shirt first and then the rest. He brushed off his chest, removing a small amount of sawdust. No matter how careful he was at work, the pesky shavings always seemed to find him. He looked at the long mirror, following his reflection from his shaven head, down his trapezius muscles, his carved out chest, his statue-like abs, and finally stopped at his semi-erect penis. What could he have been if he’d looked like this in high school? It was too late to think of such things. He grabbed a ring with two keys on it from his nightstand. The blood started to pour in more heavily now.

He pressed the living room wall firmly. There was a soft click, and the panel door opened about an inch, just enough for him to get his fingers behind it. He walked down the white-carpeted staircase to another door. He inserted one of the keys and the door opened.

The basement was covered with more white carpet on the floor and on the walls. There was a bathroom immaculate white floors to the right filled with all the necessities: a shower, towels, soap, perfume and, of course, a mirror. There wasn’t a hint of mildew or scum anywhere. The main room was the size of two regular bedrooms; it did not run the length of the house. On one side of the room sat an entertainment center that he had built himself in his spare time at the shop. But there was no TV or stereo in it. Twenty feet away was the bed—a king size—dressed in white comforters and pillows. From the ceiling, four chains at each of

the four corners of the bed dangled with shackles at the end of them. On the wall next to the bed were at least fifty pictures: mostly young women, most naked, all of them brunettes, and many bound and gagged but all alive—in the pictures at least. They were taken in various locations—the woods, basements, one in a farmhouse. There was still room on the wall for several more pictures.

*She* was on the floor next to the bed with her arms hugging her knees, her knees covering her breasts, and her legs and feet obstructing the view of what Max wanted. The bruise around her eye was light green now and almost gone. She would soon be back to perfect, just the way he had found her. He could almost hear her heart beat from across the room, violent and uneven. If she were excited that would be good. Being afraid would be far better.

He walked slowly toward her. Tears were in her eyes although she did not cry. He grabbed one of her wrists firmly and swung it away from her body, claspng it in the first shackle. She didn't fight or yell, in fact ever since the first time, she had fought less and less. Now the fight was out of her. After all arms and legs were secure, he lay on top of her.

When he finished he unshackled her and she ran for the bathroom. On his way back up the stairs he stopped at the bathroom door.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked.

There was no reply, which was fine with him. He would fix her supper a few hours later and then be done with her for the day.

After she had cleaned herself up she sat down on the floor next to the bed. She refused to sleep in the bed and spent most of her time on the floor. She looked around for her clothes and then remembered she had none. She had nothing much of anything now. For the past week everything Mary Baumbright had been was being stripped away layer by layer. The veterinary medicine student was now in a cage of her own. Her family was across the country in Cincinnati. Her boyfriend and girlfriends were on winter break. Mary was supposed to be in Japan studying the panda bears and eating sushi with the rest of the students. Surely her professor would call someone when she didn't make the trip. Surely her mother would become suspicious when there was no call from Japan. Surely someone was looking for her. But she had no way of knowing. There were no windows in the basement. The walls were carpeted and probably sound-proof. Obviously no one had heard her the entire week, and she had heard nothing from outside. Had he designed the basement for this very thing? The thought sent shivers down her spine.

Mary knew eventually he would kill her, either out of psychosis or boredom. Most of her wanted him to. If she somehow returned to normal life, where would she begin? Would she go back to class as if nothing had happened? Would she be on Court TV reliving every horrible minute for the pleasure of America? How could she face Zach or touch him again? How could she ever be with another man? Life made no sense now. She'd planned to be a veterinarian, but now she was ruined and she would probably be dead soon.

*Death.*

The word did not feel right in her head. As much as she wanted this nightmare to be over and as much as she thought that she had lost her life already,

she was not ready for death. There had to be a way out. There is always a way out. She looked at the chains hanging from the ceiling. She'd tried to pull them out after the first time he raped her, and if she couldn't do it then with all the anger and adrenaline, there would be no chance now. What about the bathroom? Showerhead, razor, the mirror—all potential weapons. *Weapons*. And then she remembered what her father used to say. Use the most dangerous weapon a human has is—*its mind*.

## XI

We sat in Roman's living room in dead silence. The somberness was understood without a word spoken. Each of us was alone with our thoughts. Although I didn't know exactly what Roman and Heather were thinking, I still didn't buy the aliens.

I broke the silence. "He's fuckin' off his rocker about this alien shit."

"What do you care?" Heather asked.

"I care 'cause I'm tired of wading through waist-high shit every time he talks."

"It's not like he's asking you to change religions or something," Heather said.

"It's just goddamn annoying," I said. "What do you think Roman?"

"Pick was complaining the other day about how you cuss all the time. How you squeeze your colorful adjectives in front of the most unlikely of nouns," Roman said.

"What does Pick care, he cusses all the time too. Besides sometimes 'gosh darn it' just doesn't get the point across like 'fuck'."

"I understand that. But he says you cuss all the time because you have no imagination, no thought about having something better to say. Pick says it annoys him."

"Like I give a damn what annoys Pick? It's just the way I am."

"Maybe it's just the way Carl is too," Roman said.

As subtle as it was, Roman had a way of slamming his point across. From that moment on I was a bit more conscious about what flew out of my mouth and what I said about people.

"So what now?" Heather said. "Should we check on him every so often?"

"I'll check on him in the morning. Even in his weak state Carl wouldn't appreciate an around-the-clock intrusion on his privacy," Roman said.

There was a soft knock at the door. Me and Heather jumped off the couch out of surprise. I don't know if it was because the only people that ever knocked on his door were already here, or Agent Johnson and the aliens had burrowed their way into the back of our minds. Roman got up calmly and walked to the door. When it opened—as if that night hadn't been strange enough—Johnny the Killer stumbled through the doorway and fell into Roman's arms.

Roman led Johnny to the rocking chair and sat him down. The Killer had plastic hanging from his neck, and his face was sweaty and gray, like wax. His hands trembled. Without asking, Roman retrieved him a glass of water.

“What happened, did you get the bad end of the deal in some sex game?” I asked and laughed.

Johnny didn’t crack a smile. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

“You didn’t have anywhere else to go because you don’t have any friends Johnny. You’ve lost all of them over the years remember?” Heather said.

Roman put the glass of water in Johnny’s hands. It slipped from the Killer’s shaking grip a second later, but Roman snatched it with the hands of a magician before it could shatter on the hardwood floor. Roman put one hand on Johnny’s shoulder this time as if to calm his former nemesis, then gave the glass back to him. Johnny sucked it down violently, the water seeping from where the glass met the edges of his mouth. He took a deep breath.

Johnny rubbed back the hair on his head. “Oh shit man, they almost killed me.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Bobby and Boochie.”

“I told ya not to get mixed up with those thugs. Didn’t I tell ya?”

“Last night I was with ’em and they almost put some handicapped dude into a wood chipper. I couldn’t go through with it, just couldn’t be a part of it. So I stopped ’em. Today they blindsided me and took me to Freddy Flowers’s office, put this goddamn plastic sack over my head, and stuffed me in Boochie’s trunk. I thought I was done for, gonna suffocate to death, but I felt a tire iron next to my head, managed to rub my face on it and poke a hole in the plastic. I managed to break the tie on my wrist with a screw hanging in the corner of the trunk. When they opened the trunk I hit ’em with the iron and ran like hell.”

“You’re lucky is what you are,” Heather said.

“I told you not to be fuckin’ around with Freddy Flowers,” I said again.

“So you’re just here for sympathy or what?” Heather asked.

“No, I want your help.”

“That’s rich,” Heather said.

“Help with what?” I asked.

Johnny tried to clear his throat and then did something I had never thought I’d see.

Johnny the Killer cried like a baby.

Even though tears streamed down his face and snot dripped into his mouth, when he began to speak, most of his words were distinguishable.

“They got Apollo, man. They’re gonna make him fight tomorrow in some kinda gladiator fight against other dogs. He doesn’t stand a chance. He’ll be tortured. They make ’em fight to the death.”

Roman went to the kitchen for water and tissues.

“Why don’t you just go to the police?” Heather asked.

“It’s useless. Freddy’s got ’em all in his pocket,” Johnny answered.

“So just go steal him back before tomorrow night,” I said.

“It’s not that easy,” Johnny said. “I don’t know where they’ve got him right now. The Flower keeps the dogs somewhere else until the show. And these fights are just part of a bigger show. Freddy calls it Extravaganza. He has one

every four months. It's some sick masquerade party. Charges five hundred a pop just to get in the door. It's like some sort of perverted circus."

"They wear masks?" Heather asked.

"Everyday people in Collingston can't be spotted at some depraved event," Roman said, handing Johnny the water and handkerchief.

"Exactly," Johnny said. "You wouldn't believe how many high rollers attend this thing."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It's on the same property as his greenhouses north of town. One of the roads leads way back in the woods. It's like an old warehouse that's been converted into an arena. He uses the basement as a kennel the day of the fight. The only problem is the only way into the basement is through the arena. There's no other entrance. But Freddy lets his guests go down before the show starts to get a look at the dogs so they can get an idea of which ones to bet on."

"How many men will he have?" Roman asked. I could see it in his eyes, that soft spot for animals, and the computer in his head already making calculations.

"Twenty, maybe thirty," Johnny said.

"Armed?"

"There's an armory off the entrance. Freddy makes even his own guys put their guns in there. I guess one of 'em got drunk one time and shot a guy awhile back. Freddy figures he can't afford people dying at this thing, even if he is tied in with the pigs and sharks. He figures his soldiers can handle things anyway. The armory is for emergencies only."

"This all sounds pretty ballsy to me," I said.

Roman's face was blank, his eyes lifeless. I always imagined the busy signal noise of a telephone when he looked like that.

"Not if we're the only ones with a gun," Johnny said.

"No guns." Roman snapped back from the canyons in his mind.

"When does it start?" Heather asked.

"You're not going. It's too dangerous," Roman commanded.

"Excuse me. I didn't ask you, nor will I. I've known Apollo since he was a puppy and I *am* going."

"We do need a driver," I said.

Roman shook his head and let out a long sigh. He didn't argue any further.

"I have one stipulation of my own," I said. "If I put my ass on the line here you're going to play baseball this season."

"I'm going to. It was all I could think about riding with Boochie and Bobby," Johnny said. "I'm tellin' ya though, we gotta bring my gun..."

"If you want my help, we do it my way," Roman said. "My way is without the gun. Besides we won't need it. I've got an idea."

"Imagine that," I said.

## Chapter 13

### Extravaganza

#### I

Johnny was right on the money when he described the building as a warehouse. The outside was wooden. Some of the boards were newer than others. The walls were at least fifty feet high graced at the top with rectangular-shaped plexiglass windows. The roof was flat. If it wasn't painted pink, it could have just been any other building.

The inside was a different story. Seating ascended from floor to ceiling on all sides—brown wooden planks, like the bleachers of an old minor league ballpark. There were four spotlight stations on their respective sides, and numerous lights, like those in a gymnasium. Many plant and flower arrangements decorated the structure, pots in every row of every aisle, and flowers wrapped around the square poles that supported the roof. The arena had a dirt floor apparently spray-painted pink, oval in shape, surrounded by three-foot high boards like the wall of a hockey rink. The enormous amount of greenery coupled with the brightness of the floor gave artificial life to the building, like the pit of a Venus Fly Trap.

At the north end of the arena floor was a doorway, about twice the size of a garage door. Pink curtains hung in front of it, as well as around it, hiding the concrete ramp that led to the basement. Torches as high as the doorway itself stood to each side, the two flames burning halfway to the ceiling like Olympic torches.

Roman entered before us—one of the first in attendance—to put into action the first part of the plan. He called it “insurance,” but wasn't anymore specific than that. “Don't deviate from the plan,” he'd said to me and Johnny probably twenty times in the last day. It was also the last thing he said to us as we pulled up to Freddy's warehouse. To Heather he said, “Whatever happens, stay in the vehicle.” With that he pulled down his mask and disappeared inside.

Me and the Killer made our way to the line that was forming about twenty minutes later. I was pulling a black trunk behind me. It was made out of heavy-grade plastic, rectangular in shape, and had a snap-down lid. Even though the trunk had wheels, it was no easy feat maneuvering it across the ice and the snow-covered gravel. We wore what I like to call fancy masks; Heather had known where to purchase them. Johnny's was blue with thin lines of gold winding throughout. Mine was white with red slashes through it. They weren't anything special in my opinion. A mask was supposed to look like something—a famous person or a creature of the night—but these were just different shaped plastic, held on our faces by a silky ribbon that wrapped around the back of our heads. Heather assured us this was what the upper class wore to parties such as this. If any of us would know, it would be her.

The doorman was none other than Boochie Anderson. He didn't wear a mask—none of Freddy's crew did. Johnny's tire-iron swing was apparent by his bandaged nose. His eyes had black circles as well.

“Just let me do the talking,” I whispered as we approached. “He might recognize your voice. Remember don’t deviate from the plan.”

Johnny’s silence affirmed he understood.

We pulled the money out of our suit coats—another provision of Heather’s—the same coats we both wore to Homecoming.

The fat man patted us down, sweeping every inch of our suits. He made us lift up our feet, one at time, to save himself from crouching down.

“What’s with the trunk?” Boochie asked.

“We’re going to buy some flowers,” I said.

“We’ve got boxes for that,” Boochie responded.

“No, I mean a lot of flowers. We didn’t want them to freeze on our way back.”

Boochie bent down, his knees cracking from his own weight, and his lungs struggling to fill in their compressed position. Eventually he opened the lid and examined it.

“The Flower doesn’t usually allow things like this inside.” Boochie rubbed the silver hoop that stuck from his chin. “Shouldn’t mind though if you’re buying. Go ahead.”

## II

The arena was filled to capacity. The people lining the bleachers were dressed in glittering dresses, suits, and black tuxes, and all wore masks. If I didn’t know what was going on here, you could’ve convinced me easily that we were at a fund-raiser for some big time politician. I knew a lot of people in Collingston. I wondered how many I would know if they removed their masks. Maybe I didn’t want to know.

There was space for me, Johnny, and the trunk in the front row, more than enough actually. Throughout the oval of the arena there were very few people seated in the front row. *Was it not a good view?* I could see fine, the bleachers started at the top of the wall. I noticed the reddish-pink dirt on the arena floor again and something occurred to me. One of those thoughts you wished you could unthink—maybe the dirt wasn’t spray painted at all, maybe people didn’t sit in the front row in fear of what they might get on them. I turned around to see if the seats behind us were taken. They were.

The trumpets and drums of Barnam & Bailey’s were replaced with the loud clatter of a death metal song—a tune I could not quite place—and on the arena floor were several clowns, mimes, and sideshows. The mimes did their usual stuck in a glass box routine, while the clowns juggled bowling pins. A man at the far end blew fire from his mouth. Another ate swords. Toward our end a lady lay face down on a wooden bed. A steel cable hung from the ceiling over her. At the end of the cable was a metal rectangle full of large hooks. The man next her—the assistant I suppose—inserted the hooks into her back one by one. Eventually the cable rose, and her skin stretched thin, like taffy after you just tore a bite from it. She dangled a good twenty feet in the air. At any moment, I thought her skin would rip and send her crashing to the floor. Instead she just smiled, like she was at a spa getting her back massaged. I could barely watch, not because of their

painted faces, or the fear that the fire guy would light himself, or the sword guy would stick the blade too far down, or the thought of skin ripping. It was much more primitive than that. It was the way they were dressed—or the lack of I should say. They all wore pink leather, but not in the places it needed to be. The men's penises swung back and forth with movement in their routine, and the skin-lady's breasts hung below her, balling up at the ends from the pull of gravity.

"Freddy's a sick fuck ain't he?" Johnny said, stealing the thought right out of my head. "It gets worse, believe me."

I scanned through the crowd trying to see someone, trying to see Roman, but there was only the endless sea of masks. Roman wore a black suit and plain black mask, fitting attire for someone as modest as him. It reminded me of the geek sitting in the lunchroom and how the color of life is often emitted from the inside, not the outside.

*He's taking care of the insurance, remember?* A voice said in my head. *Yeah but what the fuck is the insurance?* Another voice asked back.

My eyes stopped at the top row on the other side. The bleacher section there was non-existent, giving way to some sort of platform, like the skybox of a ball stadium. There were several people seated around a table laughing. I couldn't see their faces, but I was sure they were laughing. The man in the middle wore a pink suit, sat with his legs elegantly crossed, and sipped from a straw that went under his mask to a champagne glass. His mask was pink as well, in the shape of a tulip. It was *The Flower*.

One of his men tapped him on the shoulder and placed a microphone in his hand. A second later the arena was dark and with it the chatter of those in attendance. The spotlight showed on him.

"Without further ado ladies and gentleman, welcome to *Extravaganza!*" Freddy shouted.

The crowd in the arena rose to its feet, standing and clapping in ovation.

*Welcome to hell.* I thought.

Johnny grabbed me under the arm and lifted me to my feet. I snapped out of my trance and started to clap.

The spotlight was turned on the floor now, exposing a platform. It had four posts, and from them hung chains connecting in the center to several leather straps. It was some sort of medieval swing. A man stood beside it, wearing a mask and cape, his only other accessory a giant wand. And around him stood the clowns and mimes. He pointed into the crowd and began to circle the stands with the wand's line of sight. The wand pointed up and down the aisles and rows jumping from person to person as if it had a mind of its own. Finally it stopped. It was pointing at me.

Before the spotlight turned on, my stomach dropped. Two clowns made their way to the arena wall and before I could run I realized they were coming for the person next to me. She smelled pretty and the curves of her dress said the same. The clowns grabbed her by the ankles and started to drag her down to the arena floor.

I wanted to help her, grab her arm so they couldn't pull her down. But I just sat there. I don't know if it was because I was relieved it wasn't me, or if I heard Roman's voice in my head telling me not to deviate from the plan.

The woman kicked and screamed, but her effort was futile. The crowd erupted in satisfaction. In the middle of the arena now the clowns pulled up a black circular curtain around her. The magician tapped his wand twice and the curtain fell. Her dress was gone. The woman covered her breasts with one arm and her vagina with the other. The clowns grabbed her again, dragging her toward the swing. Her flailing was minimal, because it was hard to fight and cover herself at the same time, but at the platform she clung to the poles with each hand. Her legs kicked at the clowns, but in the end she was strapped to the swing. Separate fixtures hoisted her ankles up and apart. Her arms dangled to the side defenseless.

The crowd cheered.

The magician skipped up to the platform, his cape flapping behind him. He held up the wand over his head. At that moment the lights brightened a little, giving the arena the glow of a candlelight dinner. Dancers ran out, female and male, naked except for their masks. Silk streamers flowed from their hands, dancing behind them like flags in the wind. They ran and jumped to the hard music, turning the harsh noise into a choreographed ballet, circling the woman in the swing, and finally converging on her like the vultures they truly were.

The magician lowered the wand, and the dancers fell to the dirt floor, as if to bow to its power. He turned it over in his hands with slow movements, and then gazed at the woman in the swing with her legs spread like gates.

The crowd screamed with glee.

"I don't think I can watch this," I said.

Johnny put a firm hand on my knee, thinking I was going to bolt. "Relax, it's not real."

"Whattaya mean?"

"The woman I mean. She's on the payroll. The Flower's sister. Gets raped every four months."

"Sister?" I didn't know if I felt better or worse. It wasn't a defenseless woman anymore I guess. Even if it wasn't rape, how could a man let his sister participate, much less watch? "Sick fuck doesn't do the man's name justice. Not even close."

"Tell me about it," Johnny said back.

The disappearing wand was just the beginning. The lady's unwilling spirit subsided as the show progressed, her kicks and acts of defiance turning to an active and welcomed role. Not only was the magician a major participant, but a dog was brought out to enjoy himself. The clowns and dancers were next, male and female.

I'd seen my fair share of deplorable acts of humanity over the Internet, things that made you sick in the stomach and wheezy in the head, but this was something different. Computer screens gave you a sense of safety, a feeling that no matter what was being shown, somehow you were exempt from it, a distant spectator caught at the wrong place at the wrong time, safe to return to reality with a click of the mouse. Here though, there was no escaping. It sat in front of our eyes unfolding like everyday life. Even with Freddy's countless flower

decorations there was an underlying odor in the arena. It was foreign to my nose, subtle but strong, not quite the foul stench of animal waste or decomposing body parts. It lingered throughout and hung in the air like a fog over the arena. For the first time in my life I smelled it first hand, the stagnant aroma of human evil.

The first act of Freddy's Extravaganza ended an hour after it started. The crowd stood in ovation, not exactly cheering—it was more ominous than that—their voices and clapping made a soft moan of perverted satisfaction. The dancers and clowns bowed as if they just finished Macbeth. The lady in the swing seemed lifeless, her appendages limp and body exhausted, and covered in a glistening human foulness that I'd rather never remember.

Johnny pulled on the shoulder of my suit coat, urging me to stand.

*Don't deviate from the plan.*

Even that voice, whether it was Roman's or my own, could not get me to my feet. I sat, wishing my brain not to digest the events my eyes just saw.

The overhead lights slowly started their ascension to brightness and the floor was cleared of its sex platform. The spotlight came back on the VIP section, and Freddy stood in it. His posture was proud like the director of a *Tony* winning Broadway play.

"Ladies and gentleman, this is our intermission. You now have fifteen minutes to inspect the beasts that you would like to wager on and to choose any of our plants from our exotic selection. The gentlemen by the curtains at the far end will instruct you with directions. There is more champagne to drink. Drink and be merry. Extravaganza will continue."

"You all right?" Johnny asked as we made our way under the pink curtain, down the ramp to the basement.

"Just a little shell-shocked," I said. "Remember we've got to be the last people to leave down here, so make it look like we're combing over every dog good."

"You seen the janitor yet?"

"No. He'll be down there though."

The ramp ended, and now there were two choices: right to the flower sales, and left to the dog kennel. I pulled the trunk behind me, wishing we were really going to buy flowers. We turned left though and made our way down the narrow hallway. With each passing step, the whines and barks got louder, the smell of urine stronger. We were traveling into the depths of hell.

One of the Flower's men stood at the entrance, his eyes fixed on the four-wheeled trunk behind me.

"We're buying flowers after we pick out our winner," I said.

His uneasiness subsided and we entered without an interrogation.

The room was narrow and simple, dirt floors, no decorations. Another guard stood at the far end of the room, eyeing the crowd. Forty kennels lined the sides of the room, leaving a three-foot aisle for the spectators. The men and women pointed, inspected, and sometimes laughed, writing their picks down on note pads, like they were at the local pet shop choosing a puppy for the kid.

But this was no pet store.

My thought of hell was not far off the mark. I expected to see ravenous dogs foaming at the mouth, rattling the doors of their cages in their anticipation for blood. Instead the majority lay in their cages, most of them whimpering in fear. Some barked of course, but not the ferocious siren of attack. They cried out for help, soft uncertain dog voices that begged to be taken home, taken anywhere, even by the cruel crowd that would eventually watch their demise.

We passed the first two cages. The thoroughbred gladiators I'd imagined were not there. The first dog looked like it got a hair cut from a drunken shopkeeper, its fur blotchy and sporadic, torn out in places, cruel reminders of its previous battles. The dog across from it had permanent gouges on its face, claw marks from its last adversary.

We continued to walk, and with each cage we passed, I prayed there would be one dog that looked somewhat healthy, maybe even happy. It just got worse though. Half-ears and mangled hides were everywhere; one dog was missing an eye, others had torn paws and chewed necks, and many had flies pestering open wounds. The saddest part about it was, these were the winners—champions from past Extravaganzas—the losers were the ones that died in battle. These fights were to the death, and you could see that knowledge in their eyes.

Most had ribs that were visible, skin stretched tightly over the bones. No telling how long the Flower had starved them, but it was his way of ensuring the most violent fight—what his constituents paid to see. They would fight one on one, in tournament format, until only one remained. The winner not only got to live but also got to eat. The dogs knew. They all knew.

We came to Apollo's cage. He lay on the floor with his pink paws covering his eyes, shivering from fear. As ugly as that goddamn white Pit Bull was, it was a welcomed sight, seeing a dog as of yet free from Freddy's violent games. Johnny walked ahead of me and his leg passed his best friend's cage. The dog stood up and began to bark, crying for his master.

"Just keep walking. I know it's hard but keep walking," a voice said beside us.

Roman had evidently taken care of what he called the insurance, and now walked beside Johnny in his black-as-night attire. His mask was expressionless, and I was glad I couldn't see the sadness under it.

"All right people. They're taking bets upstairs now. You've got about two minutes to pick a winner," the doorman said.

The crowd filtered out quickly. The three of us separated, pretending to make our last-minute inspections. Roman walked with his hands behind his back. Johnny kept looking back at Apollo. My hands were sweating.

"Let's go fellas," the man at the far end of the room said and started to walk toward us with his arms out.

He swept us toward the door and the other doorman.

"You gotta winner?" the doorman asked.

"I think so," Roman said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket.

Roman grabbed the man around the throat and stuffed white handkerchief over the man's nose and mouth. Johnny and I grabbed the other guy, wrestling him to the floor. Fifteen seconds later Roman's man was asleep. Johnny held a

hand over our man's mouth, removing it only when Roman brought the poisoned rag down to his face. I ran back down the aisle pulling the trunk to Apollo's cage and undid the latch.

He licked my face as he jumped out.

"Okay boy, it's okay, you gotta be quiet now."

Apollo's ears stood up and then lay flat on his head, as if he understood. A second later he was in the trunk and the lid was down. Roman and Johnny peeked around the doorway.

"It's clear let's go," Johnny said with his head still in the hallway.

I didn't move. All at once it was like every dog in the room had its eyes fixed on me. Their soft begs and whines were not as bad as their faces—solemn frowns of disappointment. I could hear them in my head. *Just undo our latches and we'll do the rest.*

"What the fuck are you doing? Let's go," Johnny said.

I could deal with human suffering, saw it everyday on the thousands of news channels. After a while I had become desensitized to it, a part of me thinking that people probably deserved most of what they got. But what had these animals done? They didn't benefit from the rational thought that humans used. They were total victims in my estimation.

Roman looked at me and then at the dogs. For the first time, without a word, I knew we were thinking the same thing.

"We've got to let these dogs out, Roman," I said.

"You're nuts," Johnny said. "If we let those dogs out Freddy's men will know something's up. They'll be runnin' all over the place. We can't risk it. We've got to go now! Don't deviate from the plan, remember?"

I couldn't see the synapses fire in Roman's eyes, but behind that black mask there was an apocalyptic battle going on between logic and emotion.

"Johnny's right. We've got to go," Roman said.

We walked up the ramp; passing two of the men Johnny called handlers. They wore thick gloves on their hands, and carried small whips. One of them wore a patch and the other was missing an ear. Apollo didn't make a sound. I watched Freddy as we walked the length of the grandstands and passed the sick appetites of the crowd. It took us only thirty or so seconds to make our way from one end to the other, and as we approached the exit, there was still no one coming to stop us. No one listening to the little transmitters in their ears or running to tell the boss of our theft. It would take the handlers a few minutes to notice one dog missing.

"Ya all can't come back if you leave," Boochie said at the door.

"We came for the flowers and the sex," Roman said.

Thirty feet from the building, we began to run. Apollo maintained perfect silence, as I dragged his carrier over the often-bumpy clumps of hard snow. The black Escalade was parked exactly where we'd left it. Roman's plan had gone off without a hitch. We were home free.

At the vehicle, two emotions collided within me. We'd escaped with our lives—an extraordinary feat considering whom we were dealing with—but I could still hear the awful sounds of those dogs begging for their freedom. I didn't have

time to think about it too long because panic came over me at the sight of the Escalade.

Door unlocked.

Keys in the ignition.

No Heather.

Roman opened the back doors just to make sure she wasn't lying on the floorboard. He opened the front door and hit the button for the vehicle's hatch, and then looked back at Freddy's arena.

"Where the hell would she go?" Johnny asked.

"That's just it. She wouldn't go anywhere," I said back.

"Take Apollo out of the trunk and put him in the back," Roman said.

"We gotta get out here, man," Johnny said.

"We're not leaving Heather," Roman said. "You wanted to free the dogs Tony, here's your chance."

"What happened to all that bullshit about not deviating from the plan?" Johnny groaned.

"The plan has been changed due to circumstances beyond our control," Roman said, starting back to the arena.

Johnny put Apollo in the back, fighting a hurricane of kisses and licks. He caught up to us just before the doorway. Roman stopped us as we were about to enter.

"You guys have the easy part. Get back down there and let those dogs out. It'll create some confusion that will maybe work to our advantage. When you've freed them, get back to the Escalade and wait for Heather and me. Whatever you do, don't take your masks off. We don't need Freddy on our backs for the rest of eternity. Don't hang around in the arena, I can take care of myself."

Roman entered the doorway without giving us a chance to respond. The fight had already begun, cheers roared from the stands but you could still hear the violent snarls from the floor of the arena.

Boochie stuck his arm out, trying to halt Roman. "I told you assholes once you leave that's it."

Roman hit him with a quick jab to the throat, then pinched the fat man's Adam's apple between his thumb and index finger. The tower of wobbling flesh fell to his knees like a blow up doll that had just been deflated. He held his throat with both hands and gasped harder than usual for air. Roman ripped the earpiece out of Boochie's ear and smashed his radio on the ground.

"Go now," Roman said to us. "You'll have to hurry because I'll be quick."

The hump of Boochie's stomach was nearly waist-high to Roman as he knelt beside the choking henchman, whose eyes were wide with panic.

"Don't worry Boochie, you're not going to die. I just bruised your esophagus pretty good. Tell me where she's at and you'll have nothing more to fear."

Spit splattered from the fat man's lips as he tried to speak. "I don't even know who you're talking about Jack."

Roman looked Boochie's face over, studying it for a lie, and also showing an interest in the metal hoops that pierced it. The liquidy growls could still be

heard in the arena even though the crowd was the loudest it had been all night. Roman put all eight of his fingers in Boochie's face rings and gripped them as tight as he could.

"Please don't," Boochie begged.

"I won't as long as you tell me the truth. First, who was patrolling the parking lot tonight?"

"Bobby, Bobby Dukes."

"Was he the only one?"

"Probably."

Roman pulled just enough on the rings to raise Boochie's skin.

"I swear. I'm not positive. Bobby usually takes care of the lot. I don't know if someone went with him."

"He didn't come out this entrance?"

"No, he goes out the back."

"If he found someone hanging around in one of the vehicles, where would he take them?"

"Freddy's office down by the armory."

Roman glanced around making sure nobody was coming and stopped his eyes at the small podium Boochie had been sitting at. On it was a pack of large heavy-duty zip ties. He grabbed them, first securing Boochie's wrists, and then using two on his enormous ankles.

"If you want to keep your jewelry intact, I wouldn't tip anybody off."

Boochie closed his eyes.

### III

"I'm going to ask you one more time what you were doing out there, and I want the truth," Bobby Dukes said.

Heather's wrists were pinned against the desk by Bobby as he leaned over her. She could smell the grease in his hair and the smoke in his breath. She looked him in the eyes. "I told you. My brother came to buy flowers, I was just waiting for him."

Bobby smiled and lowered his face down to hers. At first she thought he was going to kiss her; before it registered, his wet tongue made its way from her temple down the side of her cheek and stopped at her ear.

"You're fuckin' hot," he whispered.

"You're not," she said back, and kned him as hard as she could in the scrotum.

Bobby's grip lifted immediately and Heather ran for the door. Bobby grabbed for the flowing blond hair that trailed behind her, and snapped her back to him, his arm now wrapped tightly around her neck from behind.

"I was going to just pound you good and get it over with it, but now I'm going to take my time so you feel every inch of it."

"Don't you mean I'll feel *the* inch?"

Bobby flung her around so she was facing him again and smiled. "Gotta little sass on ya. I like that."

“I’d rethink hurting me. It’ll be the worst mistake you ever make.”

“Baby, I forgot to tell ya, I’m a slow learner,” Bobby said as he raised his fist.

Then a knock at the door.

The voice on the other side was muffled. “Dukes we need you out here, there’s a problem.”

“In a minute, I’m busy.”

“Somebody’s trying to steal the gate money.”

Bobby walked to the door, unlocked, and opened it. “Who the fuck thinks they can...”

Roman’s hand stopped the rest of the sentence, clamped like a claw on Bobby’s face, his palm pressing the nose up, and his middle and index fingers pressing on the eyelids, forcing the thug backwards. In a second they were to the desk. Roman tripped him, and the back of Bobby’s head bounced off the edge as he dropped to the floor.

Roman took Heather’s hand, keeping his attention on Bobby, and pulled her behind his back. Bobby got to his feet, vision blurred from the fingers in his eyes and the collision with the desk. He shook it off as if he had sustained similar injuries in the past.

“You got some balls,” Bobby said as he charged.

Bobby swung. Roman grabbed him close to the armpit, and used the man’s momentum to send him to the right. The action carried Bobby backwards and he hit the dry wall with his head, denting it. The entire shelf above and all of its flowerpots crashed on top of him.

“Are you all right?” Roman asked Heather.

“Fine. I’m sorry Roman.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know you told me to drive off if anyone approached me, but I just couldn’t leave you guys,” Heather said.

“It’s in the past,” Roman said. “Right now, we have to work on getting out of here. There are quite a few of Freddy’s guys hanging around the back entrance. We have to go out the front.”

Roman stood thinking for a moment, and then exited the office briskly, leading Heather by the hand.

#### IV

The two dogs doing battle in the middle of the arena floor were a blood-soaked growling mess. One of them, a brown and black Rottweiler, seemed to be one bulging muscle, from his oversized head to the tip of his stub tail. The other was a Pit Bull, twice the size of Apollo, and dusty brown in color. The massive jaws of the dog gave credence to the talk about generations of selective breeding for violence, done for just such an event as Extravaganza.

Their teeth sank into each other’s necks repeatedly, and though it looked as if the fight had been going on for quite some time, there seemed to be no end in sight. Exhausted, the dogs would sometimes unlock from each other and back away for oxygen. The handlers would let this go on momentarily and then the

whips were cracked, and the animals flew toward one another with bloody saliva dripping from their teeth and death in their eyes.

Heather followed closely behind Roman, down the walkway in front of the grandstand on Freddy's side, but stopped when she heard the cracking of the whips. She was suddenly lost in another world, looking at the arena floor. As hard as it was watch, it was just as difficult to turn away—a horrific display of how human intervention could tweak the balance of nature and raise the dark side of it—like the twisted song of an evil muse.

Roman pulled on Heather's hand, but her feet were in concrete. The stairs that lead to the front hallway and the exit were only fifty feet away, but four of Freddy's men were climbing them. Roman looked up at Freddy. One of the Flower's henchmen was pointing at Heather and him. Freddy was shaking his head calmly. At the far end—the staircase from which they had just come—more of the troops were heading toward them.

Whether someone had found Boochie zip-tied on the ground or Bobby Dukes had managed to rise from the broken flowerpots and get to a radio, Roman was not sure. It didn't matter. The troops were coming and Roman's once flawless plan was now a worst-case scenario. Roman was suddenly glad he'd taken time out for the insurance.

"Heather."

Heather continued to stare at the awful sight on the arena floor.

"Heather!"

She snapped back to reality and looked at Roman and then at the lines of Freddy's men closing in on both sides of them.

"I want you to go up into the crowd, somewhere where Freddy's guys would have to climb over a lot of people to get to you."

"What about you?" Heather's eyes were afraid.

"I'll be fine. I'm not going to let anything happen to either of us."

Roman gave her a nudge, and Heather made her way up the bleachers through the cheering crowd. She stopped somewhere in the middle. Freddy's men ignored her and continued toward Roman. Roman counted six on his left and seven on his right. The crowd began to divert its attention to the scene on the walkway. Soon there was no cheering at all from that side of the arena.

Freddy got on the mic, still seated, this time with no spotlight. "Just a slight problem ladies and gentlemen, it will be taken care of in a few seconds."

Roman stood his ground as the gap on both sides closed. He could hear Ninja in the back of his head. *We brought you thirteen of them today.* Roman looked down at the arena floor. To his surprise, the dogs had stopped fighting and both they and their handlers were now staring back at him.

"This will be quick," The Flower said to himself and then took another sip of champagne.

## V

The two men Roman chloroformed were not lying on the floor of the kennel anymore. One of their friends had either dragged them off or the effects of the chemical had worn off. Regardless, the room was empty except for me and

Johnny. The dog next to me was wagging his tail like he knew we were his only chance for freedom.

"I just thought of something," Johnny started. "What if we let all these dogs out and they attack us. They're starved. Maybe they think we're food."

"Let's let 'em out, one at a time. Once one takes off down the hallway, we'll let another go. That way we're only dealing with one at a time," I said.

"Sounds like a plan."

We started at the far end of the room so we wouldn't be boxed in if the canines thought it was dinnertime. Johnny opened the first cage, but instead of running for freedom, the dog backed up from the opening and growled.

"Come on boy, let's go," Johnny said patting his leg.

The dog barked ferociously.

"We ain't got all night, let's go. You're free," Johnny said and then whistled.

The dog only got madder.

"He thinks were one of those handlers," I said. "Thinks he's gotta go fight."

"Whatta we do?" Johnny asked.

Without responding I opened the cage across from the one we just opened. Same response, the dog cowered, backing away from his cage door. The two dogs looked at each other. I was sure they were going to charge each other and fight to the death right there in the aisle way. I was wrong. The barking stopped completely and both dogs put their ears up and tilted their heads to the side, as if to say, "what the hell is going on?"

"Let's just open 'em all up. They'll eventually catch on," I said.

Johnny went down one side and me the other. The reaction was the same every time; the dogs retreated to the back of their cages. As I got to the last one I looked back. None of the dogs were out. Johnny caught up to me on his side and stood up. We stood for several minutes.

"Just goes to show ya how afraid they are, how much they hate it," I said.

"We better get goin'," Johnny said. "Hopefully the janitor's got Heather back to the car.

"Let's do it."

## VI

Me and Johnny walked up toward the exit stairs. Johnny walked carefree like he was taking a Sunday stroll, mimicking the thought in my own head—almost home free. I stopped when I noticed how quiet the crowd was. And every happy thought in my head disappeared as I saw the grandstands on the other side. On the front walkway, Roman stood in the middle and Freddy's men were five feet away on both sides.

I yanked on Johnny's coat because he still hadn't noticed. The Killer stopped and gawked as well.

"He said no matter what happened to get back to the SUV," Johnny said.

"We can't leave him," I said back. "Let's just sit down and if Roman needs us, we'll be here."

“Are you fuckin’ nuts? If we get involved and they find out who I am, they’ll kill me. They already tried once.”

“We all risked our lives for that ugly ass dog of yours and now you want to just leave him. Sit the fuck down.”

Johnny sat close to the same spot we started the night in. “Apollo’s not ugly.”

I didn’t respond.

To Roman’s right the first man in line chuckled nonchalantly as he approached Roman, no doubt thinking the skinny janitor would be easy pickings. That thought did not last long.

Roman hit the man with the heel of his palm, driving the man’s chin upward, and snapping the man’s head backward into the second man in line. A chain reaction occurred, leveling the entire row like dominoes. It reminded me of Karate competitions, where the guy would hit the top brick and the ten bricks under it would break.

The line of men to Roman’s left stopped their approach, momentarily in shock. The first man swung, but Roman caught his arm and bent it the wrong way, a painful maneuver that I’m sure Ed Pentoch could relate to. Roman let go and the man fell off the walkway onto the arena floor.

Roman took the second man’s kneecap out with a kick. He ducked twice from swings of the third man, then gave him a quick elbow to the side of the temple and a fist to the crotch. The third man wore a hood, Roman grabbed it, pulling it over the man’s eyes and bringing his head down, then crushing a knee into his face, all in one motion. The fourth man swung a hard roundhouse punch. Roman sidestepped it; the man’s forward momentum carried him off the walkway and he landed on the dirt floor of the arena. The fifth man and the last man charged at the same time. Roman bent down, doing a one-eighty with the first man and flipping him in the air. As Roman came upright, he caught the hand coming from the last man, bending the wrist backwards and using the man’s thumb as a steering device. A second later the man’s arm was behind his back, his face looking at the floor. Roman shoved him a few steps forward then let him fall face-first into the dirt below.

Me and Johnny watched, trying to see all of Roman’s movements. If we had popcorn, we could’ve been at a movie. Roman had cut through thirteen of Freddy’s men in little over a minute. Seven of the men now lay in the dirt with the dogs.

“You oughta praise Jesus and Mary, he didn’t use any of these moves on you,” I said to Johnny.

Johnny didn’t respond.

One of the men in the dirt clawed his way up the arena wall and tried to grab Roman’s ankles. The man’s fingers were crushed with two quick stomps from Roman’s heel.

“Who does this guy think he is?” Freddy asked one of his soldiers.

The once-excited crowd was now seated and silent, people on both sides confused by the events in front of them. A couple of claps could be heard—the

uncertain applause of a few that thought they were seeing another act of Extravaganza. The claps died when the rest of the crowd did not join in.

Most of the men in the dirt began to stir again, stumbling to their feet and brushing the dust and blood from their thick leather coats. The man whose arm was inverted the wrong way and the man whose knee was dislocated continued to wallow in the pink dirt.

The dog handlers had their respective fighters leashed now. Both stood with an eerie pride, something that gave them satisfaction in being a part of a living creature's destruction. Maybe it was the scars the handlers wore. One was a burly type with a medium build, long scraggly hair, a beard to match, and black leather patch over his right eye. The other was wiry, not big, but still his muscles were defined. He wore a cut-off shirt, had a razor-shaved bald head and was missing a left ear.

The Rot and the Bull lunged hard toward the two injured men on the ground, only to be yanked to a sudden stop by the thick chains around their necks. Human blood must have been preferred over that of their own kind, especially in the state of hunger they were in. Maybe the animals thought if they ate the men on the floor they could avoid killing each other.

The line of men Roman had leveled with one hit were back on their feet as well, but this time their leader was feeling his chin instead of laughing. And when one of the men started to approach Roman, the leader held him back.

Freddy's men in the stands began to descend the bleachers toward the walkway where Roman stood. Behind me and Johnny more troops left the stands, exiting down the north stairwell to the hallway and eventually coming out on the other side.

The confidence I had in Roman was starting to fade as Freddy's troops began to regroup. It wasn't going to be only thirteen of them this time. There were more like forty and now they took him seriously. Bobby Dukes was at the north staircase on the opposite side of the arena, digging into a large metallic box from the armory. He placed a handgun in the grasp of every henchman that passed him.

"Where are those damn dogs at? I'm not waiting around and getting killed over this," Johnny said softly.

"But you'll let Roman get killed over it, huh? We're here because of you if your memory's short. A leopard can never truly change his spots."

Johnny stood up as if he were going to leave.

"He wouldn't leave you Johnny, and I can guarantee you you're not on his top ten list of favorite people."

Johnny sat back down. "I knew I should've brought my damn gun."

"Yeah, a lot of good one gun's going to do against forty."

"At least we'd have a chance."

"We still gotta chance as long as that guy is on his feet," I said.

Roman jumped off the walkway onto the arena floor and walked to the middle. The dog handlers immediately unleashed their warriors, cracking their whips to send the dogs in Roman's direction. And the dogs did run that way, but, once at the janitor's feet they stopped. Their jaws did not open at all, nor did their

teeth cut through Roman's black dress pants. They only sniffed around the janitor, and then, as if the same thought entered both dogs' small brains, they focused on Freddy's two men still agonizing in the dirt.

