

Totem (Book 1: Scars)

by C Michael Lorion

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Dedication

This book, and the past three years (yes, three!), are dedicated to my wife, Rebecca. No one else believed in me as deeply as she did, sacrificed as much as she did, nor will enjoy the fruit of our labor as totally as she will. Rebecca, my wife, my lover, and my friend, this first one's for you.

PS. Let's.

Acknowledgments

I wrote this story mostly in solitude while listening to music through my headphones to shut out any distractions. That does not mean I wrote this story in a vacuum. Many people have contributed to this story in one way or another, some of them in many ways, some of them unknowingly. This is where I get to (finally!) thank them.

At the end of the book, I've listed a handful of authors and their works that have influenced my writing in numerous ways.

First, my Beta Readers who sacrificed time and energy reading early manuscripts and offering valuable feedback: **Randy Harris, Ken Knowlton, Matthew and Lisa Brouillet, Shawn Lorion** (yes, he is my brother), and **Rebecca Lorion** (my wife). Thanks, guys. I owe you! Still up for the Ale House? It's on me!

Shawn: What a life it's been so far, eh bro? Look where we've been, how far we've come, and where we are now. I only wish we lived closer so our beautiful families could enjoy each other a lot more often. Good thing we have eternity.

Randy: A truer friend I've never had. Our times together, though not as frequent as we'd both like, always feel so comfortable, so easy, so...right. Like it couldn't be any other way. Know what I mean? Yeah, I know you do.

Uncle Ken and Aunt Betty: There was a time, back in the day, when your home was like a home-away-from-home for me, even though I lived only five minutes away. Thanks for sharing everything—your books, your music, your pool, your house, and, most importantly, your lives. You have greatly enriched my life, not only as my uncle and aunt, but as my friends.

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My family: **Rebecca**, I love you. We did it! **Kyle, Seth, Sydney, Kaeden, Roman, Judah, and Micah**, there's a scene in the movie Mrs. Doubtfire where Daniel (played by Robin Williams) is fighting for joint custody of his children. He pleads his case before the judge, stating that he's addicted to his children. Ditto for me. I can't imagine what it would have been like the past five or so years if I'd had a regular nine-to-five job, how much of your lives I would've missed. I am blessed in so many ways having you all in my life. I love you!!!

Joe: Thanks for bringing us ice fishing, hunting, and all the other outdoorsy things we did as a family. I may not have been too much into it at the time, but the experience sure came in handy in writing this story. Oh, and thanks for bringing the grandkids to the fishing derbies. Now, we need to get 'em on the ice!

And last, but certainly not least, **Mom**: I think I owe, among so many other things, my love of reading to you. Remember when the Gardner Library was in that building on Connors Street, before it moved to the supermarket building? You would bring me and Shawn there, usually returning books late if I remember correctly. I remember getting Dr. Suess and Sesame Street (there's a monster at the end of this book!) and Richard Scary books. That must have been when it all started, my love affair with books, so for that Mom, I am eternally grateful. But more than that, you have been the singular constant in my life. For that, thank you just does not seem like enough, but it's all I've got for now. So...thank you, and I love you.

Prologue: May 26, 1637

He tried to shut out the cries and screams of his people. His heart beat inside his chest, pounding against his ribs as if it wanted to escape. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. The stone arrowhead slipped in his hand and cut his finger. Blood oozed from the wound and dripped onto her cheek. She did not cry. She did not whimper. She looked him directly in the eye. She was stronger than he was. He'd known that for a long time, but until now he hadn't been aware how much stronger.

"My son. Finish what I have commanded."

He glanced over his shoulder to the source of the voice. He could throw the arrowhead with enough force to pierce the heart of the one who spoke. Maybe that would free his own heart. But...he could not do that. He knew it, and so did the one who had spoken. He had no choice in the matter.

Smoke from the fires outside seeped in through the cracks. The stench of burned flesh stung his eyes.

"It must be done. She must learn the lesson."

He looked down at the girl's face. She was beautiful. He looked at the young man lying face down on the ground with the tomahawk lodged in his back. He could not blame the young man for noticing the girl's beauty and acting on the impulses he must have felt coursing through his body. He would not blame any man. For she was beautiful, more than any girl he had ever seen. But that did not mean that things could be done that violated his tribe. There must be retribution.

He only wished it didn't have to be him that had to carry it out.

"My son...."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He gripped the arrowhead tighter and lowered it so that its point made contact with her skin above her left eye.

Flames ate through the wall, heat searing his flesh, smoke burning his eyes.

He made the cut.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1978

Chapter 1: Kimi Enters the New World

Kimi made the unfortunate decision of taking a flying leap out of The Passage without thinking ahead. She paid the price for her short-sightedness. Overshooting her projected arrival spot, Kimi found herself hurtling toward a massive boulder. She extended her arms to soften the blow, which ended up not softening anything. Instead, her left wrist crunched as the momentum of her body mashed it into the boulder. Pain shot through her arm. She also rolled an ankle. More pain, this time up her right leg. Clutching her wrist to her chest and turning to lean against the boulder, Kimi slid to the snow-covered ground. The deerskin-covering she wore prevented her back from scraping against the cold, rough surface of the massive rock. She closed her eye and willed her body to breath slower. After a few moments, it obeyed her. She then listened. Except for the leafless, snow-covered branches creaking in the breeze, Kimi heard nothing.

Crouching against the boulder, Kimi straightened her arm and tried moving her wrist. Another unfortunate decision on her part. Pain flared in her wrist. The Elders—the ones who had sided with her—had warned her to be careful, to step through The Passage. She should have heeded their words. Her father’s voice echoed in her spirit. *Experience—the fathomless reservoir of life’s wisdom.* Next time, she would remember.

Kimi leaned against the boulder, put all her weight onto her good ankle, and pushed herself up. She surveyed her surroundings and thanked The Great Spirit that she recognized where she was. To her right, a depression in the snow indicated the cart road that led from the summit of the mountain to its base. To her left, the forestry tower. She breathed a sigh when she saw these things. They told her she was where she needed to be, which was in the clearing at the two-thousand foot summit of Wachusett Mountain. Others in the past had found themselves in much different places other than their intended destinations of arrival. A few had ended up not only in different places, but in different dimensions. Those had been the most unfortunate few.

Looking to the gray sky, Kimi offered up her gratitude. *Thank you, Great Spirit, for your guidance. Thank you for your protection.*

She tried moving her wrist again. She felt bone grate against bone. The pain brought a tear to her eye. At least one broken bone, maybe more. She fought back the tears, willing herself to not break down. She needed to be strong. She inhaled, lifted her leg, and rotated her foot. It fared better than her wrist. It hurt, but the pain was manageable. More importantly, she could move it. She needed mobility right now, and she had it. She would have been in desperate trouble if she was unable to walk. Not that she wasn’t desperate as it was already. Having arrived late, and now having to favor her wrist, she was at a distinct disadvantage.

She would have to trust The Great Spirit that when she found Achak she would be physically capable of doing what would be necessary. She needed to be prepared mentally as well, for when that time came, Kimi was not at all certain she would be capable of carrying out the task charged to her by the Elders.

Satisfied with the condition of her foot, tucking her wrist in close to her stomach, Kimi stepped away from the boulder. Everything started spinning and swirling and tilting. The white snow and the black trees and the gray clouds whirled about her, spinning faster, swirling wilder,

tilting farther. Her insides protested. She pin-wheeled her arms trying to stay balanced and, in the process, smacked her broken wrist against the boulder. Kimi screamed as fire flared up her arm. Like one of the older men in her tribe that had had too much time on the so-called peace pipe, Kimi staggered away from the boulder and tripped over a rock buried under the snow. Reflexively, she drew her wrist in close to her body and shifted her weight to her left foot, trying to avoid more pain.

It didn't work.

She fell onto a foot of hard-packed snow. The rough edges of the crusty snow scraped her deerskin-covered shoulder and her face, drawing blood from her right cheek. As painful as that was, it could have been worse. At least she had been able to protect her wrist. She rolled onto her back, wincing at the pain in her wrist and ankle and shoulder. Pushing herself to a sitting position, shrugging as much of the snow off as she could with minimal movement to protect her wrist, Kimi checked her shoulder. The deerskin covering the Elders had given her had not torn, which was a good thing. The covering would keep her warm and dry for now, as long as it was intact, but a few more falls to the ground like that and eventually it would rip. Given how cold it was, she couldn't let that happen.

Taking a deep breath, Kimi pushed off from the snow with her right hand and, shifting her weight to her left foot, she stood. She steadied herself against the boulder with her good hand. Cradling her wrist, she raised her head to the sky and prayed to The Great Spirit, again seeking strength, guidance, and courage.

After waiting to make sure the vertigo did not return, Kimi stepped away from the boulder and surveyed the area once again, looking for footprints that would tell her which way to go to find Achak. But there were no footprints. There were animal tracks—deer and coyote and rabbit and bear—but nothing else to indicate that Achak had been this way.

But, that was impossible.

Kimi turned and tilted her head. She squinted, searching for the tell-tale shimmering of the air. There it was. The Passage was still open. There were no tracks in the snow near it except for hers, which picked up a few feet from the opening. But Achak had come through right before Kimi had. She had seen him enter The Passage, and yet, there was no evidence here that he had come out of it. But that, too, was impossible. Once inside, there was no other way to go except out the other end. That meant Achak was here. Kimi could not understand the lack of footprints, but she knew he was here. He had to be.

Confused, Kimi tried to think of an explanation. Coming up with nothing, she raised her hand to her cheek and rubbed the raw, bloody skin. She ran her fingers up to her temple, across her forehead, and let them caress the scar that encircled her empty eye socket. She fingered the emptiness. Where there was once a beautiful, deep-brown eye, there was dead tissue. She would not cry. No. She had not cried then nor since, and neither would she now. There was no time for that.

She raised her head toward the sky, hoping for a sign from The Great Spirit that would tell her it would be all right, that everything would turn out for the good, that she would one day be made whole again and be accepted back into her people. She had lost so much in her eighteen years. Had it been eighteen years, or had it been longer. An eternity? There were times when the guilt, and the shame, and the loneliness drove her to wish that it all would...

...end.

Kimi lowered her head. She knew that even if The Great Spirit granted everything back to her, including her full eyesight and complete acceptance by her people, none of it would matter

because it wouldn't bring back her father. He was the one who had paid the ultimate penalty and given the supreme sacrifice for Kimi's singular act of disobedience.

As for her mother....

Enough feeling sorry for herself. That would accomplish nothing. She had to find the Totem and stop Achak. Preferably, in that order. Given that there were no footprints to follow, finding Achak was going to be more challenging than Kimi had anticipated. Finding the Totem.... How was she supposed to find something she had never seen and never been told what it looked like? Before being banished from her people, she had heard the stories about the Totem—most of which were, no doubt, more legend than fact—but no one had ever learned for certain its true identity. Some said it was in the form of a wooden image of an animal, some a grave marker of a noble warrior, still others the skin of a bear or wolf. Any of these forms, and countless others, were suitable for holding the power of the tribal spirits. Any of them could serve as the Totem.

Kimi stood straight. She lowered her head and closed her eye. She prayed to The Great Spirit. She waited. Minutes passed. No voice. No vision. Nothing. She raised her head and opened her eye. She was on her own. No. That was not true. She felt as though she was on her own, but she knew that feelings most often were deceiving. This was simply the way it was between her and The Great Spirit. It was as elemental to her life as air was to breathing. Stories had been passed down through the generations of ancestors who had heard directly from The Great Spirit, or had been visited by a Vision, or had been given a Revelation by other means, all of which served to guide them in their lives. She'd even heard rumors of Achak being given a sign after spending an entire night offering up petitions.

No matter how long they were, or what form they took, Kimi's petitions had never once been answered with any sign or vision or voice. Still, she continued seeking The Great Spirit's guidance, always knowing that her petitions did not go unheard, always believing that The Great Spirit was there, guiding and sustaining her. She had no other choice but to be sure of that much.

Kimi looked to the east. She would go in that direction for no other reason than it would bring her closer to the rising sun, which, for now, was hidden by the gray clouds speeding across the sky. Perhaps heading east, The Great Spirit willing, would draw her closer to Achak.

Closer to her twin brother.

Chapter 2: Josh, Achilles, and the Girls

Josh Schofield swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He slapped his feet onto the cold hard wood floor and cursed his old man for skimping on the heating oil. It was February, the energy crisis was long gone, and still the guy couldn't find it within his stone-cold heart to splurge a little on some friggin' heat. They owned three cars and a boat, lived in a beautiful house, and the guy was afraid to spend money on heat? How messed up was that. Running a hand through his dark, curly hair, squinting in the direction of the green glow that silhouetted the tiny alarm clock hands on the bureau, Josh cursed again. 6:30. A full half-hour before his alarm was set to go off. He yawned, thought about crawling back under the covers, but decided against it. *What the hell*, he thought. *What's another half hour of sleep.*

So Josh sat on the edge of the bed wearing nothing but his Fruit of the Looms. Yeah, it was the middle of winter, he had to sleep with twenty layers of sheets and blankets and quilts, but Josh was a sleep-in-his-skiivvies kind of guy. Always had been, always will be. Take your clothes off at night, hop into bed, wake up in the morning, change tighty-whities, throw on some clothes, and you were good to go. No time wasted fiddling with pajamas and all that crap.

Rubbing the crusties from his eyes, Josh remembered what day it was: Abby's sixteenth birthday.

"Damn."

He had let Abby talk him into driving her to Albany. As in Albany, New York. As in what the hell had he been thinking? *Sure, Abby. I'll drive you to Albany. What? Oh, to visit your mother's grave? Sure, no problem. Sounds like a reasonable request. Dead of winter? No problema, mi dear muchacha. Albany, here we come!* As smart as Abby was—and she was smart, certainly the smartest girl (not to mention perhaps the smartest person) he knew—she often came up with half-baked ideas. Like the time she tried training herself to run backward as fast as she could run forward just in case she ever needed to run backward. Or when she was on the kick of memorizing poems and then switching the lines and stanzas and forming new poems in her head which she would then memorize. Or when she attempted to write a 2,000 word short-story without the letter 't.' She had always admitted that those ideas were lame-brained, things to do just for the fun of it, and she even seemed to glow in the laughs they generated from all her friends.

But not this time. This was not another foolish stunt of hers. She truly believed there was something to gain by visiting her mother's grave all the way in Albany. Maybe there was, but Josh couldn't help but wonder if Abby was still angry at him for breaking up with her and this was her weird way of getting back at him. She could be stubborn—and lately, quite spiteful—so it certainly wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Abby was dead set in her determination to get to Albany, and she seemed convinced that it was a legit idea and how dare he question her on it.

In spite of the well-known fact that Josh loved driving, he wasn't exactly gung-ho about hopping into The Beast for a road trip to eastern New York. In the winter. On the first day of school vacation. He should be working at the Ray's Music Emporium today to earn an extra few bucks to sock away for the summer concert frenzy. But, he figured what the hell, maybe he owed

it to Abby seeing how he hadn't given her an honest explanation of why he broke it off with her. Maybe today he would even tell her the truth. Or some of it. Maybe. At the very least they could try to enjoy being together as they once had. Hell, it was worth a shot, seeing how they'd been friends since elementary school.

Josh stood, stretched all the muscles that needed to be stretched, and scratched all the appropriate places that needed to be scratched (along with a few inappropriate places as well). He strolled to the bureau with the cocky confidence that only an American eighteen-year-old high school senior, varsity football and basketball captain could wearing nothing more than his Fruities, and still retain every ounce of dignity.

He switched on the lamp and opened a couple drawers. Tucking the clothes under his arm, Josh took another stroll across the room to the console stereo sprawled against the opposite wall. He flipped through the vinyl stacked on one end of the music-spewing behemoth: Styx, Kansas, Skynyrd, Nugent, Heart, Boston, one from a new band called Foreigner that he hadn't opened yet, and KISS among others. He found the one he wanted. He lifted the turntable lid, slid the vinyl out from the protective cover, and fed it into the machine's hungry mouth. Josh lowered the needle onto the record with the care and precision of a surgeon performing open-heart surgery. He twisted the volume knob up to nine, thought better about blowing out his speakers, and dropped it down a couple notches. The mammoth Pioneer speakers on each side of the console hissed and crackled and popped with the noisy silence of dead air.

The deceptively innocent guitar notes drifted out of the speakers and filled his room. Rather than follow his routine of singing and air-guitaring like he was channeling the spirits of both Robert Plant and Jimmy Page, Josh did nothing. He opted instead to listen to Page lead the musical charge as Plant, John Bonham, and John Paul Jones followed him into the deep recesses of the ten-minute epic "Achilles Last Stand." Contrary to what everyone else in the universe believed, *Presence* was Zep's finest album. By far. Yeah, sure, all their albums were great, he wouldn't argue that point. But *Presence*? Come on. This album was what rock was all about. None of their other stuff even came close to the guitar-driven odyssey of "Achilles Last Stand," the funk-rock groove of "Nobody's Fault but Mine," or their most underrated song, "Hots on for Nowhere."

And speaking of hots. The Led Zeppelin album cover still in hand, clothes still under his arm, Josh's eyes drifted up the wall where they settled on a most pleasant sight—the two hottest babes who ever walked the face of planet Earth: Farrah Fawcett-Majors and Cheryl Tiegs. Two immortal beauties pinned side-by-side. Israel had the Wailing Wall, Germany the Berlin Wall, and China the Great Wall of...well, China. Good for them. Josh had his own wall—the Wall of Lustful Attractions. The old man could call it the Wall of Lustful Delusions all he wanted. Truth be told, Josh wondered why the old man had let him hang the posters in the first place. But he had, and who was Josh to argue with the great one's parental authority. The old man probably stole a peek every once in a while when Josh wasn't home.

Farrah in the red one-piece with the golden tan, flashing that delicious smile that was enough to make every guy in America from sea to shining sea blow a head gasket. Next to her was Cheryl who—in Josh's most humble opinion—had the goods on Farrah. Farrah was hot, no question about that. But Cheryl? Man! There was something about her goods that put everyone else to shame. She had it all. The girl-next-door smile, eyes that could melt a New England snowman in February, windblown hair that Josh's fingers could get lost in, the belly button that screamed sexy and cute and come get me, even the way she wore that skimpy purple bikini—or whatever color it was, but, then again, who really cared, right? And the killer, the thing that

really revved Josh's motor, was Cheryl's right thumb hooked under the string of her bikini bottom, teasing Josh with the unreal, illogical, yet eternally hopeful possibility of a private peek right there in his own bedroom. Man, oh man.

Yeah, there was Farrah and Jaclyn Smith and Suzanne Somers and that chick whose name he could never remember, the one who was in that movie *The Deep* and wore the white wet shirt in the boat (what a great piece of movie directing *that* was!). Most of the guys he knew would choose one of them over Cheryl. Not Josh. He'd take Cheryl any day of the week and twice on Sundays. Given the chance he'd even—

THUMP, THUMP!

Josh jumped at the banging on his door. His clothes dropped to the floor. The framed, autographed Dr. J poster that hung over his bed rattled against the wall.

"Turn that crap down!" Like a cold shower, the voice of He-Who-Hated-Good-Music cooled Josh a good fifteen degrees. For the sheer pleasure of it, Josh hesitated before obeying the Great One's command.

"Wait for it," Josh whispered to no one. After a moment, he snapped his fingers and pointed at the door.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

"I said—"

"I got it, I got it!" Josh reached into the console. "Don't have a coronary." He cranked the volume up to ten, waited a second, then dropped it to five, which was still loud, but not loud enough to send He-Who-Has-Sensitive-Ears into another door-pounding tantrum.