The dogs took off in a dead sprint toward the injured men. The handlers did their best to try to capture the beasts but the dogs were too quick. In a matter of seconds each of the dogs were on each of the men, clamping their powerful jaws around the helpless men's necks. The handlers cracked their short whips on the back of the dogs. But it was too late. The dogs were eating.

The screams of the injured men lasted only seconds—the dogs tore through their necks and vocal cords, smacking their gums together as they choked down the human flesh. And even though the bodies in the dirt thrashed and convulsed, they were closer to death than to life.

While seeing two dogs mangle the life out of each other was considered sport, seeing them tearing skin from humans was not. A collective gasp of horror went through the crowd—some distorted version of the wave at a baseball game. At least half of the crowd ran for the front exit.

"Don't leave. We'll have this insurrection contained in moments. Don't leave. Extravaganza will resume. Please!" Freddy the Flower announced over his microphone.

But the pleas fell on deaf ears. Eighty percent of the crowd fled the arena, a mass exodus that pushed and trampled the weaker of its members. Elegant dresses were tore, masks fell off faces, and the precious betting slips flew through the air like confetti, eventually littering every corner of the arena. Men and women alike were pushed off the walkways and fell to the floor. They clawed and scratched, trying to pull themselves back up, but each time the masses drove them inadvertently to the dirt.

The two dogs finished their feeding at the same time. They left what were now only body parts and moved to the far end of the arena. They lay down, bellies in the dirt like they were under a shade tree on a hot summer day.

Now the handlers charged Roman, cracking their whips. He dodged the first several snaps of the thin leather, but when he saw the space between him and the wall diminishing, Roman moved in on the handler with the patch. The whip caught Roman on the shoulder, but he managed to grab the hand that held it. He twisted Patch's wrist and the whip dropped to the ground. Next the one-eared man snapped his whip toward Roman's black mask. Roman sidestepped and instead swung Patch into its path. The second whip wrapped around Patch's neck and stayed there like a lasso around the head of a calf.

Roman knelt down and retrieved the first whip from the dirt. One Ear waited, perfectly still, as Patch tried to unwind the leather from around his neck. Before the man could get free, Roman snapped the whip he now held and its end curled around the neck of One Ear. Immediately One Ear let go of the second whip, still attached to Patch's neck—and Roman snatched the handle out of mid-air. Now the janitor had both men, both held by the whips wound around their necks, both trapped much like the dogs they had so many times beaten into fighting each other had been.

Holding the whips, Roman began turning in place, circling in small steps the spot where he stood. The two handlers had no choice but to follow the motion. The whips tightened as they ran, trying to keep up with Roman as he spun around and around. Finally satisfied with the momentum built up, Roman let go of the whips. Patch and One Ear went full-speed into the arena wall, crashing into it like hockey players. The handlers did not bounce off the wall like the sportsmen on ice though. Instead the wood barrier cracked and splintered as the built-up kinetic energy displaced itself. The handlers lay right below me and Johnny's feet. The men did not get up.

"Impressive," Freddy whispered to himself, and then grabbed the mic again. "Enough of this foolishness," Freddy's voice grated over the arena speakers. "Unmask this little pest."

Freddy's soldiers dropped one by one onto the pink dirt of the arena floor, jumping from the walkways like paratroopers descending on the desert sand, each with gun in hand. Some had smiles, smiles that were not friendly. Others were like robots, following the simple commands of the motherboard.

The crowd was sparse and uneven on both sides as Bobby Dukes scooped Heather off her bleacher seat. She squirmed and fought but Bobby had his arm around her neck. Her feet dragged down the aisle as he made his way. Bobby stopped their descent at the other walkway, high enough that Roman could see them both. He pressed his gun to Heather's temple in plain view.

Freddy's wall of men marched on, rapidly approaching the slight black figure backed against the wall below me and Johnny's feet.

"Whatta we do? Whatta we do?" I whispered to Roman.

"I told ya I should've brought the fuckin' gun, janitor," Johnny added.

"Just stay in your seats. Everything's going to be all right," Roman said.

"I don't know Roman..." I began.

"Trust me. We've got insurance remember?"

Somehow that statement did not make me feel better. What could the insurance possibly be? Was the Collingston SWAT team going to descend from the rafters? Was the world going to come to an end at this very minute? Was Roman bulletproof? Did he have that much faith in his so-called insurance, to not twitch at the sight of a gun pressed against the head of the person he loved the most? Forty-some armed men stood before him. I doubted Roman more at that moment than any other time. More than the time he took me fishing to prepare for my Algebra test, and more than the time I saw Johnny's thugs charge him in the Hollow. I just sat there though, not because he told me to, but because I was scared shitless and my brain came up with no other plan.

"Let the girl go and we'll be on our way. I don't want any trouble," Roman shouted to the man in the grandstand across the arena.

"Ha! You don't want any trouble? Ruined my party is what you've done. Trouble is all over you. It's a little late for negotiations, wouldn't you agree?" Freddy said over the speakers.

"I agree that you're insane if you think this a party," Roman said. "I swear to you, if you don't let us pass this will be the last night this building stands."

“Ha! I don’t know who you think you are with your neat little maneuvers and such, but there are two kinds of stupid men in the world. One who barks naked at the moon and one who does it my living room.”

“Since you’re in the practice of using tired clichés let me give you another one. If you’re going to journey down the path of revenge, you better build two coffins, one for the person and one for yourself.”

“Cute, very cute. What are you a philosopher?”

Roman thought for several seconds. “No, I’m a janitor.”

Freddy shook his head at the statement. “No one talks to The Flower this way. Unmask the self-called janitor.”

One of Freddy’s men reached for Roman’s mask only to have his arm slapped away. Another man reached out and was sent flying into the arena wall. He landed on top of Patch and One Ear. Yet another man swiped for the mask. Roman grabbed the man’s arm and flipped him 180 while still holding it. The man’s shoulder popped in mid-rotation before he slammed to the dirt floor. Roman let go of the man’s limp arm and put a heel to his nose for good measure. Several of the soldiers turned their heads back toward Freddy’s side of the arena, as if they were awaiting new orders.

“Enough, enough, enough!” Freddy’s voice boomed through the speakers. “Shoot the silly bastard. We’ll unmask him when he’s good and cold.”

The arms rose. The guns aimed. Heather screamed in the background. Johnny scooted down the bleachers, removing himself from the path of the bullets. With no other bright ideas popping into my head, I closed my eyes and prayed.

## VII

### San Diego

Max Sheehan applied the last coat of stain to the baby crib he had been working on for the last several days. This one was being shipped to Maine, to someone’s happy home, to the land of pine trees and lobster. As he wiped the stain on the bars of the crib, his mind wandered. He thought of his current set up. How perfect the basement was. How he had gotten no struggle out of her this last time. The police knew nothing except she was missing and weren’t too concerned since students were often missing during winter break. He had followed her for weeks, scouting her every move and habit. She went to the library on Wednesdays. On the far side of the quad, he’d parked his car next to where she walked. He’d knocked her out with chloroform in a handkerchief and gotten her into the car with no witnesses. The simplicity and perfection brought a smile to his face. It was all he imagined but something was amiss. Was he getting tired of her? The thought enraged him. All this planning and preparation was supposed to last him a good while—longer than a week, even a couple of months he’d thought when he planned.

He could find another easily enough. Charlotte, the traveling saleswoman, came every Thursday. She was tall and dark headed and proper. Hair in a bun and glasses that made her look innocent. No. He would stick with the one in the basement as long as he could.

Max put the stain rag in paint thinner and cleaned up his station. He wasn't sure if he would go get ice cream, but he was sure he would visit the basement.

## VIII

Max opened the door but she was not on the floor as he expected. She was on the bed spread eagle with her fingers running up her naked flesh. He stopped his approach, startled. She moaned and breathed hard, lungs moving breasts up and down. She raised her head and gazed with her best come-hither eyes. Max started toward her slow and cautious. As he approached the bed she dropped down to the floor on her knees and stayed there until her eyes were looking directly up at his.

"I want you in my mouth," Mary said.

Max's eyes widened from surprise. The shock was overcome with excitement and Max stepped closer to her.

Max was already fully excited as he was every time he came to the basement. She put her right hand on the back of his leg and felt the tenseness in his hamstring. Her mouth went around him and she began.

*Relax you sick bastard,* she thought.

A couple of seconds later her hand felt his hamstring loosen. She continued her work as she looked up and saw his eyes shut.

*You can do this. It's your only chance.*

Without further hesitation she bit down as hard as she could and twisted her head. It made a snapping sound like that of biting into the skin of an overcooked polish sausage.

Max screamed with pain.

Mary pulled away and to her surprise the head of his penis was not in her mouth. The only evidence of the act was the blood on her teeth and corners of her mouth. She did not bite it completely off but the lower half of it dangled in a mangled mess, attached only in a few places by the flesh her teeth had failed to sever, and a couple of veins that remained somewhat in tact.

Max fell to his knees trying to hold himself together with one hand. With the other he took a half-assed swing at her but she moved in ample time. Mary lifted the cover that hung from the bed onto the floor and carefully picked up the makeshift knife she had made the night before. It was jagged glass from the mirror she'd broken in the bathroom. The handle was toilet paper rapped around one end of the glass and hardened with nail polish.

Mary got to her feet with Max still on his knees. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She breathed heavily and the glass knife shook in her hand. Max writhed with pain, eyes closed, sounding much like a woman in the throes of labor. Mary looked at the big vein in his neck, and drew back her weapon.

After all he had done to her and all he had taken from her, she couldn't cut his throat. Her tears came down hard now, hard enough she couldn't see. She wiped them away and looked over at the two keys lying on the floor next to the door. A voice popped in her head. *Run Mary! Run!*

She kept the knife in hand and broke for the door. Two steps into her escape Max grabbed her ankle tripping her to the ground. The jolt to her body

flung the glass knife through the air and it landed next to the keys and door. His grip was tight. With her free leg she kicked Max's face over and over until he let go of her ankle. Thinking getting up would waste valuable time, Mary crawled for the door. As she reached it she picked up the keys with one hand and the knife with the other. On her feet now she inserted one of the keys but the lock would not turn. She fumbled to the other key but before she could get it into the hole, Max's arm was around her neck. He was choking the life out of her. She gasped for air but got nothing. Max wasn't just trying to stop her from escaping now; he was trying to end her all together. *I haven't come this far to die inches from freedom she thought.* Her face was turning blue. Her veins stood out from her forehead.

*The knife, Mary!* Her father's voice rang in her head.

She shifted her weight slightly, swung her arm behind her, and jabbed the jagged edge into Max's side several times until he released his grip. On the final stab the knife wedged in his side and did not come out. Max staggered from her, lost his footing, and fell backwards to the floor. Mary put the correct key in the lock and turned it. This time the door opened. She scampered up the stairs to the next door, switched keys and opened it as well. She looked at nothing in the living room and headed for the front door. It was not locked. Mary opened it and ran down the street. She knew not where she was running, only from where. Her bare feet smacked at a quick pace against the hot pavement. She didn't care that she was naked.

Mary Baumbright was free.

## IX

Freddy's men raised their weapons and aimed. There was a long almost eternal silence.

And then.

Click.

Click. Click. Click.

Probably forty or so soft clicks, the last one being next to Heather's head.

Not a single bang.

The soldiers looked at their guns in bewilderment. A thug in the front row pressed the side of his gun, and the clip came out. He peered with one eye down the black rectangular container. "There's no bullets," he said.

"What the fuck?" Bobby said.

The Flower stood up and dropped his champagne glass shattering it against the green wooden floor.

*Insurance.*

I finally got it. While me and Johnny were watching the show, Roman broke into the armory and emptied every round of their guns.

I jumped out of my seat. "Yes! Yes!" I yelled until realizing I was making the only sound in the entire arena.

"Kill him! Kill him!" Freddy screamed at his men. "Kill the janitor!"

The black leather wall of Freddy's men moved in on their final attack, taking slow careful steps, an ominous wave of doom. Several of the troopers

dropped their weapons, but most held on—even a gun that had no bullets could still bash in the side of one's head.

"Thirty-something to one. Even the Janitor's gonna have his work cut out," Johnny said.

Really it wasn't thirty to one. It was more like five to one, six different times. All thirty of The Flower's troops couldn't fight Roman at once. Sure they had his back against the wall and marched at least four rows deep. But it just wasn't physically possible for all of them to take him at the same time; somebody would always be waiting behind the guy in front of him.

Roman leveled the first row, fighting several of them at the same time. It was like he had eight arms, and often Roman would hit or kick them without even looking. When one was eliminated, dropping to the dirt, another simply stepped up and took his place. It reminded me of trying to close the annoying pop-up ads on the Internet.

Five minutes into it, Roman had fought off of every last one of them. Freddy's soldiers picked themselves out of the dirt—some quicker than others—and slowly started to surround Roman in the middle of the arena. Roman was the peaceful eye at the center of a hurricane. The circle moved in on its center and Roman was now fighting ten or so men at a time. And although his chest moved up and down for oxygen, Roman's actions only quickened.

What images did Roman see through those eyes of his? Did his brain operate at such a high velocity that the arms and fists and legs and kicks that came at him seemed to be in slow motion? Was time frozen for everyone except him? Or did Roman just see numbers? Were the attacks and charges just a mathematical formula? Did his brain have the counter offense instantaneously? Was Roman just the solution on the other side of the equal sign? Was he simply balancing the equation? I was sure it was all of those things and none of them—some special gift that words could not give justice to describing.

Three fists came at Roman. He sidestepped one, ducked one, and caught the other, flipping its owner to the ground. Then a boot. Roman caught the leg and swung it. The body on the other end knocked down several of its comrades, like a bowling ball to pins. A bear hug came from behind at the same time a fist came at him from the front. Roman jerked his head and the fist hit the bear-hugger instead. Roman squatted slightly, flexed his shoulders forward and backed into the bear-hugger, his arms reaching back to grab the man and lift him off his feet. Still piggybacking the bear-hugger, the janitor charged the man in front of him and head-butted his attackers' skulls against each other. Even from the stands it sounded like two billiard balls smashing together. An elbow to the temple of the guy to his right. A right forearm block to avoid two o'clock. An open hand to the nose of the guy in front. A duck for ten o'clock. A flat footed kick to the chest of the one directly behind.

Roman stood in the center of the arena with his hands on his knees as the Flower's men slowly emerged once again from their temporary graves. Like everything Roman did, his fighting was meticulous. Even so it was difficult to inflict mortal wounds to his enemies since he had to be so quick and fight so many at once. I counted twenty-four thugs back on their feet.

“We’ve gotta help him. He can’t last much longer,” I said.

“What if they find out it’s me? I’ll have a bounty on my head,” The Killer said.

“If we don’t do something, you won’t have to worry about a bounty. We gotta make it out here first,” I said back.

There was still a traffic jam of people at the south exit. If the crowd hadn’t been so panicked they could have all been gone by now. But fear was probably the most irrational of emotions.

Bobby Dukes still had Heather around the throat, standing on the opposite walkway across the arena. The useless gun lay on the bleacher behind him. A switchblade had replaced it, and now the point of the sharp steel pressed against Heather’s neck.

Freddy Flowers was still standing, and although he seemed to enjoy the game unfolding before his eyes, there was a sense of uneasiness to his stance, and an urgency that made him crave for the janitor to be brought to his knees.

Freddy’s soldiers’ third offensive started. Roman fought and fought well, but his actions were slowing. Instead of decapitating the aggressors with a single blow, it was taking several now. The troops seemed to sense this, and their energy level elevated like that of lions closing in on a wounded antelope. Roman lost his footing a couple of times, rolling in the dirt, and dodging back and forth between boots. You could see the eagerness in the thugs’ eyes, the anticipation of victory tingling in their nerves. But each time Roman got knocked down to the level of those evil feet, he somehow got back to vertical.

“He’s not invincible after all,” Freddy whispered to himself and sat back down in his chair.

Bobby Dukes zip-tied Heather’s wrists to the rail on the walkway. She sat down out of exhaustion. Her arms dangled awkwardly from the wrists, unable to support themselves, and her right leg pinned her left underneath it. The kicking and squirming drive for freedom had left her now. Who knew what atrocious suggestions Bobby Dukes had whispered continuously in her ear while as she watched the man she had come to love fight for both their lives? Heather strained to hold her head up and peered through the damp bangs that covered her eyes. Bobby pulled the hair on the back of her head, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. The light from the rafters blinded her, and then his fist came down and everything went black.

Boochie Anderson now joined Dukes, and the two scurried back and forth in front of the grandstands, grabbing anything that could be used as a weapon and tossing them down to their warrior friends. There was something sinister about everyday objects being used as weapons, something more violent and perverse than guns and knives.

At different times the soldiers would get knocked down, but they found that pleasant surprises awaited them; Bobby’s and Boochie’s presents were met with blood-smearing smiles and half-open hopeful eyes. They caught chains, broomsticks, two-by-fours with nails sticking out, flowerpots, rope, sledgehammers, and axes.

I had seen momentum shifts plenty of times in baseball games. The right fielder throws out the go-ahead run at the plate and then gets the game-winning hit the very next inning. This was different. At the beginning Roman handled them with relative ease, almost something out of a cartoon, but that energy had darkened now, and the tide had turned to something much more in the realm of reality.

We'd come there to kidnap a dog and pulled it off with relative ease. Now we were going to be lucky to escape with our lives. All reason was gone from my head. I jumped the rail and sprinted across the blood-soaked dirt of the arena. I ran out of sheer emotion. I ran to help my friend.

I heard Johnny's feet directly behind me. Even he finally realized the consequences of standing by and doing nothing. "Dukes is mine," I thought he said.

I tackled the back of the first soldier in view, driving his face into the dirt. I punched the back of his neck repeatedly until his struggle to get up was gone. Johnny grabbed the two by four that had been meant for one of Freddy's men right out of the air. The Killer swung the lethal lumber, taking out four or five of the soldiers in a matter of seconds only to have a chain wrapped around his neck from behind.

Three of them had him on the ground, unmasked. They took turns swinging at him.

Bobby nudged Boochie and pointed at Johnny. "Some balls the kids got comin' back here huh?"

"Is that what ya call it?" Boochie said and laughed.

I felt a pot smash in pieces on the back of my head. And then I too was on the ground.

Roman was still on his feet taking on about ten of them. But he was tiring, losing, getting hit often and seldom hitting back. I could finally see his face. The mask was trampled in the dirt. The arena floor was scattered with bodies, some moving, some not.

*I wasn't meant to die like this. Eighteen years old fighting men twice my age in some psycho's warped circus. For the life of a dog nonetheless. Please God. Please God.*

I don't know if the man upstairs heard me or the dogs' curiosity finally overcame their fear. But the canines stood uneasily in front of the curtain, confused, watching the battle. Their tongues seemed to hang all the way to the dirt and their eyes moved over the potential food in front of them.

The hesitation did not last long. The hungry animals spread out over the arena and went for the wounded men on the floor, savage piranhas swarming the pink sea of dirt. In seconds every dog had his own body, his own plentiful meal. Teeth gouged in, heads swung back and forth, flesh ripped. One of the dog's mouths covered a man's nose, and when it lifted the nose was gone. Two dogs played tug of war with each of a man's arms. Several of the beasts pounced on Patch and One Ear, taking their vengeance one bite at a time. Though their former incarcerators' bodies were still warm, revenge can be eaten at any temperature.

Freddy Flowers was on the mic again, cursing what he called God's foul beasts. His voice came through the speakers but sounding fainter, more like a

whisper. It was hard to translate the ranting. It was lost beneath the gurgling screams of his own men.

The dogs waited patiently as Roman sent his attackers to the dirt, like students at obedience school. I imagine if Freddy's men had had their choice, they would have voted to fall straight to Hell instead of onto the arena floor. Many of them were conscious through the entirety of the dining, and could only watch as their flesh and blood tore away from their bones. The dogs stopped short of killing some of them, leaving the once-proud soldiers to suffer, giving their souls time to either repent or curse. Not one of them made it back to their feet.

When all stomachs were full, our four-legged friends paced the arena nervously, remembering what it was built for and looking for an exit. A couple of laps was all it took. The corpses and body parts had made a pile against the west wall, stacked up at least three feet atop of what remained of Patch and One Ear. Now the dogs ran up the slick human staircase with relative ease, pouncing on the flesh, and jumping to the walkway. They ran as a pack to the exit and to their freedom.

There were six of us left standing.

Freddy was now down on the walkway, leaning over the railing. His pink suit only made the anger in his face seem redder and his disarrayed hairs escaped the once perfectly slicked-back ponytail. Boochie and Bobby stood next to him, awaiting orders; Heather dangled beside them, almost conscious now. Me and Johnny watched as Roman approached on the arena floor below.

"Let her go and we'll be on our way," Roman said from his spot next to the curtains.

"Who are you?" Freddy said and laughed. "You're just a kid. Ha! A fucking kid. Let her go? I think not."

Roman plucked the torch from the ground next to the curtain. Without hesitation he held it to the pink silk. The flames traveled over the material, igniting the entire doorway as quickly as fire over gasoline. In seconds the entire north wall was burning. Roman heaved the torch like a spear. It landed in the stands behind The Flower. The vines and flowers that adorned both the rafters and the grandstands began to wilt and smolder.

"Not my beautiful children. This is not how it happens," Freddy screamed.

Johnny jumped to the rail and I followed behind.

"Dukes is mine," Johnny said again.

Unfortunately that left me with Boochie. As Johnny catapulted over the railing and clotheslined Bobby to the walkway, the fat man caught me in mid-air. My face smooshed into his flabby chest, his arms wrapped around me, squeezing the air from my lungs; my legs hung limply over the arena floor.

Johnny and Bobby exchanged several blows. Both were ballroom brawlers, and they stood like boxers before the bell. Johnny got a few good licks in only to have a switchblade drawn on him.

Freddy backed away from the entire scuffle.

"This is going to be more fun than that wood chipper anyway. I'm gonna gut you like a pig," Bobby said as he waved the blade in front of Johnny. He jabbed it at The Killer but his arm was caught in mid-strike.

Roman stopped the attack, clapping his hands on Bobby's wrist. Immediately Dukes dropped the weapon. Roman still had hold of the wrist and turned it back to the forearm. There were several cracking sounds.

Johnny unleashed a series of punches on Dukes, bringing him to his knees and eventually to his back.

Roman picked up the knife, cut Heather's bonds in one quick slice, and caught her before one blond hair hit the walkway. Gently, Roman propped her against the first row of bleachers. Heather's eyes were already turning black from the earlier punch that knocked her senseless.

I could feel the heat all around me and hear the crackle of Freddy's arena as it burned. Smoke filled the air, eclipsing any light from the gymnasium bulbs above. I could see Freddy pacing on the walkway and brushing back the tight hair against his scalp. Everything was getting black in my vision. I was close to passing out, but for some reason all I could think about was what shade of purple my face was. At any second I thought my head was going to pop like a zit.

Boochie dropped me and I fell to the arena floor. As my head hit the dirt, I squinted through the smoke. Roman had gone underneath the fat man's legs from behind and grabbed a handful of Boochie's family jewels.

Roman twisted one way and then the opposite. Boochie inhaled a large gasp like Roman had just hit the release valve on some pressurized mechanism. The fat man stayed on his feet though, and with no other strategy popping into that sweaty tattooed melon of his, he simply fell backwards landing on Roman and crushing him against the walkway.

Beneath him Roman wiggled his fingers like the slow tentacles of a bug underneath a shoe. Heather got to her feet and stomped on Boochie's stomach. It was no good; the pounding only displaced the wave of fat that was his belly. You can't hurt jello.

With his right arm, Boochie swiped her to the side. Heather was no more than a paper-thin pest to him. He made no effort to get up, seemingly satisfied with his current fighting tactic. I got out of the dirt and from under the railing reached up and grabbed Boochie's ankles. His heel smashed me square in the nose and I was back in the dirt again.

Roman gave up trying to contract his diaphragm underneath the weight. He held his breath and somehow wiggled his hands out from behind the fat man's shoulders. Heather kicked the jelly belly again several times, only to get flung against the bleachers by Boochie's arm. Her attack was productive though, giving Roman enough room to free both arms from under the shifting weight on top of him.

Now his fingers searched the fat man's face, the blind phalanges trying to read silver Braille. Roman searched until all of his members on both hands were safely wrapped like meat hooks around the silver hoops on the fat man's face. Boochie shook his head trying to free himself, but with one pull Roman stretched the skin and ripped out every last ring.

Boochie let out a cry far worse than any wounded animal. His right eyebrow hung loose over his eye, the space between his nostrils was absent, and

blood began to seep through the pin-sized holes in his cheeks. Boochie rolled off to the side, a red mess.

The Killer and Dukes continued to exchange blows, their punches glowing orange from the reflected flames. Johnny's left eye was almost completely swollen shut and he covered the ribs on the same side.

Freddy Flowers stood twenty feet above them on the bleachers, scanning the arena for something that would help his man. Physical involvement was out of the question—fighting was something that was beneath the silk suits and propriety of a man such as him, even under dire circumstances like these. Finally, his eye caught the flaming flowerpots that ran up the aisleway of the bleachers. He grabbed them by the handle and swung them through the air at Johnny—his beautiful creatures would not die in vain after all.

Roman got to his feet still gasping for air and started toward Freddy, passing the gladiators on the walkway like they weren't even there, and dodging the flaming pots from the bleachers. The fireballs moved slowly and were no match for Roman's quick ducks and side steps.

Freddy backed up the stairs of the bleachers, grabbing his bombs from each side of the aisle of every row he passed. Roman walked up as well, moving his body only slightly as the flaming pots passed him.

One of the firebombs missed Roman but continued down to the walkway and hit Johnny. Hot red ashes sparked as the pot hit The Killer's back and smoke bellowed from his suit coat. An instant later Johnny's backside was ablaze. He took a couple of steps like he was thinking of running. (Stop, drop, and roll, was always miles from thought when you needed it most.)

I ran down the length of the arena wall, stopped at Johnny's ankles, and grasping from below pulled with all my strength. His head hit the walkway face first, something I was sure he would forgive me for if I saved his life. I pulled him under the railing and let him fall to the dirt. I began to push him over. The Killer caught on and started to roll himself, with the words of that old grade school anthem playing in his head I imagine. When the flames were safely out Johnny shed the smoldering coat.

Freddy only had two rows left before reaching the top—four more fire pots. Roman continued his slow pace; keeping enough distance so he could react to the flaming projectiles. Bobby Dukes began to walk up behind Roman, stopped out of exhaustion, and pulled out a cigarette and lighter despite the thick blackness that hung in the arena.

Roman ducked the last of Freddy's flaming plants and grabbed The Flower by his neck.

Bobby Dukes was not so lucky.

As he flicked the silver lighter with no success, the pot hit Bobby in the head, igniting his hair like a candlewick. I could hear the grease sizzle as it flamed. Bobby calmly walked over to the rail, straddled it, and then dropped to the floor below as if the hot flames only consumed the grease and not the roots of his hair. He bent over with confidence and rubbed his head in the dirt, and then threw dirt with his hands, and then rolled. None of it worked. Panicked now, Dukes ran for what was left of the exit screaming, the flames growing to the ceiling with each

stride. He climbed up the arena wall, his entire head burning, took two steps on the walkway and fell back to the dirt as one giant flame.

The building crackled like the embers in a campfire, snapping and seeming to sway under its own weight. Johnny the Killer ran for the exit with what was left of his coat covering his face. I covered my face as well as the smoke was unbearable and the heat about fried my eyes.

Roman stood at the top, still holding The Flower's throat.

"Who are you?" Freddy asked.

Roman stepped close to him, nose to nose. "I'm nobody. I'm a ghost. And like a ghost I'm going to disappear. But if I ever come across you or one of your thugs ever again, I'll haunt you to the depths of hell."

"I'm a businessman," The Flower responded. "A smart businessman. I'm sure our paths will never cross again. In fact I'm positive."

Roman let go and ran down the bleachers, skipping every other one. He jetted down the walkway to where I had Heather on her feet. Roman scooped her up and carried her to the exit. I followed them, turning back one more time in amazement, and watched Freddy Flowers exit by the opposite staircase.

The frozen tundra was welcome terrain and the bitter cold felt like a spring breeze. Roman carried Heather over the crunchy snow with relative ease. His skinny arms were like oaks. On the ground next to the exit lay Boochie Anderson, patting snow on his newly acquired wounds. Twenty or so others occupied the snow-covered lot of Extravaganza. Those lucky enough not to become dog chow sat in the snow, tending to their wounds. Several of the soldiers and the entertainers who had exited with the fans stood around watching like students at a bonfire as their circus warmed the icy January sky.

Several looked at us as we headed towards the Escalade, but looked away when they saw Roman. It was amazing how much respect could be gained in such a short time, even with the lowest of humanity.

Roman put Heather in the front passenger seat. I sat in the back next to Johnny, who was laughing as Apollo bombarded him with licks.

"Nice of you to make sure we got out," I said to Johnny.

"What? I saw he had it under control. I couldn't fuckin' breathe man."

As the Escalade rolled down the two-lane road there was no conversation, only passing fire trucks and police. Roman occasionally glanced at his sleeping beauty in the next seat. My skin was still warm and from the rear view mirror, I could see in the distance the orange and yellow glow of The Flower's Extravaganza turning the night sky into the brightness of mid-afternoon.

## Chapter 14

### Degrees of Women

#### I

Somewhere in Syria.

Agent Johnson stood directly below the ceiling fan. The air felt good, especially with no sand floating in it. The bartender had fled when Kazar and his men entered the room, pushing his customers out the door in front of him. The room was silent except for the rickety fan. Kazar sat down at the table in front of Agent Johnson, grinning.

The rest of the men surrounded Johnson with their automatics aimed, unlocking their safeties in unison. One of the men reached into Johnson's suit coat and pulled out the agent's .45 Kimber, setting it on the table in front of Kazar. Kazar picked it up, looking at both sides of it, wondering where it had been and whom it had killed. He put the Kimber in the pocket of his own white suit coat.

Kazar spoke in muddled English.

"My men have tracked for you the last month. It is hard to believe an operative like yourself would be caught and tracked down so easy. At least you could have dressed like an Arab, you stick out like sore toe. The papers you seek belong to me and so sorry for you they will stay with me."

"It's sore thumb. Not sore toe," Agent Johnson said. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe I didn't dress as an Arab because I wanted to get caught? It would be an easy way to lead me to the papers."

Kazar's grin faded slightly, the face of a man at a poker table unsure if his opponent was bluffing.

"Regardless, you are defenseless. I would kill you here, but the bar owner is my friend and he would be ruined. Besides my men and I don't wish to carry around a heavy body. I have a far more fitting end for you Agent Johnson."

Kazar said something in Arabic and three of the four men left the building. The remaining man pushed his automatic into Johnson's back, moving him out the front door. An old Jeep wagon pulled up and Johnson was shoved into the rear seat next to another man wielding a machine gun. Kazar got in the front next to the driver.

The jeep rolled loudly and was slow in leaving the small village behind. Ten miles out of town the dirt road turned into no road and then into desert sand. The Jeep stopped atop a large dune, a plateau of sand that was still solid enough to support the weight of a vehicle. The man next to Johnson shoved his machine gun into the agent's side, motioning for him to get out. Johnson complied. The air was dry and the sun stood tall in the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. Kazar spoke again in Arabic, and the driver stayed in the jeep.

Agent Johnson, Kazar, and the man with gun walked from the jeep a good distance toward the far side of the top of the dune. Countless dunes dotted the distant horizon, all of them lifeless, just beaches and beaches of bright brown sand.

Agent Johnson's foot sank, and he tripped falling face first, but breaking the fall with his hands. The man with the gun cursed in Arabic and jerked Johnson violently to his feet by the back of his collar.

"Well Mr. Johnson this is where we say our goodbyes," Kazar said smiling once again. "Unlike your American mobbers we don't give a shovel so you can dig a grave. We just shoot you and let you roll down the side of the dune. The night winds of the desert will cover you up quite nicely."

"Mobsters," Johnson replied.

Kazar's eyebrows raised in bewilderment.

"You said mobbers. The pronunciation is *mobsters*," Kazar's smile left him once again. "And besides, how is this guy going to shoot me if he can't see?"

Kazar looked at his man, but before any words left his mouth Agent Johnson tossed the sand cupped in his hands directly into both of their faces as he fell to the ground. The man with the machine gun began to fire but hit only dry desert air. Johnson grabbed the gunman's leg and swept it out from under him. The man fell face down in the sand spraying bullets across the desert landscape on his way down. Kazar dropped to the sand as well and heard the copper projectiles buzzing through the air as they passed his ear.

Agent Johnson jumped on the gunman's back, grabbed him under the chin, and snapped his neck effortlessly. Kazar fumbled for Johnson's gun which was tucked snugly in the pocket of his white coat, but it was too late. Agent Johnson pulled the trigger of the acquired machine gun, and pumped bullet after bullet into Kazar's face, turning it into a smashed rotten tomato.

The man in the Jeep took three steps toward the battle but was sliced down before he could fire or even yell.

Agent Johnson looked around at the bodies, making sure they were lifeless. He walked by the first man and gently kicked the man down the side of the dune. He came to what was left of Kazar and knelt down. He opened Kazar's white jacket, splattered now with red and brown stains, pulling out first his gun and then the documents. Johnson quickly thumbed through the papers making sure all were intact.

Satisfied, Agent Johnson stood up. His foot gave Kazar's body a nudge. Down the hill of sand it went, rolling until it stopped at the bottom of the dune in a shallow valley next to the gunman that had gone before him. The wind blew briefly, depositing a thin layer of sand over the blood-soaked bodies.

Johnson looked at the two bodies expressionless. "Maybe you won't have to wait for the nightly winds after all."

Arriving back to the Jeep, he found the bullet-riddled driver immobile, but gasping hard for his last breaths. Johnson squeezed the trigger of his Kimber and hurried the process along, blowing what was left of the driver's brains out the back of his skull and into the sand.

## II

We never really spoke about Extravaganza too much. Even the rumor-spreading mouths of teenagers could be humbled by certain atrocities. Roman was confident that we would never see Freddy Flowers again, and that was good

enough for all of us. Heather probably took that night the worst. She was not quite herself the first few days afterwards; there were dark bruises around her eyes, and her previous overflowing opinions at the lunch table were non-existent.

Roman blamed himself, of course, citing that he should have never let Heather go with us in the first place. Should have gone by himself. Heather reminded him yet again that she was a big girl and would do what she damn well pleased. A long time ago, Ninja told Roman to never walk through a door unless he knew what was on the other side. Roman had followed the philosophy to a tee. His plan was brilliant—emptying the guns for insurance—it ran as smoothly as a hockey puck over ice. But sometimes no matter how well prepared you are, things just get fucked up, especially if you bring three amateurs along for the ride. Johnny put his two worthless cents in once, stating that if he'd brought his gun none of the other shit would've happened. I told him if he'd brought the gun, they would have taken it from him and killed us all.

Freddy Flowers slithered his way out of any investigation. Johnny was right about Freddy's connections. The only thing in the paper was a statement from the fire marshal stating that the "abandoned" warehouse burned to the ground by accident and there was no one present during the fire. There was no mention of a well-done Bobby Dukes carcass. There was also no one in attendance stepping up to blow the whistle on the Flower. After all, it could not be discovered that the elite of Collingston had been at such an event.

As the weeks rolled on, talk of The Flower and his awful circus faded away, replaced by old lunch room jokes, unusual facts from Roman like a human can swim just as fast through syrup as he can through water, and comments from the gallery on the promising future of baseball and of graduation. Time heals all things? Maybe if a certain janitor is along to help you through it.

Carl had recovered almost immediately from his sickness, visiting the Tavern nightly, and receiving guests every so often at his front door. I never saw one of his so-called crack whores turned away. He listened to his crazy-ass radio programs and had us over for beer and ginger ale. As the month's full moon approached Carl began to bring up the aliens again. I learned just to tune his nutty ass out. It was all in his head.

February was nothing more than a school girl tease, the fake hope of spring popping up in a sixty-degree day once or twice, only to return to its winter chill the very next morning. Its only good attribute was its length: always short, which meant less prison time. I wonder why the Emperors picked February to rape of its days, a question I never got around to asking Roman. He did, however, inform me about what a bogus holiday Valentine's Day was, of how the gift card companies resurrected some story from the depths of history and turned it into a gold mine.

Anyway, I spent my February increasing the intensity of my workouts, playing catch with Sam and Pick five days a week, and visiting *On Deck* at least three times a week. I even dragged Roman out of his books a couple of times to throw to me. He popped the mitt well; it wasn't just a fluke that day in January. But with all my begging he still refused to be interested in coming out for the team.

I still had no offers on the table for baseball; all the college stuff was in the back of my mind to be honest. I kept my eye on the prize—the state title—a title

that had eluded the Silver Streaks since baseball became a sport at the high school. We had a good enough team to get there, of that I was positive. We just needed that one extra ace in the hole, that one solid pitcher that unlike Johnny wouldn't implode when the going got tough.

Coach Demera knew it too. He was hungry. I could see a little more arrogance in his step as he strolled through the halls. I could see that look in his eye, that killer look a tiger gives his distant prey. He was going to put us through hell; you could count on it. He was going to tell us things like "if you like the smell of a woman better than the smell of your mitt, you need to shit and get : you'll be able to chase the chicken asses your whole life, but you only get to put that mitt on for a short time." Of course he was right, and I had already got a head start on Coach, dumping my dead weight ahead of schedule.

That dead weight, I heard through the grapevine, was now dating a sophomore. A fuckin' sophomore. Some French foreign exchange student named Jacques, who wrote poetry and could grow a full beard. I saw them pinned up against the lockers in the hallway, coincidentally the same hallway that led me to my locker. Who's she shittin' anyway? I could give a damn.

Jack Rollins was as happy as a pet coon, since The Killer returned to school, making sure to grab the seat next to his former commander, and hanging on his every word. Unfortunately for Jack, Johnny had grown up a little—almost suffocating inside a plastic bag and being thrown in the back of a truck will do that to a guy I guess. And when Johnny didn't have any specific orders for Jack, the silence we'd enjoyed for the last two months was gone. With nothing else to do Jack talked, and talked, always with the high-pitched laugh and the I-screwed-your-sister look in his eye.

Brunno was in the thick of wrestling season, starving himself at lunch to make weight, and despite being scared shitless by Carl, he was undefeated and on fine pace to make a run at the state title. He still stuttered his daily business math questions to Roman, often repeating the same problem from the day before. Math just wouldn't sink into Brunno's fat head, but Roman never became impatient.

During those winter days, Roman and Heather spent most of their free time together, going to his house directly after school (mostly to bed I imagine), and then Heather studied and Roman fell into his endless reading. They would separate briefly during the evening—Heather to cheerleading and Roman to work—only to unite at midnight again.

Times were good.

### III

#### San Diego

Max Sheehan jogged down the concrete slabs of the Villa's front lot, looking constantly behind him, peeking to his right and left into the palm trees on both sides, and grabbing his painful crotch and the still-open wound in his side. The makeshift sling he'd fixed for his most important limb had run its course, and Max needed some kind of medical attention.

For six years he'd been on a steady ascension to perfection. Sure the first time was sloppy—but since then? Not one body found, not one drop of his semen,

or a stray fingerprint on a doorknob. And the best part wasn't the room he had built in his new home on the coast. It wasn't the hours of control over the women. It was the fact that nobody ever knew about the rapes or killings. They weren't even looking for anyone because there was no evidence of any crime. The posters on milk cartons and gas station windows of missing young women would never bring the authorities to Max's house.

He'd come to San Diego only because that's where the wind blew him. It was bright there, always was. Max thought the first day he arrived that maybe the sun would burn away the darkness in his soul, maybe the black urges would melt away, and maybe he could be human. In the end the sun was no match.

How did it go so wrong? He was always careful with choosing his victims. Mary Baumbright was five foot nothing, a hundred and nothing, didn't partake in the party scene and kept to herself. Max could always pick out the ones that were abused. He couldn't have been more wrong with Mary.

None of it mattered now though. They had his fingerprints, DNA, and knew his identity. It would only be a matter of time before they went through the pictures on his basement wall, identified the girls, found their bodies, and made a map of his last six years. He had to get out of town. Not only that but he had to disappear, become someone else, and worst of all his playtime had to stop.

Dogey would help him. Dogey would know what to do. He always did.

Max pounded on the brown door, only to be answered with a sliding piece at eye level. The door opened to the dimness of Dogey's front room. The room was always the same shade of black whether day or night. The fumes of cigarettes and lager rushed out of the doorway, along with the cracking noise of pool balls from the back room. Max limped in and sat at the counter.

Dogey grabbed for the Tequila, but after looking Max over, opted for the coffee cup. He produced a cigarette, offered it, and stuck into his own mouth when Max declined.

Dogey was a crime broker. He sold information, alibis, scores, and made it his business to know things before anybody else did. Dogey had never been to a police station. Like Max he was invisible—the producer behind the camera. His one rule was to never ask questions of his clients, a policy that had made him a good deal of money and kept him out of jail. A policy that kept him from knowing that a serial killer sat across the bar from him.

Dogey only stared at Max, seeing the blood spot on the side of his shirt that seemed to be growing by the minute, and waited patiently for his customer's demand. Max sucked down the first cup of coffee ignoring the blistering heat. Dogey filled it again.

"Unfortunate circumstances have made it impossible for me to stay around here," Max said.

"Where do you want to go?" the broker asked.

"Back east somewhere, I suppose. Somewhere I can blend in. Somewhere with work."

Dogey rubbed the top of his lip as if to smooth out an invisible mustache. "I know a cat in Illinois looking for some carpentry work. He's not legit, so I'm sure there's more to it. Pays well."

Dogey picked up the phone behind the counter, hit a single button, and spoke to the man on the other end of the line. “Yeah. Max is dead.” Dogey covered the receiver and looked at Max. “Illinois then?”

Max nodded.

“What name?” Dogey asked him.

“Don’t care.”

Dogey uncovered the phone, “Yeah, Illinois and he doesn’t care. Give him some plastic and a clean cell phone. Some Vicodin too. He’s going to need some stitches.”

Max pulled out a neat stack of money and laid it on the counter as Dogey hung up. “It’ll be a few minutes my friend.”

“Will this cover it?”

Dogey looked at the high stack of hundreds and nodded.

Thirty minutes of silence and five cups of coffee later, a petite woman appeared from the staircase just next to the front door, carrying a small black bag. Max couldn’t help but notice her dark brown hair. She set it on the counter and shuffled through the contents, handing Max his new life.

The lady said, “There you are John Smith. Three credit cards, cell phone, painkiller, and two Illinois driver’s licenses. I’m going to have you come downstairs for the stitches, the fake nose, and hairpiece. I gave you one ID with hair and the other with none. I figured we give you hair to get you through the airport. After that it’s up to you. I’ve got you on a four o’clock so we have to hustle. Any questions?”

Max looked at Dogey. “Where at in Illinois?”

“A place called Collingston,” Dogey replied.

#### IV

Roman stomped his shoes on the porch even though his sidewalk was clear of snow. Once in the living room he bypassed the towers of books against the wall—it was always hard to ignore them, to walk by without taking one in hand and flip through the pages to all those wonderful places—and walked to the kitchen for water. Roman was always thirsty after school, whether in the dog days of late summer or in the frozen cold. His thirst gave credence to a theory he’d developed over the years—the human brain burned the body’s fuel just as quick as any muscle.

Heather stood just in front of the door, removing her earmuffs and scarf, unzipping her fluffy goose-feather coat, and stripping the gloves from her hands. It must be nice, she thought, to walk into the dead of winter with only a flannel and stay as warm as Roman did. Was he really warm? Or did his mind just ignore the elements? It was silly for her to be preoccupied with such questions, but for some reason it bothered her. Maybe it was her competitive nature. Competitive was an understatement. When she was little, she made her father roll her countless rubber balls, sometimes until the sun went down, and wasn’t satisfied until the ball landed a distance that was comparable to the home run at school. She practiced for months until every kick at recess hit the row of pine trees in centerfield—the fourth graders’ makeshift fence. That determination stayed with her over the years. It

was the reason she ran every day. And while some of her peers as well as their parents might have looked on and claimed lunacy, they couldn't argue the fact that Heather dominated every challenge in her life—school, cheerleading, and student government. If it were any other person than Roman, that seemingly perfect stance in all aspects of life would have made her envious if not infuriated. But surprisingly, when Heather figured out she couldn't match Roman's idiosyncrasies, her heart did not declare war.

She pulled off the last of her winter armor, placing it neatly on the floor next to the lampstand. She noticed something as she raised her head, saw something out of the corner of her eye. Something that hadn't been in the friendly confines of Roman's small living room slash bedroom before. It wasn't the wallpaper. The hundreds of ball players still stared back at her. It was something bright. A color that didn't fit in the room, and now her eyes retraced the path of her head and found the object that had caught her attention.

On the floor next to Roman's bed leaned a canvas—a brilliant tapestry of bright colors. And while her first glance didn't reveal exactly what image the colors merged to create, it was clearly some sort of painting. Heather took only two steps closer before she remembered the scene.

Remembered? That might not be an accurate statement. She had physically never been to the place in the painting, but she'd gone there on two different occasions in her mind. Once when Roman told his story, and once when she finally laid her head on her pillow after countless hours of wakefulness after the business at the Hollow.

The painting was identical to the image that her mind's eye saw when Roman described it with his thoughtful words. The brilliant yellows and reds, and every shade of orange in between stood out in the sky, then in the reflection on the waves below. The perspective was fitting—from a window, with tropical palm leaves hanging over the edges on both sides. Out from the view lay what seemed like miles of golden tan sand that traveled to the horizon where it met the ocean as well as the setting sun. The black shadows of birds floated on the wind miles away against the cloudless evening. Immediately Heather forgot that it was winter outside, forgot that she lived in Collingston.

She thought of walking on the beach with Roman and at that instant his arms wrapped around her waist, and his chin rested on her shoulder. An image popped out at her from the painting, two black blotches that her eyes missed at first glance, two subtle details off in the distance, miles from the window, miles across the sand of the beach. It was two people, or shadows of people, hand in hand, walking toward the ocean and into the giant red-orange sun that teetered on the curvature of the earth.

"It's beautiful." The words were just supposed to be a thought in her head, but escaped from her lips in a whisper.

"Maybe the best prison view in the world," Roman whispered and pulled back the hair from her neck, either because the locks obstructed his vision, or because he wanted her to feel his breath on her neck. Heather hoped it was the latter.

“I’ve been there before,” Heather said. “In my dreams. We jumped through that window or hologram or whatever it was, and sat under the sun on the sand. We never said a word, just sat there, and when the sun started to set, we walked toward it, like somehow if we kept on going it would never fully disappear behind the ocean.” Heather reached her fingertips out and touched those two souls on the soft canvas.

Roman kissed the lobe of her ear. He pulled the bottom of her sweater gently up from her stomach, until it was over her head and on the floor. Roman undid the clasp on the front of her bra with his right hand and at the same time unbuttoned her jeans with his left. She turned and kissed him, sliding the silk panties away from her waist and then wiggling them down to the floor with her legs. Roman slid out of his flannel with a similar fluttering gesture using neither hand. When everything was out of their way, Roman laid her down gently and followed her with his own slow descent to the bed.

If there was one skill or task that couldn’t be learned through some textbook or the black words on a page, it was surely this Roman thought. As his nervousness passed that first time on Christmas, he knew he would someday perfect this ritual. Why wouldn’t he think such a thing? Every obstacle, roadblock, and problem that ever stood in his way was in inevitable danger of being conquered. In fact it was only a matter of time. His mind had mastered the art of denying himself that final pleasure too fast. His fingers had mastered that blind dance on the silky floor of her body. His mouth had learned when to give to her lips, and when to take. He had a good teacher after all—though there was no one to measure her against. This was a time (he first thought) that was supposed to be completely void of dialogue. It shocked him the first time Heather talked out loud during their love making, suggesting this and that, and literally telling him to do things.

Not long after those first few sessions did it finally emerge in his brain—this wasn’t something you could perfect, it wasn’t something you could have planned ahead of time, it wasn’t a mathematical equation. If you went after it like another problem to solve, you would fail, and fail miserably. If you mastered some format, some technical plan of attack, the mystery and anticipation would wither and die. And while in every day life Roman begged for routine, longed for logic, this was the one place he had to be different. And different was better than he ever dreamed. Roman shut his mind off in those moments of passion and let his heart drift where it would.

Roman was on top of her, his arms and hands lying parallel on hers, his thrusts beginning to quicken. She couldn’t hold on much longer (a feeling Roman had been fighting since the beginning of this flesh-to-flesh horizontal dance). Heather’s arms escaped Roman’s and her hands (and nails) found his back. Her breathing and moans heightened to a point of not being able to raise any further and finally Roman gave in as well. Not because she told him to, or because he was guessing it was time. But because he could see it in her eyes—that electric look of one that has just touched a cloud.

Heather seemed to hold onto her final sigh as long as she could, like the first drop on a rollercoaster, that no matter how long it was or how sharp the drop,

you would always come back for more. Roman could feel a hard shiver go through the body underneath him, and now it was Heather whose calves cramped in joy and toes curled in satisfaction.

They lay there silent for minutes, maybe hours, staring at the ceiling without conversation as if they were watching the sun set on that beach. Their breathing eventually went back to normal pace, their flesh to normal temperature as the sweat evaporated. Heather's hand lay on Roman's chest palm up, her body too tired to roll over so she could look him in the eye. Roman ran his fingertips down the folded lines in her palm.

"I want to thank you, Heather. I never thought that I would ever be happy again. You saved me. You taught me what it is to be a person again."

Heather shut her eyes and kissed his hand. "I'm happy too, Roman. Isn't it ironic, our relationship? I'm supposed to be the rich girl cheerleader, some ditz who bounces her way through life with no thought or regard for it. And you work as a janitor. I want to be a doctor and mother and a wife. I want to show my kids that the world doesn't have to be the way it is. What about you?"

Roman hesitated, caught off guard by the question. "I've spent so many years worrying about the past that all I've been doing these last few months is living in the moment. Kids?" Roman paused again. "If I did have children, I don't want them to be like me, awkward I mean."

"You're not awkward Roman. And any mother would be lucky to have half of you in her children. Your mind, your courage, and most importantly your heart."

"It's kind of you to say such things."

"Not kind Roman, fact," Heather said, rising from the bed and walking to her bag on the other side of the room.

Roman kept his head on the pillow and smiled as he watched.

Heather slid on a pair of athletic shorts, a T-shirt, and over both top and bottom went sweats. She pulled the long blond locks back into a ponytail, but released them, finding a brush was needed for the frayed mess on her head. Her hair was always like that when they finished—the electrocuted frazzle of someone who stuck their finger in the light socket—and to Roman it was starting to become the favorite of her hairstyles. Several quick pullbacks from the bangs with the brush, some kind of one-handed magic trick with her scrunchy, and Heather was ready for cheerleading practice.

"Teach me to fight," she said.

"Where's that coming from?"

"I still think of that asshole Bobby Dukes from time to time, and how helpless I was with his arm around my neck. I don't want to feel that way again, ever."

"I don't think you have to worry about Bobby Dukes," Roman said, getting up from the bed himself.

"There are more than just a few Bobby Dukes in the world, Roman."

Roman walked over to her at the door. "This is true. Okay. Whatever you want."

“Nothing spectacular. Just maybe teach me a few deadly punches.” She kissed him and smiled.

“I want you to take this with you.” Roman walked over to the painting. Carefully, he lifted the canvas by its edges.

“Roman...I don’t know.”

“It was meant for you. Besides I’ve looked out that window enough to burn a permanent image in my memory.”

“Thank you.” She moved the painting aside, wrapped both arms around him and kissed him again. It was a long one this time, something that made Roman want to go back to bed.

Heather let out a sigh. “I gotta go. I’ll see you tonight then?”

“Yes.”

Heather carried the painting out as Roman shut the door behind her. He walked to the kitchen and downed two quick glasses of water. As he returned to the living room a knock came from the door.

*Did she forget something?* That’s what he wanted to say as he opened the door. But he didn’t. It might have been the sixth sense that people like Roman seem to have, or maybe he could smell the overuse of perfume through the door, but before she was in plain view the signals in Romans brain cells had figured out who had come a-knocking. It was someone he’d never imagined seeing on his doorstep.

## V

Gina Hawthorne stood on the porch, draped in a black mink coat with the lustrous fur collar snuggled against her neck. As always her perfume seemed to spread through the air with an unmatched velocity. And though the fragrance almost knocked him back a step or two, it was still sweet to smell. There was no evidence of it but Roman was sure her face was painted with the several layers of makeup it took to erase twenty years. She could have easily passed for thirty and there was no mistaking where Heather obtained her beauty. In her hand she carried a large flower-print bag—something Mary Poppins might travel with—and on her face she wore a crimson-lipped smile. A smile that looked like it pained her to make.

“May I come in?”

Roman waved his arm as he backed away from the doorway. She entered but only took two steps into the living room/bedroom. She tried to be subtle but her eyes danced around the room in a flurry of curiosity, examining every inch—the baseball card wallpaper, the polished floor, the spotless furniture, and the neatly stacked books, finally stopping at the bed. Her eyes looked unimpressed.

A nervous gloom filled Roman—something maybe a soldier felt when the drill sergeant came for inspections—and now he remembered that he stood only his underwear. He walked over to the wild sheets on his bed and looked down to see his clothes in a pile before his feet.

“Quite the cozy cottage you have here,” Gina said as she placed her bag on the floor and removed her silk gloves.

“Thank you,” Roman’s politeness was as fake as her compliment. He bent down and jumped into his jeans (both legs at the same time) and then began straightening the sheets of his bed, as if he could erase the event that had taken place just moments ago. As he tucked the edges under the mattress, he couldn’t help but feel like a criminal trying to cover up the scene of a crime.

“You need not tidy up, nor clothe yourself. What’s good enough for the daughter should be sufficient for her mother. Don’t you think? Besides this isn’t a social engagement. I will take only a small amount of your time.”

Roman didn’t respond. He finished with the bed and threw a shirt on.

Gina lifted her bag off the floor, opened it by the two handles on top, and looked at its contents. Satisfied, she closed it, walked over to the couch, and set it down.

“I want you to stop seeing my daughter.”

“I’m in love with her, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

Gina laughed out loud. It was an awful sound—laughter that sprang from spite—echoing through the house as if it traveled through the caverns of hell.

“Love? Dear Roman, your enlightened mind must know that love is only a word. Only a term used to explain the chemical reactions in your brain. Those reactions no different than the feeling one gets when eating large amounts of chocolate or releasing endorphins while on the treadmill.”

“I don’t eat large amounts of chocolate and I’m not much for the treadmill.”

Gina’s awful laughter stopped. “Mock me if you must. I want you gone. I want you to disappear into the night to wherever you came from. Or you go somewhere new. It doesn’t really matter.” Gina looked over to the couch. “There’s one hundred thousand dollars in the bag. I expect it will be enough to give you a fresh start somewhere if you don’t squander it. And I expect that you will be gone before school starts tomorrow.”

“Why do you hate me so much?”

“It’s not a matter of hate, Roman. It’s a matter of what’s best for my daughter. You’re a very talented young man. Your path just lies in a different direction than Heather’s. She is to go to school and become *someone*. To marry and have a family. To live with her own kind, not some drifter, some janitor.”

Roman walked to the bag as Gina slipped her gloves on. She opened the door. “Best wishes Roman.”

“Mrs. Hawthorne,” Roman said with the bag of money outstretched toward her. “If this bag is still here tonight when Heather comes over, I will not lie to her about how and why it came into my possession. If the bag is not here there will be no reason to bring it up.”

Gina peered at the bag and then at Roman, hoping to see some sign of insincerity on the janitor’s face. “Fine. I’ll make it two. Two hundred thousand. I can have the rest by the end of the day.”

Roman took two steps and held the bag so the handles touched Gina’s hand. “It won’t matter if you bring the entire bank vault down the street on a semi-trailer.”

Gina ripped the bag out of his hand and swung open the door. On the porch she said, “You’re making a big mistake.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Roman watched as the high heels stumbled over the cracks in the sidewalk to the black BMW on the street.

“Drive safely.”

## VI

If Roman told me the story a year ago, all I would’ve been worried about was the money. Maybe something to the effect of “You turned down two hundred thousand fucking dollars?” But I was more mature now, more in tune with people’s feelings since meeting the janitor. The money statement kinda just rolled off my mind. I was immediately pissed at the end of it. I kept calm though, and did my best to make him feel better. I shot him straight.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about what the bitch in high heels thinks of you. She’s always been a scheming cunt. Always messing in Heather’s business, over stupid shit. The only reason people give her the time of day is because she’s rich and she’s hot. There isn’t much to her after that. I think Dr. Hawthorne would’ve kicked her ass to the curb along time ago if Heather wasn’t around. You should watch your back though. Gina doesn’t like to take “no” for an answer. You should tell Heather, she’d set her straight.”

“I don’t want to cause problems between Heather and her mother.”

“You know what your problem is? You’re too fuckin’ nice. People like Gina Hawthorne don’t understand nice. They only understand money.”

Roman didn’t respond.

With Heather’s arrival our conversation came to a halt. She immediately noticed there was something wrong with Roman—although he looked fine to me—and asked him about it. Roman gave her a smile to stop her worries. It was amazing how women knew—women’s intuition, sixth sense, motherly instinct, whatever you wanted to call it—they always knew.

One by one, our lunch table patrons seated themselves, sparking what seemed to be a hundred different conversations. Chairs were rearranged, tables pushed together, and soon our group was at least twenty strong, digging into the lunches and each other’s gossip. A book sat to the side of Roman, and while I had seen him drill through the words of countless pages, he rarely opened one these days. It must have been there in case Heather had no stories of her own to tell, in case there was a moment of down time where he could feed his mind. I saw him look over at it several times, as if it were tempting him the way drugs do an addict, but he never opened it.

Johnny the Killer appeared with tray in hand, laughing to himself before he could tell the rest of us. Johnny was always good for a joke or two—some of them were actually pretty good. And although our table was fifty percent of the female persuasion, it never stopped the Killer from reciting vulgar often degrading jokes. The entire table listened regardless.

“A man in a hotel lobby wants to ask the clerk a question. As he turns to go to the front desk, he accidentally bumps into a woman beside him and as he does, his elbow goes into her breast. They are both quite startled. The man turns to

her and says, 'Ma'am, if your heart is as soft as your breast, I know you'll forgive me.' She replies, 'If your penis is as hard as your elbow, I'm in room 320.'"

The table broke into laughter. Milk squirted from Sam Peterman's nose, Jack cackled like a hyena, the cheerleaders were laughing, and even Heather broke a smile.

My tears and laughter stopped when I saw the two people coming toward our table. Sally and Jacques or Jock or whatever his name was, were coming straight for me, hand in hand. I was relived a little bit when they ignored me and talked to Heather.

"Jacques got our lunch switched to the first lunch period with you guys. Isn't that the best?" Sally asked Heather.

"That's great," Heather replied. "Here, there's room right here, let me pull up a couple of chairs."

I scooted reluctantly to the left to make room for Sally and Frenchy, asking in my mind what I had done to deserve such a punishment. It wasn't jealousy, I promise. It was more the fact that I viewed Jacques as quite the lesser man. And if a man like Jacques made Sally happy what did that say about me? The kid didn't have an ounce of muscle on him. He was shorter than me and had pale white skin, like the color of a toilet. He had long woman-like hair and a thin spotty beard, which I'm sure he combed in front of a mirror for at least an hour.

Jacques was all smiles when he sat down. "You are Anthony, yes?" He held out his hand, and I shook it. It was a limp grip, just as I imagined.

"Uh, just call me Tony. Only my good and close relatives and friends get to call me Anthony."

"I see. Tony then. I am Jacques." The "J" rolled off his tongue like it was two or three syllables instead of just a letter.

I hated him immediately.

Roman saved me from the torture, or at least diverted my attention. "Carl wanted to know if you and Heather wanted to come over to his place for supper. He's making one of his specialties."

"What's that?"

"Some stew. He wouldn't tell me exactly what was in it. He said I'd never taste anything better."

Under normal circumstances I'd be wary of eating anything Carl was cooking, but the stress of the situation hindered my judgment.

"Sure. What time?"



## Chapter 15

### Dinner at Carl's

#### I

Freddy Flowers sat at his desk at the main farm, busy over papers and bills. Classical music played from the speakers positioned in the corner of his office. When the business was finished, Freddy grabbed the squirt bottle on the edge of his desk and began to spray his beautiful children—as he called them—humming to Mozart and admiring the greenery that turned his office into a jungle. Three knocks came at the door.

“Come in.”

A well-built man with an obvious hairpiece entered. Stubble covered his leather-tanned face and his eyes seemed to pierce through everything they looked at. They were the brightest blue Freddy had ever seen.

“Oh yes. John Smith I presume?”

Max nodded, looking over his shoulder at the strange plants that surrounded him.

“Don't worry, they're harmless. Unlike other creatures that inhabit this hole we call a planet. Please sit.”

Max sat, looked around, and pulled at his clothing as if it itched. It was apparent that he was afraid of something more than exotic plants.

“There is nothing to worry about, Mr. Smith. The only law around here is I. Nothing happens in this town without my approval. The only thing you need to worry yourself about is work.” The Flower could see the tension drain from John Smith as he spoke the reassuring words. “And work, you will have plenty of.”

The Flower stood from his chair and reached out his hand. “I'm Freddy Flowers and I'm glad to have you on board.” Freddy glanced down at John's forearm as they shook.

They both sat again. “That's a brilliant tattoo you have there, something that fits well with our philosophies here.”

Max pulled down his sleeve to cover the picture on his arm. He gave a laugh, something that was forced instead of flowing naturally. Freddy thought it was the sound of a man who hadn't laughed much. “It's from another life,” Max said. “Something I want to forget.”

“I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to pry, only to compliment. Let's get down to business shall we?”

The Flower pulled out several photographs, pictures of the inside and outside of what the warehouse that housed Extravaganza used to look like, and also stills of the half-blackened mess that remained.

“Dogey said that you're one of the best carpenters he's ever seen. Is that true, Mr. Smith?”

“I worked more with crafting furniture and the artwork on such fixtures,” Max answered.

“But can you fix my beautiful building?”

Max paused. “I can. But I'll need a lot of men and a lot of lumber.”

“Man power is not a problem, dear Mr. Smith. This town is crawling with low life gutter-dwellers that will work for as little as the scraps from my plate. Tell me what you need.”

Freddy and Max worked out the fine points of the arrangement. An arrangement Max found, that would bring him more money than any other of his countless jobs had through the years. A purely cash salary, and when the warehouse was complete, Freddy promised more work, maybe even a partnership in a furniture business. Freddy also provided for Max’s housing, at an apartment complex he owned on the East Side of town next to a church on a corner frequented by hookers. “You can go to hell and heaven without walking more than fifty feet,” The Flower joked.

## II

Supper was at 6:00. We met at Roman’s and all walked over together. As reluctant as I was to put anything in my mouth that Carl considered fine dining, I was starving. My increased workouts burned the calories quicker than usual, and my stomach was like a bottomless pit. It also helped that when we opened the door a rush of warm aroma hit us in the face, something you smelled as a kid at grandma’s house after a long day of riding bikes and playing ball.

It was the same pea-green, dimly lit living room. What sounded like some kind of Buddhist chanting came from the tape deck in Carl’s radio. The sound of the low humming monks was accompanied only by something simmering in a pot around the corner in the kitchen. Our host was nowhere to be found.

Exhausted of all other possibilities, the three of us walked down the basement stairs. I could see all the junk as we descended, the boxes of papers or whatever they were and the bicycle and countless other pieces of crap. I could hear something before Carl came into view, a low hissing or buzzing, air being let out of a tire maybe. My mind wandered into a thousand different scenarios before I reached the bottom.

I knew Carl was very odd. In fact I had no doubt the man walked a daily tight rope, balancing his life between sanity and schizophrenia, with his cockamamie stories of aliens and full moons, his paranoid theories of the government, the visiting crack whores, and his cunning charm that wooed the geniuses and teenage hot bodies alike. None of it was adequate preparation for the sight before me.

I told you briefly—the day Brunno shit his pants—of the weird looking box in the middle of Carl’s basement, a structure with four legs underneath and several consecutive screens inside of it. The buzzing noise was apparent now, hundreds and hundreds of small bees, trapped in some sort of man-made beehive. Carl was farming bees.

It was over the beehive box that he stood now, shirtless, with his back turned to us. Carl slid open a small window on the top of it, an entrance just big enough to get a hand into. With the whipping finesse of a frog’s tongue, he reached in, held his hand open for several seconds, and with two fingers snatched out of the air one of the gold and black insects by its wings. He began to lift the bee—stinger first—toward the bulging vein in his own neck.

“Carl!” Heather pleaded.

Heather’s scream did not detour our gray-haired host. There was no hesitation of movement towards the vein as he spoke. “No worries my dear, Carl has done this many times.” A second later the stinger poked into his neck. The bee’s abdomen shuddered as it pumped its venom. Carl made only one sound, not a wince of pain as I imagined, but a sigh of relief, that of a heroin addict finally getting his fix. The other bees flew to the top of the cage as if they were worried about their brother. Roman explained to me later that when bees sting they admit a pheromone that stimulates the others for attack.

There was no brigade of bomber bees, on account of the screen. And now Carl turned to us with a wide smile. As if the events up to now weren’t enough, I noticed Carl’s chest.

On his torso were three wide scars, black gashes that started where his neck met his left shoulder, and traveled diagonally down his stomach to his right hip. My imagination warped me through space and time, and suddenly I was in a Vietnam jungle watching as a seven foot gray alien slashed Carl with its three elongated fingernails because the Colonel would not give up his weapon and go with the creature. Another flash, and I was back in Carl’s basement watching as he buttoned up his shirt. My knees weakened a bit but I managed to stay on my feet.

“I hope your appetites are hearty. I made enough to feed the third battalion.”

### III

He could’ve have fed me rat poison and I wouldn’t have known the difference. My brain was still deciding whether it was in Collingston or Cambodia, and my appetite was still on overdrive. Heather must have been as thunderstruck as myself, because she hadn’t spoken a word either. Roman, of course, was not shocked—he’d probably been to stranger events in his journeys into book land.

Carl placed a bowl of some kind of stew in front of me. It was gray and slimy but smelled wonderful. There was at least the familiar sight of a carrot and a meatball-like object floating on the top. I took a cautious half-spoonful. The stew was creamy and the meatballs better than any I’d ever tasted. They were kinda hard on the outside, but once bitten into the juice was very tasty. There was some kind of skin floating in there as well, the texture was tough like cooked cabbage but it tasted good. I decided after the first bite it was delicious, and before I knew it three large bowls worth were in my stomach. Carl offered homemade bread on several occasions, but I declined claiming I needed room for more of the stew.

I sometimes felt that Heather thought of food as she did everything else, like it was a competition. Like she couldn’t let the food beat her. It must have been one of those times, because her bowl emptied and refilled more quickly and more frequently than mine. I had seen her eat two super burgers at *Better Burgers* one time after a basketball game, but I think she had that beat.

Roman chewed at his nonchalant pace, like the food was more of a nuisance than anything else. He was probably deciphering how much energy could

be converted from the caloric intake of the stew or some shit. He did though shake his head in satisfaction a couple of times.

Carl put a fourth bowl in front of me, but I had to at least take a break. I thought it a good time to ask about the stupid ideas whirling around in my head. “So what’s up with the bees Carl?”

“I have to house ‘em in the basement on account of the goddamn cold.”

“No, I mean stingin’ yourself with ‘em. Does it keep the aliens away or some shit?”

“Ah no, only medicine, guy. They keep Carl in control over his broken down body. I got the shakes not long after I turned seventy, and the bees cure me.”

“Shakes?” I asked again.

“Ah, what do you call it, uh...Perkinsons?”

“Parkinson’s disease?” Heather joined in.

“Aye, ‘tis it.”

Heather looked at Roman who seemed not even to be listening. Or maybe he had already heard the story. “So you’re telling me,” Heather began, “that you have Parkinson’s disease and that by stinging yourself with bees you don’t have any symptoms at all. You’re not on any medicine? I mean drugs.”

“Ha, drugs. Just a goddamn way to keep you sick and line the pockets of some bastard sitting in an office. Fuck the drug companies I say.”

Heather just shook her head.

“So where’d you get this remedy from, some healer in Zimbabwe or what?” I said laughing.

“Not Zimbabwe. A lot closer than that mind ya. My neighbor.” Carl looked to his right. He looked at Roman.

Me and Heather stared at Roman as well, our silence urging him into an explanation. “It’s not that big a deal. People have been using venom therapy for centuries. I read a couple of books on the subject and when Carl refused any medication, I suggested the bees. Holistic healers use snake, spider, scorpion, and even jellyfish venom. I thought bees might be our safest route. Synapses that are not working correctly or not at all in the brain, seem to fire up again when the venom makes its way through the blood stream. Sometimes nature has the answer before science does.”

I could tell Heather was becoming flustered. “You don’t really believe that some little bee venom is a cure for an illness that modern medicine spends millions of dollars and countless hours on every year?”

Roman chuckled a little and kissed her on the cheek—a response I saw more and more these days to Heather’s intellectual challenges and her need to compete with him. To Roman it was just a way to disarm her. I think it only made her madder, but in a good way. “I don’t know that it’s a cure,” Roman said with a laugh in his voice. “I do know the day after he started the therapy his symptoms stopped and haven’t returned.”

“To the bees,” Carl raised his mug of beer and chugged it down.

Heather was out of responses.

“To the bees,” I said raising my glass of milk.

“To the bees,” Roman said with his ginger ale.

Heather finally lifted her glass. She spoke softly. “To the bees.”

The conversation was enough of a break to recharge my hunger, and the fourth bowl went down like the ones before it. I crushed one of the meatballs in my teeth and the juice squirted down my throat, like I just ate a cooked grape. It was at the moment that my curiosity returned. It was delicious yes, but for the life of me I couldn’t place what exactly it was.

“So what kinda stew is this anyway?”

Carl lit his pipe, an act that took several seconds when you counted in the puffing and re-lighting. “Mountain oyster,” he responded.

“Huh? Mountain oyster stew. Don’t think I’ve ever heard of it. Come to think of it, how the hell are there oysters in the mountains?”

“There aren’t any oysters in the mountains,” Heather answered for me. She had a look of fright, an expression that said we had just done—or eaten—something terribly, terribly wrong.

Carl looked at me through the smoke with a shocked expression that I’d never heard of mountain oysters. “Pig jewels if it does ya.”

“Pig jewels?” I asked in denial.

Heather covered her mouth with both hands and mumbled. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Hog testicles,” Roman interjected.

I looked down at my bowl and shook my head. It now occurred to me what the rubbery cabbage thing in my bowl was and why it was so chewy. I had just eaten four bowls of pig scrotum soup. For some reason my stomach didn’t heave and I had no urge to puke. What filled me was anger.

“How in the hell do you have people over and feed them pig balls without even tellin’ ’em? That’s just wrong.”

“Do you like hot dogs guy?”

“Sure.”

“Well I once made my living working in a factory that wrapped dogs. And I tell ya not one scrap of pig ball nor mice terd lying on the floor was denied processing. You’ve put far worse in your belly than the sack of a hog. My grandmammy passed this recipe down to mama. Back then we could only afford the cheapest parts of the animal, but she turned something ugly into something good for the soul. Now I say to ya, hot dogs or Carl’s delicious stew?” Carl toked on his pipe, with that smug look of his.

I didn’t answer his question. “Ya know you sit there like some kind of philosopher with your gray beard and pipe, thinking you’ve got it all figured out, but the truth is you’re just an old man that drinks too much and fucks too many crack whores.”

“Tony that’s enough,” Roman said.

“No it’s not and I’m not done yet. You and the bees in your basement, and the green tea, and the off the wall stories about aliens tryin’ to take ya. All of this shit so you can impress us and maybe have a friend or two. You’re nothing special, just plain ole crazy. You’re just fuckin’ crazy.”

“Tony.” Roman stood up.

“Let him be. Let him be.” Carl took the pipe out of his mouth and set it on the table. “Ah, maybe you’re right guy. Carl does drink too much and have the company of whores from time to time. I tell ya though, I have no reason to lie about the rest of it, there’s plenty of ’em down at the Tavern that listen to Carl’s stories without him havin’ to have ’em over for dinner. The truth is, I see you, and your friend, and the pretty lady as partners. Many apologies guy, if I’ve made offense. I’m just trying to make up for lost time, I am.”

What the fuck was I doing? Ripping Carl because he was a bit off. I’d had a stressful day at school and just needed to vent I guess. Frenchy with his rolling J and limp handshake kept playing over in my head. “Look, Carl, I’m sorry. I was way out of line and you, of all people, don’t deserve to hear any of those things. I had a bad day and I’m just taking it out on you.”

“No worries my friend. Carl has seen enough bad days to know what you speak of. But it sounds like your anger comes because of a woman.”

I didn’t respond or even look up, but I could feel both Roman and Heather staring a hole through me.

#### IV

We cleaned up the kitchen. Carl washed. Heather dried. Me and Roman cleaned the table off and brought them the dishes. I felt so bad about goin’ off on Carl, I was about to do the unthinkable: I asked if he ever came across the aliens again.

His hands froze immediately in the soapy water. After a second or two, he regained himself and gazed out the window just above his sink, like he could see the ET’s out in the yard. It was the same gaze Roman had when he told of his parents, the Pentochs, and Agent Johnson.

“Only once more, and that time they weren’t after Carl. After the service I got a job working security for one of the government labs. Not hard work after ya been through a war. They had a goddamn fence like Fort Knox, with security gates and armed men. My job was to just walk the halls and make sure nobody was in there that ought not to be. On one of my rounds I tuned the corner and there it was, halfway down the hallway, just standing there lookin’ the other way. Same seven feet tall. Same slimy gray skin. I just froze. My heart flippin’ a mile a second. Then he turned to his left and opened one of the lab doors. I walked down the hall, shaking like a damn wet dog, and peeked around the doorway. The thing was holdin’ a scientist with one arm and with the other...”

Carl wiped his face with his sudsy hand, like he almost couldn’t finish the story.

“With the other he did what?” Heather asked.

The look on Roman’s face was one I’d never seen. It was almost like he’d been there too and was remembering. It was beginning to freak me out a little.

“With the other hand he had the doctor’s face. Those damn long fingers and nails covered it like he was going to squeeze his head in. The lights in the lab and the hallway started flickering. There was an awful loud humming sound, not in my ears, but in my head. The doctor just laid there, like he was passed out from the drink, and all of a sudden.” Carl stopped and swallowed hard. “Electrical

energy or I don't know what started flying around the alien's head. Some sort of bright yellow or blue waves circled around the thing's head and then down his arm, and out those sharp nails into the good doctor's head. He shook like he was being electrocuted, but it wouldn't have taken that long to kill him as this went. I wish I would've pulled my gun and shot the bastard right there. But I never even took it out of the holster. It stopped after a minute or so. The lights came on. The creature leaned the doctor over a chair and then turned and looked at me. He was smiling I tell ya, even though he had no mouth. And poof, just like in the jungle, evaporated into thin air. I woke the doctor, saw he was not injured on his body, but his mind; he gibbered away, asking me if I saw the angels and telling me what they told him."

"What did they tell him?" I asked.

"That the machine they left inside of his head would finally bring peace to the world."

"What was the doctor's name?"

"Doctor Jesup," Carl answered.

"Dr. Sebastian Jesup," Roman added.

## V

We finished the cleaning, and the clearing of our minds. I apologized to Carl for the twentieth time, and now the three of us found ourselves in Roman's front room. The janitor was visibly shaken by the conversation at Carl's and he paced the room—as much as Roman could do such a thing I guess—trying to digest Carl's story with the potent acid in his mind.

"So you're tellin' me this alien shit is for real?" I asked.

Before Roman could answer Heather shot another question at him. "How'd you know the doctor's name?"

Roman stopped walking laps around the room and looked at us. I'm not calling him a liar, but Roman's brain chose his words very carefully. He answered Heather first of course. "I came across a document during my stay with NN. Somebody made a mistake and put it with the codes I was supposed to be breaking. I ran out of codes, so naturally I opened the file. It was schematics for some type of machine, accompanied by a profile of Dr. Jesup and his work. The doctor claimed that angels came down from heaven and gave him the blueprints for the device. It was quite similar to Carl's story of an alien downloading it to his brain."

"So this alien shit is for real?" I asked again.

"Jesup put the plans down on paper. Halfway through the blueprints Jesup got scared, nobody really knows why, and ran. The NN still hasn't found him. That's also part of the reason Johnson won't leave me alone. He knows I saw the file."

"What field was Jesup in?" Heather asked.

"Nuclear physics."

"They want him to build a bomb?"

"No it wasn't a bomb, it was beyond anything I'd ever seen. I'm still not sure what it was or what it does."

Something told me that Roman knew exactly what the machine did. But I didn't pursue the issue. "Goddamn it, so you're sayin' there really is aliens?"

"All that I know is that there *is* a Doctor Jesup and that the government wants him because of his knowledge of how to construct this machine. What the doctor and Carl saw that night is up for interpretation."

"This is all above me man. I'm goin' home. You comin'?" I said to Heather. "Of course you're not."

Despite the evening's events she had her arms around him and her mouth on his before I even got out the door.

## Chapter 16

### Mop for Mitt

#### I

The frozen blanket of white that for the last three months had held the landscape of Collingston hostage in one amount or another finally started to recede. The brown grass was a pleasant sight, confusing to the eyes that had for so long seen nothing but white. The icicles on tree limbs reduced themselves to wet bark. Roads were now a dry almost foreign surface welcomed by the tires of automobiles. The sun stayed with us longer each day. The children were anxious to reclaim their stomping ground—kick ball and hide and seek sprouted in the neighborhood evenings.

I always believed as a young boy that March got its name because the heroic forces of spring marched against the evil villains of winter. The battle raged on, each force putting a flag on the days it conquered, trading the blows of cold and warmth back and forth. It turns out that I wasn't that far off—you tend to learn these things when your best friend is a walking encyclopedia—as March was named for the Roman god of war, Mars. It was the original month of the New Year in those long ago days, as well as being the month when the Romans started their war campaigns.

March more than anything was a beacon of hope, something concrete enough to put your faith in. No matter how many days the brigades of winter claimed as their own, you knew the forces of spring would always win out.

It also brought one other thing: the single greatest game ever invented, a game that for the past hundred years no matter who you were affected you in some way, a game that is watched more than presidential debates on TV, a game that dominates the minds of little boys and grown men alike (especially during the days of fall), a game where a man's name can be etched on the tablets of history by one throw, one simple flick of his wrist, a game that fathers and sons share at million-dollar stadiums but take home to their back yards just by playing catch; the only game where the defense controls the ball. A game with no time limit, no tying, and where hope lives until the last strike of the last out of the last inning.

The fieldhouse we practiced in was a monstrous building. It had a full Olympic-sized track, four basketball courts, and ceilings over seventy feet high. Nowhere else in the state could you find a high school that even came close to having a place like Collingston's fieldhouse. I also imagine that nowhere else in the state would you find a facility like this with only one team practicing. Coach Demera had enough pull and enough respect from the higher-ups that for two hours every day, the only team allowed in the fieldhouse was baseball.

On one side you had the sixty-yard dash times going. In the middle, guys were getting ground balls. Returning starters were hitting in the cage in the middle of the field house. On the far end were a group of about twenty guys running nothing but line sprints. That group was there for one reason, to weed themselves out. Coach Demera would take the twenty guys he thought had no chance in hell of making the team and run their guts out. One by one they would drop like flies, gather their shit, and head for the door. After about thirty minutes Coach Demera

would take the five or so that were left and let them run the sixty and take ground balls, and if they were still standing after that he would let them hit at the end of practice. I guess he figured that if they were willing to go through all of that maybe they had enough heart to get better and someday help his program. In my three years I still had not seen one kid out of that group make the team.

Johnny the Killer was on one of wooden mounds, and I was a little excited, scared maybe, because our season depended on how the Killer threw. Johnny threw his first pitch right down the middle at eighty-three miles per hour. The next was eighty-five and the next eighty-six. All that Johnny really had to do at this tryout was show up and throw the ball like he gave a shit. Grouse told him to throw the breaking pitch and it broke all right, about five feet in front of the plate. I did my best to block it but it bounced off the rubbery floor and rolled to the far end, hitting a cart one of the janitors was pushing. The field house was so long that I didn't recognize the janitor as Roman until the ball stopped at his feet. His dark eyes stared at the ball on the floor, eventually picking it up and lookin' it over like he was counting the seams. There was something about a ball—it didn't matter if you were a grandma or just out of diapers—that begged you to throw it.

"You're supposed to throw it, not read it," Johnny shouted at the top of his lungs and then laughed.

Johnny yelled so loud everybody stopped. The coaches, the bats, the runners—everything just froze. Roman continued to look at the ball, turning it over and over in his hand. I put my glove up as a cut-off man between me and Johnny. Roman took a small step and threw a rope over my head right to Johnny's mitt. The ball had no arch and when it popped Johnny's glove he shook his wrist back and forth because of the sting. I looked at Johnny and then back at Roman who was already starting to push his cart across the field house again.

Coach Grouse looked at me. "Who is this freakin' guy?"

"Roman Swivel. I knew he had a hell of an arm but the son of a bitch just won't come out."

"Is he a pitcher?"

"Yeah," I said back.

Coach Grouse motioned for Coach Demera who was watching Sam Peterman hit in the cage before all this happened. Peterman by the way would rock that net like an earthquake, the balls jumping off his bat like thunderbolts, his swing flawless in the cage. There was only one problem: come game time, or anytime there was live pitching, Sam could not make contact. He led the team in strikeouts the previous year and was in danger of becoming the all-time strike out leader in Silver Streak history.

"Alright Johnny, that's it for today," Grouse said.

Coach Demera walked over in an annoyed strut, clipboard in hand and his coaching bag over his shoulder. "You seen everybody you want to see?" Demera asked Grouse.

"I want to see this kid that just threw the ball a hundred and eighty feet on a straight line with no crow hop or warm ups," Coach Grouse replied.

"You mean the fuckin' janitor?"

"Yeah, the fuckin' janitor, I wanna see him throw off the mound."

“Whatever, it’s your time.”

Coach Grouse ran over to Roman before he made it out of the fieldhouse. I couldn’t hear the conversation but somehow he convinced Roman to take a few pitches off the mound. Coach Grouse rummaged through his coaching bag and produced a glove for Roman. Roman thanked him and walked over beside the mound where Johnny was still standing.

Johnny slammed the ball into Roman’s open mitt as he shook his head and smiled. “This isn’t like scrubbing toilets.”

Roman remained expressionless.

I stood up and took three tosses from Roman.

“I’m ready,” Roman said

“Don’t you want to take a few more?” I suggested back

“I’m ready.” Roman didn’t wake up that morning expecting to pitch. He wanted to get it over with and go back to his all-important cleaning.

I put my mask on and got down in the crouch, not really knowing what to expect—throwing BP at *On Deck* was a little different than pitching to a catcher in front of radar guns and the eyes of coaches.

Coach Demera’s body language had an ambivalent posture, like he could give a damn if the janitor threw or not. But he didn’t walk away either.

“Alright kid, let’s see what you got,” Couch Grouse said.

Roman’s stance looked good, his torso stretched tall and his feet a little less than shoulder width apart. Roman looked at me and I smacked my mitt with my throwing hand. His wind up started, nice and fluid, as good as mechanics as I had seen. At that moment in the field house, despite the wooden mound and the artificial light overhead, despite that ridiculous gray janitor’s outfit, he was a pitcher. The ball was there in an instant. WHAP. The ball broke the webbed part of my mitt, hit me in the chest, and knocked me on my ass. Coach Grouse spit his gum out onto the floor like someone just gave him the Heimlich maneuver. His radar gun read 92. Coach Demera took his hat off and scratched the top of his head. I picked the ball up, threw it to Roman, and got my spare mitt out of my bag along with a palm pad. I would be feeling the sting in my hand at least until tomorrow. Somehow though, I never felt a pain as good as that one.

I made sure my eyes were wide open on the next pitch. Roman wound up nice and easy and here it came. Still hard to see, but it didn’t matter because I never had to move my mitt. 93 on the gun.

“I’ll be damned,” Coach Grouse mumbled.

“Alright, this is crap, something’s wrong with that gun of yours, coach,” Demera said. “Let’s try mine.” Coach Demera got his gun out, tuned it, and pointed it at Roman. “Let’s see what he’s got on a real gun.”

Roman wound up and delivered. WHAP! Again I never moved the mitt. 94 on the *real gun*. Coach Grouse started laughing in delight. Coach Demera reached in his bag but instead of a radar gun this time, he pulled out a black thermos-like cup and took a hard drink.

After tryouts Roman insisted on taking my broken mitt home to fix it. I knew better than to stand in his way.

## II

John Smith stood at his window watching as the nightly eye candy made their way from daytime sleep to the setting sun and the darkness of the sidewalked streets. The church bells rang at St. Thomas Cathedral. Even in the cold nights of March the nightwalkers came out in their fishnet hose and their high heels. Some wore tacky fake fur coats that weren't long enough to cover their bellies and weren't buttoned enough to cover the tops of the breasts. They were never out there long enough to get chilled anyway. The constant traffic of factory workers and doctors on their way home from work made sure of it. They were men that opted to forgo candlelight evenings and conversations of character, deciding to have their money catapult them to the finish line. An even trade these days—some would say—when you factor in the cost of drinks, tips, a movie, and all the painful seduction and begging.

John could relate. After his first night in Collingston, he found himself standing in front of the window, masturbating to the walk of the working girls, despite the painful stitches. It was like a parade of skin set up for his own amusement. He could never finish until a brunette came into view. As much as he wanted Max Sheehan to be dead and gone, some things never die easily.

But John Smith was winning. Over the course of the last couple of weeks John had fought off the urges to fantasize about his victims. To relieve his hands wrapped around throats and to see eyes almost popping out of heads. After all, it was about the eyes, wasn't it? Death was just a byproduct. It was about those eyes. Eyes that begged and pleaded for their life—a life that he held in the palms of his hands. What power he had tapped into—the ability to end life or free it. That was the past though. Now he was just ordinary wood working John Smith, who at first started pleasuring himself to the show outside, then invited the show in, and was now paying for it on a nightly basis.