Dropping the *Presence* album cover onto the stack of vinyl, Josh realized he risked the major embarrassment of his mother barging in (again!) while he stood there in only his tighty-whities. He snatched up his clothes from the floor. You'd think that at eighteen, graduating from high school in less than four months, in possession of his driver's license, old enough to be drafted into the armed forces of the U S of A, and legally eligible to vote in the next presidential election (not that he would) that a guy wouldn't have to worry about his mother crashing in on his private party. Wasn't there a constitutional right to privacy? Josh couldn't recall learning in history class about a mother's amendment that exempted them from that. Unless that had been covered in one of the numerous classes he'd slept through during the past year-and-a-half.

As John Bonham's staccato drum beat drove "Achilles" to its inevitable conclusion, Josh got dressed in the usual: jeans, concert T-shirt (the chosen band of the day? Foghat!), sneakers (Snow? Who cares.), and leather belt with the massive, statement-making belt buckle with one word emblazoned in blood-red lettering set against a black background surrounded by a brushed-silver edge. One word that said everything there was to say about anything—KISS.

With the lightning bolt S's firmly fixed to his waist like the 'S' on Superman's chest, Josh was ready for the day. Ready for the load of crap his old man would heap on him and for Abby and her half-baked road trip to Albany.

Abby. He pictured her in his mind, the way she had looked when he'd first truly took notice of her. Not when he'd met her on the first day of first grade in Miss Quimbly's class, nor when he'd first talked to her on the last day of school before Christmas vacation in Mrs. Bolton's third-grade class, when she'd given him a Christmas card. And not on any of the days following that when they'd become good friends and had hung out all the time.

No, Josh had not *noticed* Abby on any of those days. That day had come on the first day of school a couple years ago when he'd entered his junior year of high school and she her freshman. *That* was the day Josh noticed Abby Lynne Graham. Something magical happened over summer

that year that transformed all the awkward junior high girls into glowingly robust young women (that may be stating the case too strongly, but at least you get the picture).

That was the day Josh noticed Abby: wavy, often out-of-control—she would say free-spirited—fiery hair; freckles that hibernated during the winter and awoke in time for summer; svelte yet athletic runner's body that exhibited both strength and grace when she ran. On that day, Josh had seen a girl that had been given a new body over the summer, and that girl had seemed to enjoy that body as much as a gazelle leaping and shifting through the African savanna.

And it had not been only the body Josh had noticed. No sir. It was her personality, too. Yes, Josh *did* care about such things. Her exuberance for life completed the entire package for him. She had developed the uncanny ability to make a person feel at home in her presence, as if she knew everything about you, the good and the bad and the ugly, and held none of it against you. Abby, over that summer leading into her freshman year, had transformed into quite the desirable young lass.

And now, more than two months since the breakup, all he could do was brood over all he had lost. Josh had ended it with Abby the day before Thanksgiving break. He had felt horrible doing it, but he also knew he had had no other choice at the time. Better to have caused her a little pain than to have prolonged the inevitable, causing tons more heartache later.

Sure it was better, he told himself. *Keep telling yourself that, you friggin' idiot.*

Before heading downstairs, Josh dug through the stack of vinyl again, looking for an album he had by-passed earlier. He pulled out *Destroyer*—the best KISS album ever recorded, no matter what anyone else had to say about it—and slipped it onto the spindle, readying it to drop when the Zeppelin album was done. He then left the bedroom, turned right, took five steps to his brother's room, and as was his custom every morning, rapped his knuckles on the door twice. There was no response. There had been no response yesterday. And there would be no response tomorrow morning when he would again rap twice on the door. Nor would there be a response the day after tomorrow. Josh could spend all eternity knocking and rapping and banging out a Peter Criss drum solo on his brother's door and there would be no response.

Never.

What a frightening word, he thought. *Never. NEVER. NEVER! How do I live with never? Never doesn't just mean for as long as I live. Never goes beyond my life. I could spend the next twenty years knocking on every friggin' door in the whole country, in the whole damn world, and there might be a response from the other side of every single one of those doors, but none of those responses would be from Julian.*

Never.

Josh lowered his hand and pulled it away from the door. He was tempted to knock once more, but decided not to break the ritual. Across the hall, the door to his parents' bedroom was closed, which more than likely meant they were both still in there. More than likely they were reheating the leftovers from last night's delightful smorgasbord of innuendos and accusations.

He wondered what mood the old man would be in this morning. Not that it mattered. He'd learned to cope with each one whenever it reared its ugly head. There was the nit-picky mood, the silent brooding mood, and the on-the-warpath mood. Door number one, door number two, or door number three? *Well, Monty, seeing how the old man has been on the warpath of late, let's go with door number three.*

Josh descended through the gauntlet of family photographs that plastered both walls of the stairway: first days of school, Little League team pictures, family reunions—Dad's side only, of course—Christmases and Thanksgivings and Halloweens, vacations and birthday parties. The

Kodachrome images were once joyous remembrances of good times. Now they served as mocking reminders of all that the Schofield family had lost in the past two years.

He purposefully did not look at the photograph that mocked him the loudest of all. That was the one of him and Julian sitting in *Pythagoras* on Lake Champlain. He didn't have to look at it. The image was scalded onto the cornea of his mind's eye so that whether his eyes were open or closed, whether he was awake or asleep, he lived with the photograph every minute of every day. His shrink said it was becoming a permanent part of his psyche, or something like that. As if the head doctor knew what really went on inside Josh's mind. Josh thought of it as the reverse of never. He would never get a response from the other side of Julian's door, and he would always have that image with him.

At the bottom of the stairs Josh turned the corner and entered the kitchen. Or, as he had once referred to it—only once, given the lecture he got from He-Who-Does-Not-Appreciate-Good-Sarcasm—The Great American Overpriced Kitchen Appliance Showroom. The old man had spent the past two years overhauling the room, replacing everything in it with newer, shinier, bulkier stuff. Every kitchen appliance, gadget, and utensil ever invented in the modern era was on display. He doubted any of it was any better than what they'd had before, but, then again, Josh didn't consider himself an expert on kitchen fixtures. From the industrial-sized, brushed-steel monster stove to the hulking refrigerator, from the oversized dish washer that was big enough to wash the old man's Caddy to the state-of-the-art trash compactor—which Josh thought was a total waste of legal tender, pun intended—from the two blenders to the two sinks (both with garbage disposals), the entire room screamed overkill.

Spending mucho dinero on high-end stereo equipment and muscle cars and other essentials that enhanced one's quality of life made all the sense in the world. What was the point of listening to AC/DC or The Motor City Madman or Zeppelin or (dare he even think it?) KISS on a cheap piece of crap record player. Or cruising around the back roads of Old Wachusett in a beat-up Ford Pinto deathtrap. There was no point. Common sense. But kitchen appliances? Come on. How big does a stove or fridge have to be to cook up scrambled eggs or keep the milk from spoiling? And it wasn't just the appliances. The old man had replaced all the Formica counter tops with custom-cut stone slabs. A mammoth island—complete with second sink, second stove, and built-in cutting block—stood like an inside linebacker in a zone defense guarding the middle of the kitchen, daring anyone to even think about juking his way around it for extra yardage. The tile floor *alone* probably cost more than most of his friends' cars.

Again, overkill.

The Great One was never satisfied. Why have just one sink and one stove when you could have two of each. Two hundred dollar fridge? Nah. Go for the six hundred dollar one. Chevy or Cadillac? No contest. The man no longer had any sense of what it meant to have enough. It wouldn't have surprised Josh to find out the old man had bought a second family that he had stashed away on a deserted island somewhere in the South Pacific, a better version of this one that he could visit every once in a while, one that he could go to when he finally got sick and tired enough of this inferior one.

Josh trekked across the expansive room, made it around the island/linebacker, and opened one of the food cabinets in the corner. He pulled out the big yellow box of Cheerios. He sat on one of the six leather-cushioned bar stools that surrounded the island like obedient worshippers at the sacrificial altar. He opened the box and shoveled a handful of the little o's into his mouth, paying no attention to the ones escaping between his fingers and fleeing along the square ceramic tiles. He was about to bellow out the Cheerio yodel just for the sheer pleasure of it, but

realized he was going to get enough guff from the old man about the music and he probably shouldn't push his luck. No overkill for Josh, thank you very much. Like that great squinty-eyed, clenched-teeth philosopher Harry Callahan once said, a man's got to know his limitations.

"Josh, honey." His mother's bubbling voice trickled down the stairway. "You left your music on."

Josh could hear Zeppelin jamming out "Royal Orleans" (why do the DJs never play that song?) all the way down in the kitchen, and his mother, as intelligent and commonsensical as she was, still felt the need to remind him that he left his music on. He loaded another handful of o's into his mouth, thought about getting up, or at the very least answering his mother, but instead reached for a third handful.

Staccato footsteps echoed down into the kitchen, emanating from the gauntlet. The sound revealed two useful tidbits of information. One, the great David Jacob Schofield was descending from on high. Two, Josh had made the right bet picking door number three. *Great*, he thought. *Excellent friggin' fantastic way to start the morning*. If Josh were a betting man, and he had to place odds on his chances of escaping the impending encounter unscathed, he'd put them at three to one, against.

Against his better judgment, Josh turned toward the footsteps.

David Jacob Schofield entered the kitchen. Dressed appropriately enough for a college mathematics professor—brown sport coat with blue elbow patches, light blue open-collared shirt, dark blue pants and casual shoes—there was nothing intimidating about David Jacob Schofield's appearance, nor in his medium height and build. But the art of intimidation, the way David Jacob Schofield practiced it, involved more than simple physical appearance. There were the two 'A' words: attitude and action. That's what David Jacob Schofield was all about. Show people the appropriate attitude (and by appropriate we mean whatever attitude that gets you what you want with no regard for the other person's feelings) and carry out the necessary action (and by necessary we mean employing whatever means it takes to achieve the desired goal).

Josh watched his father. The man strode across the room and leaned against the stove between the fridge and the sink. He ran a hand through his thick, wavy brown hair. He crossed his arms. Glared at Josh. Each movement, from the narrowing of the eyes to the arching of the left eyebrow, was carefully designed and executed for maximum effect.

Maybe the odds needed to be tweaked just a touch, say ten to one. Still against, of course.

Hoping against the odds to lighten the mood, knowing it would more than likely backfire on him, Josh employed his best Eddie Haskill imitation. "Good morning, Father." He followed it with a cheek-to-cheek smile and threw in a hearty, if not sincere, "How are you this morning?" before grabbing more Cheerios and stuffing them into his mouth.

Apparently, the old man did not appreciate the humor. A minute passed. Then another. Josh felt like a lab mouse in a maze, the mad scientist waiting to see if said mouse would find its way out or run headfirst into another dead end.

Another minute passed. Finally, his father spoke.

"If you continue to abuse that stereo system I bought for you by blasting that incessant screaming and screeching you *think* passes for music, no matter what time of day or night, I will heave it out your bedroom window. I'll take every album you own and I will donate them to your girlfriend's church for the next record burning rally and you will sit and watch the entire callow, cacophonous collection float up to the heavens in thick black smoke."

After Josh recovered from the word 'cacophonous'—he'd never even heard the word before it came out of the old man's mouth—three thoughts popped into his head. One, he could sell

tickets to everyone at Old Wachusett High School to come over and watch the old man get a hernia trying to lift Josh's Marantz up and out his bedroom window. Two, Abby's church had never done any of that crazy record burning stuff. The holy-rollers who met across town did that. Three, Josh could recall two different occasions when he had told the old man that he'd broken it off with Abby months ago. Obviously, those conversations about Josh's love life had left quite the lasting impression on the man.

His father opened the fridge, took out the bottle of orange juice, and reached for a glass in the wooden cabinet above the counter. Unlike most parents, Josh's father never tied up his mini-lectures with silly questions like, "Are you listening, young man?" "Do you understand me?" or "Got that?" It was understood that when David Jacob Schofield spoke you listened, you understood, and you got it. No questions asked, no response required.

Josh responded anyway. Why not? The odds were already stacked against him. "Okie dokie. I understand." He considered adding a "Sieg Heil" with raised arm and clicked heels, but choosing to prolong his life, he instead settled for a simple "Sir" for good measure and added effect.

The old man poured a glassful of juice, downed it in one gulp, rinsed the glass, dried it on the dish towel hanging from the rack under the cabinet, and returned the glass to its proper place in the cabinet. Leaning against the counter and crossing his arms, he turned his full attention to Josh. "Knock off the sarcasm."

Josh nodded. His heels involuntarily moved a fraction of an inch toward each other before he stopped himself. His father glowered at him, seemingly aware of what he was thinking. Josh shrugged, his palms turned out. "What?"

His father waited a moment before speaking. "I still hear it."

Hear what, Mein Fuhrer? By the time that thought had travelled from his brain along the synapses and nerve endings and arrived at his mouth, the words had changed to, "Oh, sorry." He swept the escaped Cheerios that lay dead on the counter into his hand, knelt to pick up their fallen comrades on the floor, opened one of the island's lower cabinet doors, and tossed the handful into the trash. He closed the Cheerios box and put it away. He felt his father's eyes drilling into the back of his head like a mental vampire sucking the thoughts out of his brain. "Guess I kinda forgot," Josh said, glancing at his father without looking him in the eye. Conventional wisdom said it was best not to look directly at a growling dog.

Bolting up the stairs two at a time, Josh narrowly missed crashing into his mother who had just come out of her bedroom. Dressed in a green knit sweater, black slacks and shoes, her dark hair cascading over her broad shoulders, looking twenty-nine rather than thirty-nine, Constance Schofield did not fit the bill of your typical small city New England public library director. Except, perhaps, for the paperback glued to her hand, index finger serving as temporary bookmark. Today it was one of Robert Ludlum's. If she hadn't been his mother, Josh probably would've considered Constance Schofield thing of a knockout. While not in the same vein as Farrah or Cheryl, his mother was more along the lines of Kate Jackson or even Jaclyn Smith. Good-looking, classy, funny, a touch of subdued hotness underlying it all. Sidestepping her, Josh quickly buried that last thought as far down into his psyche as he could, hoping the thought would never resurface no matter how much digging around he or anyone else would do inside his head in the near future.

"Good morning, honey." His mother winked at him as she passed, signaling Josh not to worry too much about his father, that he would get over it, even though they both knew that the past two years indicated otherwise. Josh offered her a genuinely affectionate smile.

At the bottom of the stairs, she looked up at Josh. “You said you wanted to bring a bag lunch to work today, so I made one for you. Turkey sandwich with pickles and tomatoes, an apple, and celery sticks. The bag is in the refrigerator, middle shelf on the door.” She turned the corner, said, “Oh,” caught herself with one hand on the doorframe, and poked her head up the stairway. “You’ll need a winter coat. It looks like it could snow today.” She disappeared around the corner before Josh even thought about thanking her for making lunch. A twinge of guilt nibbled at his conscience. *Nice going, he thought. As if she didn’t get enough grief from the old man, you can’t say a simple thank you? Way to be a real friggin’ jerk.*

Not only that, he had lied to her about working today. Yeah, he’d lied to his parents plenty of times in the past, but...it felt different lately. With his father being the way he’d been the past year, Josh had sensed a kind of camaraderie with his mother, which made lying to her seem so...wrong. He’d thank her later tonight, after he got back from his day trip to Albany. Hell, maybe he’d even tell her the truth about Albany. She might tell Abby’s father, but that wasn’t Josh’s problem. He and his mother needed to stick together.

The past two years had been difficult for all of them, and his mother seemed like the most well-adjusted of the three, but Josh sensed that was more an act that she put on than anything else. And if he kept thinking about it he’d start worrying about his mother and he had enough to dwell on today, so best to banish those thoughts now.

In his room he plucked his NOVA 40 headphones off the floor where they lay next to his bed. They were big mothers, looked more like giant earmuffs than headphones, and they delivered unbelievable sound. He plugged the cord into the stereo jack on the Marantz receiver, sat cross-legged on the floor with his back against the console, and listened to “God of Thunder.” When the song was done he got up and turned off the stereo. He unplugged the phones, laid them atop the stack of albums, and lowered the lid on the turntable. Standing in front of the stereo and looking up at his girls, Josh pondered his life for a few quite moments. Satisfied he had plumbed the depths of his emotions, he stepped into the hall.

Five rooms occupied the second floor of the Schofield house. His parents’ room was directly across from his own, down the hall was his mother’s book room, his father’s music room stood guard at the end of the hall, and Julian’s room was next to Josh’s. Josh turned right and took the few steps to his brother’s room. He stood in front of the door. On the other side, closed off from the rest of the world, was a place he both treasured and feared.

Reaching for the knob, he checked over his shoulder to make sure no one was coming up the stairs. Satisfied both his parents were still in the kitchen, he wrapped his fingers around the brass knob. It was cold. He hesitated. He turned the knob and nudged the door. It swung silently inward. He paused to think once more about what he was doing. He tilted his head toward the staircase and listened. No footsteps.

Josh stepped across the threshold and entered his brother’s room for the first time in months. For the first time since he’d been back from his stint in the looney bin.

Chapter 3: Abby's Ultimatum

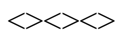
On the morning of her sixteenth birthday, Abby ran. With the darkness of the night behind her, the gray twilight ahead, she ran. She wore sneakers, sweatpants, sweatshirt, and gloves. No hat. She liked the feel of her red hair flaming out behind her. So no hat, no matter how cold it got. And it was cold this morning. Her lungs burned, her calves ached, a stitch in her side threatened to spill out her insides, but she kept running. Never stop. Push through the pain. Smash through that wall no matter how much it hurt. Pain was not something to fear; it was a thing to be conquered. If dealt with correctly, pain could even be used to one's advantage.

As she ran in the road to avoid the patches of snow and ice on the sidewalks, Abby thought back to that drizzly autumn morning more than a year ago when she had stood at the starting line of her first-ever cross-country race. A freshman, she had been terrified that she wouldn't finish the race. All she could visualize at that starting line was herself doubled over half-way through the three mile course and puking her brains out as the other runners zipped by her. Now, in the middle of Elm Street and close to home, Abby grinned. Her legs pushed her body onward as her arms slashed through the frigid air. She remembered how, halfway through that race, the pain had hit her. The wall, as they say. It had sprung up in front of her and smacked her entire body. The cramps had got so bad that she had come close to quitting.

But that would have meant letting the pain defeat her, and that was something Abby could never allow. It hadn't mattered to her if she had to crawl across the finish line in last place. She would not let something as superficial as pain stop her. She had continued. And she had finished that race, crossing the line in fifth place to the cheering of her coaches from the sidelines and the two teammates that had finished in front of her. She then hobbled to the nearest tree, dropped to her knees, and with one hand on the slimy bark, the other ripping out clumps of dirt and grass, proceeded to puke her brains out.

Abby ran because she was good at it. Sure, she could write poetry and short stories, and yeah she was a decent point guard on the court and played a mean defense as a fullback on the field hockey team, but running... She was good at it. Finishing fifth in her first cross country race wasn't too bad, and finishing third in the state meet only a few months later wasn't too shabby either. For Abby, though, it was a lot more than finishing first and beating everyone else, as fun as that was. Running was who she was. That sounded so cliché and trite, but it was the only way she could think of it. Running was who she was.

Rounding the corner onto Cherry Street and heading for home, Abby thought about what lay ahead for her. The euphoric feeling she usually felt near the end of her run dissipated like the vapors of her breath. There was another wall waiting for her at home. It sat in the den, in the chair, behind the safety of the desk. Abby would go home, take a three minute shower, get dressed, and confront that wall that was her father.