It was more than he hoped for. They did things to him, and let him do things to them, that John only thought possible if one was threatened with death. If he told her not talk she shut up. If he wanted her naked, she was naked. If he wanted her ass, her legs wrapped around her head, her nipples bit, objects inserted—all was granted. It was still power.

But something wasn't right. It wasn't the real deal, just an act put on by performers who were good at taking your money and making you believe in Neverland. The minute John became bored he could feel him—Max stirring in the bowels of his stomach, begging to be let out, whispering ideas into his mind.

Now in John Smith's dark apartment is a young brunette, no more than sixteen, naked and arms handcuffed to the respective columns on the end of John Smith's bed. She is breathing heavy. Tears are in her eyes. But those tears aren't real. She agreed to play his little game thinking all the while that she had played much worse. What she doesn't know is that there is another person in the room trapped in the body of Mr. Smith.

John is on her and in her now, pushing to make it hurt. He can hear her moans and feel her chest as she breathes. He opens his eyes and sees tears in hers. But they're not real. She is after all not an actress, but only a hooker. He can feel Max's rage in his head, as if the dark soul is pulling his brain apart with his

fingernails. Her moans are even, too even. Her eyes are not afraid. This is only work to her. Max is too strong. He needs to show her. He needs to do what he does.

Max pulls out; ripping the condom off that John Smith agreed to wear. It flies through the air and sticks to the wall. Max is back in her now and at once she knows something is terribly wrong. Her fake moans become screams but are vanquished with the palm of Max's thick hand. Now she is crying. Her arms are flailing like a flag in the wind, jolted back every time by the handcuffs. He takes his hand from her mouth but continues. This time her one scream is cut short by both of his hands around her neck. Her eyes bulge. Veins are apparent in her forehead. Her body flutters under him, squirming for life. Her eyes are begging for freedom. Now he can finish.

*There's another way for us.* John Smith says from a distant place in his head.

"There's no other way," Max says out loud.

*Can't you hear it?*

"I don't hear anything."

*Listen, in the distance. I know you can hear it.*

It was the church bells of St. Thomas, a beautiful sound that for a moment made Max feel human. The grip on her neck loosened as the chimes rang. She lay motionless. Was it too late? Please don't let it be too late. John jumped off, knelt by the bed, and put his ear to her heart. It was slow but beating. He tilted her head back and blew into her mouth. After several times she started to awaken. John unlocked the cuffs and went to the bathroom for a glass of water. When he returned she was dazed, but already dressed. She took a sip of the water, and when her throat wouldn't swallow, she threw it in his face and ran for the door.

Max Sheehan tried to grab her.

John Smith stopped him.

### III

The water felt good. The shower wasn't the best John had ever been in; but then again Freddy's apartment was nowhere near as luxurious as his house in San Diego. What a beautiful home it had been, except for the basement of course. How good it had made him feel when he finally restored it. How human he had felt. Could he feel that way all the time? Could he always have the songs of the bells at St. Thomas in his ears?

His new boss's complex was ahead of schedule and would likely be completed in the next month. John had never been in charge of so many. They were good workers for the most part and respected him as their leader. He felt like one of them, out in the cold air, cutting lumber, measuring beams, having jokes told to him over sandwich pails at lunch. Carlos had even asked him over for supper one night, but John declined when he found out of his sixteen-year-old daughter.

Was the monster in him finally dying? For the first time since he started his blood-soaked career, this was the first time he could not finish her off. Was Jesus calling to him? He'd never been too much of anywhere as a child least of all

to church. He couldn't recall one instance in which his mother actually took him somewhere. He rode the bus to school alone. He played in the yard alone. He read his comics in the bedroom alone. He tucked himself in at night and woke up the same way.

Was he to be human after all, and walk with his brothers as a man? Maybe someday he would have a wife, and she would give him a son. And he would kiss him and hug him and take him to the park and play catch and ride bikes with him. Were such things impossible to dream?

#### IV

John Smith's journey to join the human race started with a visit to St. Thomas Cathedral. To become a man he had to kill the monster, and the only way to do that was confront it head on. He wouldn't do it alone. Jesus would help him, just as he called to him through the church bells as Max tried to choke the life out of another victim.

John didn't know Jesus. He'd heard of him yes; flipping through the channels on the tube, there was always a brief stop of curiosity on the Christian channel, or overhearing saved men and women proclaim their joy in the booth behind him on Sunday evening dinners at restaurants. Jesus would save him. John believed this, not out of faith, but out of despair.

The one time he actually attended church was one Christmas Eve as a child. Mother already went to bed of course; holidays were no exception to the rule of early to bed and early to rise. Maybe that's why he could never sleep—she slept enough during the hours of her life for both of them. John, out of boredom more than religion, trucked the harsh journey through winter and snow to the warm chapel a couple miles down Grape Orchard Road. They sang "Silent Night" and the candles were lit. Even in the darkness he knew they were staring and pointing. He could almost hear their thoughts, "that's that Sheehan boy," "his mother sure isn't very friendly," "he doesn't have a father you know". The feeling of warmth and acceptance he felt at the beginning of the service were frozen solid by the time he left.

Now it was different. He wasn't a boy anymore with fragile feelings—feeling was non-existent. It only mattered what Jesus and he thought.

John couldn't help but admire the fine architecture of the cathedral—the Stations of the Cross handcrafted on both sides of the interior, the high arching ceilings, the hand-stained pews, the large altar with the Last Supper engraving. He paused for a moment in awe—wasn't this the point he was supposed to make the sign of his new master?

He would learn as he went. John entered the confessional. It was time to remove the darkness from his soul once and for all.

In the small chamber the air was dry and musty, the confines tight and uncomfortable. A small square hole covered with crisscrossed balsa wood divided him from the holy man on the other side, a fixture John remembered seeing on the bottom of porches or as a divider in a garden. He stood because he knew not what to do next.

“Please sit my son,” the voice came from behind the divider. “Beautiful day for March isn’t it, the sun and the birds.”

“Yes.” That was the only word that would fly. A long silence—long for John Smith anyway—followed to the point of painfulness. *This is a bad idea.* Just before the point of leaving the voice spoke again.

“What brings you to our Father’s house today?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not Catholic.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” the priest said and laughed.

“I think I’ve made a mistake.” John stood up.

“Please don’t go. I did not mean to be trivial, only to make you feel more comfortable.”

“I’m not sure how this works, what I’m supposed to do. Am I to pray?”

“If you would like. This is the house of the Lord and He receives all acts that are given to His glory. He shed His blood for you on the cross, and wants only your faith in return.”

“I’m not sure he made the right choice if he died for me.”

“None of us are worthy of his grace, all of us have fallen short, all are sinners. What troubles you?”

“I think I’ve fallen shorter than most. A part of me is so dark that I don’t think it can be saved.” John paused, trying to choose the right words. “I’ve committed so many violent acts toward women that I can’t even count or remember them all.”

“And are you sorry for these sins?”

John paused again partly because of the priest’s abrupt response, as if the confession did not surprise him in the least, and also because he didn’t know the answer. Was he sorry? Did he really have any remorse for the girls? Was wanting to stop the same thing as sorry?

“I am sorry,” John said.

“Then pray with me son, for the road to heaven is paved with forgiveness.”

John spent an hour in that booth. Not reliving the murders—that was the past—but finding out how exactly you traveled the road to heaven.

## V

“So anyway, you’re gonna be at tryouts tonight, right?”

“No,” Roman responded throwing my re-strung catcher’s mitt across the table.

“Do you realize you’re the missing link to our state title? You’re the guy Coach Demera’s been waiting the last ten years for. We need you man.”

“I haven’t even played baseball since Little League. There’s no way the balance of your season rests on me. You only saw me throw ten pitches. I’m not that good.”

“You hit ninety-four on the gun. Ninety-fucking four. There aren’t too many people that can do that. That’s draft velocity. And who knows, you get your arm in shape you might throw even harder. We’ll dominate teams with you on the mound.”

Roman ate a mouthful of spinach. But instead of that blank stare—the look I so often got with our conversations at lunch—I could see something in his eyes. It wasn't excitement, maybe not even hunger, but no matter what words were coming out of his mouth, and no matter what look he was trying to give me, I had him thinking. Maybe even wishing. Maybe that small boy back in Iowa was telling him how great it was to dream of being a big league ball player, of how it sounded when the leather popped in the catcher's mitt sixty feet away, of how good it felt when you struck the guy out looking.

"There's no way I could work and play baseball. It's just not possible for me to juggle both schedules."

"You've got your whole life to work, man."

Roman only continued to eat. I wanted to tell him again how fuckin' stupid he was for a genius. But I didn't. My only hope—the Collingston Silver Streak's only hope—was a young Iowa farm boy who hadn't spoken to anyone for years.

The rest of the stragglers made their way to the table. The lunch hour talk turned to a ration of bitching about the sprints Coach Demera made us run, about sore legs and butts and arms, about how hard it was to go from your chair to standing, or walk up stairs, or turn your steering wheel. I smiled at all of it. And although I was a little sorer than I let on, I took great pleasure in telling them they should have worked out more in the off-season like I did.

Sally and Frenchy were regular members of the round table now, putting on a daily display of affection for one another—it seemed every lunch period Jacques was reciting some cheesy-ass poem he'd written about her—with the kissing and staring it was enough to dampen, if not destroy my appetite. The difference between those two dumb asses compared to Heather and Roman was the genuineness. If you took away Heather's looks and Roman's smarts, I still think they'd be just as into each other.

Sally on the other hand was not in love with French boy. She might have thought she was, but I think it was more the idea of being in love. The idea of a foreign guy who wrote poetry and obeyed her every command. I'm a realist and maybe that's why I can never stay with anyone longer than a couple of months. I speak the truth and the truth was, Sally, like most women, loved to hear how wonderful she was. And she was a cool girl; I'll give her that—a smokin' hot body and fun to be around—but Helen of Troy she was not. The armies of the world were not going to fight over her, much less two guys in a cafeteria. And while Jacques's so-called enlightened European mind spat out anti-American jabs from time to time, I promised myself I'd keep my mouth shut. I promised I wouldn't go to war.

Pick Bryant lay with his head on the table, foregoing lunch for sleep, adding a welcomed lack of volume to our lunch group. Jack still talked the entire time, but at least their voices weren't converging over our lunch table like pots and pans clanging together. Sam Peterman just finished telling us what a mistake he made the night before—rubbing down his sore leg muscles with Icy Hot and accidentally misplacing some of it on his genitals. I felt for him. No matter how careful you were with the stuff, it always seemed to make its way up your legs, and

the family jewels would inevitably swing themselves into it. It gave knew meaning to the term “burning sensation.”

Jacques laughed at this as if he were one of the guys. I felt the thermometer of fury rise in the back of my head. I’d bet a good portion of my poker winnings over the years that Jacques very seldom had sore legs and probably never used anything like Icy Hot.

“You Americans make me laugh,” he said. “Always torturing your bodies for the most frivolous reasons. Always obsessed with the way you look and what people think of you. A product of your society.”

“I didn’t run fifty sprints last night because I thought it would make me look better,” Sam responded. “I did it because it’ll make me a better ball player.”

Sam’s words didn’t make it to Jacques’s ears. The exchange student continued to ramble in that thick-tongued French accent. “Materialistic I think is the word. Idolaters worshipping athletes and actors, putting your money above all else.”

“What does any of that have to do with baseball?” Sam asked.

“Baseball, what a silly sport. How many hours do you spend preparing? Two? Three? So you can hit the little white ball farther, and run the bags faster. At least soccer is graceful, even tennis has an artistic sense, but baseball is bulky and crude. I guess it fits with your culture.”

That was it. I couldn’t take it anymore. “And what would you know of it, Frenchy. I’d like to see you swing a bat or throw a ball.”

“Anthony, Anthony, I have no wish to play your silly game. In France we speak of art and love, and are intelligent enough to appreciate true beauty, that which occurs in nature, and rests in all people.” Jacques picked up Sally’s hand and kissed it, staring at her with the bedroom eyes.

“Call me Anthony one more time and I’ll...”

“And you’ll what? Attack me with violence? Just like your Presidents. Always wanting to go to war instead of talk peacefully.”

I found myself standing now, feeling the blood rush in my head with every heartbeat. My fists were clenched. All I had to do was reach across the table and strangle the scrawny Frenchman by the neck. *Don’t prove his point. Don’t go to war with him. No matter what, it’ll look like it was over Sally.* I sat back down.

“Ya know Jacques,” I made an extra effort to role the “J”. “I bet your dirty French grandpas and uncles don’t feel the same way you do.”

“What do you mean? Why do you call my ancestors dirty?”

“While they were busy laying down their weapons so Hitler’s boys could march right in and take over, back here in the good ole US of A we were planning how to bail your sorry French asses out. And that’s exactly what we did. So you could appreciate your beauty, and speak your language of love, not take baths for a week at a time, and bitch and moan about every move this country makes.”

Jacques flew up from his seat, pointing and yelling at me in French. I’m sure I could hear the word cocksucker in there somewhere. Sally collected him and walked him away from the table. Sam, Pick, and boys started clapping of course.

“Are you Roman Swivel?” A student worker was standing next to Roman with a piece of paper in her hand.

“Yes.”

“Here you go.”

Roman opened the call slip.

Heather leaned over to peek at it. “That’s the athletic office. Coach Demera’s office.”

Roman knew exactly where it was but seemed to be in denial. He looked at me. “What do you think he wants?”

“You know exactly what he wants.”

## VI

An older lady that looked more like a librarian than athletic personnel greeted Roman as he entered the office. She told him to go in and have a seat, and that Coach Demera would be right with him.

While most of the school reeked of prison décor, Demera’s office was quite different. The office looked small but only because there were so many items jammed into its space and hung on its walls. A single chair sat in front of the baseball coach’s desk and Roman sat down.

Behind the desk, running the entire length of the top of the office wall, hung the ten plaques from the Silver Streaks’ previous state playoff appearances. There were several third and fourth place engravings; even a couple of seconds, but the elusive first was absent. Countless baseballs with player’s signatures were frozen in time by the glass cases that housed them. They sat on the file cabinets and smaller desks around the office, reminders of the past and of teams that didn’t want to be forgotten. The floor was green and looked to be turf instead of carpet. Old mitts and bats were stacked neatly against the bottom of the walls, and they gave off the smell of dirt and nostalgia, tricking Roman’s nose into thinking he was at the ball field.

Below the state playoff plaques, in a mural that took up most of the wall, was a painting—no doubt created by a former player or players. It was abstract—an out of focus blend of silver and black—and in it stood a person holding two scales, one in each hand. It immediately reminded Roman of Lady Justice in courtrooms, except the scale holder was dressed in a baseball uniform and cap, and wore no blindfold. In his left hand he held the lighter scale, which was stacked with numerous bricks. And on each brick was a word. Roman read them with the shutter speed of a camera: preparation, intelligence, ability, luck, strength, speed, size, focus, pride, leadership, experience. In the player’s right hand he held the other scale. It had a single brick on it, but the player leaned toward its side because of the weight. The scale was only an inch or so off the ground. On the brick was a single word: Determination.

“Glad you like it,” Demera’s voice came from behind Roman. “It’s about as true a philosophy as I’ve come across. Not only in this game, but all aspects of life. Too many times I’ve seen teams that should’ve run the table but didn’t—all because they didn’t have the one brick that’s more important than the rest.”

Demera walked around the desk, sipping something from his black and silver mug, and sat down in front of Roman. "I'm not going to waste your time here so if you don't mind I'm going to cut right through the bullshit."

Roman nodded.

"You know why you're here. You're obviously no dummy. I took a look at your grades. I've never begged a player to come out and I'm not about to start with you. Don't even want ya if you don't have that all-important brick in your own arsenal. I don't give a shit about where you've been or how many people you struck out in the past. The only thing I care about is this team, and I know you could make us better. I don't expect you to decide right now, but I do want you to consider something. In my high school coaching career I've coached roughly eight hundred players. Thirty percent of those guys went on to play college ball, ten percent played some sort of professional ball, and one lonely soul made it to the big dance. Not one of them came in the first day of practice and hit ninety-four on the gun. Not a one of 'em."

Demera took out a folder and started working through it. Roman just sat there, unsure if the meeting was over. When the coach failed to speak more, Roman got up.

"One more thing, Roman. I may have coached eight hundred players but I've cut three times that. I've got the sad job of crushing the dreams of young men. Guys like Jason Wallace. A kid, strong as an Ox, who hit the ball harder in the cage than most I've had. Cut him though, because he was born with legs that only formed down to his knees. The poor guy hit off his stumps at about three feet off the ground. Jason would've cut his left nut off and sat it on my desk, if he could've played this game. If he could do what you can do."

Coach Demera went back to the papers on his desk.

Roman stood in the doorway for several minutes, looking into the mural on the wall.

## VII

Agent Johnson pulled up to the garage door on the side of the broken-down warehouse. The bricks were actually red, but looked the color of brown rust. Johnson pushed a button on his dashboard and the door contracted upward. He pulled the car into the warehouse and parked next to the rest of the vehicles.

Johnson walked to the far side of the warehouse. Two goggle-type eyepieces protruded out of the wall. Johnson placed his eyes against them and a red beam scanned over his eyes. Below the eye scan was a metal mold. Johnson's hand went into it and a quiet beep sounded from behind the wall. A panel slid sideways and where a second ago there was just a wall, there was now a doorway. Johnson walked in.

"Level two," Johnson said.

"Level two," the elevator responded, descending after the door shut.

On level two the door opened. Johnson walked the length of the hallway in front of him passing by countless empty offices. He came to a large metal door. The door opened automatically. Johnson took off his trench coat and hung it on the coat rack next to the door.

The peephole as Johnson and the rest of the agents called it was a small plain room. There was only space for two or three people maximum in it. Agent Stenworth stood with his arms folded in front of him, shaking his head back and forth. On the wall directly in front of Stenworth was a two-way mirror. The peephole showed what was in the next room.

There, an Arab man was seated in a steel chair. Thick metal clamps covered his wrists and ankles, keeping him tight against the seat. The chair was built into the floor, a permanent fixture in the room. Bright lights hung above the man from the ceiling. Padded egg-shaped foam draped the wall of the room. The screams from the man could only be heard over an intercom. The screams were loud even though the intercom was turned down to its lowest level. The man was naked, sweating profusely, and coated with dark almost black blood. A puddle of urine and blood lay on the floor beneath the chair.

Johnson was unmoved by the scene.

“We got a trooper here huh?” Johnson asked.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Stenworth replied. “We’ve been going at him for over twelve hours, ever since I got your email. Nice work by the way. This son of a bitch is about as tough as they come. Didn’t speak a lick of English for the first two hours, after that he spoke it quite well. Had the interpreter in here for nothing. Still won’t give us the location though. I’ll tell ya we’ve gone down the list with this guy. Injected him with the truth juice. Gave him a good hour of high voltage. Hit him with the clubs until Sike and Williams couldn’t lift their arms to swing them anymore. We pulled out everyone of his fingernails and two of his teeth with a pair of pliers, and still nothing.”

“What’s the blood from under the chair?” Johnson asked.

“We were sticking ice picks in his balls and ended up having to castrate the poor bastard. I had to call the meds to sew up his crotch so he wouldn’t die on us,” Stenworth replied.

“Have you tried the tank yet?” Johnson asked.

“I thought it would take too long,” Stenworth responded.

“This guy just wants us to put him out of his misery, if he knows he’s gonna live for awhile, he might be more inclined to give it to us,” Johnson said.

“What’s this asshole’s name again?” Johnson asked.

“Mushin Ahmed,” Stenworth said back.

Johnson held down the button on the intercom. “Take Mr. Ahmed down to the tank,” he said.

Sike and Williams unlocked Mushin from the chair and his body fell in the blood and urine in front of him. Agent Sike wrapped a thin chain around his neck and pulled up until Mushin was on his feet.

In the tank, Mushin’s wrists were placed in steel cuffs hooked to two chains that hung a good ways from the ceiling. A plastic vitals monitor was placed on one of his fingers. A clamp was placed around his neck with wiring running out of it that went up to the ceiling as well. Sike took Mushin’s left arm and placed an I.V. into one of the veins in his forearm. The plastic tube from the I.V. also rose to the top of the ceiling along the path of the chains that imprisoned Mushin. Williams placed a mask over his face, stopping him from using his mouth to bite anything or

anyone. Mushin's legs were shackled tightly as well, keeping him in a vertical position.

The tank was only 20 feet by 20 feet, but had a ceiling as high as forty feet. The ceiling had two large air ducts implanted in it. The walls were colorless, like the floor, made out of concrete. Underneath Mushin's feet was a drain and under the drain, a metal seal. At the bottom of all four walls were circular holes the size of softballs. The only light that entered the room was from the solid steel door that opened to the hallway

Agent Johnson walked into the tank and stood directly in front of Mushin. He grabbed Mushin by the hair on top of his head, raising it until Mushin's eyes met his.

"I want to tell you what all this is for, Mr. Ahmed," Johnson began. "In the two minutes after I leave this room, thirty eight degree water will be pouring in from the holes you see at the bottom of the walls, until it has filled the room up to your waist. Since the blood from your heart travels into your legs and into the water, your core body temperature will begin to decrease at a rapid pace, until the point of hypothermia. But just before that point we'll drain the water from under your feet, fill the room with hot air and warm you back up. The wire attached to your finger there, is fed to our computers in the next room, which monitors your body temperature, heart rate, and tells us whether you're awake or not. If you should happen to fall asleep Mr. Ahmed the collar around your neck will send 30,000 volts through your body until you wake up. Sleep deprivation in our experience is far worse than the pangs of hunger and physical bodily harm."

"It matters not, Allah will take me within the hour," Mushin replied.

"See that's the kicker, as we say here in the States, Mr. Ahmed. That I.V. in your arm has enough good stuff in it to keep you alive for a week or so. That's a long time to wait to see Allah. We already know it's in San Francisco. We know it's in the next forty-eight hours. We even know who is planting the bomb. Kazar and the boys spilled their guts on that one so to speak. All you have to give us the location they're staying at beforehand Mr. Ahmed. I'm sure you'll do the sensible thing. In return we will give you your death."

Johnson patted him on his bruised shoulder as he left the room. The door slammed shut cutting off the light from the hallway.

Two hours passed. Mushin's body shivered with the frequency of an earthquake. Every few minutes the shakes would stop and Mushin would drift off into sleep—only for a second. The voltage brought him back each time, almost popping his eyes out of their sockets. The desire to fulfill his mission and please Allah was slowly being replaced by the desire to meet Allah.

Stenworth, Sike, and Williams watched the monitors in the room next to the tank with anticipation. Johnson entered the room holding a cup of coffee. The silence broke as Stenworth struck a match and lit a cigarette. Stenworth looked at his watch as he inhaled hard on the smoke.

Stenworth started for the door. "It's been two hours, we've got to call Langley."

Johnson put his hand on Stenworth's chest stopping his tract to the door. "Give it a little while longer."

“We don’t have any longer. Every second counts,” Stenworth said.

“What are you going to tell them, that we don’t have anything yet? They’re just going to tell you to keep trying. This is all we’ve got. He’s going to break. Give it forty minutes and then if we have nothing, you can make the call,” Johnson replied.

“Alright, forty minutes,” Stenworth replied, smashing the cigarette under his shoe.

Forty minutes was an overshoot. It only took half that time. Achmed’s screams came over the monitor, some of them in English and some in Arabic. Not only did he give them the apartment they were staying at but the precise time of the attack. The van they were using. Their names and descriptions. All of it spilled out like the blood that came before it. The bomb was going to go off while the terrorists drove across the Golden Gate, and it was all going down in less than six hours during rush hour.

“Did you record all that?” Johnson asked Sike.

“Got it all,” Sike replied.

“Get Langley on the phone. Have them call my cell when the terrorists and the bomb are secured,” Johnson said.

The water drained from the tank and hot air started to pump into the chamber. Johnson walked in and stood in front of Mushin once again, who was now mumbling in Arabic.

“Once we have the bomb and your friends in custody I’ll put you out of your misery Mr. Achmed. Hopefully for your sake we won’t have to fill this tank up and start all over.” Mushin shook his head from side to side.

With agents from the FBI and CIA already combing every crevice in San Francisco the hunt took no more than an hour. The bomb was secured. Two of the suspects were taken by force; the other was shot down in a gun battle with the field agents.

Johnson’s cell phone rang. The conversation was short.

Johnson raised his gun, pointing it between the tired yellow eyes in front of him.

“Thanks for your cooperation Mr. Achmed,” Johnson said.

A single shot rang out in the tank, piercing Mushin’s forehead, killing him instantly.

## VIII

The first five minutes of practice, during stretching, I kept looking over at the double doors hoping Roman would walk in. There were other glances at the door as well. Coach Demera acted like he didn’t give a shit. His “one player never makes a team” philosophy was hard at work trying to disguise the anticipation evident in his fidgety feet drawing circles on the fieldhouse floor and in his apparently nonchalant glances toward the hallway. Coach Grouse paced around as much as his short stubby legs would carry him. Halfway through practice I quit looking at the door, but kept thinking what a waste of talent it was. I helped out scared freshman (several of whom wouldn’t be back tomorrow) with bunting drills and such. I hit in the cage. I caught for a couple of last minute desperate guys who

thought they were all of a sudden pitchers. It was just a deflated practice for me, going through the motions, pissed off because all hope seemed to be lost.

Coach Demera never mentioned Roman that night. But he was oddly quiet. His voice wasn't banking off the fieldhouse walls, telling an infielder to get his butt down, or a hitter to quit dropping his hands. We also ran more sprints that night than I remembered in all of the previous years. A couple of players that might have made the team actually walked out after sprint number fifty something. Coach Demera would deny it to his deathbed, but I think he was just taking his frustration out on us.

A curious thing happened the following morning. Final cuts were posted outside Coach's office on a piece of paper. It was real simple. If your name was on the sheet, you made the team. If it wasn't, don't get any stupid ideas like Coach accidentally left you off.

I must have been the very last one to look at it. Ten minutes before the first bell. My finger found the Falcone name after scrolling down only a couple of spaces. It was one of those situations where it came in handy to have a name that was at the front of alphabet. Some other names on the list: Pick Bryant, Sam Peterman, Scott Jakowski, and Johnny Killman. The very last name, listed with an asterisk next to it, was none other than Roman Swivel. In four years I'd never seen someone make the team by only coming to one day of tryouts, much less the last five minutes at the end. I guess the asterisk meant he performed well enough to make the team, but wasn't present for the entire tryouts. Coach Demera was keeping hope alive a little while longer it seemed.

Roman didn't share our optimism. At lunch our pleading and words of encouragement fell on deaf ears. Heather even intervened, trying to talk sense into that Iowa farm boy buried deep in Roman's soul. She ended up calling him obtuse, which I imagine is what smart people say to one another when they really mean "dumb ass". Roman was flattered; I could see it in his eyes. He appreciated the guys at the table thinking so much of him, and he was surprised that Coach had kept his name on the list. But that was as far as it went.

## IX

Roman showed up his usual half-hour before roll call. He organized his janitor cart, topping off the bottles of cleaning solution, replacing dirty rags with clean ones, and even wiping the cart down from top to bottom. Boss Chatterling handed out assignments to all the other janitors and released them into the hallways.

The Boss leaned back on her makeshift desk in the dusty boiler room, removed her glasses, and rubbed the hard-pressed indentions on the sides of her nose. Roman stood at attention.

"Ya know Swivel, when you first started here I would of bet a lot of money that you would never make it. Physically I mean. You're just a scrawny little guy, and I never thought your body would ever keep up with the demand. Never judge a book by its cover I guess. They still say that don't they?"

"Yes."

“In thirty-seven years I’ve never had a worker as good as you. You take pride in your work just like I do. Maybe that’s why you and I have always gotten along so well.”

“Boss Chatterling, you’re not gonna get mushy on me, are you?” Roman smiled expecting one in return.

Helen only put her glasses back on and spoke in a serious tone. “Perish the thought Swivel. Perish the thought.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Quite the opposite Swivel. Something’s very right. That’s what makes it so hard. I knew I’d lose you in a couple a months. I just never knew it would be this soon.”

“I’m not following you.”

“I’ve got to let you go.”

“I don’t understand. You just said I was the best...”

“Let me explain Swivel. I got a call from Coach Demera over the weekend. I’m firing you for your own good. There’s a group of guys that really needs you.”

“I made a commitment to work for you. I don’t want to let you down. Besides that’s just a game, they’ll do fine without me.”

“Is that what your father would have said Swivel? That it’s just a game.”

Roman didn’t reply.

“I didn’t think so. Believe it or not Swivel, this high school was cleaned meticulously before you got here, and it still will be. Granted I might have to hire three guys to take your place, but in the end I always find a way to get it done.” Helen stood up and picked an envelope off the desk. “I figured up eleven weeks until the end of school. I had payroll cut you a check for that time and then some. Imagine that, me manipulating the system. Consider it severance pay.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t go gettin’ all mushy on me Swivel. You don’t have to say anything. Just go strike the sons of bitches out.”

Roman smiled. “Thank you, for everything.”

Boss Chatterling held out her hand and shook with the former janitor. Roman still couldn’t get over her grip.

“The pleasure was all mine, Swivel.”

## X

We’d already spent thirty minutes of practice trying to get through stretching. Coach Demera was a perfectionist, so when stupid freshmen didn’t follow the routine, we all had to run. What should have taken ten minutes tops turned into a circus of confused underclassmen. Coach would always let us seniors sort out the mess, but after several failed attempts, running was the only surefire way to get everyone’s attention.

After finally making it through the stretching, we were allowed to play catch. Even after continued warnings from us upperclassmen, the stupid-ass freshmen continually dropped balls. So we ran more laps. Then we got our gloves and tried it again. Two minutes later we were back running.

The first week of Coach's practices were often referred to as hell week. Demera had two major critics of his coaching methods: parents who thought the players were being subjected to cruel and unusual punishment, and their sons who were secretly cursing Coach in the silence of their thoughts. Nobody liked the piss run out of 'em, least of all me. But I also was smart enough to know that it worked. Fear was a great motivator, maybe the greatest. And two weeks from now you'd be hard pressed to see a ball hit the ground during catch, or somebody talking to their neighbor and out of sync during stretching. Whether you liked or hated the man, the result was always the same: he made you better.

After catch, we divided up into infielders and outfielders for drill work. That meant how to drop step on a ball and crow hop correctly for outfielders, and wooden gloves for infielders. Wooden gloves were exactly what their name stated—circular thin slabs just big enough to cover your hand, with an elastic band on the back for your fingers. Those crude devices turned mere mortals into actual shortstops and second basemen.

It was during those monotonous drills that Roman walked in. He still had his gray janitor outfit on and couldn't have looked more out of place. The drills stopped. Everybody including the coaches just stared for a minute. Then there were a few claps and before long the entire varsity joined in, expressing their welcome with their hands.

"That's enough," Coach Demera said.

The clapping stopped.

"I've got good and bad news for you, Swivel. The good news is I'm going to let you practice in that get up of yours this one time. You can tell from the ovation your teammates want you with them, and so do I. The bad news is your teammates have run a hundred eighty-seven forty-yard sprints in the time that you've missed. You're gonna have to take care of that before you can join them."

My stomach tightened at the thought. I was a little nervous that Roman might rethink playing after such a burden. But he only nodded and went to the track. Demera sent one of the assistant coaches to count the sprints.

Our drills continued, and then there was a walk-through of our bunt defenses, and at the end there was base running. Roman was still running after practice finished. The entire varsity stayed around and watched. It wasn't that we liked watching him run, it hurt all of us. It was more of a respect thing. And then Coach Demera did the unthinkable. He pulled out his stopwatch as Roman ran, clicked it at the beginning and at the forty-yard mark. Roman was sucking hard for air by this time. I don't care how good of shape you're in; forty minutes of sprints will make jello out of the best legs.

Coach Demera looked down at the watch and shook his head. "What number are you on Swivel?"

"One hundred and eighty," the janitor gasped back.

"I've got bad news again. If you don't run the sprint in under six seconds it doesn't count. And if doesn't count you have to start over. You just ran that one in six three."

This was the moment I'd feared. It was also the reason we all stayed around. I knew what Coach was doing. He wanted to make sure Roman was

committed. And in his mind the only affirmation of this was to take Roman to the point of breaking him mentally and physically. He wanted to know how bad the janitor wanted it.

Roman looked at Coach in disbelief, but only briefly. He got back on the line and waited for the go ahead.

“Go,” Demera said and clicked the watch.

I jogged up to Roman at the far end and took the place next to him. His eyes were squinted from the sweat, and I could hear the air wheezing in his chest. “What are you doing?” he said.

“I’m running these with you. This is a team game remember?”

After two sprints Sam Peterman, Pick Bryant, and Scott Jakowski were running with us. After four everyone but Johnny was running. And after six, even the Killer joined in.

As much of a hard ass as Demera was, he had a soft spot for team camaraderie. He only made us run ten sprints as a group, citing that nineteen guys running ten sprints was one ninety, and that was three more than he needed.

Roman thanked us all afterward.

We thanked him as well.

And that’s how it went it for us. In the two weeks that followed, we were subjected to Coach’s perfection; his never-pleased you-can-do-better philosophy, and the boot camp practices that went along with it. That meant three hours a night of cussing and yelling from the drumlike voice of a man who stood no more than five-ten, and looked as if he should be teaching art appreciation somewhere. It meant practices outside anytime it wasn’t freezing, even though there’s not much difference between thirty-three and thirty-two when you’re fighting the winds of March. It meant going over bunt defenses, cut-off alignments, offensive procedures like hit and run and bunting. It meant fielding ground balls with wooden gloves. It meant swinging the bat until the blood blisters on our hands popped. We did it all a thousand times and then some. And when we messed up, when somebody dropped the ball so to speak, we ran until we puked. Then we ran some more. And just when your body thought it couldn’t take any more, when your legs told your brain there’s no way they could take another step, we started all over again. For me it meant pitchers like Roman popping my mitt until I couldn’t feel my fingers anymore and blocking fifty or so balls a practice off the floor from the pitching machine.

When running and puking did not get the results Coach Demera was looking for he would clear practice, throw us out, and tell us not to come back until we were serious. There were guys like Johnny the Killer cussing Coach, quietly plotting as we ran to come together and overthrow his evil regime. Maybe if we stood against Coach and refused his tortures he would change. Johnny the Killer on several occasions tried to get us all to quit. What would Coach do then? Maybe we could jump him in the parking lot after practice. It was all bullshit though, just hot air venting from the mind of a guy who was known in the real world as the Killer, but in Demera’s practices as Johnny Killman. Truth be told, Johnny was scared shitless of Coach. Never said a word to the man’s face. Johnny, like the rest of us, had been through it for four years. He knew what the

deal was. If we all hated Coach Demera enough it united us. The only way to beat him was to be perfect. And the only way to be perfect was to come together as a team, to care about the guys next to you more than yourself.

Coach Demera majored in Psychology in college, and I think only the fear of jail time prevented him from putting shock collars on us. I imagine he dreamed at night of those collars, and how abrupt the results would be with their use. The funny thing was—and Coach had this down to a science—just about the third week of practice, when everyone was at their breaking point, and hating him more than any person they ever met or heard about, our games started. We now had a whole team to focus our frustration on instead of one man.

Curious things happened that last week right before the first game. The fire in our legs started to recede. The soreness in our arms was gone. We were running sprints with ease. The blisters on our hands were now callused over. The bickering between teammates over mistakes, the talking during stretching, the goofing around, and the dropped balls during catch—all of them were gone. In three weeks he'd chiseled us into a ball team. And when the guys started to throw harder, hit better, run faster, and realize that they were in the best shape of their lives, instead of hating Coach, they started to love him.

Roman took to Coach's system immediately. Demera's practices were highly organized—there wasn't a second of three hours wasted—and Coach demanded perfection. Those philosophies fit like pieces of a puzzle into the slots of Roman's brain. It was inspiring to watch him go from being last in the sprints to first, to watch Coach Grouse mold him from just a thrower to a pitcher, to watch him become a silent leader on the team because of his work ethic. Roman even stayed around after practice every night at Sam Peterman's request, and threw him countless balls in the cage. He never complained like the rest of us. I guess when you've lived a life like Roman's, baseball could hardly be considered work.

## XI

Near Washington D.C.

Agent Johnson sat on his sofa in the dark, holding a glass of wine and staring at the picture on his end table. The photo had been taken the day they closed on the house. His wife and son had the same smile—wide gleaming teeth that seemed to take up the entire width of their faces. They'd never gotten a chance to spend a night in the house—a man halfway around the world with a warped idea about how planes should be used on the Twin Towers had seen to that. Johnson smiled anyway, and ran his long fingers down the sides of their faces in the photograph.

The pile of mail sat on his hardwood floor, touched last by the mailman who sent it through the slot day after day. Johnson couldn't remember the last time he had actually been home. His wardrobe was scattered across the country at Bravo and the other NN bases. It was better that way—to be working all the time. There was nothing left for him here anyway and the evil in the world wasn't going go away by him just sitting at home. Johnson wasn't naïve enough to think that finishing off Kazar and his plot was the end of it. But freedom was built on one dead terrorist at a time. So what was next?

Johnson flipped open his phone to find no messages waiting. He walked over to the only other piece of furniture in the room, which was a computer station. He turned it on and swirled the wine around in his glass and drank it down, waiting for the computer to access his NN account. There were no emails. To most this would be a blessing, but Johnson didn't know how to function anymore without an assignment in front of him. He had fought, chased, and killed for so long it was all he knew now.

He sat there for a second, maybe wishing the computer would chime the familiar alert letting him know he had an email, maybe hoping there would be new orders for him, maybe wishing the Voice would call him in and have another assignment. But he already the next assignment didn't he? One that he was not looking forward to. The lack of communication was an eerie way of fate telling him it was time.

Looking forward to it or not, there was only one way to go about this work of his, and that was to get on with it. Johnson brought up the NN's search engine—a cruel device that not only searched the Internet and all of its numerous browsers, but also broke into so-called secure locations of state and local governments, as well as private companies and schools. Johnson had conquered the awkwardness of his oversized fingers walking on a keyboard several years back, and now they danced keys that spelled Roman Swivel into the blank space. He hit the search button. Only seconds passed.

“0 surface query hits for ‘Roman Swivel,’” the screen read. “Would you like to do an exhaustive search with Internet Bots?”

Internet Bots were not robots at all, but a billion or so programs that “crawled” every inch of the unfathomable amount of data in cyberspace. The Bots search may take days, even weeks, but if the name Roman Swivel floated out in the electrical universe, they would find it. Johnson clicked yes.

“Where are you Roman?” he whispered to himself. “Where are you?”

## XII

Gina Hawthorne walked into *The Lone Rose*. Most of the time when she wanted flowers one of the employees would be sent, but this was an occasion Gina wanted to be perfect. There wasn't time to deal with the errors of the servants.

*The Lone Rose* wasn't your typical flower shop. Upon opening the door, the usual rush of fragrance hit Gina in the face, but there was something else. The smell of expensive brewed coffee lingered in the air, and the aroma of cinnamon made its way through the thick floral scent. Classical music danced over the flower petals, surrounded the interior of the store, and bounced off the large glass windows that made up the wall just to the left of the entrance. Lavish flower-printed furniture lined the outlying walls, and on those furnishings sat different people, most of them women Gina's age. They ate Danishes and sipped their flavored coffees in petite cups, the handles of which could only be held by two fingers.

Freddy spotted Gina immediately and rushed out from behind the counter, almost knocking over one of his employees. He walked over quickly, trying to keep a professional demeanor. Their smiles met in the middle of the aisle—a smile

that would not be so happy if Gina knew of her daughter's circumstances at Extravaganza and if Freddy knew that the blond beauty that helped ruin his party was the daughter of the person he now spoke to.

"Dear Mrs. Hawthorne, to what do we owe a morning filled with such grace and beauty?" The Flower asked and bent down to kiss her hand.

"Only your help, Mr. Flowers, only your help," Gina said and laughed.

"How may I be of service?"

"I host Bridge club this month, and was wishing to decorate the house for the occasion."

"Your wish is my desire. I can only hope that your purchase will be half as lovely as the woman in front of me."

Gina didn't blush, only batted her eyes at the shower of compliments. With her looks and more importantly her money, she had come to expect such adoration. "I am not going to waste your valuable time Mr. Flowers by picking out every plant. I trust your keen insight and impeccable reputation in such matters."

Freddy walked over to the counter, picked up a pad and pencil, and began to write. "Will you be doing the entire mansion or just the lower levels?"

"Just the immediate area. The foyer, sunroom, staircase, and of course the dining room...speaking of the staircase, you wouldn't happen to know of a good carpenter would you? My daughter's new boyfriend pointed out a couple flaws in our wood work and it's been driving me to insanity ever since."

"What an auspicious question. I recently hired a carpenter myself, to fix one of my warehouses some meddling teen-agers decided to try to burn to the ground. It must be fate that brings you here to today."

"Would your man be interested in some side work?"

"I'm certain he would be. The man is a genius when it comes to carpentry. I think we are going to go into the furniture business together. Should I send him over so you could talk?"

"Mr. Flowers, your word is good enough."



## Chapter 17

### The Smell of Spring

#### I

I remember that first game like it was yesterday. The middle of March was an ugly time for baseball in the Midwest. The high temperature was thirty degrees and it snowed so hard at one point we had to stop the game for fifteen minutes. No matter how many pairs of socks you wore, it was always hard to feel your toes.

We didn't fill the five thousand seats at Collingston County Stadium, but there were a good five hundred Silver Streak faithful braving the elements that day. There were a lot of old timers that never missed a game. Most of them had probably been alive when the damn thing was built and for one reason or another just couldn't stay away. Then there were the students, people like Jack and Brunno, who wouldn't pass up a free opportunity to make fun of opposing teams and yell degrading comments. And there were the parents and girlfriends of players, people who didn't give a shit about baseball, but would be damned if they'd miss their loved one making some great play. All of them were bundled up like Eskimos and sat practically cheek to cheek for warmth.

Joliet Catholic was our opponent that day, a private school powerhouse that always had a strong program and finished high in the state tournament every year. Johnny shut them down for four innings, allowing only one base runner on a walk. We were up by four runs thanks to a two out bases loaded triple by yours truly. And then the snow came. The umpire let us play through it as long as we could but decided to clear the field when *he* couldn't see anymore. It was soft, wet snow, with huge flakes that you could almost hear plop when they hit the ground. The air was thick and white for a good fifteen minutes.

Most of my teammates huddled in the bottom of the dugout during the delay, rubbing their hands together and in some cases jumping in place for warmth. Roman sat on one of the benches at the end, positioned with his hands in his baseball jacket and his legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles. Demera and Grouse argued about whether Johnny the Killer was going to take the mound after the break or if they should bring someone new in. Grouse usually lost these battles, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Johnny might go back out. I stood at the top step and scanned the crowd in the stands. Most of the time I was so focused on the game I couldn't tell you one person in attendance. It was kinda nice to be able to look at the crowd.

The majority was massed together just behind home plate. It was the best view in the park and also the least windy. Carl sat off by himself, drinking out of a can wrapped in newspaper. The elements had still not swayed him from his drink of choice. Mr. Buttworst had his camera strung around his neck, snapping pictures of what he would later call "baseball in the snow." Carl left his seat briefly to talk to the good teacher, undoubtedly asking him questions about his camera and his photography hobby.

Heather sat in the middle of the crowd—pink earmuffs and all—leading her cheerleading friends in stupid little chants and cheers that ended up in laughter.

Sally sat a couple rows in front of the main group with her coat pulled up around her neck and slouched down in her chair. Frenchy had his puny little arm around her with a thin jacket on and no stocking cap. His nose was as red as Rudolph's and even from that distance I could see him shiver. French Boy was definitely not dressed for the occasion, and I bet he wished Sally had her arm around him instead of the other way around. Good. Maybe he would turn into a pasty white French popsicle. Ma and Pops sat up toward the top of the stadium, wrapped in their matching Eskimo outfits.

Johnny took the mound again in the fifth. The snow shower had done minimal damage to the field. The only evidence of a delay was the wisps of white snow here and there on the infield grass. It reminded me of the lightly frosted fake Christmas trees of a department store. The dirt was damp but still solid on account of it probably being frozen.

As good as Johnny was in the first four innings, he was that bad in the fifth. He threw his first pitch five feet over my head to the backstop and walked two hitters on eight pitches in a row. I glanced over at the dugout to see Demera shooting Grouse a piercing "I told ya so" glance. Coach Grouse shook his head and in seconds the two were arguing again, hopefully about whom they were going to bring in. I called time and walked to the mound, not really to talk to Johnny, but to buy some time.

I saw Roman take his jacket off and head for the bullpen as I got to the Killer. "I'll be fine. I just need to get warmed back up. I think my arm is fuckin' frozen," Johnny said.

"You're done, Johnny. We just have to buy some time to get Roman warmed up. If Coach doesn't take a trip, make sure you take a lot of time between pitches."

"We're bringing in the goddamn janitor? Shit! I can get these assholes out. I've done it the whole game."

I continued to act like I was listening to Johnny's rant, but all I could hear was Bill Wright's mitt popping in the bullpen down the left field line. The umpire broke us up in time to save my rebuttal to the Killer.

Batter number three of that inning reached base on an infield single. Johnny made a good pitch—an inside fastball at the knees that sawed the hitter off. Unfortunately the ball rolled past the pitcher's mound and slowed so much that Pick Bryant at short had no play on it. The only thing he could do was hold the ball. Although no runs scored, the bases were now loaded and the tying run was coming to the plate.

Coach Demera called time and came to the mound—a snail's pace replaced the usual giddy-up in his step. People that don't know the game get upset when all this time out and talking shit happens, but that's just 'cause they don't know what's really going on. Demera was doing the same thing I just did. He was using his free trip to the mound to buy Roman some more time to get warm. I don't remember the exact conversation on the mound between the three of us, but it had nothing to do with baseball. Johnny kept trying to convince Coach that he could get out of the jam, but Demera kept commenting on the weather. He stood out there until the umpire broke us up, and when he got back to the dugout he called

time again, stating he'd changed his mind. He told the umpire he wanted the man in the pen.

Demera retrieved the ball from Johnny's hand and rubbed it in his palms as if to warm it. Johnny said, "I think you're making a mistake."

"You threw a good game Johnny, but that's why I make the big bucks, so you don't have to do things like think."

Johnny walked reluctantly off the mound, grabbed his first baseman's mitt from one of the subs that ran it out to him, and took his spot on the infield.

Roman sprinted from the bullpen out to the mound, his skinny frame unable to fill out the uniform that clothed it. He didn't look like a ball player. But I reminded myself he also didn't look like he could whip an army of thugs in the Hollow or at Freddy's warehouse.

Demera handed Roman the ball. "It's thirty degrees out and you don't have on any sleeves Swivel. You hot blooded or something?"

I answered for Roman. "The cold doesn't bother him none Coach."

Demera just shook his head and smiled. "In case you haven't been paying attention we're in a real pickle here, bases loaded, nobody out, and the tying run is at the plate. Are ya nervous kid?"

"A little."

"Don't be, this isn't your mess. My job as a coach is to find out what you're made of and apparently there's no time like the present. We've got the corners in, just try to keep the ball on the infield," Demera said and headed for the dugout.

Roman looked at the ball like it was going to share some confidence with him.

"Look," I said. "Johnny was getting these guys out before his arm froze up. It's cold and you throw hard, let's live on the inside corner. Sound like a plan?"

"Yes."

Roman's first warm-up pitch flew over my head and hit the backstop. The whole Joliet dugout was smiling like Hyenas, before the kill. His second pitch hit the plate and bounced over my head. The third pitch was right down the middle but with no zip. Pitches four through eight were on the inside corner and progressively elevated in velocity. Roman's last warm up stung my hand, and the popping sound of my mitt put a silence through the stadium as well as the Joliet dugout. They didn't look as anxious to step in the box as before.

The hitter stepped in and the umpire yelled, "Play." Roman stood on the mound with the ball in his mitt pointed toward home. The only part of his face I could see over the mitt was his eyes. Those brown spheres were full of concentration and for the first time my friend—the warrior genius janitor—was an actual ball player. He was a pitcher. I gave the old number one with my finger and Roman started his windup without shaking his head. He lifted his left leg with perfect balance to the point of his knee almost hitting him in the chin. His long arms swung like a pendulum, he took a fluid stride to the plate, and in a fraction of a second the ball hit my mitt. The batter looked back with raised eyebrows in disbelief. The stadium was as silent as I had ever heard it. The umpire made no

call. I held the ball there waiting for him to signal something. Finally the word “strike” came from his throat, but it was choked with amazement.

The crowd’s disbelief ended on strike three, when the batter took a swing after the ball was already in my glove. At first a few claps came and then they escalated to an all-out cheer. Grouse was smiling from ear to ear and paced around in the dugout, unable to stand still from his excitement. Roman was all business, stepping back on the rubber every time I threw the ball back to him.

Coach Demera’s wishes of a ground ball to the infield were far exceeded—Roman finished the game, striking out the side in all three innings throwing only thirty-six pitches. The opposing team touched the ball only once—a foul ball that would have killed somebody on their bench if they hadn’t scattered.

During the clean-up, guys were all over Roman, doing what teammates do—pounding him with compliments and making him feel like Cy Young. Roman only concentrated on the dirt he was raking on the mound. From time to time a smile would break free and a “thank you” might fly, but Roman shrugged off the praise. In his overly modest way he reminded the team that he only played three innings and that they already had the lead when he came in. Of all Roman’s talents, being a teammate might be his greatest. The spark of life he had energized people around it.

Mr. Buttworst and Carl made their way down to the fence by our dugout and caught Roman as he was putting his rake away. The teacher had his coffee mug in hand but set it aside to shake Roman’s hand. He held up his camera with a cheesy-ass smile on his face. “I’ve got some good shots of you for the yearbook, Roman. Just when I think you’re all out of surprises, you go and make a state-ranked team look like the Bad News Bears.”

Carl jumped in before Roman could say a word. “Say guy, you threw the ball well eh? Had them bastards scared you did. How do ya throw the ball so hard?”

The question almost overloaded Roman’s brain, not because it was difficult, but because there was no answer. After seconds of deliberation Roman told the truth. “I don’t know Carl, I just can.”

“Ha! That’s the first time Carl has ever heard you not be able to answer.”

“I’ll second that,” Buttworst said.

Roman just shook his head.

Mr. Buttworst reached in his coat, pulled out an envelope, and handed it over the fence. “I’ve been meaning to give this to you. Read it when you get home.”

“What is it?”

“Just read it when you get home.”

“Say guy, you want to come over and have a celebration brew?”

“Thanks Carl, but I think I’m just going to relax at home.”

“That means reading eh?”

“Eh,” Roman replied and laughed.

“Well take care,” Buttworst said as he walked off. “See you tomorrow. Carl, let me give you a ride; it’s on my way.”

“Carl will make your trip even shorter, Bill. Just drop me off at the watering hole.”

Roman stood and watched the two as they made their way to the exit—two men who had become unlikely friends, two men who were each in their own way as close to a father figure as Roman would probably ever have.

I caught up with Roman in the dugout after all the field equipment was put away. We were the last people left in the stadium besides Demera and Grouse. “You need a ride a home?”

“I think Heather’s waiting in the parking lot, but thanks.”

“You guys want to grab a sandwich or something?”

“I just want to go home I think. This pitching stuff is stressful.”

“Yeah, not allowing a ball in fair territory, striking out nine in a row, real stressful.”

Roman grabbed his equipment bag, patted me on the shoulder, and walked toward the gate. Heather stood there waiting for him.

As good as our start was, as good a game as I had, as happy as I was that Roman was a Silver Streak and did so good, something was missing. I just felt a little empty inside. I felt alone.

## II

As much as Roman disliked Heather’s driving—the non-slowness at turns, the constant riding of the bumper in front her, the running of yellow almost red lights—he never said anything. It was just something he got used to and now he read the contents of Mr. Buttworst’s envelope despite the jerkiness of the ride. Roman read both pages in seconds and looked out the window with a blank stare.

“What’s wrong?” Heather asked.

“Mr. Buttworst apparently sent my transcripts to Northwestern. This is a letter from the admissions office accepting me into the college of mathematics with a full scholastic scholarship.”

“That’s great Roman.” Heather looked over noticing Roman didn’t share her excitement. “I got my acceptance letter last week. Wouldn’t it be great to go to the same school? In a couple of years we could get a place together. We could...”

Heather stopped at the glance Roman was giving her. Even if the NN stopped hunting him, they would always haunt his dreams she imagined. Heather rode the bumper of the car in front of her, but instead of slowing swerved to the passing lane and accelerated the Mustang. Roman put his hand on the dashboard.

“How long has it been since you last saw him, six months? The way you talked, it sounded like Agent Johnson cared about you or at least respected you. Maybe he’s just going to let you live your life.”

“Even if he wanted to let me be, he doesn’t have a choice. He doesn’t make the rules. He only follows orders.”

Heather swerved from lane to lane, bypassing the slower vehicles and making her own route. “To hell with Agent Johnson and his orders. Maybe it’s just time to take a chance and move on. Are you going to spend the rest of your life waiting on a guy that may or may not show up?”

It was always a short trip with Heather, and the Mustang pulled up in Roman's driveway. "Maybe you should come in and convince me some more."

"Why Roman Swivel, what kind of girl do you think I am." Heather batted her eyes and laughed. A serious look came across her face a second later. "I planned on convincing you all night but only if you teach me to fight."

Roman laughed as he opened the car door.

"Come on Roman. You keep blowing me off and you promised you'd teach me to fight."

"I feel like I'm being propositioned here. I'll have to think about it," Roman said as he unlocked the front door.

"Think about it too long and you'll be thinking alone."

### III

The Pinto was the last vehicle left in the Stadium parking lot. Demera and Grouse had even left by then. I walked to the car with my head down and the gray clouds overhead as my only company. Their gloomy presence conveyed the same feeling that lived in the pit of my stomach.

Sally stood next to the Pinto. She looked about a hundred pounds heavier with all of her winter clothing on. I smiled, but couldn't tell if she returned the gesture on account of her coat collar covering her mouth. Only her eyes peeked through. They were a lot prettier than I remembered.

"Do you mind giving me a ride?" her muffled voice asked.

"Where's Frenchy?"

"His name's Jacques and he left with the others before the game ended because he was so cold."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I don't know. I really don't. Something made me stay and talk to you. I wanted to tell you what a good game you played. When you got the triple, I felt all warm inside, like I was there running the bases with you. Like a part of me swung the bat too."

"No offense Sally, but you haven't watched a whole game of baseball in your entire life and now you think you're hitting triples."

"That was before I met you."

I didn't know what to say. I just stood there and stared at her.

"So can I have ride or what?"

"I'm sorry," I sat down my equipment bag and unlocked the door for her.

The Pinto fired on the first turn of the key. The heat even worked now thanks to Roman, and Sally unzipped her winter coat and took off her gloves. "I don't think I've ever been this cold," she said, holding her hands in front of the vents on the dashboard.

Sally was good looking, always had been. It was hard to keep my eyes on the road while trying to sneak a peek every couple of seconds. There was something different about her though. It wasn't her hair or make up. She still had the same perfume. Her lipstick was the same.

"Did you do something different with your hair?"

“Nope, I’ve worn it the same way since school started. Why does it look bad?”

“No, no, just seems like there’s something different about you that’s all.”

Sally pondered the question for a moment. “Nope, nothing different.”

There was a long silence between us; so long in fact I drove north through the entire city of Collingston before another word was spoken. I had plenty of stupid ideas bouncing off the walls in my head.

I pulled in her driveway reminiscing about the fall day that her father came home and how bad my luck had been with her in the sex department. I wanted to speak volumes as she opened the door and stepped onto the street, but only one question came out. “Why are you with him?”

Without missing a beat, like she’d known the question was coming, in that eloquent way the female species can put the opposite sex in their place time and time again, she answered. “Because he treats me like a woman. Thanks for the ride, Tony.”

With that the Pinto’s door closed and Sally walked up to her front door, gave a brief wave, and disappeared into the house.

I put the Pinto in reverse and headed for home.

#### IV

Gina opened the double doors of the Hawthorne mansion. The man stood there in a brown Carhartt jacket, hands in his pockets, and eyes fixed on the ground. He raised them reluctantly to meet his new employer. He was only ten or so years younger than Gina, a rather handsome man with beautiful blue eyes. If it weren’t for the hideously obvious hairpiece, Gina could see one of her single friends dating him.

“You must be John Smith. Please come in. I’m surprised that you were able to work me in so quickly. Mr. Flowers said it might be a couple of weeks.”

John Smith only gave a shy nod and walked into the foyer.

“Can I take your coat?”

“No, thank you.”

Gina brushed off the man’s odd behavior, but there was something about him that she couldn’t put her finger on, something that was amiss. Maybe he was just tired. “Let me show you my problem.”

Gina turned and walked up the staircase and pointed out the two stairs that months before Roman had commented were off a couple of degrees. John turned his head trying to see the flaw but in the end just took a small level off of his belt and sat it on the stair. The bubble in the middle moved slightly to the right.

She led him back down the stairs into the dining hall, where she motioned to the wall and began to describe the fixture she would like to see adorn it. She would leave it up to him on the details, for she had already seen his craftsmanship first hand at *The Lone Rose*. She went on and on about how drab her mansion’s dining hall had been, and how there wasn’t a single day she passed up the stairs that the two off-kilter ones didn’t make her burn with anger. Eventually Gina’s babbling was drowned out by another voice, a voice that John Smith hadn’t heard

in a good while, a voice that emanated from the depths of his soul. The voice of Max Sheehan.

*Look at the dark brown hair. Isn't it lovely? She's very beautiful isn't she? Look at the way her breasts fill out her top, the way her ass fills out her pants. Not the ass of someone her age is it John? What could you do to that? What would you make her do?*

John Smith grabbed the necklace that hung around his neck, searching with his thumb until he held the charm on the end of it. It was Saint Jude, a gift from the priest down at St. Thomas's. John rubbed the charm between his thumb and index finger, as if the friction would erase the evil voice in his head. Gina continued her woeful story, a tale that could complicate only the lives of the rich.

*Crimson red lips, full and wet. Her face smooth, not a blemish on it. How soft is that neck?*

John rubbed the Saint more rapidly.

*Those beautiful eyes, you can see her soul through those eyes. And what would that soul look like as it trembled in those precious pupils...*

"I must go," John interrupted her. "I'll be back tomorrow to start the work."

"Oh, okay," Gina said and walked him to the door. "Is everything all right, Mr. Smith?"

John looked at her but with Max's eyes. "Just a little under the weather. I'll be back tomorrow."

John sprinted down the driveway to his truck after Gina closed the door. He stopped and gasped hard for air, not from the run, but from the person within choking him. John stood at the truck door, arguing with the voice in his head, on whether to leave or go back in and do what Max wanted to do.

After ten minutes of talking to himself out loud, John Smith got in the truck and drove off.

## V

Heather had given up on her calculus and now she stretched out on the couch and put a pillow behind her head. She propped the soft cushion so she could look at Roman as he read in his rocking chair. She watched as the pupils in his eyes sped down one line of his book and then shot back to the beginning of the next. It was like watching the mechanized structure of a typewriter at high speed. There was a slight wrinkle in his forehead, a sign of concentration for most, but Heather wondered if Roman's was more than that—did his line magically transport him into the pages of the story? She watched as his serious face morphed into brief glimpses of frowns and smiles, joy, and sorrow. His arms though thin were defined and his dark hair was still wet from the shower. Heather now found herself thinking of how truly handsome he was—a thought that had built over time. She thought back to the locker row at school when she'd dropped her grandma's cheerleader statue to the floor. The janitor with his ugly gray uniform and his shy personality was hardly attractive that day. It was amazing how the inside of a person transformed the outside. A smile came to her face. There was no doubt she was in love—very seldom does one get enjoyment from watching

another person read. It was peaceful. Heather imagined she could watch him forever.

Roman's eyes unlocked from the page for a brief yawn.

"Is it that boring?"

"Actually I can't put it down. I'm just tired," Roman responded.

Heather got up, walked over, and pulled back the book to see the cover.

"To Kill a Mocking Bird. You haven't read it before?"

"Amazing isn't it. Somehow I missed this one. You remind me of Scout. Sure she's a lot younger than you, but you're both strong, smart, and unsettlingly stubborn."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Speaking of stubborn, when are you going to teach me to fight?"

"Heather..."

"No don't Heather me, you promised and you keep putting me off."

"Why do you want to learn to fight so bad?"

"I want to be able to do the things you do. I want to be able defend myself against people like Bobby Dukes. I don't want to be the helpless damsel in distress."

"I would hardly categorize you as a damsel in distress. I should be worried about the rest of the people in the world, not you."

"Quit making jokes. You know what I mean."

Roman knew when he was beaten in arguments with her—unsettlingly stubborn might have been an understatement. "Fine, but know this. The only reason I can do the things I do is because I spent everyday of an entire year in a padded room fighting against some of the best in the world. Some things you can't teach."

"Just the basics then. Show me how to defend myself."

"Help me up." Roman stretched out his hand and Heather grabbed it. In a second Roman was on his feet with Heather's arm behind her back. Roman's other forearm was snug against her neck.

Heather tried in vain to pull free. She tried to slip out underneath. She tried to kick him in the genitals with a back swing of her leg. She even tried to bite his arm. All of her efforts ended in failure.

"By the time you try all those maneuvers you're out of oxygen," Roman whispered in her ear. "I'm pulling back so why are you trying to go forward? Which way should you go Heather?"

Heather stopped her struggle for a moment, gathered her thoughts, and took a deep breath. She stepped back against Roman, grabbed the forearm around her neck, flexed her shoulders forward and angled down. Roman rolled over her and slammed against the hardwood floor.

"Not bad," Roman said.

"Wow. I can't believe I just did that."

In the next hour Roman showed Heather the basics of combat—the rules from Ninja echoing in the caverns of his mind. He taught her how to step into a punch, what the most vulnerable points on her opponent's body were, and a few joint locks that would bring the biggest of men to their knees.

Their combat session ended with Heather pushing Roman backward onto the bed, with Roman telling her that this particular fighting style would be an ineffective tactic, with Heather silencing the last of Roman's lessons by putting her lips against his.

## VI

The winds of March blew themselves out eventually, turning the indecisive weather into a ritual of semi-daily rain showers and a constant climb in temperature. This was April, and though the moisture came in mist and sometimes sheets, while the trees started to bud and the grass became green with life, Silver Streak baseball was also on a crescendo to fever-pitch levels.

Roman was moved into the starting rotation because of his performance in the snow that first game. He took the mound every fourth day and annihilated every batter and team that stepped into the box against him. Teams tried to scout him, but it was useless. After all there wasn't much to scout—Roman threw the ball over the plate at ninety-plus miles per hour. He didn't have a certain way he pitched you or some magic potion he took before the games. Sure he would change speeds and throw an occasional off-speed pitch, but there was no need to slow the ball down for their bats. The magic was in his arm, either you could hit it or you couldn't. Most could not.

Roman made my job behind the plate very easy. If no one ever got on base it was hard for them to steal. A sore hand the next day was the only trouble I ever had. And while Roman was sending batter after batter back to the dugout, I was sending ball after ball flying. I hit over six hundred during that first stretch, pounding out ten doubles, three triples, and two homeruns.

Johnny the Killer found success as well. With Roman facing the tougher opponents Johnny mowed down the abilities of the second tier teams. He was more relaxed and didn't erupt one time on the mound. Johnny was a very strong number two pitcher, maybe the strongest in the state. Instead of being jealous of Roman taking his spot, he seemed to like his new role, and supported his former enemy in every aspect of the game. There was some kind of unspoken respect growing between the two of them. Maybe they would never be friends off the field, but both were competitors, and both became very close teammates.

Pick Bryant at Short and Scotty Jakowski at Second were near flawless up in the middle. I never really trusted middle infielders. They were liars—a mold that fit Pick perfectly—deceiving runners and worrying more about how pretty they looked than the actual outcome of their actions. But I tell you they were something to behold: their soft hands and lightning-quick actions turned the art of the double play into pure magic.

Sam Peterman tracked down many a fly ball in the outfield, gunned down runners trying to stretch singles into doubles, and got his share of hits, but still struck out way too much, especially with runners in scoring position. Roman continued to throw him a good half-hour of balls in the cage after every practice.

The small mass of people bundled behind home plate that first game had grown steadily with each victory. Now every home game was sold out to standing room only. They came to watch the skinny kid from Iowa chuck the pill at high

velocity. It seemed every strikeout added more people to the crowd. Our local newspaper, the Collingston Current, covered every game, home or away. The radio sent a pitch-by-pitch rundown over the airwaves. It didn't take long for the sports reporters to find that Roman was on pace to break just about every pitching record kept by the state athletic association. After ten games we were undefeated, ranked third in the state, and only one game went more than five innings on account of the ten-run rule. Roman had not given up a single run.

## VII

Washington D.C.

Agent Johnson sat in the back of the cab as it rolled by the Washington Monument. No matter how many times he strolled through the nation's capital, a sense of pride always fluttered in his stomach seeing its monuments, buildings, and memorials. It was that pride that had kept him at his job this long. Those structures were more than just granite and stone, they *were* America. And America still stood in large part because of contributions he made to its security.

It wouldn't be long now until he reached Andrew's Air Force Base. He would board the cargo plane with his luggage because ghosts couldn't fly with normal people, military or not. In umpteen hours he would be in Baghdad meeting informants that were close to the enemy. He would extract their information, determine if any of it was credible or relevant, and report back. A menial assignment such as this didn't bother him. It was just part of the bigger battle and someone had to do it. It was a slow month for terror if there was such a thing. If it weren't, Johnson's assignment would be quite a bit more difficult.

His cell phone rang just miles away from Andrew's and Johnson flipped out the all-important device. It was a call from someone with the NN.

"You might as well turn around. There have been some developments," his long time partner Stenworth said.

"Developments?"

"Did you do a search with Bots awhile back?"

Johnson thought a moment and then responded, "Yes; why?"

"They turned up something about a day ago. Do you have your laptop with you?"

"Yes."

"Turn it on. I'm going to download some pictures our satellites took as well."

"Thanks." Johnson shut his phone and unzipped the bag next to him. He opened the laptop and accessed the NN's search engine via satellite link. The results came in seconds.

The screen read: "12 query hits for Roman Swivel."

Johnson clicked on the links, noticing all were web links to the same site, the Collingston Current. He didn't read, only scanned for the most relevant information. The words that stuck out: Roman Swivel, Collingston, and Illinois. Johnson opened his email to find Stenworth's pictures already in it. The chance that this was the wrong Roman Swivel was put to rest by the images that now shown on his screen. They were Roman walking in front of school, Roman in a

yard in front of a house with a girl, and finally Roman standing on the mound in his uniform ready to deliver a pitch.

"I'll be damned," Johnson whispered to himself. "You couldn't stay hidden after all."

"Did you say something?" The cab driver asked.

"Turn around please, there's been a change of plans."

## VIII

It didn't take long for rumors of Roman's arm to spread—not only was it all over the media, but the baseball world as well. It started with a coach from the local community college to see the second time Roman took the mound. A few weeks later every baseball person from the University of Illinois to the New York Yankees was in attendance. All of them to get the once-janitor to sign on the dotted line.

Roman was uninterested at first. He wouldn't even speak to the scouts and coaches. I'm sure it was too farfetched for that genius mind of his to grab hold of, not because he thought he couldn't perform at those levels, but because just like every dream he dared to conjure, in the background was Agent Johnson always there to stop him. Eventually the scouts' insistent pursuit wore Roman down. And he did talk to them, but never committed to anything. He told them that he wanted to leave his options open.

The hysteria Roman's arm created was evident the day we played our archrivals Bloomington. The Purple Raiders were ranked fourth in the state, and we were now second. They had a lefty on the mound who threw in the mid-eighties with a great change-up. The scouts were foaming at the mouth at the potential matchup. There were more of them than I could count on brief glances to the stands on my way to and from home plate. All I could see was a sea of radar guns pointed toward the mound, a wall of people from the top of the bleachers that overflowed from one side to the other, and camera flashes from our fans who knew they were witnessing something at Collingston Stadium that they might never see again.

Neither pitcher failed to disappoint. In six innings, Steve Minks, Bloomington's Ace, gave up no runs, five hits, walked two, and struck out ten. Roman was even better, matching the blank score, giving up one hit, walking none, and striking out twelve.

I had only struck out twice all season up until that game. Minks sent me back to the dugout three times. I grounded out once and struck out twice, both times swinging through that change-up of his.

We were scoreless after six, and Roman took the mound again in the seventh. His pitch count was low and he had only allowed one base runner. Bloomington was at the top of their order and although they looked hungry, I knew deep down they weren't anxious to see an arm that still had not dropped in velocity since the first pitch.

Roman hit the leadoff man in the head, knocking his helmet off, and damn near killing the poor bastard. Even though the guy was Bloomington's best runner, they had to put in a sub because after several minutes he still didn't know where he

was. The second batter attempted to move the runner over to second by bunting. This time Roman hit him directly in the chest as he squared. There was a hollow thumping sound that silenced the crowd into fear of fatal injury. Another pinch runner was entered. I called time and ran out to the mound. Coach Demera was standing in front of the dugout with his arms crossed thinking of taking a trip himself.

“What the hell’s a matter?” I asked. “All of the sudden you got control problems? Your arm all right?”

Roman took off his hat and rubbed his forehead like he was trying to get rid of a terrible headache. I could see his fingers trembling. “My arm is fine. I just can’t concentrate. There’s someone in the stands...”

“You’ve pitched in front of big crowds before. Even if you lose this game the scouts are still going to want you. A strikeout and double play and we’re out of...”

“You don’t understand. Agent Johnson is in the stands.”

I turned and scanned the mass of people under the roof of the stadium; there were thousands, and even if I did know where to look, I had never seen Johnson before. My job as a catcher was to keep my pitcher focused and that instinct kicked in automatically. “Even if he is up there Roman, he’s not coming after you in front of a couple thousand people during a baseball game. Let’s get out of this thing and go hit. Don’t let him screw this up for you too. Right?”

“You’re right.” The nervousness was replaced with the competitive face I had grown accustomed to seeing.

Coach Demera walked out to the mound. “Everything all right?”

“Just a little setback Coach, he’s fine,” I said.

“Sorry Coach. I’m okay.”

“That’s good, just don’t let there be anymore setbacks or we’ll be down a couple of runs.”

The three-hole hitter hadn’t touched Roman all day, and as we suspected he attempted to bunt. Roman threw the first pitch hard chest high down the middle of the plate. The batter fouled the ball straight up. I caught it and fired the ball to second base because the runner failed to get back to the bag. Roman struck the next guy out on four pitches.

Sam Peterman led off the bottom of the seventh. Even though he had struck out three times already Demera let him hit. Peterman took two of the ugliest swings I’ve ever seen, but with two strikes on him he worked his way back to a full count. Minks threw the payoff pitch just outside and Peterman walked. Pick Bryant attempted to bunt but was called out after bunting the ball foul three times. That brought me on deck, and Scotty Jakowski to the plate. I looked at Roman who was standing on the top step of the dugout looking into the crowd. “You all right?”

Roman smiled. “I think my imagination just got the best of me out there. I don’t see him anywhere now. Do me a favor and end this thing so I don’t have to go back out.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Demera tried to hit and run with Scotty Jakowski, but he lined out deep to the right fielder. Luckily Peterman was able to get back to first without being doubled off.

I came to the plate with two outs, tie ballgame, and the winning run on first. There was no way Minks was going to strike me out again, not this time.

I took the first pitch at my knees. It was low and away but the umpire called it a strike. Minks made a mistake with the second pitch and threw it right down the middle. It surprised me since he had been so good all game. I just missed it and fouled it straight back behind me. *I wish I could have that one back. You gotta protect here, two strikes on ya. Protect but don't chase.* Minks reached back and popped the third pitch up there harder than the first two. It was high and I took it for a ball. *Throw me that change-up again. I'm not going to swing through it this time. I'm gonna wait and knock it off that right center wall. Throw me that change-up.*

Minks delivered, and just as I guessed, a change-up on the outside corner. I waited this time...and *crack*. The ball jumped off my bat, a frozen rope to right center. The right fielder dove for the ball but missed. The center fielder picked it up as Sam Peterman reached third. Demera was waving him all the way. The center fielder launched the ball like he had a cannon for an arm. The ball was low to the ground on a straight line, passing over second and then the mound. The ball bounced. Sam slid. The catcher tagged him just as he crossed the plate. The umpire looked at the play for a second. "Safe!" he yelled. "Safe!"

Our dugout emptied and jumped first on Peterman at the plate and then on me at second. There was a pile of bodies on top of me, and for a few brief moments we were a single mound of pure joy. The Bloomington Purple Raiders looked on with sullen faces of envy as they waited to shake our hands. The excitement and the crowd slowly dwindled away and after about an hour it was just Roman and me, sitting a couple rows back in the stands, watching a guy mow the outfield under the stadium lights.

## IX

Carl joined us in the bleachers just minutes after we sat down. He carried a twelve pack of beer and smoked his pipe. "Mind if Carl joins you fellas?"

"Sit down and pass me a cold one," I said.

Carl threw the can through the air; it looked like a knuckle ball because it had no rotation as it traveled. It was a maneuver that Carl had undoubtedly done many times over. "Say fellas, that was one hell of a game you played there."

"Thanks," Roman said and smiled.

"Sitting with the two heroes I am, future major leaguers."

"Maybe Roman will, Carl; there's really nobody beating down my door right now."

"Stupid bastards they are then."

"Thanks," I said and slammed my beer into Carl's. He sat down behind us and leaned forward between our seats.

"Beautiful scene in front of us, isn't it, Carl?" Roman commented.

"Aye, 'tis my friend, beautiful indeed."

A thin fog formed just above the freshly-cut grass and swirled around from the south breeze, like the essence of a ghost dancing over the floor of a haunted mansion. The air was still warm and the smell of lilac was almost overwhelming. The stadium lights bounced off the wet blades of grass, casting a supernatural glow on our ball field. You could see the perfect rows made by the lawn mower that made a crisscrossed pattern in the outfield. The moon shone overhead, but unlike that night in the Hollow, it was warm and full of life.

I took in a deep breath, bringing in the smells of lilac, warm wind, and old fumes of peanuts and beer. “My granddad used to call it the smell of spring. Something you just couldn’t describe, but everyone knew what you were talking about. It made your heart skip a beat, just to remind you that hope is never a bad thing, he’d say.”

Roman shook his head and smiled. “Give me one of those beers would you Carl?”

“Ha! What’s gotten into you?” Carl said and opened the beer for Roman.

Roman threw back his head and took three swallows. He let out a sigh like he just drank the nectar of the gods. “If there was ever a time to drink a beer this would be it. It’s all over for me now. It won’t be long before Agent Johnson stumbles across my name somewhere in a paper or on the Internet. Ironic isn’t it? I managed to hide myself for a couple years and then by just playing the game I love, I sealed my own fate.”

“That’s the thing though about a baseball field,” I said. “No matter how bad your life’s going, no matter if you’ve got problems, if your bills aren’t paid, or your dog shit on the carpet, this place makes all those things go away. For a few hours every day all that matters in the world is that little white ball and all the sounds, smells, and battle scars that go along with it. For a little while we’re immune to everything outside these walls.”

Roman shook his head again and smiled.

“Well put guy.” Carl said and chugged his beer. In a second he popped another and looked up at the moon.

“Carl’s time is almost up here as well. The full moon is back and I can feel those bastards watching me more each day. If they came for me tonight, surprised I wouldn’t be.” Carl took a long drink and smiled. “It matters not. I’ve lived a good life, I have. Not giving a goddamn what people thought of me, or intruding into anyone’s business. I woke everyday and tried to be happy and make other people happy and that’s what a person’s supposed to do. They’re supposed to live their life not sit back and watch it go by.”

Roman raised his beer.

Carl’s moon watched as we toasted as friends. It would be our last toast together.

## X

Heather opened the wide double doors to her family’s home, exposing the freshly revamped staircase that her mother had insisted on having fixed. Gina rose from her relaxation room and met her daughter in the foyer. To the left, Heather could see into the dining room, where her mother’s hired help was grinding,

sanding, and cutting the wood that would eventually be a giant mural covering the entire west wall of the room. Heather could also hear music in that room, the many voices of a choir singing hymns from the speakers of a small portable CD player.

“Home so soon, dear? I thought you would be out celebrating after the victory.”

“Roman wanted to hang out at the stadium with Tony for awhile. Some kind of male bonding thing I guess. I have a lot of studying to do anyway. What’s with the gospel music?”

“John likes to listen to it while he works. He says it helps him concentrate better. He’s an odd man, but very nice and well mannered. Handsome too if it weren’t for that hairpiece. I was thinking of fixing him up with Cynthia.”

“Why would you do that to the guy? Cynthia would drive him mad. I’ve got to get a bite to eat before I study.”

“The kitchen staff has already retired for the evening, but I could whip you up a sandwich or something if you don’t mind my company.”

“That’s fine. Peanut butter and jelly with some Fritos. Actually make it two PB and J’s.”

## XI

John Smith worked with his back to them but he knew they were there. He could smell their perfume as they sat at the dining room table several feet away. The mother did most of the talking. It must be nice to come home and have someone actually care about how your day went. The soothing sound of “Amazing Grace” flowed through the room and for a moment as he sanded, John Smith felt like he was at home.

*You didn’t think that awful music would keep me away did you?*

John ignored the voice in his head and continued to sand, seeing the words of the song in his head, and rubbing St. Jude with his free hand.

*Ignore me. I don’t care. I want to do the talking anyway. I know you can smell them, that sweet innocence just glides through the room like it was meant only for you. The daughter is more beautiful than her mother is, don’t you think? Too bad we don’t care much for blondes. I think we could make an exception, a two for one deal? Imagine it, having your way with the daughter, while mommy is tied up in the corner, begging you to stop.*

John walked over to his CD player and turned up the volume, drowning out the voice in his head but also the conversation at the dining room table. He noticed as he walked back. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to disturb your conversation. This song is just a favorite of mine.”

“It’s quite all right John,” Gina said. “My daughter would like to eat instead of listen to her mother rant and rave anyway.”

“Hungry, John? Do you want something to eat?” Heather asked.

“No. No thank you.” John turned back to his saw and began to cut along the fine curving lines he had drawn on the wood earlier. The music of his new master sang, the women talked, the saw made its chaotic noise, but still he could hear Max’s voice.

*Don't you know what you could do to them? How you could pit their love against one another? How they would beg for it, if you would spare the other. How their fearful eyes would tremble at your power. Fuck the daughter first and then watch the mother's eyes as you choke the life from her child.*

"No stop it," John said out loud. At that instant the saw strayed off its path and nicked the top of his free hand. John let out a grunt of pain and grabbed his arm, dropping the saw to the floor and knocking the cord from the CD player out of its socket. The music was gone, the saw was off, and there was a brief silence until Gina and Heather ran to help him.

Blood dripped from his hand and the crimson stain already made its way up John's long sleeve. He held his injured arm with his other hand. Heather pulled out one of the chairs from under the table, turned it around, and sat the carpenter down. To Heather's surprise John had no scowl on his face or wince of pain. He only breathed hard.

"Go get the med kit and a wet towel," Heather said to her mother.

"Shouldn't we take him to the hospital?"

"We will, just get those things first," Heather said as she pressed down on the top of John's hand. It was hard to know where to apply the pressure—the wound was covered in blood, like John had dipped his hand in a bucket of crimson paint.

Gina ran as fast as she could to the bathroom closet down the hall on the south side of the house. The trip was quick—nothing she didn't experience in her daily workouts—and Gina was back in a matter of moments.

Heather took the wet rag and wiped the blood away, exposing a one-inch cut that must have severed one of the veins in his hand. "It's just a tiny cut, but it looks to be pretty deep. We should call an ambulance."

"No hospitals, just do the best you can with it," John responded.

"You need stitches, maybe vascular surgery."

"If it bothers me tomorrow, I'll go. For now just do the best you can with it, please."

"Just do as Mr. Smith wants, dear. I'm sure he's had accidents before."

Heather shook her head and dabbed up more of the blood. When she had the area halfway clean she pressed down a cotton ball on the open wound and wrapped a bandage around the entire hand as tightly as she could. John Smith did not show any sign of pain.

Satisfied with her bandage job, Heather began to clean up more of the blood that had made its way up John's arm. She unbuttoned his cuff and began to roll back the sleeve. John tried to pull back.

"It'll only take a second, I'm almost done."

If it were any other time John would have fought her, but he was injured and felt a little lightheaded. Besides she was like a beautiful angel from above, taking care of him.

Heather wiped away the now dry blood on his arm. With each swipe she uncovered more of the tattoo that decorated it, like the excavation of a relic brought back to life by the fine strokes of an archaeologist's brush.

The full image was apparent now, the naked beautiful form of a female in the middle of a spider web. Heather was transported back to the night of the hollow, when Roman told his story. It was Roman's words she heard now in her head. *There was a tattoo of a spider web with a naked woman in the middle of the arm that imprisoned my father. I see that tattoo every time I shut my eyes. His eyes wide and open, blue as the ocean.*

Heather swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to maintain her composure and not panic. She continued to wipe the arm as if nothing was wrong. She couldn't help but look up at his face.

There, looking back at her, were the piercing blue eyes of Max Sheehan.

## Chapter 18

### The good, the bad, and the ugly

#### I

Despite her heart pounding in her chest, Heather fought the urge to run and finished with Max Sheehan's arm. Even if she escaped, what then? As much as her mother interfered in her life she was still her mother. Despite all her mother's aggravating ways, her obtuse view of the world and how things were, Heather still loved her. And she wouldn't take the chance of leaving her with this killer, even if it were for a quick run to get help. Several thoughts raced through Heather's mind. An unfortunate number of coincidences must have come into play to bring the man that had killed Roman's parents into her own home six years later. How many nights while her father was away at work had her mother stay in the house alone with this evil man? Chills ran up her spine at the thought. Why hadn't he tried anything? Or was it just a matter of when? How bad would it hurt Roman to relive that night again at the sight of his parents' killer? The most important thing though was getting her mother and herself out alive.

During their brief combat session several weeks earlier, Roman had told her there were only two choices when faced with a mortal conflict—fight or run. Running was out of the question at this particular juncture. And even though Roman had taught her the basics of self-defense, Heather was not thrilled at the idea of testing them against this John Smith or whatever his name was. Heather opted for a more subtle choice.

"We should call an ambulance for you now, Mr. Smith," Heather said trying to hide the fear in her voice.

*Why is she nervous all of the sudden, John? Does she know the tattoo on your arm really belongs to me somehow?* "No, that won't be necessary. You did a good job fixing me up and I think it'll be fine."

"Well," Heather said clapping her hands together and stepping away. "I guess I should go up and get my backpack so I can study. Hope you feel better, John." Heather tried to keep a slow pace as she walked over and ascended the winding staircase.

*Why is she in such a hurry? What is she running from?* "I better get going. Sorry for the mess," John said to Gina as he walked toward the double doors, ignoring Max's voice.

"Don't worry John, the staff will get it. I'm so sorry you had an accident. Won't you go to the hospital? Heather is going to be a doctor someday you know? She wouldn't tell you to go unless she really thought you needed medical attention."

"I'm sure I'll be fine. Thank you for worrying." John Smith put his hand on the doorknob, but something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. Under the coat rack, on the floor, lay Heather's backpack. John closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *She knows who you are, John. Why would she lie about something so trivial if it weren't to escape your presence? As we speak, she is probably pressing the numbers into a phone that will finally craft our doom. It's time to let me out, John.* John grabbed the medallion hanging around his neck.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." *I can make them pay for this John. I can make it right. "Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." I can bring them pain. I can show them what real power is.*

"John, are you all right?" Gina asked.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." *What do you say John? Time's a'wasting. If we're going to go out, let's at least go out with a bang. Let's have some fun, shall we?* John grabbed his head with both hands and pressed, like his head was in a vice. He shook it back and forth violently. A moment later the thrashing stopped. He stood looking at the door, calm and still, and instead of turning the doorknob he locked it.

"Mr. Smith what is wrong?"

Max Sheehan turned around and faced her, smiling and tilting his head to one side. "There is no Mr. Smith, Mrs. Hawthorne; there never was."

"What? What are you talking about?"

John walked around her slowly, circling his prey and devouring it from head to toe with his eyes.

"I demand you stop this behavior. You're scaring me."

John grabbed her by the back of the neck and pulled her into his chest. The more she wriggled to get free the tighter his grip became. He whispered into her ear. "Scared? You don't know the meaning of the word."

John released her. Gina ran two steps until the back of his hand smashed into her face. She lay horizontal in the air like a wrestler that just got clotheslined, and then she dropped, her head bouncing off the marble tile, knocking her unconscious.

## II

The security system had been installed in the Hawthorne mansion at the same time the house was built—twenty-three years ago. The idea of updating the system had never even come up. The Hawthornes had never had so much as a peeping tom on the premises, and there was already security a mile down the road at the guard shack in front of the entrance to their subdivision. The private security guards made routine drive-bys throughout the rich neighborhood several times around the clock. The only problem of course was that John Smith's truck was on the list of authorized vehicles because of his work at the mansion.

Heather stood in front of the keypad looking at the different buttons. There was a red bell that she took to mean "alarm". Even if the security system was not wired to the local police via phone line a blaring siren might get the attention of the houses nearby or even the guard shack. Heather pushed it.

When nothing happened after several seconds she pressed it again. And when there was no sign of life she pressed the other two buttons. One was a musical note with a line through it, which Heather assumed was for a silent alarm. The other was a flame for the fire department. Neither one of them produced a response from the plastic keypad on the wall.

Heather scampered down the hallway to her room, shutting and locking the door behind her. She pulled out her cell phone from her jeans' pocket, flipping it open and pressing 9-1-1. The display read "low battery" and there were no bars

left on the power meter. The call dialed but never connected. Again she pressed the green button and the numbers dialed but did not connect. She scrolled through her phone book on the display and hit the name “Tony.” The call connected and began to ring but there wasn’t an answer, not even a voice mail. Back and forth she went from Tony’s cell to 9-1-1 until eventually the light from her display went dark and the phone was completely dead. She jumped across her bed, and found the cordless phone missing from her nightstand. She dropped down to the floor and looked under the bed. She ripped through the pillows and stuffed animals propped up against the headboard. She scanned her dresser, her makeup chair, bookshelves—all in vain. She ran to her bathroom, rummaged through the sink, tore open the doors, looked in the shower, the closet, the hamper—no phone. At that moment the lights in the house went out. Only the light from the moon came in through the drapes. John Smith had found the circuit breaker.