Abby Lynne Graham stood outside her father's den. She wore blue jeans with a red T-shirt, and over that her black high school sweatshirt with the orange wildcat logo. Finishing off the look were the brown suede boots with the tassels that she loved so much. In one hand she held a

green Army knapsack which, on school days, was stuffed with useless textbooks and scribble-filled notebooks, the pages covered with not just math and history and social studies notes, but also poetry and short stories she wrote during study halls. This morning she had packed a change of clothes, a Polaroid camera, and her journal. Stuffed inside a pair of socks was a rolled up wad of three-hundred and twenty-five dollars she'd lifted from her father's 'hidden' shoebox on the top shelf in his bedroom closet. In her other hand she held the blue winter parka with the fake fur-lined hood her father had given to her this past Christmas.

Wet strands of red hair dangled in front of her eyes. She blew them away. They fell back. Great. Abby inhaled deeply. She tightened her grip on the knapsack and parka, counted to three, and stepped toward the threshold that separated her father's den from the hall.

With that one step, Abby found herself sliding into a long-forgotten memory. The trigger was an overwhelming scent of Old Spice. Invisible tendrils of the familiar aroma enveloped her mind and massaged her soul as she planted both feet inside the den. She was no longer sixteen. She was a little girl who had just jumped out of bed and run down the hall in her Wonder Woman pajamas to find her father sitting at his desk and reading his Bible. He jotted sermon notes into his blue spiral notebook. She climbed into her father's lap and snatched his reading glasses perched on his nose, trying in vain to get them to stay on her own while pretending to read from her father's big black Bible. His name was embossed in silver script on the lower right corner of the cover. Dropping her voice to mimic her father, she recited Bible verses she had memorized in Sunday school. *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, and whoever believes in Him will be saved. Treat others the way you want them to treat you. The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want.*

Abby closed her eyes and inhaled the Old Spice, soaking in more of the memory. She heard her father's gentle laugh, mixing and mingling with the birdsongs and lilac scents drifting in through the open window on those early mornings that now seemed a lifetime away from her. That laugh had never failed to wrap her in a blanket of safety and acceptance, conveying to her soul that whatever she had to say, no matter how silly it sounded, no matter that she had interrupted her father's quiet time, whatever she had to say was important to both him and God.

Now, standing in the middle of the den, in the middle of winter, no birdsongs enchanting her ears nor lilac scents tickling her nose, Abby opened her eyes and thought, *Was that us? Was that really us?* As the memory faded, she waited for her father to look up from his Bible. She cleared her throat. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, cocked her hip, and twisted her leg and foot mannequin-style, employing the art of body language that was the sole domain of every teenage girl who had ever grown impatient with a parent, which, by implication, meant every teenage girl who had ever graced the surface of planet Earth.

Her father kept reading, his head bowed and shoulders hunched over the Bible as if he was a miner in the California gold rush sifting for a stray nugget of gold hidden at the bottom of his beaten and dented pan.

So, Abby thought. That's how it's going down. Fine. She pulled her body into alignment, cleared her throat again, and delivered the two words she had been practicing for the past week.

"I'm going."

Apparently, she hadn't practiced enough. The words stumbled over themselves, the letters causing a traffic jam as they left her mouth. Instead of delivering them clothed with the authority and assuredness she had intended, she breathed them into existence completely naked. *Bravo, Abby, bravo! Great performance! Three syllables. Two words. One line. And you couldn't deliver. Betrayed by your own voice. What's next?*

Her father still did not look up from his Bible. His lips kept moving—a habit that infuriated Abby—as he continued reading to himself. *He's deliberately doing this*, she thought. *He knows why I'm here, and he's stalling*. He wrote in his notebook, turned a page in the Bible, then another, wrote again in the notebook, and then, without looking up, said, “I’m sorry sweetheart, what was that you said?” There was a pause, a moment when it seemed as if he might actually raise his head, look at her, and pay attention. But then his lips started their annoying silent exercise again.

“You heard me.” Yes. There it was this time. The confidence he needed to hear in her voice. That she needed to hear.

He held up an index finger and kept reading.

So much for confidence overwhelming him. Fine. She’d go along with his silly charade. She could wait him out. She clasped her hands together, holding the parka and knapsack in front of her as she surveyed her father’s surroundings. She shook her head. His den was usually the epitome of organization: books standing at alphabetical attention on the shelves, desktop properly appointed with pens, pencils, writing pads and notebooks, and various magazines resting in the rack next to his desk. Everything in its proper place and a proper place for everything, as he liked to say.

Evidently he’d given up on that mantra. Empty shelves bore evidence of books that had been pulled out of active duty and had been packed away in boxes stacked against the wall. The desk was cluttered with crumpled pieces of paper, a couple of open Bible commentaries, empty Styrofoam cups, and a tangled mass of neckties. The magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Leadership Journal*, *Biblical Archeology*—with dog-eared pages scarred with coffee stains were left to fend for themselves on the two cushioned chairs, ottoman, and file cabinet.

Abby centered her attention back on her father. Edward Graham. He was proud of his last name, considering it a privilege to share it with the Reverend Billy Graham. She got the sense that her father actually believed that the Almighty Himself had christened him with the name, bestowing upon him the same Great Commission as that of Billy Graham and Paul the Apostle, that being to evangelize the lost and save the hapless sinners from the depths of hell and the clutches of eternal damnation. Or, as was the true state of affairs in her father’s case, to preach a Sunday morning sermon to a hundred souls who already knew Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, lead a dozen hard-core fanatics in a Bible study on Wednesday nights, and dole out tidbits of marriage counseling when needed. So, yeah, it was quite the divine calling.

Oh, wait a minute. Let’s not forget the part about screwing the church secretary. Abby was pretty sure Billy and Paul had never considered *that* part of *their* divine calling. Her father must not have been listening too closely when he received his marching orders from on high. Either that, or he figured that since he wasn’t married it wasn’t *really* cheating because he didn’t have a wife to cheat on. Never mind the memory of her mother, that the secretary he had cheated with happened to be lawfully wedded herself, and that the act of sexual intercourse outside of marriage was contrary to the stupid Bible he reads every day!

But those were just details. Nothing to fret over.

Abby watched her father’s lips. To think that six months ago she would’ve had no problem comparing her father to the real Reverend Graham.

She cleared her throat for the umpteenth time and opened her mouth to allow more confidence and authority to spill out, but caught herself. *Don’t lose it*, she thought. *Stay in control. Focus.*

Her father finally dragged his attention away from the Bible. His eyes flicked to the parka, to the knapsack, and back to the parka before settling on Abby. He raised his eyebrows, leaned forward in his leather swivel chair, planted both elbows on the oak desk, and steepled his fingers. The drawn-out charade reminded Abby of that geeky substitute teacher who had filled in for Mr. Kendrick's geometry class back in January. The geek had tried everything in the book to exude confidence in his abilities. The ruler-clacking on Mr. Kendrick's gray metal desk, the grim-faced pacing in front of the classroom with his head bowed and hands firmly clasped behind his back, and the empty threats to send any miscreants to the principal's office succeeded in one thing and one thing only: to reveal the ugly yet all-too-obvious truth that Mr. Substitute Geek was in way over his head and never, at any time, had the control over that class that he either thought he had, or desired to have.

"Go where?" Her father began tapping his index fingers together.

Abby did not answer her father, but kept her eyes steady on him. *Control, Abby. Don't play this game. Stay in control.*

"Ah!" A smile appeared on his face, like a light switch had been flicked on inside his head. He reached under the desk and pulled out a box wrapped in shiny green and purple paper with a white and red ribbon tied around it. It wasn't a bad wrapping job, and purple and green were her favorite colors. *But I'm not buyin' it, sweet Daddy-O. Not for one second.*

"How could I forget?" He rose from the leather chair and proffered the gift with one hand, steadying himself against the desk with the other.

Abby rolled her eyes at the peace offering. "When I turned sixteen." Abby fixed her eyes on him. "That's what you said."

He withdrew the offering and held it close to his chest. He arched his brow and tilted his head.

"Fine." Abby dropped the knapsack onto the carpet. It landed with a dull thud, echoing the sound within her heart. She slid one arm into the sleeve of the parka and tilted her head forward to allow her hair to spill inside the coat. She slipped her other arm in.

"What are you doing?" Her father set the gift on the desk.

"What does it look like?" Abby zipped the coat. "If you won't bring me," she stooped and picked up the knapsack, "then I'll get there myself."

Her father leaned over the desk, placing his hands on either side of the green and purple box. "Will you please tell me what this is all about?"

Did he really think she was *that* naïve? She hoisted the knapsack up and over one shoulder, then the other. "I'm sure it'll come to you." She turned and headed for the door.

"Abby, wait."

Abby stopped, turned, and faced her father.

He hesitated for a moment, then reached for the wooden cane that leaned against the waist-high bookshelf behind his chair. He stepped out from behind the desk to approach Abby. He stopped. He stepped back, lowered himself into the chair, and leaned the cane against the desk. He removed his glasses, folded them, and placed them on the open notebook. Leaning back, he closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. The chair hinges squeaked as he rocked back and forth. The bags under his eyes, the sunken cheeks, the slowness of his movements—it all spoke of the toll the last two months, and in particular the last two weeks, had taken on him. He looked a lot older than his thirty-nine years. Abby wished she felt sorry for him.

"Abby." He stopped rubbing his eyes and dropped his hands into his lap. He stopped rocking and looked directly at her. "Sweetheart."

Here it comes. The excuse masquerading as a reason. It used to be that he always spoke the truth to her, no matter how inconvenient for either of them. At times he had to feed it to her in bite-sized morsels, yet he always seasoned his words with grace and understanding. What she was about to get was a heaping mound of blatant lies served on a silver platter, slathered with self-pity and rationalizations.

“You know what I have to do today to get ready for Sunday’s service.”

And there it was. The truth buried so deep in a layer of unspoken lies that you’d have to dig halfway to China to find it.

Abby started to speak just as her eyes slipped to the gift on the desk. She found herself haunted by another memory that had been tucked way back in the corner of her mind. When she was nine years old she had opened a much bigger box wrapped in green and purple and red and white paper with Santa and reindeer and snowflakes covering every square inch. It, too, had been handsomely wrapped, but that hadn’t prevented her from tearing off the paper to reveal the one thing she had wanted more than anything else that Christmas—an Easy Bake Oven. She had leapt for joy and shouted and cried and hugged her daddy. The two of them had spent that entire morning baking, she in her pajamas covered with flour and dough, her father in his sweatpants, T-shirt, and slippers, both of them laughing, relaxing, eating, and having a wonderful time. They had baked a miniature cake, eaten it, baked another one, eaten that one, and had kept baking and eating until they had used up all the ingredients. They must’ve baked at least a half-dozen cakes that morning, eating all of them, not caring about stomach aches or cavities or crumbs. Her father had helped with the first one, then he had let her bake the rest on her own, watching to make sure she did everything right.

Abby had played the part of Julia Child—complete with a terrible British accent—while her father played the part of the silly dad having a grand time with his little girl.

Except, back then, he hadn’t been playing the part. It had been genuine.

And now, with a shiny gift and a pathetically veiled insouciant plea for sympathy and understanding, Daddy was looking to buy his way out of keeping his word.

Abby turned toward the door.

“Abby.” She heard the chair’s wheels roll over the hard plastic covering the carpet and her father’s shoes scuff along the same surface. “Abby, listen to me.”

She stopped in the doorway. *Why am I stopping? Why have my feet stopped moving? Just keep going. Don’t listen to him.* But she did not keep going. She stopped to listen to him, but not turn to face him.

“I think I know what this is about. I...I remember what I said, and I want to follow through on it. Honestly, sweetheart, I do. It...it just can’t be today. You have to understand. It’s important that I—”

With a swift one-eighty and two runner’s strides, Abby covered the distance between them and pointed a finger in his face. “It’s important that you keep your word.” She lowered her finger and leaned toward him. “Sort of like keeping a vow.”

He leaned against the desk, propped the cane against his leg, and crossed his arms. “That’s unfair, young lady. And it’s disrespectful.”

Executing an about-face, Abby marched out of the room. This time her feet kept moving, propelling her down the hall, through the kitchen, out the front door, and into the frigid freedom of the gray February morning.

Chapter 4: Carl Goes for a Coffee and Donut

Carl Sanderson pulled into the Mister Donut parking lot, and in an uncharacteristically thoughtful and deliberate manner, he eased the gearshift of his brown and battered 1971 Ford F-100 pickup into park. He kept the engine running, resting one hand on the shifter while drumming the fingers of his other on the steering wheel. He was thinking. He reached into the side pocket of his mechanic's coat. The metal flask was cold in his hand. Carl was fine with cold. He leaned back in the seat. He twisted off the cap and took a swig. Up until a month ago—with the exception of a few beers with the guys after work on Fridays—Carl had not been a man given to much drinking. But then again, up until a month ago he had been cruising through life just fine.

Until he'd hit a major speed bump. Discoveries had been made. Lies had surfaced. Hence, Carl's drink of choice—and the frequency of his drinking—had changed. Jess might say it had changed dramatically, but Carl would disagree with that assessment. Jess might also say that Carl himself had changed, and with that assessment Carl *would* agree. Although, not to get too wrapped up in the semantics of it, Carl didn't see it as changing. More like...progressing. Progressing in his thinking, after having seen certain...realities come to light in his life. Realities that required a response. Wiping his upper lip with the sleeve of his coat, Carl twisted the cap back on and tucked the flask into his pocket.

Carl was a man of action. When confronted with a choice, it was quite simple what needed to be done: make a decision, act on that decision, and get the job done. Too much thinking only muddled things up and delayed acquiring the desired results. But that didn't mean that Carl was a reckless fool. The man had his faults like everyone else, and at times he acted impulsively, but he at least had the good sense to know there were times in life when extensive thinking was required before any action could be carried out. His present situation happened to be one of those times. Unlike his job at the garage where he could replace a distributor cap to see if that would fix a stalling problem, and if that didn't fix it he could try replacing the plug wires, and if that didn't work he could try something else, this problem didn't work that way. No room or time for trial and error here.

Carl turned the ignition off and pocketed the keys into his blue work coat. He flinched when his fingers brushed against the cold metal bullets he'd dropped into the pocket before he'd left the house, before his wife had come down to kiss him goodbye for the day. He wasn't used to feeling such things on his person. Like the drinking, Carl had never been much for guns and shooting. Until recently. Now he had a keen interest in that sort of thing.

He reached over the steering wheel for his wool Patriots hat warming on the dash air vent and pulled it onto his head, his blonde hair curling out from under it. Hopefully the Pats could build on the new-found success of the past few years and make a legitimate run deep into the playoffs this coming season. Carl liked all sports, but he loved his New England Patriots. When all others were casting aspersions on his team during their 3-and-10 and 5-and-9 seasons, Carl stuck by the guys in red, white, and blue. No fair-weather fan he. A true Patriot fan was loyal to the team at all times, through thick and thin, for better for worse, in sickness and in health.

Loyalty. It's what holds it all together.

Bending forward and reaching under the seat, Carl reassured himself that the gun was still there. Of course, it was, but now he wasn't sure if he felt comforted or anxious by its presence only six inches under his ass. He yanked on the door lever, got out, and walked around the front of the pickup. It was cold, but Carl didn't mind. He liked the cold. Made him feel alive. He stepped up and over the snowbank, disappointed that none of the Mister Donut workers had seen fit to shovel a path through it for their loyal customers.

A young woman, who apparently did not enjoy the cold as much as Carl, dashed across the parking lot and got to the door the same time Carl reached for it. He held the door for the woman and she flew right through the opening without even looking at him or offering a thank you. Inside, Carl stepped in line behind her. In front of them was an obnoxious, corpulent hippo-man who evidently thought everyone in Old Wachusett needed to hear what he was ordering.

Standing in line, thinking about the options available to him in his present circumstance, while at the same time trying to decide what donut to get with his coffee, Carl lamented at what he saw happening to this country. To *his* country. Things like common courtesy were slowly going the way of the Edsel. The fabric of society was fraying at the seams and nobody seemed to give a crap about it. A man holds a door open for a woman, a thank you would be nice. That's all. A simple thank you. Not a big deal, just a little common courtesy that could go a long way to brightening the day of a fellow citizen. If not a thank you, perhaps a subtle acknowledgement from one human being to another, a slight nod of the head, a motion of the hand, a look that says, 'Yes, I see you, I acknowledge your presence as a fellow human being.' Was that too much to ask?

Carl didn't think so.

It was the seemingly insignificant, mundane niceties in life that served as the oil in the engine of society, keeping it lubed so the whole thing didn't seize up one day, belch out a final breath of noxious fumes, and die, leaving all of humanity stranded by the roadside. When that happened, AAA wasn't going to come to the rescue. Carl couldn't *possibly* be the only one who knew this, but it sure seemed like it.

A wallet fell to the floor. It made a wet smacking sound as it landed on a slushy patch of brown snow. *Nice mopping job*, Carl thought. *Way to take pride in your job, Mister Donut workers*. Carl watched with amusement as hippo-man sighed, grunted, and proceeded to maneuver his body into various positions to somehow lower himself so he could reach down for the wallet. The woman behind him, the ungrateful bitch who had zipped right by Carl, seemed to momentarily consider helping the guy, but, in the end, did not. That moment—the hippo-man's inability to pick up his own damn wallet, the brown slush on the floor, and the bitch's lack of compassion—fully encapsulated everything that was wrong with America. Carl could sum it up in a single word: apathy. A man allowing his body to get out of control so badly that he couldn't bend down. A woman unable to lend a helping hand. A donut worker who couldn't properly mop a floor. It was all a symptom of the disease of apathy. And the disease was contagious. No one cared for the plight of his fellow man anymore. The rich didn't care about the poor, the haves couldn't care less about the have-nots, and the hypocrites in power, or those who *perceived* themselves to be in positions of power, didn't give a damn about anyone else.

If you needed examples, there were plenty of them, starting right in Carl's own backyard in the happy state of Taxachusetts. For instance, Carl couldn't understand how a guy like Teddy Kennedy could steer his car into a lake, leave that poor girl to drown to death, and get off scot free. How the hell was that even possible in the United States of America? If it had been Carl

driving that car he sure as hell would've ended up in jail where he'd probably still be today. Instead, rich-boy Teddy gets a free ride and nobody asks two questions about the whole sordid ordeal. How's that for power not giving a damn.

What this country needed was a reminder of what justice looked like, and how it could be used to even the playing field between the powerful and the powerless.

What this country needed was a man like Carl.

Finally, hippo-man grabbed his wet wallet off the floor and got his extra-large coffee and two cinnamon rolls and a muffin. He waddled past the ungrateful bitch, not once looking up and giving either her or Carl the common courtesy of a look or simple nod. Carl could certainly understand not giving the bitch the time of day, but he hadn't done anything to deserve such treatment. More evidence of the disease. Carl turned to watch the massive mound of apathetic flesh waddle his way toward the exit, smiling at the prospect of hippo-man getting wedged in the doorway. The guy squeezed through, made it to a car parked in the front-most spot in the lot, and lowered himself just enough to work his flabby flesh in between the steering wheel and the driver's seat. Carl continued watching as hippo-man set his coffee on the dash, his rolls and muffin on the passenger seat, and started the car. Before he pulled out of the spot, hippo-man glanced up. He appeared to notice Carl watching him, and quickly turned his head away as he backed out of the parking spot. Carl shook his head in disgust. *You should turn your head away in shame, mister, thought Carl. I would too after your behavior in here, not to mention the way you've let yourself go to hell.*

With that thought, Carl grimaced at his cruelty. No...not cruelty. More like cynicism. He'd always been a skeptical man by nature, but lately, even before the thing with Jess and the preacher, he'd found himself turning more and more cynical. More than that, he was becoming downright negative. He'd always been known as the fun-loving guy, the life of the party, the one with the outrageous sense of humor, the one who poked good-natured fun at himself as well as others.

But Carl had changed.

What was the saying? The more things change, the more they stay the same. He'd heard that in a song recently. Carl *was* changing. He was progressing. The question he now posed to himself was whether or not he was progressing into a person more like his true self, someone he was destined to become. He'd have to ask the preacher what he thought about that. It seemed like a deep thought, one of those philosophical paradoxes religious people like to spout off about. He'd ask the preacher, see what the man of the cloth—more like the man of the three-piece-suit and expensive car—had to say.

Carl turned his attention back toward the front of the store and saw that the ungrateful bitch in front of him had stepped up to the counter. Carl stayed where he was. There was no need to fill in the empty space. Waiting for his turn, he looked out the frost-covered plate glass windows to check on his truck, making sure it was still there and that no one was snooping around it. Of course, it was, and, of course, no one was. Having that gun under the driver's seat made him more nervous than he thought he'd be.

A black sports car—*heck of a car to be driving in winter in New England*, Carl thought—pulled into the spot vacated by hippo-man. A couple, probably in their mid-thirties, a few years older than Carl, got out of the car and hurried hand in hand to get inside. Carl smiled at them as they fell in line behind him. They both smiled back.

See? That's all it took. Perhaps there was hope for America after all.

“May I help you, sir?”

Carl turned toward the counter. The space between him and the counter was empty. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the ungrateful bitch go out the door. Shrugging his shoulders, he faced the woman waiting to take his order.

“Sorry. Yes, you may.” It was such a pleasure to interact with people who understood what the engine of society needed in order to purr like a kitten. Carl smiled at the woman. “Medium regular, and a glazed donut. Please.”

The woman behind the counter smiled, poured his coffee, popped a plastic lid onto the Styrofoam cup, grabbed a donut from the shelf behind her, handed both to Carl, and took his money with a smile.

“Keep the change.” Carl smiled again, nodded, and turned to leave. Common courtesy. That’s all it took. As horrible as Carl’s life had been the past few weeks, and in spite of the plans he had this morning, he still had the presence of mind to show common courtesy to a fellow human being.

“Thanks,” said the woman. “You have yourself a nice day now.”

Carl turned and saluted her with his Styrofoam cup. “I’ll try.” He smiled at the woman, smiled at the sports car couple, and pushed the door open with his backside. “I’ll certainly try.”

Chapter 5: Ice Fishing

Seven inches of ice. That's what separated Greg Horton from the frigid waters of Indian Head Lake. Sitting on the green and white Coleman cooler, holding a thermos of hot coffee, Greg thought back to when he was a kid skating with his twin sister, Linda, on this same lake and how she would be the one scared of the noises the cracking ice made, those loud twangs that sounded like a gigantic Slinky being stretched and plucked underneath the ice. He thought of Linda often. They both lived in Old Wachusett, only minutes from each other, and yet they were worlds apart. The only time he heard from her was when she needed a lift or was short on cash. Nancy, Greg's wife, told him that Linda was a grown woman and that she could take care of herself and that he should stop worrying about her. Greg told Nancy that he would stop worrying about her when she left that loser Tony for good and got herself hooked up with a man who actually cared enough for her to treat her right, willing to tie the knot instead of just shacking up with her.

For now, though, Greg took his wife's advice. He smiled at the skating memory, let it go, and got back to the task at hand, which was enjoying the early morning peace and quiet on the lake. It was cold, and he had never been much for fishing—unlike his younger brother who had spent all his August afternoons as a kid fishing every nook and cranny on the shores of Indian Head Lake—but with their first child on the way, Nancy figured each of them would need time alone to recharge their batteries. After giving it much thought, Greg came to the unlikely conclusion that a frozen lake was as good a place as any to be alone. His buddies on the force would think he was nuts if they knew he was out on the ice before eight o'clock on his day off. They could think what they wanted. He was alone and enjoying his free time.

As much as he looked forward to the birth of their child, he knew that once the little one was born—according to all his friends who had kids—free time would be at a premium, if not completely nonexistent. He'd considered various hobbies that he could get involved in to ease his mind and relieve the stress: model trains (that would take up too much money and space), hunting (he wasn't too keen on hauling a deer out of the forest), bowling (too boring), even painting (there wasn't a creative gene in his body).

He had finally settled on fishing. It was relatively inexpensive, took up little space in their one bedroom apartment, he could carry the fish home in a bucket, he was outdoors, and absolutely no creativeness was necessary. When winter had arrived, he figured why not try ice fishing. All he needed was patience, and Greg had developed a goodly amount of that after spending hundreds of hours sitting in his patrol car setting speed traps on the new Route 2 highway that divided—unofficially—Old Wachusett into North Wachusett and South Wachusett. The fish under the ice were no match for him. He usually came home with a catch of at least a half dozen good ones to eat, and that was after he had thrown back a half-dozen more.

This morning he wore one layer of Long Johns, two T-shirts, a sweatshirt, his old winter parka, and a new pair of snow pants. He was *still* cold. *Damn* cold. The only parts of him that were warm were his hands. Nothing like well-insulated gloves even if they came at the expense of fumbling with the thermos. Sitting on the cooler, sipping his coffee, enjoying the peace and

quiet, he wondered when it was supposed to start snowing. The news last night mentioned getting a few inches today, which, if he were to go by the Boston TV station's meteorologist's track record of late, Greg took to mean they had no earthly idea how much, if any, snow was coming. Greg should have been a weather forecaster. He couldn't think of any other job where you could collect a full salary for failing more times than you succeeded in your job. Well, not unless you were a hitter in the Red Sox lineup last season.

Greg had set up six tip-ups in a circle roughly fifty feet in diameter. The wind wasn't blowing much, but enough to get him off his frozen rear end to chase after a couple wind flags since he'd set up forty-five minutes ago. He'd gone fishing enough times this summer, catching pickerel, perch, bass, and tons of sunfish that he'd thrown back, so that he'd finally got proficient at removing a hook from a fish that had swallowed the thing pretty good. He was also now proficient at cleaning and cooking the fish. Turns out, he enjoyed all aspects of the hobby. Or sport. Or whatever category fishing fit into. He'd also come to learn that fishing was one of those skills that every man should hand down to his sons, if for no other reason than man was at the top of the food chain and there were certain skills and responsibilities that came with the territory and should be handed down from one generation to the next. If he ended up having a daughter, well, she'd get the skills too, regardless of how icky the worms and fish felt.

Even though he hadn't been on the ice for too long this morning, had to chase after the wind flags, and was freezing his ass off—he really should have picked up a set of bun warmers at Rich's Department Store—this morning was shaping up to be a legitimately decent way to get away from it all. His mind was free from the pressures and new responsibilities that had come—and were coming—his way. There was his recent promotion at the police department, the impending birth of his firstborn, and now the house hunting they had embarked upon just after Christmas. Not to mention having to deal with his father-in-law who wasn't too keen on his daughter marrying a cop (too dangerous) and who also, seeing how he was about to be a grandfather and all, thought it would be a grand idea if he and Greg's mother-in-law moved up from Pennsylvania to live closer to their daughter. *Wouldn't that be a nice idea, Greg, my favorite son-in-law?* his father-in-law had said, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Sure, Dad, a fantastic idea. Hey, while you're at it, why don't you and Mom move right in with Nancy and me? That would be swell, wouldn't it? That way when we're in the bedroom and we're hav—

Fortunately, Greg had censored himself before any of those internal thoughts had escaped through his mouth.

But, hey, that kind of thinking wasn't for now. He was recharging for crying out loud. Forget about Linda and the father-in-law and the promotion at work and finding a house. Focus on recharging. It was cute how Nancy liked saying things like that. *Greg, honey, is it time to recharge?* He loved the way she said that instead of what she really wanted to say: *Get out of my hair, you're driving me nuts!* He loved her, she loved him, and they enjoyed being together, but she was right. They both were the types of people that needed time to themselves, unlike most of their friends who were still either young enough or childless enough to want to be out on the scene every free night they had, which meant making the rounds in Old Wachusett, driving to nearby Fitchburg, or Leominster, or maybe even Worcester. Greg was a lucky man to have hooked up with a woman who felt the same way he did about having alone time, and who actually encouraged her husband to get out of the house once in a while.

Greg held the coffee in one hand, twisted and extended his other, and looked at his watch. It was creeping up on eight o'clock, and although he had been on the ice for not quite an hour, he

wondered how long he should stay. Nancy was more than likely still sleeping in, and he was off duty today, so he had no place he needed to be right now, nor was there any place he needed to go today. He could stay for as long as he wanted. He smiled, thinking that's exactly what he'd do.

Thinking it would be a good time to check the bait on the tip-ups—he didn't know if he was supposed to check the bait or not, but it seemed like a good thing to do while waiting for the fish to bite and trying to keep himself warm—Greg set the aluminum thermos in a hollowed-out circle in the snow next to the cooler. Sliding off the cooler and kneeling next to it, he lifted the plastic lid and reached in for one of the three plastic baggies stuffed with PB&J sandwiches. He opened the baggie, shook one of the halves of the sandwich out, devoured it in three bites, shook the other half out, dropped the empty baggie into the cooler, and closed the lid. Biting into the second half, Greg headed toward the closest tip-up, his boots crunching through a couple inches of crusty snow.

He knelt next to the tip-up, finished the sandwich, took off one glove, and tapped away the ice that had built up in the hole. He lifted the tip-up with his gloved hand and set it to the side, was about to pull the line up to check the bait, when movement far off to his left caught his attention. A dog emerged from the forest that surrounded the lake. A monster of a dog, it looked to be a black and gray German Shepherd or Alaskan Husky. It sauntered out of the woods about forty yards away from him, having emerged from the spot where Lone Man's Walk cuts into the forest. Greg shrugged and turned back to the tip-up. The owner, no doubt, would soon follow the dog onto the ice to set up shop. He was disappointed at the prospect of not having the entire lake to himself anymore.

If he had thought about it for a moment longer, Greg might have realized how silly it was to think that anyone would emerge from Lone Man's Walk, and he might have paid more attention to what he thought was a dog.

Instead, Greg ignored the animal as he pulled up the fishing line, his bare fingers growing numb. The bait was fine. He dropped it back into the water and cleared more ice from the hole. As he reset the tip-up, he glanced over his shoulder to check on the dog and see who it was that had decided to invade his private time.

The dog was gone.

He looked left, then right, but couldn't see the dog anywhere on the ice, nor on the shore. It was just... gone. Greg did give that some thought. It was odd, the dog seemingly vanishing like that. Maybe it had gone back into the woods. He finished resetting the tip-up, stood, scanned the lake, and started walking toward Lone Man's Walk. He looked for tracks in the snow. There were none. The dog hadn't come onto the ice. It must have turned back into the forest, perhaps in response to its owner calling it back.

Greg turned to retrieve his glove that he'd left by the hole. He gasped and froze. Staring at him, less than twenty feet away, sitting on its haunches, Greg's black glove hanging from its mouth, was the dog. But now he saw that it wasn't a dog. It was a wolf. A big, bad-ass, black and gray (mostly black) honest-to-god wolf. Greg closed his eyes and shook his head. Maybe the cold was getting to him and he was hallucinating. He couldn't possibly be seeing a wolf while fishing on Indian Head Lake in Old Wachusett, Massachusetts. He opened his eyes. Evidently, that was exactly what he was seeing.

A wolf. All he could think about was all the stuff he'd heard as a kid as to what to do when confronted by a wild animal. Dogs—don't look at them directly in the eye because they'll take that as defiance and take appropriate measures to protect themselves. Bears—don't even think

about trying to outrun them because they could top out at forty miles an hour, easily overtaking a human being. Moose—back away slowly, try not to let it see you, because if it did and got mad or felt threatened it could stomp the living hell out of you. *And* you were never supposed to show fear to any animal, because they can sense that.

Right now a rock would be able to sense Greg's fear.

Greg didn't remember anything about what to do when confronted with a wolf. He turned his head in increments, to the right, to the left, looking and hoping for anyone else. There was no one. He had been enjoying being alone on the ice. Now he wished it was as crowded as Hampton Beach on a Saturday afternoon in August. He had to remain calm. No matter what happened, no matter what the wolf did, Greg had to remain calm. Panicking wouldn't do him any good. So no panicking. But running...running sure sounded like a good idea. *No, you idiot, he thought. Are you stupid? Do you have a death wish? Don't run. Do not run!*

The wolf—he still couldn't wrap his mind around what was staring at him—continued to sit there, motionless. The animal clenched Greg's glove between its teeth, saliva dripping from its mouth and running over the glove. Greg inched his left foot backward, not daring to lift it, instead sliding it along the crusty snow-covered ice, keeping the rest of his body motionless as much as possible. The wolf raised its tail—which, Greg now noticed, hadn't been wagging—and slapped it on the ice once, in a deliberate manner. Up, then down. Greg cocked his head at the tail's movement. Was it...was it a friendly gesture? Could a wolf be friendly... and show it? Still with the glove in its teeth, the corners of the wolf's mouth turned up. *No. Wolves don't smile.* Nor grin, which was what it looked like more than a smile. Greg inched his right foot back, his boot scraping along the snow. The wolf raised and slapped its tail again, this time twice. Up, down. Up, down. Greg started to slide his left foot back again, but stopped when the wolf twitched its head and made a huffing sound.

Run, he thought to himself. Get your ass out of here! RUN!

No. He fought that urge, knowing that running was not a good idea. It would only agitate the animal, and then he'd be a dead man. He might already be a dead man and just didn't know it, but as long as the wolf made no threatening moves, Greg was not pressing his luck by doing anything stupid. The wolf executed what appeared to be a threatening move. It twitched its head, huffed, raised itself onto all fours, and took two steps toward Greg. Its tail remained as still and stiff as if it had been frozen in place.

Greg readied himself. He knew running might get himself killed, but he'd be damned if he was going to let himself be this thing's mid-morning snack. He started to turn his body while keeping his eyes on the animal, was two seconds away from sprinting for the forest, when the wolf did an unexpected thing. It backed away from him. The corners of its mouth dropped, it looked above and beyond Greg's right shoulder, and it backed away. Then, it whimpered.

What the hell?

Then Greg did an unexpected thing, the sort of thing that, had anyone been watching him, would have seemed like an act of one who was obviously either out of his mind or had a death wish. He did the kind of thing that he never would have been able to adequately explain the reason for doing to anyone, including Nancy. It was the kind of thing that people, in dire circumstances, did for no logical reason, but knew intuitively that it was the *only* thing to do.

He stepped toward the wolf.

In return for his act of illogical trust—would he have called it an act of faith? Perhaps, if he'd had the chance—the wolf wagged its tail twice in rapid succession from side to side. It began panting, reminding Greg of how excited his German Shepherd, named Cindy, used to get

when he'd played fetch with her in the backyard of his boyhood home. Greg stepped forward again. The tail wagged again, this time faster. Another step forward. And another. Each time the tail wagged faster, anticipation growing. He was close enough to stretch out his arm and touch the animal. The wolf moved toward him, wagging its tail vigorously, nodding its head up and down. On one of the upswings, with the glove still clenched between its teeth, the wolf spread its lips and revealed its pearly whites. Only they weren't teeth. They were fangs. And there weren't just two or four of them like you'd see in a picture of a wolf baring its teeth with two fangs up and two down. There was an entire row of fangs.

The wolf flicked its head at Greg and opened its mouth, sending the saliva-slimed glove sailing through the cold February air. It landed on Greg's boot. He looked at the glove, at the wolf, at the glove. The wolf huffed, nodded its head, wagged its tail. Greg bent forward, keeping his eyes on the wolf, no longer sensing he was in immediate danger, yet not quite willing to surrender all of himself over to that thought. He reached down for the glove, ready to react to anything the wolf might do. It might appear friendly, and Greg was by no means a veteran outdoorsman who was familiar with the ways of nature, but he knew enough to respect wild animals. As far as Greg was concerned there were two things to remember when respecting them: they were *wild*, and they were *animals*.

He reached down the last inch and snatched up the glove with two fingers. He stood slowly and slipped the glove over his numb fingers, wiping the saliva off on his ratty old parka while suppressing the crazy notion of extending his hand to the wolf in a gesture of thanks. The wolf lowered itself back on its haunches, tongue hanging out of the incongruous human-like grin, tail swishing back and forth on the snow. Hadn't he watched one of those Wild Kingdom shows about wolves being more afraid of humans than humans were of them? Apparently, someone forgot to inform this black and gray mirage sitting before him.

Greg nodded at the animal. *What do I do now? Say thank you and walk away? Try shooing it away? How the hell do you go about shooing away a wolf? Wave your hands in the air, make funny noises, only to scare it into attacking you? No thanks.* Maybe he should just leave it alone. It would probably go away on its own anyway. It had given Greg back his glove, no need for it to hang around here any longer.

It's an animal, Greg thought. *It's not your personal butler, picking up your dropped laundry laying around outside, so stop thinking crazy thoughts like that.*

Greg shook his head. "I don't know what to make of you, and you seem friendly enough, but I don't trust you. You're a wild animal, so...go." Greg nodded toward the forest. "Go back into the deep, wild forests of Old Wachusett or wherever it is you came from. Go hunt wild animals, go find the pack you belong to, just go somewhere else. OK?" Greg stepped around the wolf and pointed toward the cooler. "I'm going to finish my sandwiches. I'd offer you some, but I'm hungry, so, sorry. It was nice meeting you."

Walking to the cooler, Greg glanced over his shoulder. The wolf was gazing at the sky. Greg looked up and saw only gray clouds trucking across the sky. He turned to the wolf. Its tail was not moving. He looked up. Still nothing up there to hold his attention other than the clouds. He turned toward the cooler, thinking maybe the wolf had finally got bored with him and was now determining which way to go to look for food, perhaps trying to catch a scent on the wind. He started to lift the lid, but stopped. Perhaps it would be better to wait for the animal to leave before opening the cooler and letting it catch a whiff of the peanut butter. Although, now that he thought about it, the wolf could probably smell it all over his hands and breath.

Greg turned. The wolf was gone. Good. He'd got a little nervous when he'd seen it wasn't wagging its tail anymore. A wagging tail, good. Not wagging, bad. But, seeing how the animal was gone, Greg had nothing to worry about.

WHUMP!

The sound of something massive pushing its way through a mass of air.

The sound of incredibly large wi—

A slash across his shoulder. Greg twisting, one arm reaching up and back, grasping at the searing pain, the other flailing to maintain balance. Falling, forehead cracking the ice, nose crunching, blood spurting. Shoulder in agony. Dazed, the world a blur, eyes tearing up from his broken nose. Pushing himself to his knees, reaching across his chest and over his left shoulder, feeling through the layers of torn fabric to the wet, warm, sticky gash in his shoulder.

Pulling his hand back, dripping red.

Trying to stand, falling to the ice in a whirl of dizziness. Trying again, getting to his knees. To his feet.

WHUMP! WHUMP!

A black blur, whizzing by his head. Fire, followed by ice, stabbing into the side of his neck. White and gray and black and red, a kaleidoscope of colors swirling around him, swallowing him, the world spinning out of control. Crumbling to his knees. Swiping at the dark blur coming at him, arm slashed, another instant of flesh exposed and muscle torn and ligament ripped from bone. Fire, yet cold. Pain, yet numbness.

Pulling his arm to his chest, pressing, trying to stop the bleeding. *Don't panic*, Greg told himself. *Don't panic. Stay calm.*

The wolf...where was...where was it?...the wolf...? What direction was it coming from next? Where was—

WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!

A third and final slash, this one across the chest, lightning fast and thunderously violent, another blur, black and gray and white. Layers of clothing torn and ripped away. Red stains appearing. Paralyzing pain filling his chest and shoulder and arm.

Falling forward onto his arm, screaming, turning his head, his temple slamming onto the cold, hard ice.