Heather slid back across her bed, stopped at the door in front of her, and unlocked it. Slowly, trying to avoid the softest creak of its hinges, she opened it and peeked her head out. Down the long now dark hallway at the top of the stairs was the gray shadowy outline of John Smith. She could see the bulkiness of his bandaged left arm. Even with the absence of light his eyes seemed to sparkle like a cat. And they saw her at once.

Her only chance was to get the phone in her parents’ room. It was caddy-corner from hers, a mere forty feet to the left. John was at least a hundred feet away but he was already sprinting down the hallway. Heather took a deep breath and bolted diagonally across the hall, too scared to look at her pursuer’s location and too full of adrenaline to veer off course.

She jumped through the doorway, feeling John’s fingertips swipe at the ends of her blonde locks and landed on her knees. She turned and grabbed the doorknob, hoping to slam the door and lock it at the same time. It wouldn’t shut; the bandaged hand of John Smith was grasping the doorjamb.

Heather jumped to her feet, pulled open the door slightly and with all her weight and might slammed it on the hand of her attacker. John let out an agonizing bellow but still held to the frame of the doorway. Heather repeated the maneuver again and again, this time in shorter strokes. Open and slam. Open and slam. Finally, the hand receded, and the door closed. Heather tried to turn the doorknob for good measure. It did not move.

The phone sat in the corner of the room on a nightstand. It was white with gold trim around the base, mouth, and earpieces. Her body was trembling and when she ordered her legs to run, but they only staggered. She could feel her heart pounding against her rib cage. Her fingers pressed the three emergency digits once more as she put the receiver to her ear. No ring. No dial tone. Only silence. She pressed down the holder and let go, only to hear the automated voice of a woman. “If you would like to make a call, please hang up and try again.” Then it dawned on her. John had taken one of the receivers off the hook downstairs.

Heather slid down the nightstand as if she were melting, still holding the phone, and now crying. There was a pounding sound from the middle of the door and Heather could see it jarring violently with each blow. It was not *if* John’s shoulder could bust down the door, but *when*. Roman was right, there were only

two choices, and now she was down to the last of them. Through her tears she could see her mother's purse lying on the bed. She could either sit there and die, or do something and have a chance to live. Struggling to regain control of herself, Heather walked over to the bed.

### III

Roman didn't lie. He drank only one beer. Me and Carl had no problem guzzling down the other eleven. With each beer the conversation slowed and by the end of the twelve pack, the stadium crew shut down the lights of the stadium. It was our cue to go home I guess.

The Pinto fired on the first try. Carl sat in the front seat because the Tavern was the first stop. Roman sat in the back seat looking out the window at the night sky, probably reciting names of stars and constellations in that restless brain of his.

Halfway to Carl's watering hole—as he called it—our odd but astute friend noticed my cell phone under the console. "Say guy, I think your phone is trying to tell ya something."

I picked it up, noticing the blinking display—4 missed calls. Secretly I wished at least one of those calls were from Sally, even if it was just to tell me good game. But they were all from Heather's cell phone. I clicked on her number but it went right to her voice mail. "Huh, that's odd. Four missed calls all from Heather."

"Did she leave a message?" Roman asked.

"No message." I scrolled to the call time and noticed that all four calls occurred in the same minute. "She called four times in a row, but didn't leave a message."

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Roman asked.

I handed the phone back as we pulled up in front of The Tavern.

"Many thanks fella. Carl owes ya."

"You don't owe me anything Carl, that's what partners are for, right?"

Roman got out of the back and sat in the passenger seat. Carl shut the door but leaned in through the window. "Aye partners, and I'd just like to say how lucky Carl is in having you fellas as such. Probably wouldn't been around this long if it weren't for the two of ya."

Roman stuck his hand out to shake. "You're all right yourself Carl."

"You fellas take good care of yourselves now. Stay away from the crack whores."

Any other night Carl would be hopping out of the car in a beeline for the Tavern door. But tonight, as I drove off, I could see him in the rear mirror view standing on the sidewalk with his hand up, as if he were saying one final goodbye.

"Heather's house line is busy," Roman said. "Why would she call four times in a row unless it was important?"

"Maybe she didn't call. Maybe the phone was just in her pocket and she bumped it or something. You know how those cell phones are."

"The Hawthorne's have call waiting. The only way the line would be busy is if there was trouble with the phone lines or the phone was off the hook. Something is wrong. I just have a feeling."

“You want me to take you up there?”

“If you don’t mind.”

#### IV

The fifth ram of John’s shoulder broke the lock and the door burst open, throwing splinters through the air. A glance in front of him, then to his left. He looked behind what remained of the door hanging on its hinges. He didn’t have time to react. The mace hit his eyes at point-blank range and stung immediately.

This was probably the first time Heather was thankful for Gina’s disregard for the feelings of her fellow human beings. On her mother’s key chain was always a tiny bottle of the eye irritant, and while Gina always talked of using it on the would-be thugs and thieves of lower class society, Heather was grateful to be using it on John Smith. She sprayed the contents of the small can into the killer’s face until it blew nothing but air.

John lunged at her with closed eyes and managed to grab hold of her. Without one thought, Heather kned him in the testicles. And when he grabbed his crotch she planted her knuckles in an upper cut directly to the bottom of his nose. Blood sprayed through the air. John’s groan was the only sound until the dull thud of his knees hit the floor.

Heather stood with her fists clinched, ready to go to war with him. But when he made no effort to get up, the voice of reason crept back into her head. It was that voice she listened to as she ran down the hallway to the staircase, yelling for her mother. There was no response.

After scouring the entire first floor eventually she found her mother on the sofa in her relaxation room with mouth, wrists, and ankles duct taped. Heather ripped the tape from Gina’s mouth. Her mother’s eyes were filled with tears but she was conscious.

“Oh dear, are you all right?” Gina whispered.

“We’ve got to get out of here mother. He’s still up stairs.”

“I can’t move.”

Heather tried to rip the tape from her mother’s ankles but it was wound around tight several times. “I’ll be right back.”

“No don’t leave me, I beg you, Heather!”

Heather left without arguing, bypassing the staircase and running for the kitchen. She found her way in the dark by feeling for the refrigerator, then the counter top, stove, and finally the rack of knives. She felt for the thickest handle and pulled the butcher knife from its sheath. She heard water run upstairs, no doubt Mr. Smith washing the mace from his eyes in one of the bathrooms.

Heather sprinted back to the relaxation room with knife in hand. She could hear the voice of her kindergarten teacher telling her to never ever run with scissors in your hand. Miss Joyce would have to forgive her.

She sawed first through the tape on her mother’s ankles and then on her wrists. She pulled her mother up and caught her around the waist when Gina’s knees buckled beneath her. “I’m so dizzy. I hit my head on the floor earlier.”

“Just hold on to my waist and I’ll lead us out.”

There was a loud thump at the top of the stairs and then several smaller ones, like the low roll of a bowling ball. Heather proceeded anyway, holding the knife out away from her body. And though it shook with the tremors in her hand, there was no doubt she would cut John Smith's throat if it came to it.

As they passed through the doorway to the stairs, John jumped from the seventh step and knocked them to the floor. Heather lost her grip and the knife slid across the marble tile into the room from which they had just come. All three of them wallowed on the floor for a moment, dazed from the crash.

John was first to his feet and went for the knife. Heather helped her mother up and dragged her to the door. Heather went for the lock but John charged, knife in hand. Having no choice she veered away from the door.

John took several swipes but missed. Realizing he had easier prey, John pulled Gina up from the floor and stood behind her holding the steel blade to her throat. "Move into the room." John nodded toward the relaxation room.

"Don't do it Heather," Gina said as she gasped for air. "If you go in, he'll kill us both. If you run, you'll live. Leave me."

Heather saw the tears in her mother's eyes and they started to flow once again in her own. It would be easy enough to open the double doors next to her for freedom. But there was no way she could get to the guard shack or anywhere else for that matter in time to save her mother. John would kill her before he fled, out of spite if for nothing else.

Heather walked into the room in front of John and her mother. She now knew what fear was, what people thought moments before they were to be tortured or killed, what Roman's mother must have felt six years ago in her basement. Numbness went through Heather's body—some sort of defense mechanism the brain produced when it couldn't accept the atrocity of a situation.

John pushed Gina down on the sofa. He stood behind the couch with the knife still at her throat. "Take the tape and tie her wrists, ankles, and mouth," John instructed.

Heather obliged. Her motions were slow and deliberate, emotionless from shock, thinking all the while that every second she obeyed bought more time to keep her and her mother alive. Maybe her father would come home from his business trip. Maybe the security system did send out a silent distress and the police would come crashing in. Maybe Roman would somehow know she was in trouble and save her once again.

John cut the cord of a lamp next to the window and fashioned it around the duct tape surrounding Gina's wrist. He pulled it tight, strung it over the back of the sofa, and tied the other end to one of the sofa legs. Now, Gina could only watch.

"Take off your jeans," John said.

Heather unbuttoned them, and slid them down to the floor. "You don't have to do this. You could turn and leave and nobody would follow you. Nobody would stop you. You could drive off and disappear and start somewhere new like none of this ever happened."

"Get down on the floor."

“And then I could be a normal teenager. I could go to the Prom and graduate with my friends, go to college and become a doctor and help people.”

“Shut up!” John walked up to her, stopped only a few feet away and gestured with the knife. “Get on the floor.”

Heather lay down on the floor. “I could marry some day and have kids of my own. I could take them for bike rides to the park. I would hug them, kiss them, and love them. I would make them feel warm and safe, like my parents did for me. I would tell them everyday how much they meant to me, how special they were. How I would never let anything happen to them.”

John wiped his swollen eyes with his bandaged hand, trying not to listen. He looked at the half-naked body at his feet. Her eyes were unafraid.

“You can rape me and kill me. But you can never take my heart. You can never feel who I am. You can’t take my memories. You’ll never erase my father taking me for ice cream, my dance lessons when I was three, the games I cheered at, the songs on the piano, the hugs and kisses, shooting basketball in the driveway, lunch with my friends, running in the morning with the sun along side me, laughter.” Heather had gotten to her feet now and was face to face with the monster. “You can kill me but you’ll never take my life.”

John stood there staring at her. Never had he encountered one such as her. The rest of them had begged and pleaded for their lives at one point or another. He could see the fear shiver through their skin and echo in their eyes. It was the fear that fueled him, that fed the black hole in his empty soul and satisfied it at least for a short while. But not this one. She stood in front of him and spoke the wishes of a child, wishes like he too once had. And now he could hear John Smith in his head, praying and crying to let her go.

Heather could see the battle going on behind his teary eyes. The knife was no longer pointed at her. It hung down to the side and shook as it had when she’d held it. At that moment there was pounding on the front door.

“Heather!” Roman’s voice called.

Max’s head snapped toward the noise and then came back to her. He walked briskly toward the door, hobbled by the staircase, and disappeared toward the back of the mansion.

“Roman!” Heather cried she ran for the front door.

The door opened and immediately she was holding onto him, sobbing on his shoulder, telling him between gasping breaths of her awful encounter with the monster that six years ago had killed his mother.

## V

Roman passed off the part about the man being his parents’ killer as the hysterical talk of someone who had just been through a traumatic event. Eventually we got Heather and her mother calmed down to a point where the tears had stopped and we could understand what they were saying. Max had left the butcher knife on one of the steps as he escaped, and Roman used it to free Gina from her bonds. Heather put her jeans back on and found a quilt to throw over her shoulders even though it seemed to be a hundred degrees in the house. Sometimes being cold had nothing to do with the temperature. I found my way through the

dark and turned the circuit breaker back on. Now the four of us sat in the living room.

"I'm calling the police," I said and flipped out my phone.

"This is all my fault," Gina began as she sipped from her water glass. "I should have never worried about those steps. The dining room was beautiful the way it was."

"You could have never have known, mom, that the guy you hired just happened to be a serial killer."

"I know better than to deal with Mr. Flowers though. His employees are often far from the salt of the earth."

"Mr. Flowers?" Roman asked surprised.

"He's the one that recommended that horrible man. John is rebuilding Mr. Flowers's warehouse that burned down."

Roman shot me a glance.

Heather stood up from her chair and walked over to Roman. She put her hand in his trying to dull the blow she was about to drop on him. "Roman, this John Smith had the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen and..." She hesitated.

"And what?"

"And...on his right forearm there was a tattoo of a woman in a spider web."

"It can't be." Roman paled, falling into the chair next to him, deflating like someone had ripped his soul out of his chest. He put his hands on his knees and looked at the floor, trying to put a mental rope around the rock that had just crushed his mind.

Gina began to sob. "I'm afraid I've made a terrible mistake, Heather. A few months ago I tried to persuade Roman to leave town. Here I was plotting to break the two of you up and thinking of ways to ruin him. I even had him suspended from school. If it weren't for him showing up and knocking on the door when he did, we wouldn't be alive right now." Gina walked over to Roman and hugged him as she continued to cry. "I was wrong about you, Roman. Please forgive me."

Roman said nothing, only continued to stare into nowhere.

Heather ignored her mother as well; she worried only for Roman now, and what he might do.

"The police are on their way," I said.

"I've got to find him," Roman said. "I have to face him."

"For what?" Heather objected.

"I'm not sure." Roman got up and walked into the foyer, his mind already entrenched in the business of finding this so-called John Smith. He noticed three little droplets of blood on the marble and then every few feet more splatters. He followed the trail through the to the lower level and then out onto the stone patio. A few minutes later Roman was on the other side of the Hawthorne property, standing at the tree line and staring into the woods. I caught up to him there.

"There's only one place north of here for him to run to, Tony," Roman said.

I knew exactly what Roman was thinking. Besides the Hollow and more forest, the only thing that lay in the direction John Smith was heading was The

Flower's property about five miles away through the woods. "Look, the cops'll be here any minute. They'll catch him in no time."

"That's why I have to catch him first. Give me your keys."

"Man, I don't think this such a good idea. I mean, so what if you catch up to him, then what?"

"I want answers. Just answers."

"No matter what you do to him Roman, or what he tells you, it's not going to bring your parents back."

"Either you give me your keys, or I'll run there through the woods."

My granddad always said that if you leave a loaded gun laying around long enough, eventually someone is going to fire it. Roman's anger was no different. Calm was an understatement in describing the way he'd handled the last six years. All the bullshit that he'd put up with, Ed Pentoch, the NN—all because a man decided to walk into an Iowa farmhouse and kill his mother. Roman was a loaded a gun—and John Smith had just picked it up.

## VI

Roman was going no matter what I said or did so I decided to drive him to the warehouse that housed Extravaganza. Or at least I thought I was going to drive him. At the Pinto Roman took my keys but didn't stop me from entering the passenger side. It was only the second time I'd ever seen him drive. Roman had his foot to the floorboard and the Pinto was wound out at a depressing seventy-five miles an hour. Roman did not speak on our short journey. He didn't seem to be nervous or angry. His eyes were on the road almost nonchalantly, as if we were going to school or Scotty's house for a party. I thought about how differently I looked at my life now: how many strange twists and turns had come my way since meeting my talented friend, how in a million years I never thought I'd be in a car traveling to confront a serial killer. And as we pulled up in front of the warehouse, secretly I hoped that the man we sought would not be there.

The warehouse was dark gray—primer I'm sure for the upcoming pink coating that the Flower would insist on. Part of the roof was still not complete, and it stood out like an open wound to the sky. The front door was wide open—not a good sign depending on your point of view.

We made our way up the steps to the walkway in front of the grandstand. There was no electrical lighting; only the pale blue light of the moon shone in through the missing part of the roof. In the middle of the arena floor was a new addition to The Flower's circus: silver chains hung from ceiling to floor, sparkling like diamonds. It was dark in the grandstands, but I could hear John Smith. He sat near the top, talking to himself and laughing like a mad man.

Roman followed the cackle, walking up the aisle one step at a time, as if he were going to talk to an old friend. John Smith made no attempt to run and never even acknowledged our presence. I went further down the walkway until I could see the man's blue eyes and part of his face. And then I froze—unsure of what was to happen next.

John Smith sat on the top row smiling and crying at the same time. Roman stood a row in front of him.

“Are you the angel of death?” John Smith asked.

“Sure.” Roman hit the man, knocking him into the aisle that ran down to my walkway. Roman grabbed the bandaged hand of Heather’s attacker at the same time kicking him in the stomach. John toppled down the stairs of the aisle head first, his bandage unraveling like a streamer in the wind and his hairpiece shredding itself against the aisle. He came to a stop halfway down, but Roman kicked him again. This time he tumbled all the way to the walkway, ending just shy of my feet. I moved back in a panic.

There were no grunts or groans, only thick mucous-filled laughter of a sociopath. Roman came down the stairs to the walkway as well and stood waiting for his parents’ killer to make the next move.

John struggled to his feet, holding his side, wheezing as if one of his lungs was punctured. “You’re not the angel of death,” he managed to say. “You’re just a boy.”

Roman answered by clotheslining him over the railing to the arena floor. John hit the dirt, knocking his wind out. Roman jumped over the rail and landed on his feet. I climbed underneath it and hoisted myself down. Roman waited patiently for the man to regain his breath and get to his feet.

“What do you want with me?” John asked, hunched over in pain.

Roman kicked him in the face, snapping him back to an upright position. The moonlight turned the blood spray from his nose into black mist. Another kick to the stomach planted John in the dirt again. Roman waited for his enemy to get slowly to his feet.

“Who are you?” John asked.

“I’m the angel of death, remember?”

John took a swing at Roman, only to have his face elbowed, his scrotum kneed, and his body tripped back to the dirt. He got up more quickly this time though and charged. Roman grabbed him by the arm and smashed him into the arena wall.

“Who the fuck are you?” John cried.

Roman grabbed John’s right ear and yanked. It tore from his head with a soft popping sound like rubber tearing. Roman shoved the severed ear into the serial killer’s mouth. John grabbed the new hole in the side of his head and began to laugh again, spitting out his own ear onto the dirt. Roman hit him in the neck, using the angled space on his hand between his thumb and index finger.

They worked their way across the arena floor until they were under the chains of The Flower’s crude new circus device. Roman watched as the broken John Smith gasped for air. The right side of his face was covered in blood and his left eye was swollen shut. John had given up with the questions and now stood there waiting for Roman to attack him again. Instead Roman grabbed one wrist and locked it into the chain, and then the other. John did not try to test the chain’s endurance.

“What is your name? I know it is not John Smith.”

John just stood there.

Roman kicked him as hard as he could, snapping the monster’s leg between the knee and ankle. It sounded like a branch of a tree breaking under its own

weight. The bone poked through John's skin and his jeans. He let out a scream of pain that echoed throughout the arena—a noise close to that of the people who'd been eaten alive by the starving dogs four months before. Roman waited for his wailing to end.

"Max Sheehan," he answered, breathing hard.

"Let me try and help you remember who I am. We met briefly six years ago in an Iowa farmhouse. You raped and killed my mother. I shot at you only to hit and kill my father instead."

Max hung his head. "I remember. I am sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry is not going to get it done. I want to know why."

Max shook his head back and forth slowly. "I don't know. I don't know why."

Roman reared back and punched him in the face. He repeated the action until there was no energy left in the muscles of his arm. He grabbed Max by the shirt collar and brought him eye level.

"You took my life from me!" Roman screamed into his face. "You tortured and killed my mother! Because of you I see myself blowing off my father's head every time I close my eyes. I don't sleep. You've altered my existence forever and you don't know why? Because of you I endured nightly beatings from the man who replaced my father. Because of you I know only loss, only pain. You took everything from me." Roman ended his tirade by spitting in the blood-soaked face in front of him.

"There's something inside of me that's different from normal people," Max began. "It's been there since I was a boy, a void in the middle of me where my heart should be. And no matter who I kill it only satisfies the void temporarily. With every rape it grows larger and wants more. It's like the hunger you feel in your stomach. Only I can never make it full. I can never make it stop. I pray every night for Jesus to take the darkness out of me."

"Isn't that ironic?" I've prayed every night that He would deliver you to me. That He would just give me fifteen minutes alone with you in the dark. Who says He doesn't answer prayers?"

Roman could see the medallion around Max's neck reflecting the moonlight from above. He grabbed the gold piece and thumbed off the blood. "St. Jude."

"The patron saint of lost causes," Max mumbled.

"Indeed, but do you know why he is the saint of lost causes?"

"No," Max said.

"Jude sounds very much like another prominent name in the Bible doesn't it? Early Christians were scared to pray to *Jude* and used him only as a last resort because they were afraid *Judas* might be on the receiving end instead. Maybe all along your prayers have realized their greatest fear."

"It matters not, I am saved by the risen Jesus."

"Really. I wonder what all the women you've killed are telling Jesus." Roman stepped up and put his lips to Max's good ear. "Do you think they're whispering into His ear on your behalf? Do you think my mother wants to spend the rest of eternity with you? Do you think she is praying for your immunity?"

Max only hung his head.

Roman walked away from him and out of the moon's spotlight. In the darkness of the arena's north wall Roman rummaged through the toolboxes and equipment of Max Sheehan's workers. He returned with a knife—something that would've been held in a holster on a carpenter's belt.

Roman fanned the blade out, running it gently along Max's throat and then down to just above his belt line. "After you raped my mother, while she was still alive, you slit her from the waist to the neck. I want you to know how that feels. I want you to feel the life empty out of you."

"Hey, uh Roman? Maybe this is isn't such a good idea," I said.

Max raised his head and looked into Roman's eyes. "End it all then."

Roman pressed the blade to Max's stomach and held it there without breaking the skin. After a moment he hurled the knife end over end through the air. It stuck in the arena wall and vibrated like a javelin. "It's too easy an end for you. I can't do your death justice."

From the shadows in the front of the arena came a rustling—the soft padding of shoes walking on the dirt of the arena floor. It startled all three of us. As the man walked toward the light and the darkness receded from his face, although I had never met him, I knew exactly who it was. He stood at least six and a half feet tall, had enormous shoulder width, and wore a suit.

As he passed by he pulled a gun from his suit coat, placed it against the head of Max Sheehan, and pulled the trigger. I could hear Max's brains drip out and hit the dirt long after the silenced bullet exploded the back of his head.

"You think too much Roman. Just let God sort them out," the man said.

Agent Johnson stood in front of the limp and now lifeless body that hung from the chains of Extravaganza. He re-holstered his weapon and turned toward us.

"I've been watching you for about a week now. Quite a life you've made here for yourself Roman. Nice cozy little house. I especially liked the baseball card wallpaper. You've got good friends like Tony here. And then there's Heather, what a knockout, maybe a little out of your league but very impressive. You pitched a hell of a game today, except for the two hit batsmen of course."

"I wasn't done talking to him yet," Roman nodded over at Max's body.

"Talking is overrated. You of all people know that. Besides I heard the entire conversation and I think you handled it quite eloquently."

Every man has his breaking point they say. And Roman's wasn't far off I imagined. His whole life had just come to a climax in the last two hours. And now he just stood there shaking his head and smiling. It was not a good smile.

"You've caught me on a bad day, so to speak."

"You're never short on wit, are you?"

Roman charged the Agent with a flurry of kicks and punches, moving his pursuer across the arena floor. Agent Johnson blocked or ducked everyone of them. It was only when Roman backed him into the arena wall that Johnson showed any offense. His punches and kicks moved Roman back to the middle of the floor. For as big as he was and the strength he possessed, Johnson was every

bit as quick as Roman. But like his former mentor, Roman avoided the attack flawlessly.

“My orders are to bring you back or eliminate you, plain and simple. It’s up to you which one takes place,” Johnson said.

“Eliminate me? I don’t think you’ve got in you.” Roman started his onslaught again. Johnson countered as before, but every time he blocked, Roman’s attack only quickened. The amount and velocity of Roman’s fight began to wear the agent down, and now fists and feet were landing on him unabated.

I tried to think of what Roman would do if he were me. The word “insurance” popped into my head, and I ran over to the construction equipment, knocking over a gas can as I went. I fumbled through the dark, running into tables and feeling carefully for anything that would help Roman. I returned with a mop handle, a two-by-four, a hammer, and a knife. I ran my finger down the blade, feeling in the darkness for a way to shut it. I closed it and stuck the weapon down in my belt.

Even though Roman looked to be winning, I knew this was no time to take chances. I was witnessing something that most people would never see and could never imagine. The fighting was so fast and ferocious that the tide could shift in an instant. I opted for the two-by-four and set the other potential weapons on the ground. I guess in my imagination I could see myself sneaking up behind Agent Johnson and smashing the board over his head. It felt like a good plan.

It was not.

When the agent turned his back to me I swung. While blocking a punch from Roman—as if he had eyes in the back of his head—Johnson caught the wood under his armpit. He swung it to the left as I held on. Seconds later I smashed into Roman, and we both flew to the dirt.

Without using his hands, Roman jumped to his feet, dodging the swings of lumber from Agent Johnson’s hands. I crawled out of the way and ran back to my pile of makeshift weapons, grabbing the mop handle and the hammer.

Roman was too quick and Johnson failed to hit him with the board. But every swing backed Roman up. It would only be seconds until Roman was against the arena wall with nowhere to go. Johnson held the board horizontally between both hands now and charged in an attempt to bulldoze Roman into the wall. With one quick swipe of Roman’s foot the board broke in half, sending the agent back a couple of steps. Johnson stood there for a second in shock. I tossed the mop handle to Roman. He snatched it out of the air and broke it over his knee in one motion, creating two weapons to combat the two pieces of board now in Johnson’s hands.

Have you ever heard a drum line tap their sticks together in the middle of a routine? That’s what this fight sounded like, only faster. And there was a rhythm to it—some unexplainable poetry of sound between offense and defense, between lumber and mop-handle sticks. Johnson’s two boards packed more of a punch, but Roman’s sticks were quicker and easier to handle. Roman simply ducked or jumped over Johnson’s swings, while the NN Agent used his blunt wooden swords to block the never-ending taps from Roman’s sticks. They were dancing in a way, like tennis players volleying the ball back and forth in a never-ending duel. And

like those graceful athletes of the court, the warrior that made the first mistake would lose this contest

Tat-a-tat. Tat-a-tat. Thump. Tat-a-tat. Tat-a-tat. Thump.

Eventually Johnson missed one of his thumps and Roman capitalized. His stick caught the Agent the wrist sending Johnson's club spiraling through the air. There was a second of hesitation from Johnson and Roman seized it, kicking the agent in the chest and sending him crashing into the wall. Johnson bounced off only to have his leg buckled by a kick from one of Roman's quick feet. Johnson was so tall that even with one of his knees on the ground he was still nearly eye level with his former protégé. Roman beat the giant down, landing punch after punch to his face. Roman alternated swings of his arms and as each fist connected Johnson's head snapped from one side to the other.

Johnson fell back to the dirt. Roman jumped on his torso and straddled him immediately. Like a magician whose secret was known only to the artists of combat, Johnson produced his gun from its holster and stuck it against Roman's forehead with hand-is-quicker-than-the-eye speed.

Roman dropped his sticks, and as I ran to help my friend he held up his hand telling me to stop. Both warriors' chests pumped hard from exhaustion. How badly I wanted to throw the hammer in my hand at the gun being held against Roman's head! Who was I kidding though? I'd probably miss and hit Roman.

Johnson spoke first. "While we're here destroying each other, the people that we should be fighting are hard at work plotting our demise. Every government agency from every country in the world, rogue or sovereign, is looking for Dr. Sebastian Jesup. The world is a big place to hide in but not when the entire world is looking for you. It's not a matter of when he's found, but by whom. If it's someone other than us, it's checkmate for America. Everything you know and love will cease to exist. None of this frivolous fighting and bickering will mean a damn thing."

"I take no pleasure in fighting you or anybody else," Roman said. "I just want to be left alone. I want to play baseball and help my team. I want to go to the Prom with Heather. And I want to graduate from high school like a normal person. I don't want to be mixed up in the fate of the world. Let God sort it out as you say."

"I told you at the beginning of this fiasco that you were coming with me or you were going nowhere," Johnson said.

"Fine." Roman took the end of Johnson's gun and put it in his mouth, his voice muffled as he shouted at the Agent. "Do it. Pull the trigger. I'm not going to spend my life running from the NN and I'm never going to work for them. You may as well kill me. Do it!"

Johnson's hand was unwavering as held the pistol with a firm grip. Less than a pound of pressure was all that was standing between life and death for Roman. There was no doubt in my mind that Johnson had no problem killing if it was a means to an end. Take poor Max Sheehan for instance. But the Agent was hesitating—the bullet fired this time wouldn't just kill some scumbag terrorist or demented serial killer. It might be the most expensive bullet the NN ever used. After several moments, Agent Johnson pulled the weapon away.

“Damn it,” Johnson said.

Roman jumped off the horizontal agent and immediately helped him to his feet.

“I can’t kill you, you’re too valuable.”

“If that’s what you have to keep telling yourself,” Roman said.

“Make no mistake young Roman, if it weren’t for your extraordinary abilities and potential you would be nothing more than crimson splatter on my suit.”

“Maybe.”

The door to the warehouse slammed, and up the east walkway opposite us walked six men—five of them dressed in varying degrees and shades of black leather, and one in a fluorescent orange suit. One of the thugs lit a cigarette as if it were business as usual. Boochie Anderson stood next to the Flower, jewelry-less, with ten or so scars decorating his face where the metal rings used to be. I walked slowly backwards, trying to be discreet in my attempt to find cover in the darkness that covered the construction equipment on the north side of the arena. Roman backed up as well, a couple of paces in front of me.

“Who’s the dude in the orange?” Agent Johnson whispered to Roman.

“Long story. In a nut shell he’s bad news,” Roman responded.

“This night just gets better and better doesn’t it?” I said.

“Are they carrying?” Johnson asked Roman.

“Most certainly,” Roman answered.

“Hey Roman,” I whispered. “I’ve got a hammer and a knife on me.”

He did not respond, his mind busy with better solutions.

The Flower slithered up to the railing above the arena wall with his arrogant strut. His black hair was slicked back in his trademark ponytail and he stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the odd scene in front of him. Most of his attention focused on the dead man hanging from the shackles in the middle of the floor.

“Hey boss,” Boochie Anderson started. “I think that’s the janitor down there.”

“All right,” The Flower shouted. “Who thinks they can come on my property and kill somebody in my arena without my permission? Nobody dies in this town without my order.”

None of us responded.

“Is the one that calls himself the janitor down there?” The Flower shouted again from the walkway.

“Uh, boss, I think that there dead guy hangin’ in the chains is Mr. John Smith,” Boochie Anderson said, pointing.

The Flower pulled out a pair of bifocals, placed them on the end of his nose, and tilted his head down. After a quick glance at Max Sheehan, he took them off and put them back in his suit jacket. “The goddamn janitor killed my carpenter,” he whispered to himself.

The Flower grabbed ahold of the railing in front of him and jumped up and down like a kid throwing a tantrum. A few seconds later he stopped, adjusted his

tie, and slicked back his hair with both of his hands. “I thought our paths were never going to cross again janitor. I thought we had a deal.”

“You broke the deal when you hired a serial killer.” Roman yelled back.

“What’s he talking about?” The Flower asked his men.

Boochie shrugged his shoulders.

“You have a nasty habit of killing my employees, janitor.”

“Actually, I killed your carpenter,” Johnson said.

“And who are you?” The Flower asked.

Agent Johnson hesitated for a minute. “I’m an old friend of the janitor’s.”

“Kill them. Kill them now,” The Flower ordered.

The five soldiers next to The Flower began to pull out their guns.

But Johnson was quicker. He crossed his arms under his suit coat, unsheathing two guns from their respective holsters.

Me and Roman ran for cover behind the lifeless Max Sheehan and the construction equipment. The hail of gunfire was simultaneous, and while their guns outnumbered Johnson’s five to two, they were still the underdog. Johnson walked sideways, his fingers working their magic against the triggers, his guns moving only inches to find their next target.

The man smoking the cigarette caught the first of Johnson’s pointed projectiles, and he fell over the railing to the arena floor. A second later the dirt and excess lumber were ablaze next to us, no doubt from the man’s cigarette coming in contact with the gasoline I’d spilled earlier.

Johnson’s last bullet ended in the forehead of Boochie Anderson. The fat man teetered and wobbled with a surprised look on his face. The Flower tried to move out from behind him, but it was too late: Boochie fell backwards, ass first, eclipsing any sight of Freddy The Flower. The impact splintered the first two rows of bleachers. There was a low wheeze of his Boochie’s last breath, like air brakes on a semi-trailer decompressing. There were no gasps or calls for help from The Flower beneath. He may very well have spent his last minutes on earth as a pancake.

Roman walked out from our cover against the arena wall, and I followed. As I passed by, Max’s body began to smolder from the heat of the blaze. I imagined his soul was doing the same thing right about now. Flames had found their way to the north wall as well.

Johnson walked a couple of steps toward Roman and then sprinted; the agent was on him in a second, throwing roundhouse rights at high repetition. Roman blocked and ducked, but his back was to the wall. One of Johnson’s big rights caught Roman on the cheek and knocked him to the ground. The Agent picked him up and slammed him into the arena wall. I heard Roman’s shoulder pop. He grabbed it as his back slid down to the dirt.

Johnson stepped away and produced a pair of handcuffs, locking one of them around his own wrist and letting the other dangle, then stepped back and grabbed Roman by the arm. I charged with the last of my weapons—the hammer—held high over my head. Johnson kicked me in the chest and the hammer flew out of my hands. He grabbed it out of mid-air and threw it into the wall of flames on the north side of the arena.

With his free arm, Roman grasped from behind him the knife he had thrown earlier at the arena wall and jabbed it into the thigh of the giant. Johnson let out a cry of pain and released Roman's arm. Roman got to his feet, grabbed the handcuff dangling from Johnson's wrist, and snapped it around the railing above the arena wall. Roman hit him with a left for good measure.

"You owe me at least until graduation. You owe me," Roman said.

As we walked toward the exit, I saw Max Sheehan's body burst into flames. Smoke filled the arena and I could hear what remained of the roof start to snap and buckle under its own weight. The once-dark confines were now bright from the fire. Johnson pulled the knife out of his leg and let out a deep roar.

As we reached the door, his voice came again. "Roman, the next agent that comes for you will have no problem pulling the trigger."

Roman did not reply.

## VII

Roman sat down in the passenger seat as I started the Pinto. He held his shoulder and winced in pain. The slam into the wall may have done more than just popped Roman's shoulder. I noticed it was his right arm, and although I knew I shouldn't be thinking such thoughts at a time like this, the selfish part of me wondered if the Silver Streak title run had just come to an end.

The Pinto shot rocks from under its tires as I floored it out of the crude parking lot. Eventually we reached a paved road. "Where to?"

"Take me to Carl," Roman said with the pain still on his face.

Déjà vu came over me as I looked in the rearview mirror. Once again the Flower's warehouse turned the night sky orange. I kept looking for someone following us—the headlights of Agent Johnson's vehicle—and I knew now how Roman felt every time he left his home to go somewhere.



## Chapter 19

### Missing

#### I

Roman knocked on Carl's door repeatedly. There was no response. If it wasn't for Roman's injured shoulder he probably would've turned and walked home. Instead we entered the living room—Carl's door was never locked—and searched every room including the cluttered basement. It was hours after the bar closed and Carl was nowhere to be found. We even drove up and down the route he took to and from the bar—alas no Carl.

After a couple hour search of every side street, warehouse, and possible location we could think of, I drove Roman back to his house. Heather's Mustang sat in the driveway and I could see her fingers tapping the steering wheel nervously. She knew Roman was okay for the most part—I called her when we left Extravaganza—but nights such as these tend to bring out the pessimistic side of people. Roman took two steps up his driveway and stopped. His head rose to the perfect full moon above it.

Me and Heather looked up as well, trying to see in that bright bulb in the sky what Roman saw. I wondered what it was like for him to think. When I think I can actually hear words in my head. Did Roman hear words too only at a lot faster rate, like a speed speaker or a tape in fast-forward? Whatever the case I knew after almost nine months of interrupting, it was best to just let him finish.

"Carl said that around the time of every full moon he begins to feel sick," Roman said.

"Yeah," Heather started. "And that it was because the aliens cast some sort of spell over him."

"He wasn't sick at all this week. He was as lively as I've seen him. He also said that that time in the jungle they *asked* him to go with them. Like they couldn't force him to go against his will," Roman said again.

"What are you getting at?" I asked.

"Maybe the aliens were making him sick because he refused to go with them."

"Like when they choked him in the jungle," Heather added.

"But he wasn't sick at all this week," I said. "Even tonight he was as happy as a clam." The image of Carl standing in front of the Tavern with his hand held up flashed in my mind.

"Maybe he wasn't sick because he agreed to go," Roman said.

"He was talking crazy, saying his time here was up and he wouldn't be surprised if they came for him tonight," Tony said. "You know what though? I've had it with all this aliens and serial killers and fucking secret agent bullshit. I'm going home and going to bed. If you need me to whip Johnson's ass later tonight, just give me a call."

Roman smiled.

"Honestly do you think you'll be all right? Do you need to go to the hospital? I'll stay here if you want me to," I said.

"I'll be fine. Tony, thanks for everything. I wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for you."

"Yeah, about twenty more nights like tonight and I'll be even with you."

I drove off as Heather and Roman walked into his house.

## II

As much as I wanted to go home, the Pinto had other ideas. I found myself at Sally's house, climbing the downspout of the gutter and hoping like hell it didn't rip off the side of the porch. People in the movies always seem to shoot right up these things like they're Spider-Man. I had a more difficult time of it—slipping several times and falling back to the bushes on others. My determination won out though, and I crawled along the porch roof, keeping myself invisible as I passed under her parents' room.

I tapped on Sally's window for what seemed like hours. It was a fine line I was walking—tapping hard enough that it would wake her, but not so hard that her parents would hear. Eventually the light came on in her room and she appeared in front of the window. Her grogginess was replaced by anger when she saw who it was. She opened the window anyway. We had to whisper on account of her parents' room right next door.

"Is something wrong?" Sally asked as she picked up a brush and began to comb through her hair. It wasn't to look pretty for me—just instinct to look her best at all times—something women are born with I guess.

I proceeded to tell Sally the events that transpired early that night, of Roman and Heather, Max Sheehan and Agent Johnson. She seemed to be genuinely concerned, even wanted to call and make sure Heather was all right, but my sad story really got *me* nowhere.

"So why are you here again? Couldn't you have called and told me all this?"

*Why was I here?* As much as I wanted to blame it on the Pinto, I knew it was more the man behind the steering wheel. I just stood there and looked at her.

"It's 2:00 in the morning. If you're not going to say anything I'm going back to bed. I've got a test first hour in British Literature. 1984. Fun, fun."

"I don't know why I'm here. I just felt like I needed to see you. I can't explain it. I've got stupid little thoughts running through my head. Look, maybe you're right, maybe I should just go."

"What kind of stupid little thoughts?"

"I don't know, like maybe I'm sorry for the way I treated you when we were dating. Maybe I was a fool for breaking up with you."

"That's just it Tony, it's always *maybe* with you. You didn't come here to apologize. We didn't date; it was more like you trying to get in my pants every second of the day. And there is no maybe about you being a fool. It's not a matter of you being able to say the things in your head; it's that you won't say them. That's the way it was and will always be. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm flying back to France with Jacques the day after graduation and spending a month with him. I've always wanted to see Europe."

"With Frenchy?"

Sally didn't respond to the slang term I used for his name. Instead she walked over to the light switch, shut it off, climbed into bed, and pulled up the covers. "If you're not going to say what you came to say you may as well leave."

"I'm trying to tell you. You're just not listening."

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

I stared at her for more than a minute. "Fuck it," I said and opened the window back up. I put one foot out but when my second one hit the roof I slipped and slid head first toward the edge. I tried to stop myself but there was nothing to grab onto. I fell off and landed in the bushes a good twenty feet down. It did not feel good. After pulling the twigs and sticks out of my clothes and skin, the front porch light came on. I limped quickly to the Pinto, and as I drove off I could hear Sally's father cursing me.

### III

Part of me did not expect to see Roman again when I pulled out of his driveway. Even though he laughed at my jokes and seemed not to be angry about Carl's absence, I could easily see him packing up his baseball cards and few other belongings, and disappearing into the darkness of night. I could see him traveling to somewhere unlikely, driven by the winds of chance and the pursuit of one Agent Johnson.

Over the next few weeks he proved that part of me wrong. Roman was as carefree as I'd ever seen him. He talked more, laughed often, and put down his never-ending stack of books to join those of us who lived in reality. He told me that a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders because of the confrontation with Max Sheehan. Roman would never see his parents again but at least it was some sort of closure. It seemed to me that he traded one burden for the other—the monkey of Max was off his back, but a much heavier Agent Johnson had just jumped on. I suggested at one point that maybe Johnson didn't escape the inferno of Extravaganza, that maybe the roof fell in on him, and he burned alongside Max Sheehan. Roman gave me *the* look at that comment—a gesture that told me I was an idiot if I believed it. There was no doubt that Johnson and his NN loomed on the horizon. There comes a point when you just have to say, "fuck it". I think Roman was at that point, and whether his happy face and attitude were more for us than for him, it served everyone well.

May to us meant baseball. It meant there were conference championships to win and state titles to get ready for. It meant working on the baseball field less because the monsoons of April had finally dried up. It meant trading in jeans for shorts. It meant skin on the females for as far as the high school eye cared to look. You could smell graduation in the air and the classroom part of high school was on full shutdown for us seniors. The prison guards gave up with teaching and homework assignments—our minds were already somewhere else.

Heather moved herself one Mustang load at a time into Roman's house. Whether it was the fact that she couldn't bring herself to stay in the mansion that Max Sheehan once haunted, or because she just wanted to be close to Roman those final days of school, Gina did not fight her. She even sent little goody baskets along with her daughter—food and snacks, even books for Roman. Heather who

was always looking for some cause, found one in our missing friend Carl. She plastered the city of Collingston and its surrounding area with pictures of our odd friend. Every gas station, barnyard, schoolyard, outhouse, doghouse, store, convenient mart, and church displayed his likeness. I imagine that every citizen in Collingston whether they liked it or not, knew the face, name, height, and weight of Carl Stumot. Heather even made her mother rent several billboards around the area. It was no surprise to see Carl's giant face staring down at you as you drove down the highway. When there wasn't a response Heather only doubled her efforts, branching out to neighboring cities and creating a website devoted totally to finding him.

Roman kept up Carl's property during those days in May—mowing the grass, cleaning the house, even making sure the bees in the basement never ran dry on their honey. He ran with Heather every morning at six, claiming he was staying in shape for baseball. I wondered if it was training for something else.

Roman couldn't lift his arm the first few days after battling Agent Johnson. He couldn't throw a ball the first week. By week two he was playing light catch. By the beginning of week three he was throwing in bullpens. More than anything, more than the gray matter between his ears or the quickness in the weapons he called hands, Roman was a survivor.

The Silver Streaks did falter—our perfect record was spotted with a few losses here and there—but the guys stepped up nicely in our ace's absence. Johnny the Killer went a perfect 4-0 in those two weeks. Our offense got a boost from guys like Sam Peterman in the bottom of the order. We averaged more runs in that span than the rest of the year. It wasn't something the guys wanted to do but had to if they wanted to win.