Greg Horton, who moments ago had been enjoying the solitude of being alone, now wishing and screaming for someone else, slipped from this life. In his last seconds, after an image of his twin sister flickered in his mind, Greg thought of Nancy sleeping peacefully in their apartment with their unborn child cocooned safely within her womb.

Chapter 6: Abby Behind the 8-Ball

A dog barked from across the street. Startled, Abby turned while continuing to walk, doing a complete three-sixty while managing not to slip on the snow and ice. No dog. No animal anywhere. No one else was on the street. A couple cars idled in driveways. Exhaust vapors, illuminated by streetlights and outside house lights, billowed out from mufflers and rose, twisted, curled, and finally disappeared into the cold gray morning.

Abby stopped at the corner where her street, Cherry Street, intersected Elm Street, which in turn intersected with all the other ‘tree’ streets in her neighborhood: Oak and Maple to the west, Pine and Spruce to the east. Abby headed east on Elm in the direction of Josh’s house, twenty minutes away walking distance. She entered the tunnel formed by the skeletal arms and gnarled fingers of the elm and oak branches reaching for each other across the narrow ribbon of black and snowy asphalt. The trees lining both sides of the street lent a cozy (if at times claustrophobic) atmosphere to the neighborhood, especially in the summer when they overflowed with leaves.

Abby liked this neighborhood. A lot. She knew her neighbors by name. She had friends her own age that lived near her—Jennifer Dayton, Sarah Dellasantro, and Leanne Sullivan all lived within a ten minute walk of her house—and she felt safer in this part of Old Wachusett than she would have if she lived in a different neighborhood, like the lower Green Street neighborhood near the center and The Hub at the northern edge of the city. Places Abby wouldn’t feel safe walking at night. Not that she’d get mugged or murdered, not anything that serious, but maybe accosted by a couple drunks who might try copping a feel off her. She didn’t have to worry about that living in the Tree Street section of Old Wachusett.

Another thing she liked about living here was the view it afforded her of Wachusett Mountain to the northwest. It wasn’t a tall mountain by any stretch, rising only a smidge over two thousand feet, thereby technically qualifying as a mountain. There were talks of building a ski resort on the mountain, and Abby hoped those talks would never come to fruition. She enjoyed going for long runs in the spring, summer, and fall on the dozens of paths that traversed the mountain, losing herself on the trails that wound their way through the firs and spruce and maples and birches, no one to bother her while she got lost in her thoughts. She feared what building a ski resort would do to that. Plus, there were two old-growth sections on the mountain with trees that were as much as four hundred years old. It would be a shame to have any of that disturbed, all for the sake of making a few bucks by providing a winter playground for the wealthier residents in the area, most of whom did not live in Old Wachusett.

Abby shook the thought out of her head. As she strode up the sidewalk, careful to avoid ice patches, her breath morphed into wispy vapors in the cold February air. The hood of the parka was fully extended into her field of view, giving her tunnel vision by blocking out the houses on either side of the street. If anyone in those houses had happened to look outside and see her, that person might think Abby had everything under control. A quick and steady pace, head held high, a picture of control and composure. If only that were true. Behind the façade was a girl trying to figure out how life had gone so entirely down the toilet so quickly. As if living the fishbowl life

of a preacher's kid wasn't bad enough—especially when the preacher was single—her father had to go and royally flush it all to hell. How could he have done that to her?

On top of that, there was Josh. Her first boyfriend, her first kiss, her first time around first and second base (Josh had tried stealing third, but Abby had called him out less than halfway down the base path). Then getting dumped for the first time in her life. On Thanksgiving break. How it was even possible that such a thing had happened to her was beyond comprehension. She hadn't done anything to Josh to deserve it. She'd given him everything. Well, *almost* everything. But that one thing she'd kept might have been his one day if only he'd stayed with her. *But he hadn't*, Abby thought. *So get over it. Get over him.* She was trying to get over him, she really was.

But now she had to rely on Josh to get her to Albany. To get her to her mother.

Abby hitched the knapsack farther up her back and burrowed her gloved hands deeper inside the coat pockets. She had a little ways to go before she would cross Oak Street and turn right onto Spruce. She would follow that to the end, take a left onto Woodlawn Avenue, and follow *that* until it intersected with Clark Street. Right onto Clark, left onto Leo Drive, and to the house at the end of the cul-de-sac where Josh lived.

Where Julian had lived. Until—

No. She could not, absolutely could not allow her thoughts to go there. She had no idea how Julian had popped into her head, but if she allowed herself to dwell on Julian...well...no. It would turn her mind to mush to think about that. Although it was true that Josh had been Abby's first official boyfriend, it was equally *not* true that he had been the first one she'd had feelings for. But, again, if she dwelt on that stuff it would send her thoughts all over the place, and right now she needed to focus on what was ahead of her in Albany.

And concerning that, Abby had no idea why her father was so reluctant to fulfill his promise to take her to her mother's gravesite. Yes, she knew he had things he needed to do this week, but that didn't negate his promise to her. But even given that, even before any of this had happened, Abby had mentioned going to Albany on a couple of occasions in the past, and each time her father either dodged the question or gave numerous reasons—which, in hindsight, could be seen as excuses—why he couldn't take her at the time. He was hiding something. There had to be something at the graveyard, or in Albany, or maybe even inside her father himself that he did not want her to find. Bringing her to Albany would reveal whatever it was, and he obviously did not want that to happen. Abby had no idea what 'it' was, but 'it' sure had to be *something*.

Abby shook her head. As she started to cross Pine Street she remembered something her father used to tell her, but before she could dwell on that thought for long her feet disappeared out from under her; she'd walked onto a patch of ice. She fell smack on her derriere with a jaw-crunching landing. For good measure, her tongue got caught in the crunch of her teeth, and that felt so good.

Thankfully, as far as she could tell, no one had witnessed her fine performance on the ice. She slid herself off the ice, got to her knees, brushed her rear end, and managed to stand. A picture of control and composure. Yeah, sure. She rubbed her rear end, but it did absolutely nothing to ease the pain or boost her self-esteem. She got to the other side of the street.

And just like that, with everything that had happened in the past few months condensed into one momentary fall to the ice, Abby saw it clearly. She was alone. No one close enough to catch her as she fell. No one to extend a hand to lift her up off her rear end. No one there for her at all.

Empty words spoken by her father came to mind. *Remember, sweetheart, whenever you're in trouble to call on your Heavenly Father. He will never leave you nor forsake you.* He had told

her that she could rest assured in the knowledge that God would always answer her prayers in a timely manner and in a way that would benefit her the most according to his will. Which was a roundabout way of saying that the Man upstairs was under no obligation whatsoever to answer her prayer the way she wanted.

Yeah, thanks for the advice, Dad, Abby thought, fighting back the tears. Sorry, but the curtain was pulled back on that little Wonderful Wizard of Oz fairy tale a long time ago, revealed for what it was: a hoax, ranking right up there with the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Fairy Godmother. Fakes, all of them, nothing but fakes and lies and fairy tales all to make people feel good and not have to face the sad, inevitable truth.

We are alone.

Abby felt her tongue and looked at her fingers. Sure enough—blood. Great. Exactly what she needed. Luckily, she hadn't bitten off the tip of her tongue. Luck. Instead of God, she was reduced to relying on luck. Maybe she should consult one of those stupid Magic 8-Balls with the answers floating in blue liquid that had been popular with all the kids the past few years. Josh had one of those inane things that he brought to school all the time, sneaking it out during study periods, asking it silly questions.

*Will we get a pop quiz in history next period? **YES DEFINITELY***

*Will Doug dump Beverly? **DON'T COUNT ON IT***

*Will I hit a homerun with Abby tonight? **VERY DOUBTFUL***

Josh assumed everyone else thought it was funny. Most of his friends thought it was childish, but none of them dared say anything to Josh about it.

Abby could only imagine the answers she'd get to her questions. They probably wouldn't be much better than the one's she'd already got from the God who supposedly loved her beyond measure.

*Why did Josh break up with me? **ASK AGAIN LATER.***

*Why did my father betray me and everyone else? **REPLY HAZY, TRY AGAIN.***

*Why did my mother have to die and leave me here all alone? **BETTER NOT TELL YOU NOW.***

*And what the hell am I doing? **NOBODY, INCLUDING YOU SWEETHEART, HAS THE FAINTEST IDEA!***

With that last thought, Abby stopped. What had she been thinking? She couldn't go through with this. She scanned the neighborhood, her eyes going from house to house. Most of them had lights on as families woke up and ate breakfast and prepared for the day. A day off from school for the kids, which meant snowball fights and sledding. For the dads it meant going to work, pumping gas and manufacturing wood chairs and unloading railroad cars and selling cars and repairing appliances and fixing oil burners and setting broken arms. Moms would stay at home and cook and do laundry and change diapers and wipe poopy bums. All of it so mundane. So normal.

So safe.

A car pattered up the street from behind her. A green sedan passed, its amber directional signaling a left turn. It pulled into a driveway. A man dressed in dirty work clothes got out of the car, probably returning from the late shift at one of the furniture factories. He opened the side door and disappeared inside the house. Abby heard the door click closed behind him. Through the front bay windows she saw two silhouetted figures embrace each other. After a moment they separated and faded into the shadows.

Abby definitely could not go through with this. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk, Pine Street behind her, Spruce Street ahead, and she knew there was no way she could make it to Albany on her own. What had she been thinking? She turned back in the direction of Cherry Street, in the direction of her home and her father. In the direction of safety. Sure, her life had been hell lately—*sorry for the vulgar language, Dad, but it's the honest-to-goodness truth*—but travelling across the state to Albany? What would that solve? Sure, she'd see her mother's grave, but she knew she'd need someone else there with her—anyone besides Josh—that she could trust in that moment with whatever she might find there.

Abby lowered her head and started to retrace her way back home. Before she got too far, she stopped herself. *I can't do this, either*, she thought. *I can't go back to him. I can't give up the ground I gained this morning. If I go back, then what?* She looked back toward the direction of Cherry Street, at the distance she had covered this morning, and thought about what it represented. She hadn't gone very far physically, but it might be far enough for a brand new start to her life. To go back now...that would be the wrong thing to do. She was pretty sure that would be wrong.

Tilting her head up at the gray clouds, Abby heard the voices from her past—Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, even her father's—telling her that somewhere up there, beyond the clouds and planets and stars and Milky Way galaxy and maybe even beyond the entire universe, was heaven. Which meant God Himself was up there right now. Right? Because if that was true, then it meant that Abby was looking directly at Him right now. Beyond the solar system and the asteroids and the comets and the blackest of space was the Creator, the Holy One of Israel, the Ancient of Days, her one and only Heavenly Father that supposedly loved her and would always take care of her, would never ever leave her nor forsake her nor forget her name nor stop loving her.

And that *must* mean that He was looking directly down at her. Right?

Right.

“Do you even care about *any* of this?” Abby raised a clenched fist at the sky, her cold, slender, gloved fingers clutching all her dreams and hopes and fears. And pain. “Do you care about *me*?”

A pale blue AMC Gremlin chugged down Elm Street toward Abby. It sounded like it was choking to death as it spit blue smoke out its tail pipe. Abby jerked her fist down to her side and unclenched her fingers. Everything she had held in her fist and had raised in protest at the clouds now spilled invisibly to the dirty snow on the sidewalk. She turned her face away from the car. It coughed and continued down the street.

Abby glanced up at the clouds again. She blinked away the image of a white surface floating in blue liquid inside a black 8-ball, the mocking words **DON'T COUNT ON IT** etched in black.

Just the answer she figured she'd get from the One so high and mighty. Not that it mattered. Abby didn't need to look up to an invisible, apathetic God playing hide-and-seek in heaven while his hapless subjects struggled for survival down here on the big blue marble. She didn't need to count on anyone anymore for anything. From now on, everything in her life, everything that would happen to her, and everything that she would do was up to her. She would grab the reigns of her life and take all the responsibility from here on out. No more waiting for her father to fix things, no more wishful thinking that Josh would take her back, and absolutely no more futile attempts at connecting to a freakish higher power that only seemed to relish in hiding Himself when people needed Him the most. No more any of that.

Abby Lynne Graham was now in total and complete control of her own destiny.

Making up her mind for good, Abby turned back in the direction she had been going, away from her home, away from her father, and toward her mother.

A gust of wind rattled the branches above her, shaking frozen clumps of snow loose so that they plopped onto the sidewalk. She picked up her pace, trying to hurry while at the same time being careful not to fall again.

Abby peeked over her shoulder; no sign of her father coming after her, seeking the prodigal daughter. Good.

That was...good.

She didn't need him.

Right?

Chapter 7: Connie's Golden Moment Turns Gray

Connie and David Schofield sat at the island in the kitchen. On one side: Connie reading Ludlum's latest paperback thriller *The Chancellor Manuscript*. On the other: David reading *The Wachusett Morning Gazette*. A picture of peace and tranquility. A picture worth a thousand words.

"Ungrateful degenerates." David folded the paper and slid it across the island. It stopped at Connie's elbow.

Connie continued reading with a cup of tea in one hand and the paperback in the other. This was usually her favorite time of the day—one of life's golden moments, as she liked to call them. It was the one part of the day when she had a few minutes to herself to sit, sip, and read unhindered, uninterrupted. Josh would be upstairs in his room listening to music while getting ready for school, and David would be in the shower for twenty minutes. He never used to take showers that lasted more than five minutes. Funny—or maybe not funny at all—how people can change. With Joshua and David busy during this time, this was Connie's opportunity to squeeze in quality reading time, if only for twenty minutes.

One of life's golden moments.

This morning, the golden sheen of the moment was fading fast. Their fight last night—David called them disagreements, but they were fights, albeit not of the physical kind—had spilled over to this morning and thrown them off their routine. David had skipped the shower, which meant he was with Connie in the kitchen, disrupting her sitting and sipping and reading time and coloring her golden moment a dark shade of gray.

Connie had the distinct feeling that her darling David was about to color the whole morning completely black.

She sighed as she turned over the Ludlum book and laid it open on the island, careful not to bend the spine. She would like nothing more than to ignore David, but if she did it would only provoke another fight. She sipped her tea before setting the cup on the marble island top, not using the saucer next to the book. She picked up the paper and dragged her eyes across the expanse of the island, toward her husband.

"Which 'ungrateful degenerates'?"

"Story at the bottom of the page." David opened the refrigerator, reached for the orange juice, and retrieved the same glass he'd used earlier.

"Increased Wild Animal Sightings in the Area'?"

"No," David said, drawing out the word while pouring juice into the glass. "Next to that." He pointed to show her, just in case she couldn't find the story on her own. "The one about the automobile crash." He gulped down half the juice and set the glass on a white ceramic coaster. He nodded at the newspaper in her hands.

Connie stared at her husband. How could he do that? How could he be so frustratingly nonchalant after the accusations they'd hurled at each other in their bedroom last night? If he at least showed emotion—anger, frustration, fear... anything—it would give Connie something to hold on to, something at which she could direct *her* anger and frustration and fear. Instead, what

she got from him was a blank slate as if nothing had happened. As if cruel things had not been said, even crueler things implied. As if no daggers had been thrust into each other's hearts, and there were no wounds that needed to be cleansed with painful yet necessary verbal antiseptic before they could begin to heal.

As if...nothing.

Connie sighed again. She folded the paper, laid it on the counter, and began reading. A few minutes later she picked up the paper and read the story a second time, as if holding it closer to her would change the story, or at least make the story make some kind of sense. Halfway through the second reading she dropped the paper to the counter. Connie clasped her hands together. She was unable to stop them from shaking. She stared at the paper. At the names of the two boys.

David, who apparently had watched her read the entire article, finished the juice and set the glass down. "See what I mean?"

Connie opened her mouth to speak. No words came out.

David shrugged. "What?"

Connie watched her husband rinse the glass under the faucet, wipe it with a dish towel, and put it away in the cabinet. Three innocent, ordinary actions that people carried out thousands of times every day all across the country. She watched her husband carry out those ordinary actions in a robotic manner. Not that there should be a fanfare or emotional display with such actions. But, given the story to which he was referring, there ought to be *something* besides a cold, calculated, ever-efficient, automatic pilot feel to the way he carried out such actions. She came to the terrifyingly lonely realization of the river of resentment and blame and guilt and hurt that had run its course through the core of her husband, creating a chasm that now separated his head from his heart. A great divide, seemingly impossible to cross.

She lowered her eyes to the paper and started the story a third time, but stopped after the first paragraph. "David..." She looked up at him. His back was to her as he was about to open the refrigerator. "David, we know these boys...these... 'ungrateful degenerates'."

With one hand on the refrigerator handle, David looked over his shoulder. "What?"

Connie clutched the paper, searching through it for pictures of the two boys. There were none. That didn't matter. She could see them as if they were standing next to her. Brian with his carefree dimples that drove all the girls crazy, and his shy younger brother Dale. Connie thought of Sally and Hector and felt her eyes water. Those kids were everything to them.

David was at her side. He took the paper from her shaking hand. "Huh." He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't recognize the names."

He started to walk back to the refrigerator when Connie ripped the newspaper from his hand and tossed it across the island. It landed on the far end with a slap, skidded, then sailed off the edge and unfolded into sheets of black ink as it fluttered to the floor. David stared at her, his mouth open, hands frozen in position like he was still holding the paper.

"Brian and Dale Robinson." Connie straightened her back and faced David. "Sally and Hector's boys."

David's eyes danced to the left, the right, up, down, before focusing on Connie. "Oh." His arms dropped to his sides. "Sally and Hector."

"I can't believe you don't know the names of their children."

David raised his hands palms out and backed away. "Connie, it's not a crime if I don't remember a couple kids' names."

"'Ungrateful degenerates'." Connie stared at David.

On the opposite side of the island David planted both hands on the counter and leaned forward. "Perhaps I was a bit harsh in my choice of words. However, it does not change my assessment of the facts."

"Assessment of the facts?" Connie started to get up, stopped, and lowered herself back onto the bar stool. She looked down at *The Chancellor Manuscript*, unable to recall what she'd read moments ago, or even what the plot was. Her eyes drifted to the teacup. She stared at it. There was no hint of the taste of it on her lips or tongue. She lifted her eyes toward her husband and shook her head. "I...I don't know what to say to you. I honestly..."

David uprooted his hands and pushed off from the island. He leaned against the refrigerator and crossed his arms. "Two brothers take their father's car for a joyride. They crash into a stone wall because the older one can't—"

"Brian." Connie focused on the refrigerator, on a point above David's shoulder. "That's his name. Brian."

David hesitated before continuing. "Because Brian can't negotiate the curve while speeding on a winding road covered in black ice. He's dead, the other...Dale...he's lucky to be alive in intensive care. The parents are left to pick up the pieces and grieve the loss of at least one son for the rest of their lives." He cocked his head to the side. "And you're looking at me like that?" He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

Connie did not recognize the man who spoke to her from the other side of the island; he was not the same man she had pledged her love to twenty years ago. That man was gone. That man had started dying a slow death two years ago, and it had been all the more painful to watch because it had been mostly self-inflicted because he was incapable of dealing with his own pain and grief in the midst of the tragedy through which they all had suffered.

The only thing Connie could think of to say was, "Sally and Hector." She paused, could think only of this to add: "The parents have names, too."

David dismissed Connie with a head shake and hand wave. She thought he might have said something, but she wasn't sure.

Her eyes followed his movements, though not completely registering what he was doing as he pushed himself away from the refrigerator and grabbed a paper towel from the spool on the wall rack. Connie felt as she did when she had watched her uncles carry her father's casket down the steps of the church and slide it through the open rear door of the hearse ten years ago. Watching, but too numb to see. David came around to Connie's side of the island. He lifted her teacup. Wiped the bottom of it. Wiped the tea ring left on the island. Set the cup in its proper place on the saucer. Threw the crumpled paper towel into the trash bucket under the sink. He resumed his position on the other side of the island.

Connie blinked. She stared at David. He spoke.

"Why do they continually do the exact opposite of what we tell them?"

Connie did not acknowledge her husband.

David bent down and picked up the newspaper. He folded it and placed it on the island. "Those two," he pointed at the paper, "deliberately chose to disobey their parents. Now look at the repercussions."

"David...I..."

David. The name that once had the power to transform her into a giddy school-girl now sounded like a foreign word on her lips. Connie picked up the paperback, not bothering to mark her place with her finger, and stood. She looked at David. "Not everything in life is about parents issuing orders and children falling into line like obedient soldiers. Children are not soldiers or

machines that can be programmed to act in a logical, preset pattern in every circumstance.” She raised an eyebrow at David. Her voice softened. “You of all people should know that is not how it works.”

“I know how it’s supposed to work.” David’s eyes held hers for a moment. In those blue eyes that once melted her heart, Connie saw more accusations that, if spoken, would do irreparable damage. *Please don’t, David. Please, don’t go there. If you have any mercy left inside you, please please please do not go there.* His eyes held her a moment longer. Then he turned away from her and opened the refrigerator. He removed two packages of deli meat, mayonnaise, pickles, lettuce, and a tomato. “And contrary to what you’re thinking,” David arranged the food on the island, “this isn’t about Josh and Julian. Nor is it about me. It’s about those two.” David pointed again at the paper. “I’m talking about them.”

“Oh, but David.” Connie lifted the teacup to her lips and, before taking her last sip, said, “You’re not.” She placed the teacup on the saucer. Studying David as he unwrapped the ham and turkey, she wondered if she would ever again be with the man she’d married. In a softer voice, she said, “You just don’t see it.”

David opened his mouth, hesitated, closed it. He opened the bread box and grabbed a loaf of wheat bread. Connie remembered the day the realtor gave them that breadbox. They had closed the deal on the house after signing numerous documents laden with paragraph after paragraph of legalese and real estate jargon that she and David hadn’t fully understood, but they had figured they’d be all right as long as the two of them were in it together. Even if they were paying a little too much for their first house, and even if they had no idea what they were doing buying a house in the first place. On that closing day, that late afternoon in mid-June, the realtor had given them the keys to the house and, as a house warming gift, the white wooden breadbox that they still used, that now sat on the new stone countertop. It now seemed anachronistic among the brushed-steel and silver and black and marble and granite and stone.

On that June day, sitting on the floor in the middle of their empty house eating crackers and cheese and drinking cheap wine, the two of them had been in love. They knew, they felt it in their souls, that they could conquer anything together.

“Here’s the thing.” David pointed a butter knife at her, which sliced through her memory. “We raise our kids the best we know how.” He spread a thin layer of mayonnaise onto each of the four slices of bread. “We feed them, clothe them, teach them—”

“Love them.” Ludlum in hand, it was Connie’s turn to cross her arms. She leaned forward, adding momentum to her words as she shot them across the island. “Don’t forget that we love them, David.”

David stopped, a slice of turkey in one hand, a leaf of lettuce in the other. “I don’t love my kids?”

Connie dropped her arms and turned to leave.

“No. Wait.”

Connie stopped and turned. David, holding his eyes steady on her, dropped the turkey and lettuce onto the bread. “That’s what you’re saying.” He wiped his hands on a dish towel and stabbed them into his hips. “I don’t love my kids.”

“You—” Connie cut herself off. She held her hands out, palms up, considered what she was about to say, and decided to change tack. “This is the same speech I hear every time you’re upset with Joshua. Right now? I’m not in the mood.”

David shook his head. Connie regretted her last comment. She knew what was coming. “Just like last night.”

It wasn't what he said. It was how quickly and dismissively he said it. He'd already had the four bullets loaded into the gun with his itchy tongue on the trigger, ready and waiting for the first clear shot he had. He didn't even have the decency to look at her when he shot the words at her heart. He finished making two sandwiches, wrapped them in aluminum foil, and then put everything away: meat, mayonnaise, pickles, lettuce, and half a tomato into the refrigerator, knife and plate rinsed, dried, and put into the drawer and cabinet, aluminum foil into the drawer next to the silverware, dish towel on the rack.

There was a time in their marriage when David would never have considered saying such a thing. But that was a long time ago, in a different life, seemingly in a different world. To be honest, she couldn't even completely blame him for the way he'd changed. Circumstances happened, people reacted differently, and who was to say she hadn't had a big part in the changes between them. She supposed she did. But at least she wanted to fix their marriage. At least she was trying.

Connie turned and headed for the stairs. Half-way up, she stopped and reversed direction, quietly descending to peak around the corner. David held a dishrag under running water. He turned the faucet off, wrung out the dishrag, and started scrubbing the counter next to the sink. The counter didn't need to be cleaned—she cleaned it last night before going to bed and nobody had yet done anything on it today. He scrubbed it as if it was caked with week-old food and grease stains. He continued to go after every surface in the kitchen: counters, both stoves, refrigerator, both sinks, even the cupboard and cabinet doors. When he was done, he stood in the middle of the kitchen and eyed the room like a drill instructor inspecting the morning roll call. He then went to the counter next to the sink and started scrubbing again.

She pulled her head back and faded away up the stairs, a ghost slipping from a once familiar haunt in the corporeal world, retreating further into the nebulous existence of the past two years. There was no need to continue watching to know he would go through the entire process again and, if it was really bad this morning, maybe even a third time.

Connie wished there was a way to show her husband that it wasn't the kitchen that he was trying to rid of ugly stains.

Chapter 8: Josh with Julian's Books

Josh stood in the middle of his brother's room. He left the door open so he could hear approaching footsteps coming up the stairway. With no music playing he could hear his parents downstairs in the kitchen. They weren't yelling, but it was clear from the tone of their voices that they weren't agreeing on whatever the topic of discussion was.

Gray light filtered through the blinds, blanketing Julian's room in gossamer dreariness. Up until two weeks before Thanksgiving—when he'd started hearing Julian's voice in his head—Josh had made it a point to come here every day, sneaking into the room in the morning before heading downstairs for breakfast. It had been therapeutic. No, not quite that. What was the other word the shrinks had used...cathartic? Yeah, that was it. Being in Julian's room was—*had been*—cathartic for Josh. He didn't pretend to understand exactly what it had done for him, but it had done something.

Whispers of Julian's voice and echoes of conversations they'd had in this room over the years floated through Josh's mind. Julian talking about the latest book he'd read by S.E. Hinton, Robert Cormier, John Knowles, or one of those Russian guys who wrote those impossibly long books; Josh extolling the virtues of the latest and greatest Zeppelin, KISS, Kansas, AC/DC, or Rush album; Julian asking Josh if he wanted to play pro ball for the Celts; Josh asking Julian if he wanted to write a bestseller someday, both answering yes with Julian adding that instead of writing a bestseller he'd much rather write a book that meant something to someone. Julian, ever the idealist with his head in the clouds and heart in his hands. Had Josh heard that somewhere before? Must have been something Julian had read to him, or maybe it was one of Abby's poems she liked reciting. Either way, it sure wasn't something Josh had come up with on his own.

He could hear Julian over-enunciating his 's' sounds and pronouncing every 't' and every 'd' at the ends of words, not hiding them as most people did. Josh could still hear his brother's voice in his mind's ear if he concentrated enough, but lately—except for the episodes back in November when he really *had* heard Julian's voice inside his head—it had started to fade.

And if Julian's voice faded away into nothingness, what did that mean for Julian?

That, more than anything, scared Josh. The thought that he would completely forget what Julian's voice sounded like, and that there was no hope of ever hearing those s's and t's and d's again. It meant that every aspect of who Julian had been would, over time, fade away. Maybe that was inevitable. Memories didn't last forever, at least not in undistorted form, so maybe it was for the good that Julian's voice faded into nothingness. And maybe, by thinking such psychobabble thoughts, Josh was doing nothing more than sprinkling a little salt on the entire load of shrink-speak bullshit the head doctors had force-fed him and that he was now force-feeding himself, hoping it would make the whole pile of crap taste a tad better going down. As if you could add a pinch of salt to a pile of dogshit and hope it tasted like sirloin steak.

Josh moved to Julian's bed and sat on the edge. Compared to his room, Julian's was bare, and it wasn't because his parents had packed away all of Julian's stuff; they hadn't. It was that Julian had never felt the need to cram his room with a whole lot of stuff. There were no posters of superstar athletes like Dr. J, Bruce Jenner, or O.J. Simpson hanging from the walls, no

championship banners of the Celts, Steelers, or Bruins, no rock bands or swimsuit beauties. Not even a Red Sox pennant from the couple of games their father had taken them to. There was no stereo, no chest stuffed with toys he couldn't bear to toss out, none of that kind of stuff that Josh thought was important to have in his life.

What there was in Julian's room was everything he had needed—according to what he'd told Josh on numerous occasions—to live and enjoy life: a bureau, a desk, a bed, and two bookcases crammed with books, the shelves sagging under the weight of hundreds of novels. Like their mother, Julian read—*had* read—whenever and wherever he could find the time. Upon waking and before eating breakfast, while waiting for the school bus and while riding said school bus, in study halls, in the cafeteria during lunch, walking home from the bus stop, before homework, during homework, after homework, and before bed. The only place Julian never read—and Josh had always thought this was a riot—was in the bathroom. Yup. The guy could read anywhere else except while sitting on the john. Something about having to involve his entire being in the act of reading while simultaneously going to the bathroom simply did not work for him. So he said. Such was Josh's brother.

Josh slid off the bed and knelt on one knee in front of the bookcases, tilting his head to read the titles: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *Fahrenheit 451* (that sounded like it might be an interesting read), *War and Peace* (yeah, like Josh would ever try reading that monster anytime soon), *Crime and Punishment*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Pearl* (that one was thin-enough to try reading someday), and on and on, book after book. How anyone could read so many books and still have time for living was beyond Josh's comprehension.

He reached for a particular book and had to use both hands to pry it out from between the two that sandwiched it. The books weren't dusty, and although Josh had never seen his mother in Julian's room, he couldn't think of any other explanation other than she slipped in and out to dust when Josh wasn't home. He flipped open *A Separate Peace* to one of the dog-eared pages. Four years ago when the two of them had been in junior high, Julian had convinced Josh to read this book so they could 'discuss its underlying theme.' Those were the exact words Julian had used—'discuss its underlying theme.' Josh hadn't known anyone in junior high, outside of the English lit teachers, who talked like that. Except Julian. He thrived on finding underlying themes in everything he read. *Themes are everywhere, Josh. You simply have to open your eyes to them.*

In spite of the fact that Josh was less interested in discussing the underlying themes of books than he was in reading them, he'd read the stupid thing. Hell, Julian had played enough one-on-one basketball in the backyard at Josh's constant begging that he figured he owed Julian that much. Why not read one book, especially a really thin one like this one by Knowles. So he'd read it. Turns out, the book wasn't that boring of a read after all. This Knowles guy knew how to say what he wanted to say without killing an entire forest to do it. They had discussed it, though Josh couldn't make heads or tails of any underlying—nor, for that matter, overlying—themes anywhere in the book. He may not have looked too hard, but then again, themes shouldn't be too hard to find. If they were, well, then the author hadn't done a good enough job then had he.

One of the dog-ears marked a scene that Josh had reread last year after he'd had a bad day. They were *all* bad days, but this one had been one of those my-life-sucks-I-wish-I-had-the-guts-to-slit-both-wrists kind of bad day. It was one of the passages Josh hadn't fully 'grasped' when he'd read it as a seventh-grader. *Josh, do you get it?* Julian had asked one night. *Do you grasp what Knowles is getting at here?* No, Josh hadn't grasped it. Not that he didn't know what had

happened in the scene, just that he didn't get it—the underlying theme and all. Or 'grasp' it, as Julian would've said.

Now, years later, experience having sledgehammered him upside the head, Josh couldn't help but grasp it.

Squatting next to the bookcase, Josh flipped to that same passage and read it. He pictured Gene and Phineas—*what a funny name for the sort of character that Phineas was, don't you think Josh?*—climbing up the tree, Phineas easing out onto the limb, Gene 'jouncing'—*what a funny-sounding word, don't you think Josh?*—the limb. Josh wondered—which was a funny thing to do when it came to wondering about fictional characters—what was going through Gene's mind the split-second before he sent Phineas plummeting to the river bank.

Superimposing his own thoughts onto the images of the scene playing out in his mind, Josh thought back to that Fourth of July two years ago. He had been playing basketball in the backyard with Julian and their cousins, none of their parents or aunts or uncles paying any attention to the game. Except his father. He had paid attention, damn him. He had been watching them. Watching Josh and Julian, paying *especially* close attention.

Damn him.

Josh wiped his eyes and closed the book. This was the second time today he'd let his mind slip back to that day. What the hell gives? Why today? Sure, there weren't two days that went by without him thinking about it, but he'd gotten better at not dwelling on it, per Dr. Wentworth's orders.

He shouldn't have come back to Josh's room. It was too soon. He obviously wasn't ready.

He squeezed the book back into its slot between *The Outsiders* and *The Chocolate War*. Even Josh, bibliophobe that he was, knew that a book written by a guy named Knowles didn't belong between books written by Hinton and Cormier. That was another thing about Julian. As much as he had loved reading books and everything about books, Julian had never been too keen—much to the consternation of their mother—on the whole keeping-books-in-order thing. *Josh*, he'd said, *there are too many books to read for me to concern myself with keeping them all in order, whether alphabetical, numerical, or Dewey Decimal.*

Josh found himself smiling. It didn't last long, though. Footsteps in the stairway. He stood and left his brother's room. He closed the door as his mother reached the top of the stairs. She apparently did not notice him as she went to her room without acknowledging him. Josh stood outside his room and turned back to look at the door to Julian's. He regretted that he hadn't spent more time in there with Julian when he'd had the chance.

If he had, maybe he would have developed a better grasp of the underlying theme of things.

Chapter 9: Edward Alone in the Den

Edward stood at the window that afforded him a view of the side and front yards. He gripped his cane in both hands. He had been sure that Abby would have returned by now. He should not have let her go. But what could he have done? Forcibly restrain her? Of course not. The days of treating Abby like a little girl were long gone. He'd let her go for the main reason that he didn't think there was any way she was going to go through with it. Abby was smart with a good amount of common sense, so he hadn't been worried about her threat to leave. He knew she would be back. Perhaps she was playing it out as far as it would go to see if she could force his hand. Nonetheless, he was confident she would be back.

He limped around the desk and banged his bad hip on the corner. He swore under his breath. Not too long ago the very thought of swearing would have been as foreign to Edward as speaking Mandarin, but lately, he had found himself swearing more and more. Though it was never loud enough for others to hear, it still bothered him that the words came easier each time. Pastors weren't supposed to swear. Shall salt water and fresh water flow from the same tongue? Then again, he had a lot more to worry about than the occasional curse word escaping from his lips.

Favoring his hip, Edward lowered himself into his chair. He rubbed the hip, as if doing so would magically restore it to its once workable state, or at least make the pain go away temporarily. It did neither. The hip had been flaring up recently and this would certainly keep the pain going for at least another day, if not longer. Edward knew the Bible told him that he was supposed to count the trials of life as pure joy and that they were given to produce character and virtue and so forth and so on. Right now, he was having a difficult time counting *anything* as pure joy.

He sighed and leaned back in the chair, a vacant gaze fixed on the things in front of him: the gift-wrapped box, his Bible, and the blue notebook. He swiveled the chair to look out the frost-trimmed window behind him. Gray clouds marched across the sky over the backyard. Barren trees poked up through two feet of snow like skeletal fingers reaching up from their white graves toward heaven. Snow reached the window sill, as if the house was cold and had pulled the snow-blanket up to its chin to keep warm.

Leaning forward and pressing his forehead against the frigid window pane, hearing nothing but the clock above him as it ticked off the seconds of his life, Edward found himself unsettled by how quiet it was inside the house. Quietness had once been his friend. Growing up as an only child there had been many days spent alone in his room doing homework, or studying for Sunday school lessons, or practicing his guitar while his mom cooked and baked and did laundry and his dad was out doing revival services and tent meetings and public prayer vigils protesting abortion. Being alone and surrounded by quiet had simply been a way of growing up for Edward. So he had embraced it. It was during those many quiet times that he had been able to clear his head, meditate on God's holy word, and hear from the Lord. He had been shown a lot about himself in those times, and for that he was grateful.

He'd even been able to take that upbringing into his marriage. He and Lynne decided early in their marriage to make sure each of them set aside a time each day to be alone, a time to humble themselves before their God and to listen for his still, small voice hidden in the quietness. Edward's time had always been in the morning as he was an early-riser, and Lynne, a night owl, had usually taken her turn after Edward had gone to bed. They had even managed to stick with their appointed quiet times during Lynne's pregnancy *and* after she had given birth.

And then, six months after the birth of their two beautiful little girls, that nightmarish afternoon shattered all the quietness in his life like an atomic explosion in a china shop. Since then, he'd never been able to fully adjust his life to regain those quiet times. He did set aside time for prayer and waiting on the Lord, but it wasn't the same. He'd never been able to put his finger on exactly why, and he wasn't quite sure that those times ever would be—or could be—the same again.

As he sat in the quiet of his den while waiting for Abby to come home—beginning to wonder if she *would* come home—Edward found himself missing his wife. That unexpected longing transformed the quietness into an intimidating, palpable presence pressing in on him. *Lynne, I miss you, he thought. I can't do this. I've messed up my life, I'm messing up Abby's life, and I can't do this anymore without you. I need you. Why did you have to leave us? Why?* He had loved her so much. He still did. He still missed her, fifteen years later. What was he supposed to do now without her here? What was he supposed to do about Abby?

Abby. Edward straightened in his chair, mustering up whatever resolve remained within him. He had not anticipated her earlier actions. Perhaps he should have, but there was nothing he could do about that now. Since when had teenagers started giving ultimatums to their parents. Was he supposed to drop everything, forget all his responsibilities to his congregation and church board, and take her to Albany? With all that was going on in his life right now, how could she even think that?

Because I told her I'd take her. That's why.

Reaching for the edge of the desk behind him, Edward pulled and swiveled himself back to the desk. Abby should have opened the gift. She was angry with him, he knew that and, to a certain degree he understood that. She should have opened it, if for no other reason than to show a hint of gratefulness. He had spent the better part of last Saturday driving from store to store looking for the perfect gift for her sixteenth birthday, not wanting to settle for another game they would never play or another dress she would wear only once. He had put a lot of thought and time and effort into this gift. He'd bought her a complete writing set consisting of a handsome (yet not too manly) leather-bound journal, an elegant Cross pen and pencil set, and memo pads (with girlish designs) so she could jot down random thoughts during the day and later copy them into her journal.

Abby would've liked his gift. She had been writing in journals every night before going to bed since the day he'd given her one of those children's diaries, the ones with the cheap locks and hasps on the front covers that any child could break. That had been six years ago on her tenth birthday, and since then she'd filled up more than a dozen diaries of various shapes, sizes, and colors.

All she'd had to do was open the gift. That was all.

Edward caught himself rubbing his hip. The pain was still there, not as sharp as it had been a few minutes ago, but still there. As was the memory of the day the bullet shattered more than his hip.

Edward grabbed his cane, stood, and limped to the doorway. He hesitated. Looked back at his desk. He still needed to prepare for the coming week and for his final sermon at Faith Community Church. He needed to call congregants to set up appointments and meetings. He needed to—

You need to go after your daughter, his conscience told him. Go get her, bring her back home, hold her, tell her you love her, tell her everything will be all right.