I turned over a new leaf as well—nothing but smiles for Jacques and Sally. I never let his slick-tongued accent get to me, or let her eyes tell me our story together wasn't done. It was always “how are you”, “that's great”; I even laughed at his stupid jokes and misuse of words.

It wasn't until one day at lunch that my efforts were rewarded. It came in a way I would've never expected. It was during one of those few and far between moments of silence at the lunch table when all the conversations and laughter had some how burned themselves out. Johnny the Killer had no chauvinistic jokes, Brunno had no stuttering business math questions, Pick and Sam weren't arguing over Babe Ruth's significance, the cheerleaders weren't comparing their newly acquired cancer-bed tan's, and Roman wasn't telling us of how all mammals have the ability to hibernate if only the right genes were turned on in their DNA. The only sound was hungry teenage mouths chewing food.

I bit into the piece of pizza in front of me, scanning the round table for the next potential speaker. I worked my way around counter clockwise, searching for budding conversation in someone's eyes. All were blank except for one. Frenchy was already staring at me three seats away with some slanted-ass grin like he knew something I didn't. I felt my blood pressure rise until he spoke.

“Tony?”

“Yes Jacques,” I rolled the J sarcastically. It was habit now I guess.

“I would like to make an offering of peace.”

“And what would that be?”

“I want you to take Sally to your spring dance.”

“You mean Prom.”

“Ah yes Prom.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Sally objected.

“You and Tony should go to Prom together. I’m only an underclassmen and don’t know of such American customs.”

“It’s just a dance,” Sally said.

“I have been reading in your magazine called YM. It says that you will remember Prom date for the rest of your life. That you should go with someone that knows how to have a good time.”

“You know how to have a good time,” Sally argued.

“Yes but I don’t know the customs of Prom. You should go with Anthony, I mean Tony, because you have been friends for a long time, no? Besides he has no date and you will be mine for a month in France.”

“Thanks asshole for reminding me,” I whispered to myself.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Heather cut in.

“Why do I feel like I’m being pimped out?” Sally said.

#### IV

Washington D.C.

Agent Johnson limped into the theater room and placed his hand on the crystal palm mold. The reflected light coming from the surface of the room began to darken, melting into the brown and black shadows of the hologram courtroom he had visited so many times before. He couldn’t think of a time he had been less anxious to talk to the Voice.

The man known as the Voice sat atop his judge-like throne. Johnson could see the man’s hands as they typed and pushed different buttons, but his face was black and non-existent, tucked away behind shadows. There was a long silence—longer than Johnson could ever remember—before the Voice spoke. And as much as Johnson prepared himself for the deep thundering boom of the Voice’s speech, it always seemed louder than the time before.

Finally the Voice spoke. Johnson thought the words would vibrate right through him. “By the looks of you Agent Johnson, would it be safe to surmise that your apprehension of Roman Swivel has failed.”

“It would be safe to surmise that, yes sir,” the agent responded.

“Can we also assume that our satellite images are not lying to us, that Swivel still lives?”

“Yes sir.”

“The last time you stood in front of me you said that Swivel might be more powerful than we once thought. You said that you took him for granted the first time and it wouldn’t happen again. What is your assessment of Swivel now?”

Johnson tried to choose his words wisely, both to protect Roman and himself. “He is remarkable. But in talking to him I can tell you he has no interest

in our line of work. In all honesty sir, I had a gun to his face, and he would rather me pull the trigger than be captured alive. He will never join us.”

“I sense an uneasiness with you Agent Johnson. Rest assured that Swivel will join us. There are ways around his reluctance. Our scientists have been dabbling in a new technology that uses electromagnetic pulses to manipulate brain chemistry. The three subjects we have experimented on so far have no recollection of past events in their lives, they don’t know where they’re from, they don’t even know what their names are. But their cognitive reasoning seems to be intact.”

“With all due respect sir, I would like to be reassigned. I’m too close to the situation and I’m afraid my judgment is suffering because of it.”

A long silence. And then the deep bass boomed again.

“There is no need to batter yourself over the failure to eliminate Swivel. We are after all protectors of the peace, not monsters. Your decision may have been wise indeed. Keep in mind that America stands because of you and me. America stands because of our sacrifice. Though it goes unnoticed it is a sacrifice nonetheless. We cannot jeopardize the security of the nation for the mind of one young man. I will however compromise with you, Agent Johnson. I am putting Agent Stenworth in charge of the mission; you will accompany him and the other Agents in apprehending our allusive ally.

“Other Agents?”

“I am sending every available Agent to assist with the mission. Though it won’t be all of our manpower, it will ensure our success. It will also make things less messy I suspect.”

“Forgive me sir, but I have one request. Roman asked that he be able to at least graduate. That’s less than a month from now.”

“And if he runs?”

“The satellites are recording his daily movements and I placed GPS tracers on all of his belongings. Besides I don’t believe him to be a flight risk anymore. He feels...he thinks that he is at home.”

“So be it. The wait will give your wounds time to heal and time for us to gather more available Agents. You are a good man, Agent Johnson. Godspeed on your journey.”

## V

Sally was pissed at Frenchy for his so-called peace offering. I don’t think she really minded going with me. She was angry because French Boy, even though his intentions were good, was telling her he really didn’t care about going with her to the Prom. Women hate rejection, maybe more than anything.

I’d played it cool like it wasn’t a big deal. Truth was I was happy as hell. I don’t put much stock in all the mushy bullshit about fate and destiny, but this did feel right. We had come a long way since that day in Heather’s pool and while a part of me would always want her, I was just content to be going with someone I was close to. It sure would beat going stag like Jack and Brunno.

I decided to do one more thing where Prom was concerned. When the ballots were cast I voted for myself as Prom king. Maybe that’s unethical. Maybe it was selfish. I didn’t give a shit. The crown was up for grabs these days with

Johnny the Killer losing his place on the mountaintop and who deserved it more than me? I'd put in my time. I was a nice guy. People liked me. Why not reap the benefits for once?

Heather and Sally made all the Prom arrangements of course. Women always love shit like that—the planning, the dress buying, the gushing over jewelry, Saturdays at the mall. It would take them weeks to finalize something that could've been done in a day. Let's face it, they weren't planning a wedding.

That was fine with me and Roman. We had more important things to deal with, like baseball and state tournaments. The regional started without Roman's healthy right arm, but we managed. We won the regional, demolishing each of the three teams we played by the ten-run rule and without Roman ever taking the mound. Johnny the Killer pitched in the third game and had an impressive performance, giving up only two runs in seven innings and striking out seven. Every person in the line up had an RBI, even Sam Peterman, and our defense was close to perfect, committing only one error in that three-game span.

Roman worked as hard and quick as he could at getting back; spending time with the trainer everyday after school and throwing simulated games every three days. He was scheduled to start sometime in the sectional. Roman had another project going also, something that took him to Mr. Buttworst's house every evening.

He wouldn't elaborate on his nightly trips. It was only after my questioning and begging that he let me come along. I drove us up there of course and was surprised when Roman went into the good teacher's garage instead of his house. Things got stranger, not only did Roman hand me a shovel upon exiting the garage, but I found myself following him through the forest behind Buttworst's house.

The woods went on forever and it seemed that we walked every inch of it. "Is this like the fishing, because I'm getting good grades now? I really don't need another lesson."

"No lesson," Roman responded.

We stopped finally at the bottom of a hill. Spread out on the ground next to a wheelbarrow and an ax, was a large tarp. Roman walked over and lifted it up. Underneath it was a large hole that Roman had apparently been digging for the last couple of weeks. It was probably twenty feet in circumference and five feet deep. Not three feet in back of it was a large rock outcropping that formed a wall and seemed to seal us off from the rest of the forest—a mountain in the middle of the trees.

"So what do we have here?" I asked.

Roman somehow answered my question without answering it. "I've got it wide enough, I just need it a couple feet deeper."

We took turns—one of us would scoop the dirt out of the pit, the other would empty the wheelbarrow a hundred or so feet into the woods. It wasn't the easiest work in the world, but Roman seemed to be in no hurry. He scraped his shovel, putting little effort into it, as if his persistence was more important than the pressure of the spade.

"Feels like we're digging a giant grave," I said and laughed.

Roman didn't crack a smile.

"So me and Sally, what do you think?" I said as I returned with the empty wheelbarrow.

Roman was down in the pit. He stopped shoveling at my question, placing his hands over the knob of the handle and resting his chin above them. He leaned on the tool and stared up at me like I just asked him to explain a black hole.

"Can I tell you something that's been bothering me for about nine months now?" Roman countered.

"Sure."

"Every time you refer to yourself and another person you always put yourself first."

"I don't understand," I said.

"For instance, you said 'me and Sally'."

"Yeah. So?"

"You should say 'Sally and I'."

"What's the difference?" I really didn't get it.

"It's just correct English. If you and someone else are the subject of a sentence you should say 'so-and-so and I'. If you're the object of a sentence you should say 'so-and-so and me'. But you should always refer to yourself last," Roman said.

"Sorry, not everybody has the luxury of your brain."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Yeah whatever," I muttered, as much to myself as to him.

Roman laughed.

"So anyway, Sally and *I*, what do you think?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. What do you think?"

Roman was a master of sidestepping questions. No matter how many times he gave me a question as a response, no matter how many times I knew it was coming, I always fell for it. "I don't know what I think. I used to think she was just some hot girl I was lucky enough to mess around with. I never thought about her much past that. Now though it's like everywhere I look she's there. Every time I turn on the radio the song playing reminds me of her. I know it's corny as hell."

"Why? You're human aren't you? Even the toughest guys have feelings, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I'm not the type to open the car door for a girl, or send her cheesy-ass love notes, or go to dinner and a movie. I'd rather kick somebody's ass on the baseball field and then go drink beer with the guys."

Roman threw another shovel load of dirt over his shoulder out of the pit and next to my feet. He continued to work as he talked. "Look you're asking the wrong guy about women. I've only been with one you know? The best advice I've ever gotten was from you actually. You stood in my doorway a couple of days before Christmas. I believe you said I was pretty fucking stupid for a genius. Something to the effect that you weren't going to waste your senior year watching me waste my life. It's the same thing with love, isn't it? You can be scared of it or ignore it, but in the end it's still there."

“Love,” I said out loud. “It can’t be. Where did I screw up?”

## VI

We hosted the sectional at Collingston Stadium and walked through all three games of it. Roman pitched in the sectional championship—his first game back—and threw a shutout against a team that averaged seven runs a game. His velocity was back to a hundred percent, and though it took a couple of innings to regain his pinpoint accuracy, Roman had the game in hand when he stepped on the mound.

The city of Collingston came out in droves. Five thousand-plus fans packed the stands—a record to this day that has not been broken. It was to support their local high school to some degree, but mostly I think it was because of Roman. They wanted to be a part of the things he could do, to watch him turn throwing a little white ball into pure magic. And maybe it was more than just his pitching. Maybe it was to see a skinny kid with long arms defy logic, defy nature. Maybe it was just to be around that aura of his—the intangible element some people had in them that granddad called the spark of life.

The scouts came crawling back as well. Most of them had written Roman off as damaged goods when he injured his arm and now they were babbling excuses to Coach Demera on the whys and wherefores of the their absences. Demara, of course, no matter how stupid he thought they were, was always polite and cooperative, never ruining Roman’s chances for stardom. Roman brushed them off as he always had, never committing verbally or otherwise to any one team. He did commit to one thing however, not to a scout or coach, but to Heather. He filled out the necessary paper work to enroll at Northwestern along side her.

It was getting down to crunch time for me as well. Most colleges were out of money that late in the spring. And while a couple of schools wanted me to come and walk on, I took my chances that someone would see me in the right place at the right time.

School wound down for us. The last day for seniors was the day before our super-sectional game in Mattoon. I’d spent twelve years—counting grade school—wishing, hoping, and planning a way to get out of prison, to escape the boredom. I remembered how several teachers the first day of that school year commented on how this would be the best year of my life. I remember how stupid I thought they were for saying it. As I sat at lunch that final time, I looked around at the people, and thought of the many memories we shared that had come to be a part of my life, and at that moment I knew what the prison guards meant. I knew that things would never be the same, that our round table would vanish into history, and some new group of seniors would take our place. I sat there when the bell rang for lunch to end, watching as my friends gathered their bags and books one last time. I waited until I was alone in that vast cafeteria and I tried to get one final breath of it all, holding back the lump in my throat. I finally got it. It wasn’t about the building, or the walls, or the classes. It was about faces. About friends.

In Mattoon we walked through the super-sectional. Roman threw another shutout in the championship and then Johnny the Killer won the first game by two

runs. The unlikely pair had become a rather formidable one-two punch. I drove in seven RBIs in those two games. We turned ten double plays, hit .420 as a team, and committed no errors. Sam Peterman struck out five times.

After the game Coach Demera played off the wins, stating that everything we had done up until now meant jack shit. Yes, there were only four teams left in the state, and our season would be one for the Silver Streak record books. But people don't remember who made the final four; they only remember the champion. Two games left. Two games that Coach Demera had spent his entire career waiting for. Two games that would either make the Silver Streaks immortal or allow them to fade into the background of history.

We loaded the bus for Chicago on a Wednesday morning. The school district sent five fan buses for students and fans. A good thousand other people came on their own, car pooling and driving the three-hour trip north.

Johnny the Killer started the first game against Jefferson South. Roman had thrown two days earlier and was not fully rested, although he begged for coach to start him. But as important as the state championship was to Demera, he would not risk hurting someone's arm over it, especially if it was worth potentially millions of dollars.

Johnny threw about as well as one could hope for, but Jefferson South could hit. By the fifth inning the score was tied at threes and Johnny was starting to leave the ball up in the zone. He got out of the inning luckily. Jefferson South hit a scorching line drive up the middle that would have scored two runs if it weren't for Pick Bryant making an extraordinary diving catch.

Roman went to the pen on his own during our at bat in the bottom of fifth. Despite Demera's reluctance, there was no way he could keep Roman out of the game. Coach never told Roman to take the mound in the sixth, he just did it. When Demera saw that Johnny had taken his spot at first, he had no choice but to make the lineup change with the umpire. Roman didn't get a strikeout in those two innings, but Jefferson South did not reach base either.

In the bottom of the seventh, in a tie game with two outs and nobody on, I hit a solo walk-off home run. I knew it was gone as soon as I connected with it and to this day I can't remember anything feeling so good.

One game left.

It was as close to baseball weather as you could get—76 degrees with a slight breeze out of the southwest, and not a cloud in the sky. Every seat in the stadium was filled, and the crowd overflowed down the fences of both foul lines. Both teams lined up down the baselines and faced the flag in center field. You knew it wasn't just another game when butterflies started in your stomach during the playing of the national anthem. You knew this one was special.

Our opponent was the Philastro Park Yellow Jackets, a Chicago area powerhouse that had won twelve state titles over the years, and boasted a 30-1 record coming into the game. Corey Hambrick was their ace, a six-five righty that threw near ninety, and had his own cult following of scouts.

Roman struck out the side in the top half of the first. Hambrick matched him in the bottom. Even though we had our fans they paled in comparison to those from Philastro Park. Chicagoland came out to support them, to ensure that a

downstate team would not be crowned champion. As the game went on and Hambrick and Roman threw zero after zero up on the scoreboard, I could see a slow change in the hostile crowd. They probably didn't think much of Roman's skinny six-foot frame at first when compared to Hambrick. But when the janitor crafted his flawless first four innings the crowd began to cheer for what they viewed as the underdog. After six innings, the game was scoreless.

In the seventh, with Johnny the Killer on second and two outs, Sam Peterman came to the plate. Demera wanted to pinch-hit for him—I could see it in his eyes—and so did the rest of the team. Peterman was 0 for his last 15 at bats, and had struck ten times. Demera stayed with him for some reason—one of those coaching moves that seem to go against all logic and reason. With two strikes Peterman doubled to the right center gap, scoring Johnny and giving us the lead. Pick Bryant grounded out the next at bat but we were now three outs away from the state title.

The leadoff hitter for the Yellow Jackets got a little duck snort—that's a blooper to you—over Scotty Jakowski's head at second. Roman made a real nice pitch to the outer part of the plate. The hitter stuck his ass out with some excuse-me swing and accidentally made contact. The next batter bunted him over but we got the out at first. One out, man on second. Roman sawed batter number three off at the handle, but the ball rolled down the first base line, stopping halfway up it. Neither Roman nor Johnny had a play on it and the runner was safe at first. One out, runners on first and third. Coach Demera called time and brought the entire infield to the mound.

“Look, no problem here. There's one out and we're going keep the double play in order. If they steal we're going to throw through. The guy at first is an average runner. You can throw him out no problem Tony. We're one pitch away here. The pressure is on them.”

Roman threw the fist pitch to the batter as the runner on first stole. The batter swung but missed, and I caught and fired to second in one motion. The throw was right on target. Pick caught it right above the bag, swiped a nice hard tag on the runner's feet—but the umpire called him safe.

Demera shot out on to the field faster than anybody ran that entire game. In a second he was in the umpire's face arguing the call. The umpire claimed the runner beat the tag, and there was no way he was changing the call. Demera commented on how poor his eyesight was, among other things, and continued for a solid five minutes. The umpire listened to more than he should have probably—a sign that he knew he blew the call. Demera finally left the field after the other three umpires escorted him off. Coach gave the choke sign, which wasn't for the umpire but for us. A signal for the infield to play in on the grass. There was one out, runners on second and third. The play was at home.

Roman struck out the next batter on four pitches.

One out away.

Roman got two strikes on batter number five of that inning.

One strike away.

It was their nine-hole hitter who had struck out his previous at bats and had a relatively weak swing. I called for a high inside fastball, something out of

the zone, which the batter had no chance of touching at ninety-plus miles per hour. Roman delivered the pitch right where I wanted it. The batter took a tomahawk swing at it and somehow made contact. The ball rolled at average speed on the right side of the diamond. Johnny dove for it and missed. Scotty dove in the other direction and missed. The Yellow Jackets couldn't have rolled the ball out in a better spot. The baseball had eyes. The runner at third scored easily, tying the game.

The ball rolled into right field as Sam Peterman charged it. The runner from second (the winning run) was now rounding third. Peterman fielded the ball cleanly; crowd hopped, and threw a frozen rope for me at home. The runner was five feet away from home plate.

The ball took one bounce into my mitt.

I applied a hard tag to his chest as his feet slid into my shin guards.

I knew I had beaten him to the plate.

There was a collision. We fell over each other.

A hush was over the entire stadium.

"Safe!" the umpire yelled.

*Safe? How could he be safe?* As I lay in the dirt I looked to my right. The ball was in the dirt next to my mitt. We had just lost the state title.

## VII

I slept for over twenty fours. My mind could not bear to exist in reality, to replay that ball popping out of my mitt. Mom said Roman had been by the house three times already, wanting to make sure I was all right. And I would be eventually. What was it that Roman said? Time doesn't heal all things, it only dulls the pain.

After the collision at the plate everything was sort of blurry, surreal like a dream. I remember Roman picking me up out of the dirt. I remember listening to Coach Demera's post game speech and thinking how ironic it was that every game we won during the year he had something negative to say, but now that we'd lost the most important game of our lives and of his career, he was nothing but positive. He talked of what a team we were, of how proud he was of us, of how he would never forget us.

I remember nothing of the bus ride home, or the reception they had for us when we got back to town. I was a zombie, too afraid to come back to the real world because I knew what would be waiting for me there. I thought maybe if I stayed in bed long enough, maybe I would just wither up and die.

It took a phone call from a man I barely knew to jump-start my rise out of depression. My mother brought the cordless phone in and held it to the pillow covering my head. After arguing several minutes about whether I was going to be speaking on the phone, my mother won as usual.

"Hello."

"Hi Tony, Coach Blaylock from Collingston Community College. I just wanted to call and see how you were doing. I was at the game yesterday. Tough break."

"Oh, yeah sorry you had to witness that."

“There’s nothing to be sorry about Tony. One play doesn’t make a ball player. Nor does it break a ball player. We’d like to offer you a full tuition waiver if you’re interested in playing for us. I know you have a lot on your mind with graduation and all. Take your time and get back to me whenever you can.”

“Thanks Coach, I really appreciate it.”

I hung up the phone to see Roman standing in my doorway. He was wearing a black tux and his hair was slicked back in a way I’d never seen it. My friend the former janitor was all of the sudden James Bond.

“What time is it anyway?” I asked.

“Time for you to get your sorry carcass out of bed and get ready. We’re supposed to meet the girls in forty minutes.”

It was Prom night.

## VIII

Sally was absolutely drop-dead gorgeous. She had on a blue dress—that exact same shade as her eyes—and wore her hair up in some fancy style. The diamond necklace made her neck irresistible.

Heather wore a white dress that glittered every time it touched a spec of light. The material stuck to her like an hourglass. She wore her hair down—because that’s the way Roman liked it—and her lips were glazed light pink.

We ate at Santangilo’s—just like we did for Homecoming. Last time I had to sit and listen to Johnny the Killer and act like I wasn’t bored. This time I had my best friend as my wingman, but I still couldn’t get into the party mood. I just nibbled at my food. My stomach still wasn’t ready to feel happy yet. For the first time in the history of meals the ladies put up a better effort than me.

The dance was at the Collingston Country Club, a step up from the high school fieldhouse. Our class had raised enough money to host the dance at the expensive banquet hall. Three giant chandeliers cast a soft light over the ballroom and the floor sparkled with silver glitter. The walls were decorated with white satin sheets that had vine branches interwoven every so often with red roses. Fifty or so round tables draped in white sat in the back next to the punch fountain and snacks. The ballroom floor was located in the middle of the room and a stage was set up for the DJ and emcee on the far side, across the room from the entrance.

Sally was as nice to me as she had been in months, seducing me—on purpose or not—with her eyes. It all went by the wayside though. I just kept reliving the play at the plate. I kept thinking of how many lives I’d ruined just because I couldn’t hold on to the stupid ball.

There would be six or seven songs that played before the emcee, Mr. Buttworst, was ready to announce the king and queen. Sally begged me to come dance, but I refused. I sat at one of the tables and sipped the tart punch, aimlessly watching the people dance. Seeing Roman try to fast dance did bring a brief smile to my face.

Mr. Buttworst stepped to the mic at the end of the last song. “All right ladies and gentlemen. We want to thank you for coming tonight and wish everyone a safe time. The faculty wants to remind you to play it safe tonight and

avoid any alcohol.” There were a few boos in the crowd to this. I could see Brunno with his hands cupped around his mouth.

“And now let’s get down to business.” A student handed Mr. Buttworst an envelope and he tore it open. He didn’t look right in a Tuxedo but he played the master of ceremonies to a tee. “This year’s Prom queen is none other than Heather Hawthorne.”

Big surprise there. Heather walked up and last year’s Prom queen came to meet her on the stage and put the crown on Heather’s head.

Another envelope and Mr. Buttworst had to look from beneath his bifocals at what its contents read. “Interesting. This might be the closest vote we’ve ever had. This year’s Prom king by one vote...is Tony Falcone.”

I didn’t realize he’d called my name until Pick nudged me so hard I almost fell out of my seat. I walked up to the stage, looking around at the people in disbelief. I walked up the stairs and whispered to Mr. Buttworst. “Who came in second?”

Mr. Buttworst had a half smile, half frown on his face. He mouthed the person’s name.

“Unbelievable,” I said to myself.

They sat the crown on my head as clapping and cheering came from the students on the dance floor. The people in the back even stood up from the tables and gave me an ovation that lasted a lot longer than it should have. They should have been booing me for loosing the state championship.

“Here is your king and...”

I put my hand over the mic. “There’s something I need to say,” I told Mr. Buttworst.

“Tony would like to say a few words.” Mr. Buttworst handed me the microphone.

“There’s not too many times that a person has the power to do the right thing. Well, tonight I do have the power. And I want to recognize someone that’s been makin’ things right for a lot of people over the last nine months. Someone who has done more for me than he will ever know. I beat this person by one vote for this crown. I’d like to change my vote. Roman Swivel, please come up and get your crown so you can dance with your queen.”

Roman walked reluctantly up the stage stairs as the crowd went hysterical. I shook his hand and put the crown on his head. His cheeks were flushed from embarrassment. I leaned toward his ear. “It feels good to finally catch you off guard for once.”

“It only took you nine months,” Roman said and laughed.

Heather and Roman owned the dance floor for that first song, as Faith Hill and Tim McGraw’s “It’s Your Love” flowed through the speakers. Sally and I joined them at the end. Thirty seconds later there was no place left on the dance floor.

Sally pulled me off the floor and led me outside. She didn’t say a word as we walked through the parking lot. “Where are we going?”

“I want to show you something.”

Our journey continued onto the golf course, past the first two holes. We stopped at number four green and now I found myself lying on my back looking at the stars. Sally undid my pants and pulled them to my ankles. "What are you doing?"

"Something we should've done a long time ago."

"I didn't bring any condoms if you can believe it. I didn't think with Frenchy and all in the picture, that I would have a chance."

Sally reached in her purse. "Don't worry I *did* bring condoms and what Jacques doesn't know won't hurt him."

Sally ripped open the condom package with her teeth, clothed the necessary participant, and straddled me. I now knew what people meant by the phrase "emotional rollercoaster." Finally. Finally.

Not twenty seconds into it, water started belting us from the golf course sprinklers. We both laughed until we heard the electric engine of a golf cart getting closer. "Who's out there?" A voice yelled.

Sally jumped off me and ran with her high heels in hand.

I took off with my pants around my ankles, tripping over the sand trap, and running for dear life.

## IX

Johnny the Killer stood at the backdoor to the banquet hall, sipping out of a silver flask. Sally ran by him laughing with mascara running down the sides of her face and water drops all over her dress. I was drenched and sand blasted.

"What the hell happened to you two?" Johnny asked.

"Let's just say we hit the showers a little too early," I responded.

"Want a nip?" Johnny held out the flask.

"What is it?"

"John Daniel's."

"You mean Jack Daniel's."

"If you know him as well I do, you call him John."

We both laughed. "Nah, I don't want any."

"Suit yourself," Johnny said throwing back another swig. "Ya know there was a time that I thought I would never be able to face the crowd again. After Swivel beat my ass that night in the Hollow, I prayed that God would just let me die. Things always seem worse when they're in the moment. Looking back on it, that ass beating did me a favor. You're a good ball player Tone, the best I've ever played with. You can't put us losing that game on your shoulders alone. We all had opportunities to do something. We could've scored more runs. Swivel could have struck the guy out. The piece of shit umpire could've not blown the fuckin' call. What's coach say? The great ones dust themselves off and try it again. You better get to dustin'."

"Thanks Johnny. I appreciate it. Maybe I will have just a swig."

Johnny handed over the flask.

The whiskey burned going down.

## X

Post Prom was at none other than Scotty Jakowski's house. You guessed it—his parents were out of town. Even though graduation was tomorrow Mr. and Mrs. Jakowski made a short overnight trip to Indianapolis for a little party of their own. Prom dance was just the appetizer really. The post party was what everyone looked forward to.

Scotty came through with flying colors, keeping intact his impeccable reputation as the greatest host of all time. I imagine a lot of that had to do with his uncanny ability to provide loads of alcohol. He really outdid himself this time—three kegs, and bottle after bottle of hard shit.

I found myself starting on the second pint of Jack Daniel's around midnight. I stood (more like swayed) in a circle of about ten of us. I remember hearing nostalgic stories—bits of history that would never fully die in the minds of our group. My head was spinning now and it wouldn't be long until I passed out. I saw Heather and Roman walk off toward the stairs to the boat dock. It wasn't long after that Sally came and got me.

"Should I take you home, Tony?" Sally asked.

"Why not?" I walked with her to the driveway.

It was the last thing I remember.

## XI

Roman rowed the last couple of strokes until he was satisfied that they were in the middle of the lake. Heather turned around and leaned back against him, his arms around her and her hands on top of his where they rested on her stomach. She looked up at the stars and thought how clear the night was.

"Well, where are they?" she asked.

"You have to have patience, remember?"

"I forgot." Heather said and then changed the subject. "Do you have your speech ready for tomorrow?"

"Right here." Roman pointed to his head.

"I was thinking on the way over here, what kind of idiot schedules graduation the day after Prom? Half these people will never make it up in time," Heather said.

"Sounds like something Hartman would do. To try and take the fun out of the dance."

"Probably was that asshole. Remember how pissed he got when you played "Here Comes Santa Claus" as he walked down the auditorium aisle?"

"I remember when he tried to walk up onto the stage and bounced off a barricade named Boss Chatterling," Roman laughed.

Heather turned her head and kissed Roman. She pulled away as if something had just barged into her mind. "Roman." Heather turned around and faced him, taking both of his hands.

"Yes?"

"Let's run away. Graduation is just a formality anyway. Let's just pack up what we have at your house and go and disappear. Let's just drive all night and wherever we end up, we end up. Leave all this NN stuff behind us."

“I can’t expect you to leave your life for me. To lose your family and friends. And what about school? I can’t take the place of your dreams.”

“You are my dreams, Roman. Isn’t that what two people that love each other do anyway? Don’t they give up everything in the world for each other?”

“Say we run. And then what? Are we going to have a family and careers only to be looking over our shoulder every second to see if Agent Johnson is behind us? To pack up and leave at a second’s notice? It’s no way to live a life, and I would never put a family through it. I have to fight them if I want my freedom.”

“Does that mean kill them?”

Roman looked at the sky. The stars twinkled, looking almost as if they were winking. “I don’t know what it means. I don’t know.”

Heather turned around and lay back against his stomach. The boat moved side to side, almost tipping over. Heather laughed. “Do you think we could do it in this boat.”

Roman thought about. “There’s only one way to find out.”

Roman kissed her neck.

Above that boat, in the middle of the lake, stood the bright speckled background of outer space. A flash of light split the black backdrop from horizon to horizon. It was a single comet streaking across the sky, fading as quickly as it had sparked.



## Chapter 20

### The Wind in Our Face

#### I

It was a perfect day. One of those days that blue sky goes on forever, because there are no clouds to stop it. Hot but not too humid. Green grass everywhere and butterflies floating in the breeze. The smell of spring turning to summer.

Graduation would be held on the football field, with us seniors on the grass and our families in the bleachers. Our group of friends had agreed to meet beforehand in front of the clock tower. I parked the Pinto across Stephenson Street and walked to our meeting place. Heather stood by herself in front of the evergreen that months ago she'd decorated with the spirit of Christmas.

As I walked across the street our eyes met and I couldn't help but smile. Even though my head pounded from my encounter with Mr. Daniels, I didn't care. This was parole day, a day to finally celebrate our freedom from the crimson brick prison. I kept looking down at my feet because I wasn't use to the black gown obscuring the length of my legs. All us guys wore black and the ladies silver. Heather looked gorgeous as usual, her hair done up all fancy with braids coming out of her graduation cap, her gown sparking in the sun light.

"Where's Roman anyway?" I asked.

"He insisted on walking of course. I don't even argue with him anymore." Heather stepped up to me and adjusted my tie. "I thought you'd be jumping up and down today."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because the worst day of your life ended up being the best, silly."

"What the hell are you talking about, woman?"

"Hello...Sally and you. She told me about last night."

The smile on my face faded. "What about last night?"

"You honestly don't remember?"

I searched my memory banks—number four green at the Country Club, the party at Scotty's, Jack Daniels, Sally telling me she was going to take me home, and then...I woke up in my own bed. "You're shittin' me right? I was toasted. Everything's fuzzy."

"Anthony Falcone! You spend your whole senior year trying to get with a girl, and when you finally do you forget?"

"It can't be. There's no way I'd forget."

"Well I think you better at least act like you remember. Girls like you to remember things like that. We're odd that way."

As I stood there trying to recall last night's events, our friends began to arrive—Pick and Scotty drove up together, Jack and Johnny in the Vette, Sam Peterman. All of them patted me on the shoulder or made a point to shake my hand—something teammates do when you have literally dropped the ball. I wasn't sure if it was all moral support. Some of it might have been congratulations for my apparent conquest the night before.

A dirt bike pulled a wheelie from the railroad tracks all the way to the clock tower. Its rider was none other than Brunno, with his black gown flowing in the wind like Evil Knievel. When his front tire finally hit the ground, he threw one of his arms up as if he had just jumped the Grand Canyon. Jack and Johnny clapped. I couldn't think of anything more fitting than for Brunno to be arriving to his high school graduation on a dirt bike.

"He's never gonna be right is he?" I asked.

"His dad got him the bike as a graduation present. I guess he couldn't wait to test it out," Johnny the Killer said.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Roman walking by the tracks down the street. His head was tilted up toward the sun just like that first day I watched him walk home from school. He walked with his cap folded neatly under his arm and as he got closer I could see his smile widen from ear to ear. I wondered what his valedictorian speech would be about. I imagined it would be very different than the story I got in that long ago email—about the suicidal nerd and his friend the jock. After all it was never about me saving him, quite the opposite in fact.

Heather walked to meet him on the sidewalk. Roman picked up the pace at the sight of her. His whole face was a smile and then all at once, he stopped and just stood there. His smile faded away, replaced by a look of utter disappointment and loss. That image still burns in my mind to this day. He didn't even have to look to know they were there—it was one of Roman's special abilities that I could never fully understand. I followed his eyes as he scanned the landscape.

A black van sat on the side street that intersected Stephenson. Another idled in the parking lot just south of the school. The third crept up the street behind Roman. Above a jet-black helicopter floated over, its shadow gliding over the asphalt. Roman gave a brief frown to Heather, dropped his graduation cap, and in a second he was across the street sprinting for the gravel parking lot just across from us.

## II

Even geniuses make mistakes and now Roman found himself in a fenced in parking lot, both exits of which were blocked with NN vans. The third van idled on Stephenson waiting to see what its prey's next move would be. Agent Johnson sat in the passenger seat of his van, looking down the row of cars at the boy who had become his nemesis. Roman backed up to the fence, scanning the parking lot frantically for a way out. His eyes landed on Brunno's new dirt bike as two of the vans began to converge on him. Roman jumped on the bike, failed twice at kick-starting it, then pushed the pedal down one more time, slamming it hard and throwing all his weight into it. The roaring of the engine pulsed through the air and Roman wasted no time in giving it its full test run. Instead of trying to avoid the van in front of him, he drove straight towards it. A few feet away, he stopped. The agents in the van looked at each other, puzzled. A second later Roman hit the throttle and spun around, throwing the gravel of the parking lot into the van's windshield. He made an aisle where there wasn't one, slipping through the small crevices between car doors. I saw a mirror fly off at one point.

The NN vans recalibrated their attack. Even though they were bulky and slow in that small parking lot, it was only a matter of time before they cornered Roman, dirt bike or not. Roman kept up his cat and mouse game, zigzagging in and out of cars and trucks, continually making his pursuers adjust to his route. I imagine Roman thought of it as chess—if you make your opponent move enough, sooner or later he is going to make a mistake.

The NN turned out to be a worthy adversary. They cornered Roman on the south side of the lot. To his right was a wall of cars up against the fence. To his left was another row of cars, but at the end of them sat Johnson's van. Even if Roman repeated his previous routine and passed through the line of cars, Johnson blocked his exit. In front and behind Roman were the other two vans, each rolling toward him, cutting down the free space between them. Roman let them get closer.

At a distance of ten feet both vans stopped, one in front and one behind him. Their doors opened ready for the agents to pour out. Roman pulled back on the throttle, lifting his front tire off the ground and landing it on the hood of the car to his left. An instant later Roman's motorcycle was jumping from car hood to car hood, bypassing the van in front of him. The agents scurried back to their seats and the doors slammed shut. The driver of the van threw it into reverse, hitting the gas and peeling out backwards in an effort to beat him to the exit. It was too late. Roman was at high RPMs, darting up Stephenson Street. The vans and helicopter followed him.

"We've got to help him," I said.

"We'll never catch up to them," Johnny the Killer countered.

"We don't have to. I know where he's taking them," I said.

"They were fifteen-passenger vans. I couldn't count how many agents there were because of the tinted windows, but they looked to be full," Heather said.

"Forty-five of them," I mumbled to myself. "He doesn't stand a chance."

"What are we waiting for?" Sam Peterman asked.

I looked around at the guys. Roman had affected each of them for the good in some way; still I didn't expect them to risk their lives. But I knew what I had to do. I started to jog for the Pinto.

"I'm going too," Heather said.

"Count me in," Sam Peterman said.

"We're going to miss graduation to fight a pointless fight?" Pick Bryant asked. "Even if we all go they've got us outnumbered. They're the government for God's sake. What are we gonna do, fart on 'em?"

"My mom will kill me if I miss graduation," Scotty added.

"Fuck your mom Scotty," Johnny the Killer said flatly. "Do you think the janitor would have a second thought if it was one of our asses in the sling? Hell no he wouldn't. He saved Apollo. I owe him."

"He threw me a bucket of balls after every practice," Peterman said.

"He gave back all the blackjack money at my dad's bar," Pick added.

"He helped me with my b-b-business math," Brunno said.

"We all owe him," I affirmed.

"I don't owe him shit," Jack Rollings whined. "The only thing he ever did for me was dislocate my leg. I'm not missing graduation for that piece of shit."

“He also relocated your leg,” I said.

“You’re going,” Johnny said, pointing at Jack.

“Bullshit,” Jack responded.

It was the only time I ever heard Jack disobey a direct order from Johnny. The insurrection did not last long. The Killer had enough with the talk apparently. He grabbed Jack, dragging him by the collar as we ran to our vehicles. We piled into the cars to go help our friend.

### III

The Kawasaki KX500 glided over the black asphalt of Collingston, running red lights, cutting in between cars, and reaching speeds of 100 miles per hour. In minutes the buildings of the business district and the homes of neighborhoods were left behind, replaced by farmland and forest. Roman could see the shadow of the NN helicopter following on the road alongside him.

The NN vans followed at a close distance and though they had a more dubious time with city traffic, they never lost sight of their fleeing prey. Agent Johnson loaded the odd pistol that lay in his lap with something that looked like a watch battery. His tinted window slid down into the door. Johnson stuck the pistol out, aimed carefully, and shot the short silver cylinder. The tracer hit the motor casing on the bike and stuck like a magnet to a refrigerator.

The traffic had lessened since leaving the city limits and now it was only three vans and a dirt bike for as far as the eye could see. Route 1 straightened for a good five miles at one point, a perfect time for the NN to make its move. Johnson’s van sped up to pass the Janitor’s dirt bike in the left lane and then cut back in front of him. The second van pulled into the oncoming traffic’s lane and mimicked the speed of the dirt bike. The last van came up behind Roman, just a few feet from his back tire. The NN made a moving barricade, and now the mobile walls started to slow down, forcing Roman to decrease his speed.

“Should we take out one of his tires?” A voice said through Agent Johnson’s earpiece.

“Negative,” Agent Stenworth answered. “The target is to remain intact if at all possible. Decelerate until we have him stopped.”

Roman had other ideas.

He cut the bike to the right—the only direction he could go—and veered off into the cornfield next to them. The vans stopped in the road, watching as Roman and his motorcycle disappeared into the forest on the other side of the field. The chopper flew over the tree line but came back when it could not see him through the brush.

Johnson looked at the GPS monitor in his hand. Roman inched along the screen as a small blinking dot. “I put a tracer on his bike. He can run but he can’t hide anymore.”

“He will be ours soon enough,” Stenworth said.

### IV

Our group parked a little less than a mile away from Buttworst’s house, disrobed from our graduation gowns, and hiked it through the woods. We stopped

at the tree line fifty yards or so from the teacher's long driveway and watched as the NN unloaded from their vans. I spread the leaves of the greenery in front of my face to count thirty men, all dressed in suits and ties, shoes shined to perfection. Most of them removed their coats after exiting, revealing the belts around their backs and shoulders that held their holstered guns. Besides their usual side arms I could see a smaller weird-looking pistol. It looked like those lighters with the long barrels that could spark a flame at the squeeze of a trigger. It must have been the dart gun that Roman had become familiar with in that Iowa cemetery.

Half of the agents spread out, swarming over Mr. Buttworst's house and garage. The other half formed a circle and stood like soldiers at attention, scanning the environment for the man they sought. There was never a spoken word, but still they moved like lions hunting—communication was replaced by years of skillful repetition. They were a football team that had practiced a certain play so many times it just became instinct. Johnson and a smaller man stood in the center of the worker bees, watching patiently as the area was secured enough to begin their search. The smaller man seemed to be Johnson's superior. He looked more like a college professor than a skilled agent of the government. He had thin rimmed glasses in the shape of perfect circles, a large bald spot that covered more of his head than his hair did, a fragile-looking stature, and height that seemed to diminish next to the towering Agent Johnson.

One of the agents returned with a black gown in hand. Another followed with Roman's suit coat, pants, and dress shoes. "Agent Stenworth, we found these in the loft above the garage," one of the agents said.

"There's no one inside the house or on the immediate grounds," another said.

"I smell a trap. Someone doesn't change out of clothes unless they have clothes to change into. He's thought this out," Agent Johnson said, sounding certain.

"Easy, old friend," Agent Stenworth advised. "I don't care how good he is, we have him out manned and out gunned. It is only a matter of time."

"Don't underestimate him."

Stenworth looked down at his GPS scanner. "Very strange. According to this he is within three feet of us circling at an astounding pace. I hear no motorcycle."

The Agents looked around with their dart guns in hand. Johnson looked around and then up. I followed his gaze to the crow soaring overhead. Johnson pulled his gun out and aimed. There was a soft click of his silenced weapon and the bird fell to the ground. Johnson walked over to the dead bird and knelt down.

"Crows are a very curious bird. They like anything shiny," Johnson said as he opened the bird's beak and produced his silver tracer.

"Regardless, he's out there somewhere. Find him," Stenworth ordered as he pointed to the woods behind Buttworst's house and garage.

The wall of agents spread apart—leaving a good twenty yards between each man—and slipped into the forest. Johnson and Stenworth remained in the

gravel driveway. Stenworth talked into the toothpick-size microphone in his hand. "I want a report every twenty minutes."

"What ya reckon R-R-Roman did with my bike?" Brunno tried to whisper.

"I'm sure it's in a safe place, Brunno," I said back.

"What's the plan here?" Johnny cut in. "There are only two of them left. I say we rush the bastards. There's eight of us."

"That's a great fucking plan until they take out their guns and shoot us," I said back.

"Good point. I should have brought my gun," the Killer said.

It was useless to even argue anymore about Johnny's gun. Something occurred to me at that moment—it might have been a mistake coming here. Roman knew all along what he would be up against, when this day finally came, what the NN would do, how they would try and capture him, what their procedures would be. We might just be in the way, maybe even be a handicap. As I looked down the row at my friends squatting behind the brush in their best slacks, ties, and dress, I started to feel guilt. Not only had I taken their graduation away from them, but all of them except Heather were naïve as to what we were really up against. I suggested that we just wait and see what Roman had in store for the NN. My classmates complied for the most part, except for Jack who backtracked through the woods to take a piss.

## V

The forest behind Buttworst's home sloped downhill to a small ravine with a creek running through it, and eventually flattened out from there. As the agents' distance from their starting point increased the webbing of leaves and branches overhead thickened, sheltering them from the light of the sun. Here and there single rays of light broke through the leaf barrier, turning the environment into a patchwork quilt of light and dark colors. Not only was it hard to see at times, but also the forest seemed to be twenty degrees cooler.