But what if everything wasn't going to be all right? Even if Edward gave in to Abby's demands—which really meant fulfilling his promise to her—and dropped everything, drove her to the cemetery in Albany, and trudged with her through two feet of snow to her mother's grave, Abby would indeed get what she wanted and she would see for the first time in her life the place where her mother had been laid to rest.

But things would be far from being all right. Because once Abby saw her mother's grave marker, she would also see the smaller one to the right of it. She would see the name on that marker. As ludicrous, as outrageous and impractical as it sounded, Edward could never allow his daughter to see that particular grave marker.

Edward hobbled to the kitchen as fast as his cane and bullet-shattered hip would allow him. He grabbed his wool overcoat off the hook, made sure the car keys were in the pocket, and headed out the front door. He tried not to imagine the horrible ramifications that would follow if Abby was ever allowed to find that marker. Because if she did, Edward would be forced to reveal not only who else died that day, but also the frightening truth about Abby's mother...his dear, precious Lynne... and how she had *really* died.

Chapter 10: Kimi on Indian Head Lake

Kimi stopped running. She had reached the end of the path at the foot of the mountain. She had found the well-worn path half-way down and thanked The Great Spirit for his guidance. She was also thankful for the confidence that came with the discovery of the path—confidence not in herself, but in The Great Spirit's willingness to help her. The exhilaration of following the path through mountain forest, of feeling again a sense of oneness with her surroundings, and of using her legs for the purpose for which they were created energized the rest of her body as well as her mind.

And Kimi had needed to run. She didn't know where Achak was, or what the Totem was, and she didn't know how she would find either of them, but she did know this: she had little time to find them. Kimi didn't know how long The Elders in the Old World would be able to guard The Passage against the Warriors and others who wanted to follow Achak to help him carry out his scheme. She also didn't know how long The Passage would remain open. It had never stayed open for longer than it took the sun to travel across the sky. Kimi needed to run for her body's sake and for her spirit's sake, as well as for the sake of her people.

But now she needed to rest for a moment. It was getting colder, yet her wrist was burning. She had held it close to her chest running down the mountain, but she couldn't keep favoring it. She needed to set it in a splint so that she could free up every available muscle in her body for when she found Achak. She would need all her available resources when that time came. There were plenty of branches from which she could break off a couple twigs to use for supports, but she had nothing to use to tie them together. No rope, no ties or ribbons hanging from her deerskin covering, nothing. She didn't dare tear a strip from her covering for fear that would lessen its effectiveness in protecting her against the elements. Looking to the sky, Kimi suspected she was soon going to need all the protection she could get.

Standing twenty feet from where the path opened up to a clearing, Kimi looked back into the forest and up at the small mountain she had descended. She had spent many summer days on that mountain, running with Achak through the forest, climbing the rocky ledges and exploring the hidden caves with him, spending entire days on the mountain. She had come to know the terrain that had been cut by streams and worn by the wind. Mammoth boulders were scattered along the land, giant crumbs deposited by glacial teeth that had eaten their way over and through the mountain eons ago. Trees had grown big and strong enough to hold the soil and rocks and underbrush in place, acting as glue for the entire mountain. The trees. Running amidst them had made her feel like the owl as it hunted at night, the fox as it dashed through the meadows at dawn, the bear as it lumbered through the forest in the cool of dusk. Running through the forest in the days of her youth had made Kimi feel alive and free and safe.

She would not feel those things again until she found the Totem, confronted Achak, and stopped the forces aligned against her.

She turned her attention to the clearing and did not know if what she saw was a blessing or a curse: the wide-open expanse of a frozen, familiar lake. Kimi had always thought it was too small to be called a lake, yet too big to be called a pond. Like the mountain behind her that

seemed too small to be considered a mountain, yet too big to be called a hill. That was the strange thing about this land. Everything seemed to be in a constant state of in-between. Its physical features, its place in time, everything. It had always been a strange land to Kimi, as if it was not where it was meant to be. Perhaps one day, if she lived long enough, she would discover the truth about the land she had been born on and had lived on and for which she was now fighting.

In spite of—or maybe because of—its strangeness, this was the land Kimi called home.

Or *had* called home.

The present. The past. It was all still confusing to Kimi. The reality of it was this: Kimi was here. She was the past brought into the present. Or, maybe it was the past being brought *alongside* the present. *That* was a better way of thinking about it. She couldn't say the past had been brought *forward* to the present; it had been brought *into* the present. That was the reality, the only way she could explain it to herself. And it was *still* confusing to her. All she knew was that in this land the past and the present, what had once been and what now was, the old and the new, had collided.

The forest surrounded the lake with what looked to be an opening directly across from her, a path flanked by two boulders and a huge tree. For the first time since crossing over, Kimi felt a stirring within her, a heightening of her senses. She had to follow that path. She was sure of it. The Great Spirit was guiding her, influencing her inner feelings, and she would follow the guidance she was receiving. She bowed her head and offered thanks before stepping onto the ice. She searched for signs of Achak, but there were none. No tracks in the snow, no movement in her peripheral vision, no muffled sounds. Nothing. She got no more than thirty feet out onto the ice when she froze. In the middle of the lake, a hundred yards farther out, was a circle of small structures. Kimi at first did not recognize what they were. Then she remembered what the Elders had taught her and what she had seen long ago when she first crossed over through The Passage.

Kimi dropped to the ground, looking for movement anywhere. She saw none. She should stay off the ice, instead make her way around the edge of the lake, using the backdrop of the forest as camouflage. She needed to exercise extreme caution. She also needed to get to the other side and follow that path which, she was now sure, would lead her to Achak.

Kimi stood. She turned to her left to start circling the lake when movement across the ice caught her attention. A small red flag was waving in the wind. It was one of the fishing tackle. Kimi thought for a moment. She checked her surroundings again, still no one else in sight. What she was thinking was dangerous. Whoever owned the tackle had to be close by, and even though she couldn't see them, that didn't mean they couldn't see her. That red flag was a signal indicating food on the other end of the fishing line. She was hungry. She had to keep up her strength and endurance, and she might not get another opportunity for food for the rest of the day. But where was the person who had set up the fishing site? It bothered Kimi more that there was no one here than it would have had she stumbled upon someone.

Achak? She whispered the name, fearful of what might be awaiting her.

He could have set this up to trap her, to bait her out into the open. *But wait*, she corrected herself. He would not have had enough time to find the tackle, cut the holes, and set it all up. Crouching again, this time on one knee, Kimi slowed her breathing and closed her eye, allowing her hearing to take over. She focused first on her immediate surroundings, then farther out. A breeze whispered through the tree tops. A minute passed. Cold branches creaked. Another minute. A low, vibrating hum in the distance. It sounded like one of the engines that the white people used for work. Kimi detected no one else on the ice or in the surrounding forest.

The question Kimi had to answer, the one she *always* had to answer, was simple. Could she trust her senses? She was more often right than wrong in this matter, which meant there were times when she had been wrong. What about now? If one of the white people came upon her, she could take care of herself if she needed to. If more than one, that clearly would be a problem with her wrist still hurting and her hand unusable. If it was Achak, without the Totem she was powerless against him.

Looking at the red flag waving in the breeze, a thought more certain than any she'd had in a long time struck her. A smile spread across her face. It was simple. She would trust The Great Spirit; she would take the provision of nourishment that was now offered to her. It was hers for the taking, and she would take it.

Offering up thanks once again, Kimi took one last look around the lake and stood. Thankful that the pain in her ankle had subsided, she sprinted toward the red flag, holding her wrist close to her chest. It hurt, but not as much as it had earlier. In seconds she was kneeling at the flag, pulling the line out of the icy water. The cold water bit into her hand, but Kimi did her best to ignore the new pain. It was worth it to get what was on the other end of the line. A fish appeared in the hole, squirming and fighting in a futile attempt at escaping imminent death. She pulled it up and held it in her hand, thankful for—

Kimi dropped the fish. Her head snapped toward the other shoreline, toward the belongings of whoever had been fishing. This time it wasn't movement that caught her attention. A scent, drifting and swirling in the air, enveloped her. She breathed in deeply, drawing the sweet, thick, dreadful fragrance in through her nostrils, down into her lungs. A dreadful fragrance, heavy with familiarity, paralyzing her with Fear.

Blood. Recently spilled.

Kimi rose to her full height.

Fear. She fought it, tried forcing it back from where it came. As before, when she fought the Fear, it grew stronger. The muscles in her arms and shoulders tightened. Pain in her left hand and wrist shot up her arm. Her lungs constricted. Breath left her body. Her muscles froze, her legs became solid stalagmites, her body unwilling to move. "No," Kimi said to no one, her voice a hollow whisper. "No, not now, not here. *Please, no!*" She willed her body to move. It did not respond. She tried breathing, tried expanding her lungs, but could not. She tried making a petition out loud, but her mouth clenched shut as if her lips had been sewn together by invisible, steel thread.

Her eye darted about the lake. Still no one else. She had to go see. Kimi had to fight through the Fear, through the paralysis, and get to the source and confront what she would find. She tried stepping toward it, but her legs still would not move. "No!" she pleaded toward the sky. "This can't happen. This *must* not happen. Not now. Please, Great Spirit, please. Help me!" Still nothing. No voice, no sudden strength from within, no deliverance from without.

Instead, in answer to her desperate cry, enormous silence. No wind. No movement. Only the gray clouds above. All was silent. All was still.

Kimi was alone. With the Fear.

She needed to breathe, needed to move. Her lungs and muscles she needed them, why weren't they working, she needed them she needed help needed someone to help her she couldn't do this alone she—

No! She interrupted her thoughts. *You can do this. You must do this. Alone. You must defeat this Fear. Alone. There is only you and The Great Spirit, no one else.*

Kimi fought harder to regain control of her mind. That's where the true battle was, that she knew. If she could win her mind back, her body would follow. Closing her eye, drawing out all the strength hidden within her, recalling the teachings of her ancestors, pushing beyond the veil of blood and memories, breaking through the barrier of Fear, Kimi fought for peace in her mind. And it came to her. Slowly at first, then like a burst dam releasing a torrent, the peace flooded into her mind and flowed through the rest of her body. She waited. She commanded her lungs to relax. They did, and in came the breath she needed. She commanded her right leg to move. It did. The left leg. It moved. Again. And again. She moved her body toward the shoreline, her arms now moving, her breathing heavy but not panicked. She regained full control of her mind and body.

The Fear was still there, under the surface of everything, but it no longer controlled her.

As she got nearer the shoreline, Kimi noticed droplets on the white snow and blue ice. She turned to look behind her, and they were there too. She hadn't noticed them as she had been fighting for control, but now she saw them clearly, surrounding her. An innocent sprinkle of red here, a violent gash of crimson there, the pure snow stained. Violated. Her eyes followed the trail of red to the bundle of clothing. Kimi did not want to, but she had no choice. She inched toward the crumpled clothing, knowing what she was about to face, but also knowing she would survive because she had to. That was the only reason—she simply had to.

The clothing was shredded...and stained with various shades of red. Kimi knelt. Tucking her left hand close to her, she extended her other hand, touched a piece of the clothing, and lifted it. Underneath was a white man. His flesh, what she could see of it, was also shredded and stained.

A new frozen wave of Fear crashed over Kimi. This time, she steeled herself against it. She clenched her teeth and curled her fingers into fists. She would never again give up control of her mind to the Fear as she had done for so many years of her life. Never again.

Lowering the piece of clothing and covering the white man, she stood. She turned to the shoreline, to the path bordered by the two boulders and the tree. That was where she needed to go. But first, before heading for that path, Kimi ran back to one of the fishing tackle and yanked it out of the water.

Chapter 11: Home from the Factory

Linda Horton's sorry excuse for a car—the blue 1970 AMC Gremlin that her sorry excuse for a boyfriend, Tony, had picked up at Frenier's Junk Yard for \$600—chugged, coughed, and spit out its last breath of exhaust, giving up the ghost as she angled it into the driveway. The front end bottomed out on one of the dozens of frost heaves that made shoveling the damn driveway oh so much fun. The rear end bounced once, twice, three times before finally deciding to come to a rest.

Linda swore. At least the shitbox had got her all the way home, unlike last Wednesday when she had been three sheets to the wind after the late shift and it had stalled on the way home and she'd had to call for the tow truck at one-thirty in the friggin' morning. Lucky for her Artie the tow truck driver hadn't called the cops on her when he arrived and saw how messed up she was. Not so lucky for her what she'd had to do to return the favor to that sorry excuse of a human being. Lucky for Linda, there were forms of currency other than the greenback kind, which for Linda and her man Tony seemed to be in short supply these days. What the hell. The price she'd paid to Artie, for the most part, she could afford.

What a night that had been. She goes out with the girls after work—*ok, Charlene, but just one drink because you know how I get*—and before she knows it she's drinking as if Prohibition was coming back the next morning. She has a good time with the girls—*you were right, Charlene, this was fun!*—she manages to steer the Gremlin most of the way home without incident, and then, without any hint of a warning whatsoever, the shitbox dies two miles from home. Home, of course, being the slumping triple decker palace she and her man Tony paid cheap rent for here on South Main, the godawful structure staring down at her right now, taunting her. Anyway, she gets towed home—after making full payment to Artie, of course (*like the sign says in the garage, Linda—payment due when services rendered*)—only to find Tony waiting up for her. Tony the man. *Her* man. Always lookin' out for her. Takin' care of her. Beatin' her. You can bet your ever-lovin' black velvet Elvis that Tony took real good care of his girl Linda that night. Course, it hadn't mattered one bit to Tony that she'd needed time away from the glorious job of waitin' hand and foot on him every friggin' day, and that's why she'd come home late that night. Nope. Hadn't mattered one bit.

Linda sat in the Gremlin. She brought her hand up to her mouth and felt her upper lip that wasn't as fat as it had been last Thursday morning. She put her finger in the space where her two front teeth had been last Wednesday night when she'd walked in the front door after getting towed home by Artie. A shiver ran up her spine, whether from the cold or from thinking about what waited for her up in the third floor Shangri-La, she couldn't quite tell. Although, she kind of had a sneaking suspicion it was the latter rather than the former.

Linda turned the ignition key to the off position. For shits and giggles she tried starting the car, you know, just to see what would happen. She turned the key. Nothing, like she figured. Dead as dead could friggin' be. Linda fought back the tears. She had hoped, just a little bit, that the car would start so that...so that what? So she could drive away, get as far from Tony as she could, start a new life for herself—it's a sad state of affairs when a girl thinks about starting a

new life when she's only twenty-five—maybe get a decent job paying more than minimum, find a new man who would really look after her and take care of her and leave out the beating part? She laughed at the thought as tears trickled down her cheeks. Laughing and crying. She'd heard that the two were the same emotion, different sides of the same coin. Seemed that one always took over for the other. Something funny would happen with the girls that would make Linda laugh and laugh and laugh, until she was all laughed out so much that she started crying. Then there were the other times when Tony went to town on her and she cried and when he was done all Linda could do was cry until she laughed because she was all cried out. Thus was the cyclical essence of Linda's life—crying and laughing, laughing and crying.

Mostly crying.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and tried cheering herself up with the thought that a girl could do a lot worse than Tony. At least he let her go out on the weekends, probably for no other reason than to give himself time alone with that new girl who answered the phone down at the shop, that cute blonde that he had the hots for. He denied it, he sure did, but Linda knew better. Women always knew better. Didn't men get that? She could see it in his eyes, the way they lit up whenever her name was mentioned, which, lately, had been quite often. Tony's eyes *used* to light up for Linda like that. Back in the good old days.

Linda crossed her fingers and tried the key again. Again, nothing. *Nice car, Tony. Real nice car you got me. Couldn't ask for anything better from my man. Always lookin' out for me and takin' care of me, gettin' your woman the best damn birthday gift six hundred bucks could buy.*

After a minute of fiddling and fumbling with the key, Linda realized it was still in the 'on' position. She twisted it and yanked it out for good. *The good old days*, she thought. *More like good old days gone bad. That's what the good old days were. Just a bunch of good days gone batshit bad.* How was it that days filled with love and joy and laughter, days that should be treasured in your memory forever, could, with the right circumstances—or were they the wrong ones?—and the fading of time, appear from the present to be nothing more than a mirage, or worse, a complete sham, only to be remembered not as fondly as they ought to be, but instead with a poisonous resentment lingering underneath. Funny how that could happen like that. So funny it was downright depressing as hell.

Ah, to hell with it. To hell with all of it. Making sure the car was in park—because heaven forbid it should slip out of gear and roll into the street and get smacked by the garbage truck—Linda cursed her boss for making her work another night shift as she snatched her pocketbook from the passenger seat and flung open the door. She then cursed the weather for being so friggin' cold, and herself for not wearing a winter coat. She clutched the pocketbook to her chest—with the South Main Street Bar across the street, she didn't trust *anyone* who might be hangin' out in the shadows, even if it was daylight—and slammed the car door.

Hopefully Tony wouldn't be awake yet. She didn't need any of his crap at any time of day, never mind this morning. What she needed was a hot shower (if there was any hot water left), a quick bite to eat (if there was any food left), and then a good twelve hours of catching a few z's. With her luck, Tony would be lying in bed, naked and spread-eagled, waitin' for her with that stupid grin on his face like she was supposed to jump him whenever he flashed his ugly baby yellows at her which, back in the good old days, used to be white before he started smokin' two packs of Marlboros a day. Funny thing was, Tony's tobacco-stained teeth were his least repulsive body part.

She started up the sagging wood steps that led up to the sagging porch of their sagging triple-decker that, by all rights, should have been demolished a long time ago. Half-way up the

steps a screeching sound stopped Linda from opening the first-floor door and beginning the climb up the steps to paradise. She looked behind her, expecting to see the neighborhood brats chasing after each other, their lazy mothers inside watching the morning news shows. Hell, if Linda had kids and it was vacation week that's *exactly* what *she'd* be doing on a Monday morning. *Here kids, take your coats and hats and mittens and boots and don't even think about comin' back till I call for supper 'cuz it's Mommy's alone time.* At the edge of the porch, careful not to slip on the worn and rotted plank, Linda looked up and down the street. No kids in the street, no adults on the sidewalk or in the yards. Linda turned back to—

SMACK!

The blow knocked Linda off balance and sent her pocketbook skittering across the driveway. She flailed her arms, fortunate enough to grab hold of the cold, rusty pipe railing, preventing herself from falling backward. She regained her balance and reached up to feel the back of her head. It was warm and wet. She pulled her hand down. Blood.

“What the hell?”

She searched the wooden steps and rotting porch for the rock that had hit her, certain it was one of the neighborhood punks from across the street tryin' to break a window and instead clocking her upside the head. Lousy pot-smokin', trouble-makin', no-good-for-nothin' piss-ant hooligans. She'd show 'em this time. Call the cops on 'em, fix their sorry asses. Except, there was no blood-stained rock anywhere. Not on the porch, the steps, the driveway, nor anywhere else. She looked across the street. No one there. Brave enough to throw rocks at people's houses, cowardly enough to run away before getting caught.

Unless—Tony. That sonofabitch Tony had been waitin' for her, hidin' till she got up to the porch, and then ambushed her, whacked her over the head with his Louisville Slugger. That no-good-for-nothin' sonofabitch finally got bat-outta-hell crazy. *Good for you, Tony ole boy. Have at it, 'cuz ole Linda's got a brother on Old Wachusett's police force and she's pretty sure he and his buddies would be more than happy to throw you, Tony ole boy, into the slammer and maybe even have a few go-rounds with you, just to, you know, even up the score and all. And then, Tony my man, and then—*

Another screech.

And then a WHUMP, like the flapping of a parachute, the kind with the hole in the middle the schools sometimes use in gym classes with the elementary kids, putting one kid in the middle hole and—

Linda turned in time to glimpse the blur coming at her, but not in time to do anything about it.

SMACK!!