Agent Marick walked slowly, twigs snapping and dead leaves rustling under his feet; holding his dart pistol with both hands, he constantly checked the 12, 3, 6, and 9 o'clock positions around him. Several times he thought he saw the young teenager he'd been instructed to find, but it turned out to be just a shadow on a bush or the odd shape of a tree. Marick was a young man himself, no more than thirty years of age, recruited by the NN after college and then three years with the CIA. He had no wife or children and the NN seemed to be a perfect fit for him.

This was the first time in his career that he felt out of place—wearing dress attire and polished shoes, walking through a forest he wasn't familiar with, and losing line-of-sight contact with his fellow agents a hundred yards back. He wondered what the "target" had done or had known to deserve the wrath of thirty NN Agents. This was the largest-scale mission the agency had taken on since Marick had joined it. After several minutes of thought and considering the possibilities, he could not come up with a satisfactory explanation for the mission. This Roman Swivel must hold the keys to a good number of problems that plagued the NN.

Agent Marick's speculation would not be resolved anytime soon. Something very hard hit him in the head—a rock maybe—and now as he staggered in a circle, trying to check the surroundings for the source of the projectile, his vision blurred and his body moved in slow motion as if he were under water. The occasional beams of light breaking through the tree cover might have been sunshine hitting the ocean floor. As Marick finished his circle-scan of the area, his one-time prey suddenly stood inches in front of him—as predator.

Although still unable to focus well or aim, Marick pulled the trigger on his dart gun anyway, and was surprised when he felt something like a needle penetrate his own chest. Roman had turned the gun so that it was pointing at Marick. As the dart's sleep poison crept into his veins and blackness started to close in around his eyes, Agent Marick was one step closer to understanding what all the fuss over Roman Swivel was about.

## VI

"Why did we even come if we're not going to do anything? This is bullshit," Johnny the Killer said.

"Watch your voice," I whispered back. "We came in case he needs our help. And until he needs it we're going to sit here and be quiet."

Johnny shook his head.

"Is Jack back yet?" I asked.

The Killer looked around down the line of our squatting friends and then toward the vegetation behind us. "Don't think so. I'll go get him. He's probably talking on his cell phone or something stupid."

"Hurry up, and be careful," I said.

"I don't know if this is good or bad," Heather whispered. "If it's good that their search is taking so long, I mean."

Before I could answer her there was a clicking sound behind us, and I heard Johnny say two words—"Oh shit."

Six agents stood behind us with their dart guns pointed. Jack was already in cuffs crying like a baby. His bathroom break had turned out to be very costly.

"Everybody up," one of the agents ordered.

## VII

It took only a matter of minutes to herd us out into the open gravel drive, cuff us, and force us down in a neat little row on our knees. Johnny and Bruno both tried to resist, only to be beaten down in seconds. The Killer and the wrestler with all of their brawn and bull-headedness were no match for the NN Agents, whose quick hands and joint locks brought them to submission.

Agent Stenworth now called off the search, and the Agents began to return one by one. Johnson walked by each of us prisoners, looking us over to make sure we were faces he recognized from his previous spying escapade to Collingston. Jack continued to sob and I could tell it was wearing on Stenworth's nerves.

I could sympathize with Jack I guess. Here we were on graduation day, hands cuffed behind our backs and knees in the dirt like we were about to be executed. There was a time when I would have been shitting myself like Jack, but

nine months with the janitor had changed my mindset in such situations. I counted only twenty-seven agents now—three less than before. Sure they might be out taking a piss or just taking their time returning, but by the look of urgency on Stenworth's face I'd bet that Roman had something to do with it. For some reason I knew everything was going to be all right. I knew Roman would save the day once again. That was, until Agent Stenworth spoke.

He looked at Johnson. "Marick, Washington, and Jackson are not back and are not responding to their radios." Stenworth looked at the eight of us as he thought to himself.

Jack's cry only got higher and now there was a mucousy cough with it. For a brief instant Stenworth and me had something in common. "Would somebody shut him up please?"

The agent next to Jack shot his dart into Jack's arm. Jack's crying slowed and eventually stopped—like a song in a tape player in which the batteries were dying. Jack fell face first into the dirt in front of him.

"That's fucking..." Johnny didn't get out the last word. Another agent hit The Killer in the side of the neck with a drugged mini-arrow. He too was now asleep.

"Careful with those things," Johnson said to his comrades. "We don't have an unlimited supply."

"Don't worry my friend, it will only take one to stop young Swivel," Stenworth reassured him. "Which of his friends will get him out here the quickest?"

Johnson looked at me and then Heather. "The girl."

Stenworth hoisted Heather off the ground by her cuffs. "I know you can hear me, Swivel. I'm going to make life very uncomfortable for your girlfriend if you don't show yourself. I don't wish any harm to anyone, not even you, so do the sensible thing."

Stenworth waited a couple of seconds and when there was no response he pulled on Heather's hair until she screamed. Heather tried to wriggle herself free and then tried to back into his grip, maybe to throw him over her back like Roman had taught her. But Stenworth stopped her counter-move by jamming a knee into her back. Heather was sent sprawling, her face hitting the dirt.

"Stop!" A winded voice yelled.

Roman appeared from behind Mr. Buttworst's house, his chest pumping hard for oxygen as he ran—wherever he'd been in the woods, he'd had to move fast to get here. The glimpses of the warrior that lived somewhere in Roman's soul were now fully apparent—he wore camouflage and his face was a brown, green, and black mosaic of paint. The friendly janitor I had grown to love was firmly entrenched in the art of war.

Roman continued to run toward us, then regained his senses. He stopped thirty yards away. I could see the struggle going on his eyes—he wanted badly to help Heather to her feet. My worst fears were now realized. We'd followed Roman to help him, but in fact we had done the exact opposite. We were no more than helpless worms dangling on the end of a hook.

"I don't suppose you're surrendering?" Stenworth asked Roman.

“Never,” Roman responded.

“Have it your way. Put him to sleep boys,” Stenworth ordered.

The dart pistols rose and fired. Twenty-seven sharp tips hit Roman in the chest and torso, like he was a bull’s-eye at the firing range. A second or two passed but Roman remained on his feet. Instead of falling to his knees, he pulled the darts one by one out of his chest and stomach and threw them to the ground. Johnson and Stenworth looked at each other.

Roman pounded on his chest with his knuckles. It sounded like he was knocking on a plastic bucket.

“Some sort of body armor,” Stenworth murmured. “I guess we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

Twenty-five of the agents—all but Stenworth and Johnson—surrounded Roman in a matter of seconds. They formed a circle around him. Roman put his hands in the pockets of his camouflaged shirt, and pulled out two dart pistols—spoils from the three missing Agents in the woods. With a pistol in each hand, Roman’s fingers squeezed the triggers on both guns, sending the poisoned darts plucking through the air with the sound of a blowgun in the jungle. Nine darts and a total of three guns later he was out of ammunition, but the weapons had served him well. All of the poison projectiles had found skin to penetrate, and those agents had stumbled around, eventually falling to the ground. Eighteen agents were left standing.

Roman dropped the last empty dart gun as the circle of his remaining pursuers closed in. The first Agent punched Roman in the chest, only to retract his hand, shaking it from the collision with the makeshift body army under Roman’s fatigues. The agents adapted, aiming their fists and feet at Roman’s head and legs. It was the same dance as before all over again—Roman ducking, blocking, and getting his own offensive blows in during the few split-second windows of opportunity. As many times as I’d seen it, it was still amazing—how two arms and two legs could block and duck the attack of so many. Roman could sense their swings coming—dealing with the ones in front of him with his eyes and dealing with ones in back of him without ever turning to look.

Stenworth looked at Agent Johnson.

“I told you he was good,” Johnson said.

“Yes he is.” Stenworth reached into his suit coat and produced a taser. He walked toward the fight in front of him.

Two Agents grabbed Roman’s arms and held him as Stenworth charged in with his high-voltage device. Roman struggled to free himself but failed. Blue electricity sparked between the silver poles in the taser. Just before Stenworth placed it against his neck, Roman jumped onto the unconscious body of one of the agents. The two agents continued to restrain him by the arms.

Stenworth held the zapper against Roman’s neck, but he did not convulse. Instead the two agents holding him jerked and spasmed. Roman had grounded himself somehow by placing his feet on the unconscious agent so that the current passed through him and his arms, into the two agents restraining him.

Before Stenworth realized he shocking his own men, Roman lifted one leg in the air and launched a succession of quick kicks. The first kick connected with

Stenworth's stomach, the second with his taser, and the third with his nose. The taser flew through the air and landed in the grass. The current stopped and the agents on Roman's arms fell to the ground like robots unplugged from their power source.

Stenworth picked his broken glasses from his face and felt his nose, which was broken and badly disfigured to the right side of his face. He squeezed it between his index finger and thumb, popping the cartilage as closely as possible back to a straight position.

The remaining agents descended on Roman again, only to be met with a flurry of his feet and fists. Agent Johnson ran to one of the vans, opened its sliding door, and produced a strange-looking rifle. Attached to the side of the gun were several balls. He flipped up the sight on top of the rifle, looking through it, and walking towards the battle. He stopped about twenty feet away and waited.

The window of opportunity opened—the battle separated briefly, untangling Roman from the agents and placing him dead center in Johnson's scope with his arms momentarily down. The rifle fired and through the air spun a rope with a ball at each of its ends. The rope hit Roman and wrapped around his torso, binding his arms to his sides. Johnson fired again, this time bagging Roman's ankles. Legs bound tightly together, Roman fell to the ground like a toppled monument. The fighting was over, the grunts and punches of battle gone. All was silent.

I turned my head to look around for my fellow classmates. In the excitement and panic they must have taken off—cuffs and all—into the woods. I'm not sure how far they would get not being able to use their arms. All that remained were Heather and I, and the unconscious Jack and Johnny.

Four agents walked over to Roman, picked him up by the cabled ropes that imprisoned him, and headed for the vans like they were carrying a large piece of luggage. I saw no struggle from Roman—the cables were too strong—and he lay horizontally in the air, carried at arms and ankles like a mummy. Two Agents opened the double doors on one of the vans. I got to my feet awkwardly because of the handcuffs and as they carted Roman by I put a stiff shoulder into one of the men. He brushed me off like I was a fly and I fell backwards to the ground.

"Roman!" Heather shrieked.

There was a grunt from Roman, as if to acknowledge her and at the same time show his frustration at being captured. Heather struggled to her feet and ran at the agents with arms cuffed behind her. I don't know what she thought she was going to do—and she probably didn't either. Sometimes there is no rational thought when you want something so badly. Sometimes there is only hope.

Heather threw herself at one of the agents holding Roman. Her slight body didn't budge or even unbalance him. She twisted her shoulders back and forth, trying to break the handcuffs binding her. When all her efforts had failed, she began cursing the agents at the top of her lungs. An agent pushed her to the ground. Heather hit but sprung back up, as if her adrenaline had turned the hard ground into a trampoline. She charged again only to be met by a strong backhanded. She hit the ground and lay again with her face in the dirt.

Agent Johnson walked over and scooped her up, standing her back up in a vertical position. He wiped the mud from her eyes. There was a deep hacking noise in Heather's throat, and she returned the Agent's gesture of kindness by spitting in his eye. The snot/spit stuck to Johnson for a second and then dribbled down his cheek. He wiped the mucous from his face.

"This isn't how you treat people," Heather said. "Making them do things against their will. Roman's a good person and you want to warp him into something he's not."

"We're good people too, Ms. Hawthorne," Johnson said. "You're not seeing the big picture."

"To Hell with your big picture. I hope he ends up killing every last one of you."

Johnson didn't respond. He only nodded to the men still holding Roman, and they slid him into the van.

The agents started to close the van doors but were stopped short by a loud gun-blast that echoed from the house that in all directions. The bullet was shot straight into the air as a warning or an attention-getter. Or both. The bullet came from one of two forty-four magnums in the hands of a man also dressed in camouflage. But his camouflage was everyday attire: hat, boots, and all. The man who held his silver six-shooter in the air was none other than Carl Stumot.

"The boy is not to be taken. They say," Carl said.

The flaps of his gentleman's cap covered the tops of his ears. His green army coat hung down past his waist and the whiskers of his beard were held together below his chin by a band. The silver pistols glimmered in the sunlight as they hung down at his side. Wherever Carl had been for the last month, he seemed to be in top form.

"I don't believe it," I mumbled to myself.

"What now?" Agent Stenworth said and then laughed.

"Mr. Swivel's neighbor," Johnson replied, "Don't know much about him."

"Who are you and who is the 'they' you refer to?" Stenworth asked.

"Carl Stumot I am. And they..." Carl looked into the woods behind him, "are they."

"Stumot...Stumot..." Agent Johnson thought out loud. "As in Colonel Stumot?"

"Aye, 'tis Colonel Stumot." Carl nodded his head.

"Ninja sat under him in Korea," Johnson whispered to Stenworth.

"I think you've found yourself in the wrong war, old man," Stenworth said.

A few of the agents laughed under their breath at Stenworth's comment. Their humor was cut short by a bullet piercing the forehead of the agent standing directly beside Stenworth. The shot killed him immediately and he fell to the ground with the smile still stuck to his face. The remaining agents unsheathed their guns in unison.

"No, 'tis the right war Carl is in," Carl said shaking his head.

“Hold your fire,” Stenworth ordered his troops. “Our fight is not with you, Colonel. This doesn’t involve you.”

“Nor has it ever been with Carl, just all around him. I am here for the boy. They say he is to be freed.”

Stenworth shook his head in frustration. “Who in God’s name are *they*? Who is giving you orders?”

Carl pointed with the barrel of one of his guns toward the woods. “They.”

Everyone including myself looked into the woods and its outlying areas. I squinted to see something—an alien maybe—but only shadows filled the gaps between the trees of the forest.

“I don’t have time for this nonsense,” Stenworth said as he fired his gun.

The rest of the agents followed their commander, emptying round after round at the crazy colonel. Carl raised both of his pistols and returned the gesture, making no effort to find cover. Heather ran behind the van, and I followed. The agent, whom Carl had just disposed of, lay next to us at the rear wheel of the van. Huddled over, hands still cuffed behind her back, Heather went to the body and sat sideways on the man’s stomach.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded.

“If they’ve all got cuffs, they’ve all got keys. Help me out here.”

I waddled over to the corpse and we sat, backs to each other, while I helped her pat down the body. Rummaging over a dead body is one thing, but doing it with your hands behind your back is hardly appealing. There was a circular object attached to his belt—something like a small tape measure—and a pair of keys hung from it. My hands groped their way blindly up his leg towards the belt, grabbing his dead private area before I reached the keys.

“Gross,” I whined.

“What’s wrong?”

“Let’s just say I’m probably the only man alive besides a mortician that has felt up a dead guy.”

“Do you have it or not?”

“Got it.” I pulled on the keys, which were connected by some sort of retractable string to the object on the man’s belt. After several attempts at unlocking Heather’s cuffs I finally got it in the hole so to speak. Heather discarded her cuffs and unlocked me a lot quicker than I had her. The gunfire had stopped.

I peeked around the edge of the van, almost certain I’d see Carl lying in a pool of his own blood. But I was mistaken. Carl was still standing in the exact same spot. Mr. Buttworst’s windows were shot out and I could see the outline of Carl’s form on the house in bullet holes. As the warm May breeze kicked up, both sides of his green jacket flowed in the wind, exposing fifty or so bullet holes. The sunlight showed through those little empty spheres, and for a second Carl in his coat looked like an angel with wings. Not one bullet appeared to have hit him. Carl stood there reloading his six-shooters one bullet at time. He was some time-warping version of a cowboy, living through high noon without a second thought of luck.

I looked at the ground to find it littered with more NN bodies. There were now only eleven agents still on their feet. Heather pulled on my sleeve. I followed

her as quietly as I could behind the agents and we snuck into the van that housed our friend. I watched out the back of the van as we began unwrapping Roman's arms and ankles. The process was slow—the cables were wound tightly around him—and we had to literally unroll his body one turn at a time to get them off.

"Impossible," Stenworth said. "There's no way we could all miss that many times." Stenworth pressed the button on the handle of his gun and a small red laser dot appeared on Carl's forehead right between his eyes. Stenworth held it there for a second to make sure he was on target and then pulled the trigger. Carl's hat flew off, shredded into a million pieces by the bullet. And as Carl continued to load his pistols, feathers fell to the ground around him, like snow in winter.

"Ha! Maybe your goddamn gun is bent," Carl said.

Stenworth put his gun back in its holster under his armpit. "Apprehend him before he gets his guns loaded," he ordered.

"What's happening?" Roman asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "Carl just took out half of the agents; they shot back at him but never hit him once. It's like magic. Now they're all charging him."

"I have to help him," Roman said.

"Just a couple more turns," Heather said.

The eleven Agents—including Johnson and Stenworth—were on Carl in seconds, throwing punches and kicks not to restrain him as they had with Roman, but to kill him. Carl blocked and maneuvered with a grace I had seen only in Roman, landing a few good licks of his own here and there. Stenworth pulled his gun at point blank range and squeezed the trigger. There was nothing. No bang. No click. No silenced pluck. Nothing. It was like the gun refused to fire. Stenworth reached down to his ankle, lifted his pant leg, and pulled a dagger from its sheath.

Roman was free of the cables now, and he jumped from the back of the van like he'd been shot out of a canon. He ran with a speed I'd never seen, even out of him. He was at the battle instantly.

"Let's see if you can dodge *this*," Stenworth said, throwing the dagger at Carl.

"No!" Roman screamed as he flew through the air and tackled Agent Stenworth.

It was too late. Carl's luck—or magic—had run out. The knife toppled end over end through the air, sunlight glinting off it as it went. The blade went dark as it slid into the front of Carl's throat. Carl made a gagging sound. He put his hands up to his neck and fell backwards to the ground. Roman ran over to him, touching his chest and then the knife, settling finally on just holding Carl's hand. For once Roman didn't have the answer. He couldn't save his friend. There was a gurgling sound in Carl's throat as if he was trying to tell his young friend one last piece of wisdom. Carl's smiled, winked, and then died there on the ground in front of Buttworst's house.

An agent lunged for Roman, only to have his scrotum smashed by Roman's heel. The Agent fell to the ground convulsing from the pain. Another came only to have his fingers snapped backwards to his wrist. Another's knee was

buckled. An ear ripped off. An eye pushed into its skull. At the end of Roman's fury stood Stenworth.

Roman charged him, only to be stopped by a knee to the ribs from Agent Johnson. Roman fell to the ground holding his chest, the wind knocked completely out of him. He charged Stenworth again only to be slammed to the ground by Agent Johnson once more.

"Face it kid. You're only prolonging the inevitable," Stenworth said. "How many people are going to have to die before you come to your senses?"

"I don't know," Roman responded. "How many do you have?"

"How about this one?" Stenworth said.

A second later I was on my back holding my side. The son of a bitch shot me. I remember lying there looking up at the sun, not really in pain, more pissed off than anything. I just couldn't believe he shot me. What a fucking coward.

Roman kicked the gun out of Stenworth's hand and just stood there, the circuits in his brain working their formulas and strategies. The rest of the agents that Roman had bulldozed through were slowly getting to their feet and my friend started to take a few slow steps back toward the woods. "If you want me, you're going to have come and get me," he said. And with that Roman disappeared into the tree line. The eleven agents who were still able to followed him in.

## VIII

Heather ripped off my shirt and rolled me onto my side. She pressed around the wound examining me like a doctor would. I think her prodding was more painful than the actual bullet hitting me. "It's just a flesh wound," she said.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means the bullet just grazed you, ripped the skin some but didn't penetrate."

Heather tore a strip from the bottom of her dress all the way around then helped me to my feet. She tore one of my sleeves off, wadded it into a ball, and placed it against the wound. She wrapped the torn-dress bandage around my stomach so my compress was secured, and then tied it.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we help Roman end this once and for all."

"Easier said than done blonde."

Heather jogged over to one of the dead agents and pried the gun out of his hand. Her sundress was unraveling at the bottom, smudged with dirt and mud, and her hair looked as if she had just woken up. She could have been straight out of the trailer park, but I knew better. No matter what the circumstances or how she looked her beauty always showed through. Was it beauty or courage? Maybe sometimes they were one and the same. In that instant I knew why Roman went to such extraordinary circumstances to be with her, why he risked so much.

"Move it," Heather ordered, snapping me out of my trance.

"I don't know about bringing the gun," I said, jogging behind her into the forest.

"I don't know either. But we're bringing it."

We jogged along a trail covered with dead leaves. It was a route that Mr. Buttworst used on his hunting expeditions and it was no wider than a foot. I'm sure in the fall and winter it was more visible but now plants and vegetation grew up on both sides, making it as narrow as a bicycle tire.

Heather ran at a good clip in front of me. I wanted to think she was so far ahead because of the painful wound in my side, but let's face it, Heather could run laps around me on my best day. You don't keep up with people that run at 6 AM every day unless you do it yourself. She seemed to sense my lagging and slowed down the pace against her better wishes. The trail split into a Y ahead of us.

"Which way?" she asked, not missing a breath.

"Right."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I know where he's taking them."

Our marathon continued and as we got deeper into the forest, although we couldn't see them, we could hear them, the dry leaves and twigs snapping under their shoes, and the whispers of voices into earpieces. The trail started to descend, and I knew we were close now. I told Heather to stop and led her off the path into the brush. We walked to a drop off and spread the leaves in front of us. Roman stood at the bottom of the hill. His path to freedom had turned into a dead end. Behind him was a huge rock out-cropping at least a hundred feet high and just as wide, something the glaciers of a million years ago had placed there to stop him. In front of him stood a wall of NN Agents, some holding their sides, some even doubled over from shortness of breath. Roman seemed to be unaffected by his sprint through the woods. He was calm and his stance was nonchalant, like he'd just finished strolling through the woods to watch birds.

Heather took two steps before I grabbed her shoulder. "He doesn't need us. Not yet anyway. Just trust me." I took the gun out of her hand in case she got trigger-happy and placed it between my belt and my back. I glanced down at my side to see the crimson spot on my shirt growing bigger than before.

One by one the NN Agents produced their handcuffs, waiting in anticipation for the order from their commander. Stenworth fidgeted with his glasses, the lenses of which were long gone. He seemed to be preoccupied with bending at least the frames back to how they had been before meeting Roman's foot. The entire situation was just another day of business in the work of the NN.

Johnson was not so passive. He looked at Roman and then around at the landscape, trying to read his nemesis's plans.

Stenworth spoke. "This is where it all ends, Mr. Swivel. I am curious however as to what is going through that mind of yours right now. What does a genius think at a time like this, in a situation there is no way out of, in a problem that can't be solved? Does he go into denial because deep down he thinks there is no such thing as an unsolvable problem?"

Roman answered immediately. "No, he thinks that at the beginning of the day thirty agents tried to obtain him but only eleven are left. He thinks that no matter who those agents are or who they work for, in the end they're just overrated grunts doing somebody else's dirty work, taking orders from a man who has made the cardinal sin of warfare: never ever underestimate your opponent. He thinks

that if those agents come at him one more time every last one of them will be committing suicide.”

Agent Johnson scanned the tree line again, turning in a complete circle this time, searching for something, anything that might indicate an ambush. He looked up at the rock wall behind Roman, but saw nothing his nemesis could use to his advantage.

Stenworth smiled. “You overestimate your abilities.”

Roman raised his fists and spread his feet to a fighting stance. “There’s only one way to find out. Bring your out-of-date agents and see what the future holds.”

“So be it.”

That wasn’t exactly a direct order but the NN charged anyway, mostly out of anger I suppose, at Roman belittling them and their commander. Their angry steps lasted only a few seconds. The dead leaves beneath their feet gave way, sending them to their doom. Large wooden spikes—tree trunks and large limbs—sharpened into spears awaited them at the bottom of the short pit. Stenworth teetered on the edge of the pit only to be pulled back to safety by Agent Johnson. The rest of the agents fell, and fell hard. It sounded much like a butcher shop—first the dull slice of the blade into the animal’s carcass and then the splattering and splashing of its guts on the floor. It impaled the majority immediately, poking somewhere through the lower end of them and then exiting out the neck, sternum, or mouth-nose area. The spikes had such a large diameter that upon penetration the blood poured out like pressurized water from a fire hose. One unfortunate agent did not die instantly. Instead his fall landed him horizontally, his torso somehow missing the spikes. His four limbs however were harpooned in a mangled mess. Agent Stenworth silenced the agent’s agony with his gun.

I had commented to Roman just weeks ago that it felt like we were digging a grave. For once I was right. Of course I wasn’t there for the sharpening of the trees or the covering of the hole with the leaves and vines. I found myself following Heather down the hill toward Roman, at first running and then sliding. The shrubs and branches tore into my side something fierce on the way down. I remember thinking how lucky I was to have that little slit rather than a big one like the agents in the bottom of Roman’s pit.

Roman walked heel to toe along the narrow walkway of ground between the pit and the rock wall behind him. He walked around the edge of the pit and was now face to face with Johnson and Stenworth.

“You just killed some of the best soldiers in this country, men I have served with, some for more than a decade,” Stenworth said.

“I killed no one. I even warned them that coming after me one more time would be suicide. You killed them by not taking my advice.”

“Johnson,” Stenworth said, “you never said anything about him being such a smug little prick.”

Johnson didn’t respond. He took off his suit coat, folded it neatly, and placed it on the ground.

Stenworth charged Roman. Two rights, a left, two kicks, a roundhouse. Despite his slight demeanor, Stenworth packed a quick and powerful punch, and

even though he was relatively the same size as Roman he seemed to be stronger. Roman blocked every one of his attacks.

Johnson walked around Roman and now there was a man to deal with both in front of and behind him. Stenworth took a step forward only to be kicked in the stomach. Without putting his foot back on the ground, Roman kicked behind him at Johnson's knee. The bigger agent blocked the kick.

Heather and I made our way down and stopped fifty feet from the standoff. She grabbed for the gun in my belt but I slapped her hand away. The bright sunlit spots that had poked through the top of the forest earlier were gone and now the tops of the trees swayed back and forth, exposing dark almost purple storm clouds overhead. There was a loud sound like rushing water and the wind tore through the leaves of the forest. The cool breath of Mother Earth seemed to drop the temperature twenty degrees instantly. I could hear the beginning drops of the storm tap on the canopy of leaves overhead. I thought about how beautiful the beginning of that day had been, a day so full of hope and possibilities. The approaching storm put a final exclamation point on a downward spiral. Thunder cracked in the distance.

Roman defended himself from the hands and feet of the last two agents, slipping one of his lightning-fast jabs in from time to time. But the experience of his opponents began to show. They were just toying with him—Johnson would attack with a quick assault only to back away and let Stenworth finish it, one agent regaining his strength while the other dealt with Roman.

Roman had already exhausted a great deal of his energy on the rest of the NN. Now he was fighting the best of that broken unit. Roman started to make mistakes. Roman tried to throw a punch only to have his nose smashed in by Stenworth's fist. A kick from Johnson buckled his knee. Roman stopped himself from hitting the ground with his hand, but Stenworth swept it out from beneath him. Roman was on his back now and Johnson jumped, hoping to land on his smaller opponent. Roman rolled away and the giant landed on all fours.

There wasn't enough time in a fight like this to use your hands to get up. Roman did a whipping motion with his entire body—something like doing the worm on a dance floor—his feet hit the ground sending the rest of his body to a vertical position. Stenworth kicked him in the stomach sending Roman back a couple of feet doubled over in pain. There was a loud cracking sound to the kick—the body armor over Roman's chest and stomach must have broken. He coughed and a bloody mist sprayed the air in front of him.

Unsatisfied, Stenworth continued with a series of fists to his face, beating Roman down until he was on his knees. Roman's torso swayed back and forth from delirium. Stenworth unsnapped the handcuffs off his belt and opened them in one fluid action.

Before I could stop her, Heather pulled the gun from behind my back, fiddled with safety, and then began firing at Stenworth. I couldn't see where the bullets were flying, but I knew where they weren't. Heather was shooting up everything in the forest except her target.

Agent Johnson pulled out his gun calmly and aimed at her. "Drop it."

There was no doubt in my mind that Agent Johnson meant what he said and would not miss if he fired. There was equally no doubt in my mind that Heather would never drop the weapon. I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed her hands and pulled the weapon away. She ran towards Roman. I tucked the gun behind my back and followed her.

Roman took advantage of the brief confusion and knocked the cuffs out of Stenworth's hand. They flew a good twenty feet and landed in the pit. Stenworth pulled out his gun and stuck it against Roman's forehead.

Johnson tried to grab Heather as she ran by him but only grasped a handful of her dress. A section of it tore around her stomach, but it failed to slow her down. She jumped on Stenworth's back, locked her arms around his neck, and squeezed with all her might.

Where Johnson had failed to stop Heather, he succeeded with me, catching me on the neck with his forearm. My head hit the forest floor and I swear it bounced like a basketball. I watched through blurry eyes as Stenworth grabbed Heather by the hair and slammed her to the ground. The collision literally knocked the fight out of Heather and now Stenworth held her by the back of her head and stuck his pistol to her temple.

"Even better," he said. "Now Mr. Swivel you are going to put the handcuffs on yourself, or I'm going to blow her brains out the side of her pretty little head."

Johnson walked towards them and produced his handcuffs—the last pair I imagined.

Roman was still on his knees, barely able to maintain his posture. The green and brown camouflage of his clothing now looked almost black from the sweat and blood that saturated it. His eyes were swollen almost completely shut from the last of Stenworth's beatings, and blood flowed down his face in several thin streams. The rain came down despite the shelter of the trees and although it was dark, I could see in the lightning flashes, Roman holding out both of his limp arms.

"Don't do it, Roman." Heather stole the words right out of my head.

It was too late; Johnson clasped the cuffs around Roman's wrists. It sounded like a jail cell slamming shut. Stenworth backhanded Roman across the face sending him backwards into the mud. Roman was finally down on his back, and for the first time, was not getting up.

Stenworth grabbed Heather by the hair and dragged her toward the pit of spikes.

"What are you doing?" Johnson demanded.

"I want him to know what it feels like to loose people you care about. Just like he killed our friends," Stenworth said as he approached the pit.

"Have you gone you mad? We have him. That was our objective. There is nothing in our orders about killing innocent teenagers."

Stenworth proceeded as if Johnson had not spoken, now pushing Heather in front of him. She tried to wiggle her way free but Stenworth was too strong. At the edge of the pit as he was about to push Heather in, Johnson grabbed

Stenworth's arm. Heather swerved away from the edge of the pit and retreated a couple of steps.

"Do I have to remind you that I'm in charge here?" Stenworth said.

"I'm relieving you of your duties," Johnson said as he let him go. "You are not thinking clearly. We have met our objective and now its time to call the chopper and go home."

Before Stenworth could respond, Heather kneeed him in the nuts. His feet slipped in the mud beneath him as if he were trying to balance himself on a sheet of ice. Johnson grabbed for him again, but this time Stenworth fell into the pit. The spike he landed on entered the back of his skull and stuck through where his face used to be.

I got to my feet. The dizziness in my eyes was replaced with annoying raindrops. Roman was still on his back in the mud. Johnson and Heather stared down at the pit, neither of them able to believe what had just happened. This might be my only opportunity to save Roman. I pulled the gun from behind my back and looked at it.

I'd been shooting before—hunting with my uncles and cousins and target practice at old coffee cans at the abandoned mine—but a marksman I was not. And this wasn't the movies where every bullet fired seemed to find someone to hit. I searched my memories to recall the last time I had even held a gun besides today. Johnson was only thirty yards away but the pressure was definitely on me. Heather had fired god knows how many shots earlier and there was no time to see how many bullets I had left. I told myself to just keep pulling the trigger until it didn't fire any more.

I closed one eye and raised the gun. Johnson was right in the line of sight but Heather was just beside him. If I screamed for her to move Johnson would be onto me and probably cut me down where I stood. I waited. The two of them didn't move, like they were at a casket paying their last respects—Johnson out of shock for the loss of his friend and Heather because she had just killed someone.

Finally she snapped out of it, noticing Roman on the ground, unmoving. She ran over to him and lifted his head from the mud, wiping the dirt and grime from his face. Roman coughed up blood.

It was now or never. Johnson's chest was in line with my barrel. I pulled the trigger as fast as I could. Three bullets fired from the chamber and then only clicks. The first two did nothing but alert the giant agent. Johnson tried to jump out of the way but the third bullet stung him and he fell to the ground holding his right thigh. Johnson managed to pull his gun from its holster, aimed it at me, and then dropped it with a grimace of pain on his face.

Heather had Roman on his feet by the time I got to them. We grabbed him under the armpits—Heather on the right and me on the left. It would've been easier if Roman's hands hadn't been cuffed, but we ran anyway, pulling our friend between us, his feet scraping the ground. The only thought in my head was to get as far away from Johnson as possible. At two hundred yards in the clear we stopped out of exhaustion. Dragging Roman's dead weight—even though he was relatively light—gave us the workout of a lifetime. The blood that covered me now from my armpit to my waist wasn't helping matters either.

The trail we ran down now was wider than the previous bicycle path had been. It was wide, flat, and no foliage hung over it. The trail was all that remained of an old railroad line that Union Pacific had once run. The iron rail was long gone, only the rotting wooden ties littered the side of the trail.

Roman regained enough strength to stand on his own and seemed to be getting his second wind. I was doubled over from cramps in my legs and stomach. Heather was looking down the long trail at Agent Johnson. He was ripping long strips out of his shirt, tying them around his thigh just below the crotch area. Agent Johnson was on his feet and hobbling at a good pace straight toward us.

“Which way should we go? Should we get off this trail and take our chances through the woods?” I asked.

Roman looked through the swollen lids of his eyes, first at the giant agent he had seen so many times running after him, then in the other direction. “If a train used to travel this route, the trail has to come out somewhere. Do you still have the keys to the cuffs?”

I reached in my pocket and then remembered. “The keys were on a chain on a dead agent’s belt. I didn’t even think to take them off.”

“What about trying to break them off somehow?” Heather suggested.

“There’s no time,” Roman responded.

Agent Johnson was less than a hundred yards away.

We took off down the trail again. Roman lagged a couple of yards behind us, but at least he could run on his own. It’s not easy to run without your arms and Roman lost his balance several times, tripping over a fallen branch or stepping into a small hole. We picked him up each time and dragged him until he got his feet back beneath him.

Eventually there was a hole in the forest wall, the exit that Roman was sure would be there. It wasn’t like coming out of a cave, when the light ahead became brighter and more apparent. The storm had darkened things so much I think outside the forest was blacker than inside.

We were greeted at the exit with a rush of wind that almost blew us right back into the woods. The rain came at us sideways, a horizontal bombardment of cold water that stung when it hit the face. In front of us was a broken-down suspension bridge a hundred yards long. The iron skeleton of the structure was still there—a rusted blue color—but the tracks and railroad ties were missing. Straight down the middle of the bridge there was literally nothing, but to both sides there were three feet of walkway that was probably meant for people. The bridge stood at least a hundred and fifty feet above the Hobè River. The thunder was close now, and I swore a bolt of lightning hit not three feet in front of us. It was almost like God was telling us to turn around.

But we couldn’t turn around. Agent Johnson would be on us in a matter of seconds.

“Walk as far away from the middle as you can, and make sure to hold on to the beams,” Roman said.

Heather went first, me second, and then Roman. There was plenty of room on the walkway; the only problem was that the wood was a couple hundred years old and it had probably been that long since it was maintained. I could feel

the planks stretch under my feet. They were soft from rotting and could break at any moment. I held onto the iron beams and refused to look down at the violent water below. After about a thousand baby steps Heather and I were near the end. It dawned on me then that Roman had not said a word from behind me. I turned around.

Roman stood about halfway between us and the other side, throwing off the broken body armor as well as he could with his cuffed hands, shifting his weight on the floor of the bridge as if he were testing to see which planks were most likely to break.

“What’s he doing?” Heather asked, starting back for him.

I grabbed her arm, not sure why. Roman had become part of me over the last nine months, a brother. After all it’s not the blood that runs through our veins that makes us family, but the life we share.

Roman had his back to us. “Stay back,” he shouted. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Please Roman, just come this way, come with us,” Heather pleaded.

“Don’t let her come this way, Tony,” Roman yelled over the rage of the storm.

“Let me go!” she said, twisting as I grabbed for her other arm.

“He’s got to finish this, Heather.”

The tougher-than-nails woman began to cry. She was human after all. I put my arms around her and hugged her. But I think the gesture was more for me than for her.

Agent Johnson appeared out of the woods, almost dragging his injured leg. He would take a step with his good leg and then swing his other leg forward by using his hips. He surveyed the decaying bridge, mulling it over with suspicious eyes and trying to read the battered face in front of him. Johnson stepped onto the walkway. He probably thought the same thing Roman did. It was something that had to be done.

Johnson stopped about ten feet away from Roman and glanced down. The rain pounded both of them and the ironwork of the bridge creaked under the persistent high wind. Johnson leaned toward the railing, trying to take the weight off his wounded leg. He produced his cell phone, pushed only one digit, and held it up toward the sky like an antenna.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Roman. Don’t you understand how valuable you are?”

Roman didn’t respond.

“You are beaten, Roman. In minutes reinforcements will be here. There are no trains coming by for you to jump on this time. It’s just you and me on a bridge. You’re coming with me.”

“You need medical attention.” Roman responded.

Johnson pulled the Kimber from the holster under his arm. In the same motion he shot Roman in the leg, just above the knee. “I guess that makes us even,” Johnson said.

Roman buckled down to one knee. There were no screams from the former janitor, not even a look of surprise.

I could hear something in the distance, a low humming noise. I looked down the length of the river to see the NN helicopter almost skimming the water. It was the same one that watched over us at school and it was on us now in seconds. At the bridge it ascended, trying to hover above Roman and Johnson, tossing back and forth in the high winds.

The aircraft was black, colorless, and blended into the backdrop of the storm-filled sky. Its contours looked more like the construction of the stealth bomber than any helicopter I'd ever seen. A door opened from the bottom, and from it a cable lowered. The cable stopped when it hit the bridge next to Johnson's feet. The rush of the wind coupled with the blades of the copter made for difficult small talk.

"Time's up, my friend." Johnson shouted.

Roman struggled to his feet. Somehow he was able to stand on his bullet-torn leg. His hair blew to the left as if someone had a hair dryer next to his head. He yelled back. "I'll never fight for the NN."

Johnson grabbed the cable next to him, as if to steady himself from the wind and his weak leg. "My mission is to bring you in. There are others that will deal with your reluctance. You underestimate our scientists, young Roman."

Roman stared at the agent standing just feet from him. He looked at the helicopter hovering above, at the floor of the bridge, and then turned around to us. The wind almost knocked him over but he balanced himself just before collapse.

He looked through the swollen slits that used to be his eyes. And although I couldn't see the brown in them from that far away, I could read everything I needed to know by the expression on his face. It was a look of gratitude. A look of love and friendship. But most of all it was good-bye. The bullet graze on my side was no match for the sickness I now felt in the pit of my stomach.

Heather knew as well. "Please, Roman," she whispered. And then screamed through the roaring wind. "Please, Roman; no!"

She fell into me, and I caught her and held her close.

In spite of his bruised eyes, he winked, a gesture that only Roman could make at a time like this. Something that was supposed to comfort her. But we both knew better.

Roman turned back toward Johnson, closed his eyes, raised his cuffed hands above his head, and jumped off the bridge. The wind seemed to grab him and Roman floated off the bridge. He made no contorted twists with his body or any effort to brace for the impact with the raging river far below. Roman's posture was limp as he fell, something like a long overdue sleep, and as he plunged into the rushing water, Roman seemed to be at peace.

Johnson hobbled to the edge of the bridge, looking for any sign of this boy and man he had chased for so long. And when there was none, without hesitation, the giant agent dove off the bridge himself.

There was nothing but black water and its white peaks below. The helicopter dropped back down to its wave-skimming position and combed the length of the river several times. After no success it floated back up to bridge level, its tinted black windows seeming to look Heather and I over for several

seconds, as if we were somehow hiding Roman. Finally convinced, it flew off into the distance and was gone as quickly as it had come.

## IX

I'd like to tell you that that day in May ended on a happy note. That the sun came out and Heather and I scampered down the river bank and found Roman lying there unscathed. That we brushed him off, took him to graduation, and he gave his valedictorian speech to the patiently awaiting crowd. All of that of course would be a lie. We never found Roman on the side of the Hobè River or anywhere else for that matter.

There was a memorial service two weeks later when all search efforts had been exhausted. More than two thousand people came to pay their respects. Roman knew nowhere near that many people, but somehow his legend had touched them. Heather refused to go to it. She said memorials were for the dead and Roman was no such thing. I think it was because she physically couldn't go through it.

Mr. Buttworst, instead of calling the authorities about the dead men littering his lawn decided to haul them with his tractor down to Roman's pit, put them with the others and bury them all together. There was one body out of that group that Mr. Buttworst did not bury, however, because the body was no longer there. The body of Carl Stumot was nowhere to be found. Only the dagger was present. The crazy old man had managed without prior knowledge to not only show up at the battle at Buttworst's, but he had also disappeared after dying. People ask me how he did it. I tell them the truth, that I don't know. When they don't buy that, I tell them aliens were involved. That seems to satisfy them.

## X

August

I sat on Roman's porch steps looking at Carl's house across the street. In the last three months I'd become a caretaker of sorts. In between classes and baseball practice I found time every few days to check up on the houses. I dusted the walls that were Roman's baseball cards and even kept the bees in Carl's basement alive. I owed them both that much I suppose. Part of me showed up there in hope that maybe they'd come back. That maybe Roman didn't meet his end at the bottom of that river and maybe Carl really did cheat the thin blade of death.

It was always easy to reminisce on those steps. When that hot August breeze touched my hair, I always thought of Roman, of how he walked home from school with his head tilted toward the sky with not a care in the world. It seemed so odd at the time. But now it made perfect sense. We should all be thankful for the wind in our face.

A red Mustang pulled up in front of the house. The blond that exited it was a friend I had talked to very little in the last few months. I think we reminded each other of Roman, so in our grief we made some unspoken pact to avoid each other.

I stood as she made her way up the walk and hugged her when she got to me. I felt her slow tears against my cheek and her tight grip around my chest. We sat down together and did not speak for several minutes. Heather kept my arm around her and rested her head on my shoulder.

The buoyant and bouncing ball of energy was long gone. Heather was pale, skinny, and looked ten years older. I knew exactly how she felt.

"I've puked every day since he's been gone. Every time the phone or doorbell rings I race to see if he's there. To hear his voice. I sleep in his flannel hoping that his smell never fades away. I play our conversations over in my head for the same reason. My mother's worried I'm going insane. Roman said that time dulls the pain. I was beginning to understand what he meant. But last week in my dorm room, that Evanescence song "My Immortal" played on the radio. Do you know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

"That goddamn song follows me wherever I go. Elevators, restaurants, bars, it tortures me. Anyway in my room I finally had enough, threw my pillow at the radio and knocked it off the shelf it was on. It took the shelf below with it, and smashed two of my dolls into a million pieces. It was the cheerleader from my grandma and the doctor Roman gave me for Christmas. I left the mess and went home for the weekend. I think I'm going crazy, Tony."

"I don't understand."

Heather reached into the purse behind her and pulled out two fully intact ceramic dolls, a cheerleader and a doctor. They dangled from her hand, both with little string lassos around their waists.