This time from the other side. And this time, all the lights went out as if the power cord had been yanked out of the wall socket. Then someone plugged her back in and there was a spark and things came back into blurry view. The world spun, her feet slipped out from under her, and Linda fell. She split open her cheek on the floor of the porch and cracked a rib or two on one of the concrete steps. Pain racked her skull and exploded in her side.

Craning her neck to catch a glimpse of Tony before the cord got yanked out for good, Linda saw the pewter sky above her grow darker. Storm clouds gathering. Snow today? The pounding in her head grew louder before it started to fade.

The last thing to pass before Linda Horton's eyes was a blur of brown and black and white.

Chapter 12: Edward and Abby in a Cold War

“Abby!”

Abby ignored her father. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to him. It was time for her to act, to keep walking, to move. Time to make her own decisions rather than letting others dictate her life to her. The time for talking was long gone.

“Abby, wait!”

Without looking back, she could see her father: limp, shuffle, stab the cane into the crusty snow; limp, shuffle, stab the cane; limp, shuffle, stab. Abby was absolutely disgusted with the whole limp, shuffle, stab thing. Why couldn't he be like all her friends' dads, capable of walking unaided for more than five feet without falling flat on his face? A skiing injury from his college days that broke his hip and gave him a lifelong limp. Whoever heard of such a stupid thing? She kept walking, not turning to look back, focusing on walking forward, one frozen step at a time.

“Abby, please.”

He was now close enough so that she could hear his huffing and puffing. Abby gave in. She stopped and hitched the knapsack farther up her back. She turned, not so much to hear what he had to say, but just to get it over with so she could get going again. He was bent over with one hand on his knee, the other holding his cane above his head with index finger extended, giving her the ‘could you please wait a moment’ signal while he caught his breath. Nonverbal communication. As much as Abby enjoyed communicating with words through poetry, there was something just as poetic in communicating with physical expressions. Another form of nonverbal communication involving an extended finger popped into Abby's mind, but her father definitely would not think it appropriate if she exercised that adult prerogative. Though, it would have conveyed the exact emotion she felt at that moment.

Her father straightened up. He maneuvered around a patch of ice, wincing as he swiveled his hip. “Where...do you think...you're going?” he said between breaths.

Abby shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She slipped her gloved thumbs under the canvas straps of the Army knapsack and tugged at them, holding to them for security. She stared at her father.

“Come back to the house.” His chest heaved. “Please.” Another heave, his hand brought to his chest, another gasp for breath. “We'll talk.”

“Talk?” Abby cocked her head to one side. She hitched the backpack again. “You told me that when I turned sixteen you would take me to see my mother's grave. That's what you *said*. We've *already* talked about this.”

Abby surveyed the neighborhood. Houses on either side of the street, some with smoke rising from the chimneys, others with idling cars in their driveways emitting exhaust out of their tailpipes, stood as silent witnesses to the drama unfolding in the street. Although she could not see it through the trees, she felt the black silhouette of Wachusett Mountain looming in the distance a couple miles to the west. Barren branches held snow in outstretched arms above her. The road was covered in patches of snow and ice and sand. This was her neighborhood. She was connected to this place. *What does that have to do with right now?* Abby wondered. *Connected?*

To what? What does that mean? She didn't know, yet she could not shake it. Everything and everyone around her was connected somehow by a unifying thread, not just by being in the same neighborhood or something as superficial as that, but by something deeper. *This is crazy*, Abby thought. She was losing focus, getting distracted by silly thoughts running through her mind. *Focus, Abby. Focus!*

She looked directly at her father. "I've been waiting a long time for this. Planning for it." Abby paused for effect. Then: "I've written poems about this very day." She gripped the stiff straps that held the weight on her back. "Do you have any idea how many times—?"

Abby turned away. She had to. Her emotions had ambushed her. She tried shrugging them off, but they surrounded her, attacking from all sides. Frustration. Sadness. Abandonment. Betrayal. One after the other they assaulted her. The hardest one to shake, the one she had not expected at *all*, was the sense of loss when she told her father how long she'd been waiting for this day. It had been too long. Years. And now the years were coming back at her, pointing their accusing fingers at her, blaming her for not going to Albany sooner, for not pushing it with her father more often, for not doing everything she could to convince her father to take her to see her mother's grave.

This was all Abby's fault. Not her father's. Not her mother's. It was no one else's but hers. "Abby?"

She focused on the breath vapors that swirled about her head, lasting only a moment, and then vanishing. Like so much of her life—here for an instant, then gone. But not truly gone. Just...invisible—still there, swirling all around her.

"Abby." Her father stepped toward her. "I want to go with you."

She looked at him, surprised and confused. He maneuvered around another ice patch, reached out to her, and opened his mouth to tell her he would go back for the car. She hadn't noticed it, but now she saw it parked down the road behind her father, idling at the curb. He was about to tell her that they would go together, and they could talk about everything in the car on the way to Albany, and they could set off on this journey together, and that she did not have to go through it alone. Abby smiled and reached for her father's hand.

He smiled too, extended his hand, and shook his head. "I just can't take you to your mother's grave today. I have to—"

Abby evicted the smile from her face. She yanked her hand from his, pivoted, and stormed up the sidewalk, her arms two pendulums marking off each step. The tears tried to break through, but she fought against them. *What just happened? Did I just lose my grip on reality for a few seconds? Am I losing it?*

Her father called after her. "What are you going to—, Abby! How will you get there?"

"Don't worry about me," Abby yelled over her shoulder, wiping her eyes. She was on her own. Fine. She was going to Albany to see her dead mother's grave, and she was alone. That was perfectly fine with her. Josh would be with her, so technically she *wouldn't* be alone, but she'd be alone nonetheless.

What the heck am I doing?

The silhouette startled Abby to a stop. In the front yard of one of the houses across the street, sitting atop a snowbank next to a maple tree, was the black silhouette of a gigantic dog. Abby stood still. There was no reason for her not to continue on her way—she wasn't afraid of dogs—but she didn't. Instead, she felt compelled to stay put. The dog sat on its haunches, unmoving. It appeared to be staring at Abby, though she couldn't be sure because its eyes were

lost in the blackness of the silhouette and the shadow of the tree. A cold current ran down Abby's spine. She felt her feet move toward the animal. She should go to it. She should—

Something clamped onto Abby's arm, jerking her body backward and spinning her around, frightening her. Through strands of red hair dangling in front of her eyes, the sudden movement knocking the hood from her head, she was face-to-face with her father.

"You can't do this," he said through clenched teeth and trembling lips.

Abby pried at the fingers squeezing her arm. "You're hurting me!"

"You can't do this."

Abby narrowed her eyes. "Watch me." She continued prying at his fingers.

His grip tightened. "I can't let you do this."

"I don't care." Abby scratched at the fingers. "Let go. I'm going and there's nothing—"

He shook her arm once. "Are you listening to me?" The change in his voice caused Abby's fingers to stop their scratching and prying. The anger in his voice from a moment ago had given way to pleading. Tears welled up in his eyes. His throat worked as if digging deep inside for the right words, deep inside the pit of his stomach, digging all the way to hell. "I can't," was all that came out. He lowered his head and let go of her arm, dropping his hand to his side.

"Can't?" Abby rubbed her arm through the sleeve of the parka. "Try *won't*." She ignored the change in her father's demeanor and decided to cross the road. She stepped off the curb, and as she did she slipped on snow-covered ice. Her arms pin-wheeled in time to catch her balance before the weight on her back pulled her over. She started crossing the road.

"Abby, *please*...."

Abby stopped in the middle of the road. Her father stood on the sidewalk, leaning heavily on his cane, exhaling heavily, the vapors drifting listlessly above his head.

Standing in the road with hands on hips, staring at her father, a question—the one that had started haunting her—resurfaced in her mind. What did he not want her to see in Albany? Her father obviously did not want her going to her mother's grave. Which had to mean there was *something* in Albany, possibly even at the grave site, that he did not want her to see. But that was ridiculous. What could possibly be there that he didn't want her to discover?

Abby hitched up the knapsack, turned, and set off down the path of her own choosing, more determined than ever to get to Albany.

"Abby...*please!*" The tone in his voice told her he was resigned to letting her go, told her he now realized he had no choice. His daughter had made up her mind and there was no stopping her. She was going, even if it meant being on her own.

But she was not *quite* on her own. Neither Abby nor her father noticed the two bullet-sized holes of flame-blue light. Blending in with the shadows of the houses and bushes and trees, sliding from one to the other, the shadow with the blue eyes followed Abby as she set out on the course of her own choosing. Its eyes watched her every move while at the same time scanning its surroundings.

It would be proven over the course of the rest of her life that the choice Abby made on this particular February morning would set her on a path that, in accord with the prophetic sentiments of Abby's favorite poet, Mr. Frost, would take her into a wood that, indeed, would prove to be lovely, dark, and deep.

Chapter 13: Josh Awakens The Beast

Josh's parents were gone, his father to the college and his mother to the library, both having pulled out of the driveway at the same time ten minutes earlier, his father in the black Cadillac, his mother in the red Toyota Corolla, he going one way at the end of the street, she the other, the whole thing an apt metaphor. Or was it an analogy? No, it must be an underlying theme. Yeah, that's it. An underlying theme that explained how his parents' marriage had gone down the crapper the past few years, each of them going their separate ways.

Anyway, they were both gone and he'd waited long enough to make sure neither of them came back for anything. Josh got off his bed and grabbed his jean jacket off the bedpost. Half-way down the stairs he stopped at the photograph. *The* photograph. It showed two boys on their father's boat, *Pythagoras*, on Lake Champlain, smiling, hair trailing behind them, red life jackets covering their hairless, tanned chests. Their dad had been driving the boat while their mom took the picture. That had been three years ago when they were fifteen, just a couple weeks after their birthday. Two weeks on the lake doing nothing but listening to the radio all day (Burlington had a great rock station back then that played all the good stuff), playing ping pong in the rec hall (which meant one brother always beating the other, but the other never seeming to mind too much), walking the old railroad trestle out into the lake, swimming out to the raft and catching some rays for hours on end, fishing with their father at night, and, of course, flirting with the girls whose families had come down from Canada for a couple weeks of vacation. French girls! (Or French Canadian, but, then again, who kept track of such things.)

That day on the boat with mom and dad, both boys would have agreed, had been the best day ever of the best vacation ever.

Josh shook his head and sighed. A thousand-ton anchor settled inside his chest, mooring his heart to a past that got swept out to sea a long time ago. He should not have stopped to look at the picture. How long had it been, a couple months? He should have kept the streak going. He pulled his eyes away from the two boys and descended the rest of the stairs. He crossed the kitchen, evaded the island guarding the middle zone, snatched his car keys that dangled from the wall hook, and slipped out the side door that opened into the garage.

He draped his jean jacket over the wood railing, walked down the five steps to the garage floor, and stood next to the covered machine. His heart lightened and his pulse quickened. He bent down and grabbed the corner of the car cover. He pulled it up to his chest, gave it a flick of the wrists, and pulled the fabric toward him, all in one graceful movement. The trick had taken him an entire week to master.

And there it was—The Beast. His 1967 Pontiac GTO hardtop that he and his father had restored. Equipped with a 400 cubic inch engine that cranked out 360 horsepower at 5,100 rpms (*no, Dad, of course I won't ever push it that far!*), Rochester Quadrajet four-barrel carb, three speed Turbo-Hydramatic TH-400 tranny, Hurst Performance Dual-Gate his/her shifter, Rally II wheels, and, topping it off, black high-gloss paint job that gave it a black-panther-on-the-prowl-at-night look.

The car was a monster. It was... The Beast.

When his father had bought the car five years ago for Josh's thirteenth birthday and had it brought home on Big Earl's ramp truck—it would be months later, as the transformation of the car took shape, that Josh would christen it The Beast—the thing had been in bad shape. The entire body had been littered with dents and dings, the quarter panels cratered with rusted-out holes, right front fender bashed in by a stubborn tree or telephone pole, engine caked with grease and grime, interior drenched in the rancid aroma of old cigarette smoke and stale cologne and Josh didn't even want to think about what else. Whoever had owned it obviously hadn't known the first thing about taking care of such a beautiful machine.

But the old man knew how. Josh didn't see eye-to-eye with his old man on many things, and he thought his father was clueless about a great many *other* things, but one thing they did agree on, and one thing his father knew, was cars. It had taken three years' worth of late nights in the garage eating pizza and grinders and take-out Chinese, saving and scrounging up enough money to buy body panels and engine parts. There had been arguments about what to fix next and how to fix it, they got bogged down overhauling the transmission, and they had to wait forever for Kit's Auto Body to finish the paint job. Julian had even pitched in every now and then in spite of the well-known fact that he knew next to nothing about cars. There had been many times when Josh had thought they wouldn't finish it; times when he had wanted to quit because it was too hard, too time-consuming, too much arguing. But his father wouldn't let him. He always came out with the right thing to say to Josh when discouragement got the best of him, always telling a well-placed joke or story to break the tension when the two of them got on each other's nerves and were in danger of progressing to each other's throats. Josh never would have seen it through to the end if it hadn't been for his father.

In spite of how difficult it had been, Josh had lots of memories from those days. Lots of *good* memories.

Josh folded the car cover as solemnly as a soldier folding an American flag to be presented to a widow. He then tossed it over the roof of the car. It landed on the floor next to the work bench with a soft *flump*. He heaved open the garage door then unlocked the driver's door of The Beast. Reaching up to the railing and snagging the jean jacket, he swung it over his shoulders and slid his arms into the sleeves.

Josh slid behind the wheel of The Beast. He closed the door. He ran his hands over the steering wheel, remembering the day he and his father had spent hours calling and searching all the local and not-so-local junk yards looking for this particular one. They had found it in the next-to-last junk yard on their list. On that sun-drenched, humid August afternoon it had taken them an hour to drive south to the other side of Worcester, another forty-five minutes of sweating and swearing to work the steering wheel off the column of the car, followed by the weary drive back home. On the return trip, the sun having set and the evening darkness creeping over them, they had stopped at a pizza place in Rutland where they ate BLT subs and barbecue chips, drank Cokes, put quarters in the jukebox, and laughed. As hungry and hot and tired as they had been that night, they had laughed all the more and all the fuller.

He reached into his pocket for the keys and inserted one of them into the ignition switch. He checked the rear-view mirror, angling it until it was just right. He grinned and nodded at his reflection. He turned the key. The Beast roared to life, unclogging its throat with a rumble of the engine, breathing out exhaust through its dual tailpipes. Josh relished the power of the machine. He turned on the radio—permanently tuned to WAAF 107.3 FM—in time to hear the DJ segue from AC/DCs 'Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap' into a song by Van Halen, a newly discovered rock group. The song, Josh would find out minutes later, was 'Runnin' with the Devil.' He

listened to the bass intro, decided he liked the sound of the lead guitar, and cranked it up. He then moved the shifter and guided The Beast out of the garage. He stopped in the driveway, got out, closed the garage door, and hopped back in. As he closed the door and pulled into the street, Josh could hear his mother's voice inside his head—yeah, just what he needed, another voice up there!—telling him to be sure to drive safely and to wear a winter coat because it was cold and it was supposed to snow later today.

“Don't worry, Ma,” Josh said as punched the clutch, rammed the shifter into second, and stomped on the gas. “I always drive safely, and it's definitely a jean jacket kinda day.”

Chapter 14: Edward Thinks and Drives

Edward drove down Cherry Street, turned west onto Elm, then wound his way through Old Wachusett center and toward the southern edge of the city where Faith Community Church was located. He thought about his current situation and how he had never, at any time during the past fifteen years, thought he'd be in the position he found himself in today. Nearing forty-one, still a single parent, struggling in his relationship with his daughter, and about to prepare his final sermon as pastor of a church he had grown to love.

He drove through the streets of Old Wachusett, passing by the ranch and cape and colonial homes, the small businesses in the center of the city (Ray's Music Emporium, Leland's Chevrolet, IGA Foodliner, Halfrey's Dry Cleaners) and others tucked away on side streets (Talbot's Jewelers, Blount's Meat Market, The Book Nook, not to be confused with the regional bookstore chain The Book Corner at Timpany Plaza), and a half-dozen pizza parlors, package stores, and barber shops. Old Wachusett had become his home. Most pastors didn't last beyond seven or eight years in a church before they felt it was time to move on, but not Edward. His plan had always been to get a congregation, feed the sheep for thirty years or so, and then retire. Then he would have time to volunteer in nursing homes, visit the elderly and the sick, and mentor young pastors. Old Wachusett was the perfect place to carry out that plan. With a population slightly under twenty-thousand, it was one of the smaller cities in Massachusetts and Edward liked it for that reason alone. Until fifteen years ago he'd lived his entire life in Albany, and the reluctant move to a smaller community had turned out to be a welcome change.

The change had also been necessary. After what happened with Lynne, he'd had no choice. He had to move after that, even though he would've liked to have stayed in Albany. It was a good community in which to raise a family, pastor a church, live a quiet life. He had made a place for himself as an assistant pastor of a midsized congregation and had been groomed by the senior pastor to one day take over the church. He and Lynne had settled into a respectable neighborhood that quickly became their neighborhood. His neighborhood.

Edward stopped at the lights at the intersection of Routes 140 and 101. Faith Community Church was a quarter mile down the road on Route 101 heading south. Sitting at the lights, waiting for green, Edward couldn't help but think of the similarities of fifteen years ago and where he now found himself. He had established a place for himself in Old Wachusett, had a reputable church with a good congregation, a beautiful, intelligent—albeit at times feisty and stubborn—daughter. And he was losing it all.

Again.

Years ago he had come close to losing Abby, and now he was close again, albeit in a much different manner. This time he was going to do something about it. He had to talk to her. He couldn't remember the last time they'd had an honest, open conversation, the kind they used to have when Abby would tell him about the cute boy that looked at her in geometry class. The kind where he would tell Abby how much he missed her mother and how much Abby looked like her. He missed and needed those conversations. He suspected Abby felt the same way.

He would talk to her tonight. She'd come back after walking off her anger, would probably be lying in bed and writing in her journal when he returned from the church in a few hours. They would talk then. She'd apologize for her rash decision this morning and her display of disrespect toward him, Edward would apologize for his wrongdoings over the past couple of months. They would start down the road of healing their relationship.

They would become the family they used to be. He would—

A horn blared behind him. Edward glanced up to make sure the light was green then eased on the gas, not caring to make eye contact in the rearview mirror with the driver behind him. A minute later the Impala crested the rise in the road and the green wooden sign with gold lettering came into view: Faith Community Church. Turning right into the parking lot, Edward grunted as he passed the sign, struck by the memory of the day he took the senior pastor position at FCC and how the first thing he noticed about the church was its lack of signage. His first item on his first agenda for his first board meeting had been to secure the services of a local business to design, manufacture, and install a sign. After all, the good citizens of Old Wachusett needed to know that Faith Community Church was here and alive and well.

He sighed. It all seemed so trivial now.

Edward parked the Chevrolet. He got out of the car with his suit coat in one hand, closed the door, and retrieved his cane and briefcase from the back seat. He swung the rear door shut and limped across the parking lot, carefully avoiding the patches of ice and snow. When he reached the shoveled cement walkway that led to the front doors he started fishing through his suit coat pocket for the church keys. There were a dozen keys on the key ring—the main doors, side doors, main office, his office, maintenance closets and Sunday school rooms—and finding the one that fit the front door always took a minute or two.

The simple act of finding the right key to slide into the front door lock was enough to distract Edward from the brown pickup truck that slowed at the entrance to the parking lot of Faith Community Church, and the act of opening the doors and entering the foyer prevented Edward from seeing the truck pull into the parking lot and drive to the rear of the church.

Chapter 15: Connie, Margaret, and David Cassidy

Constance Schofield used the five-minute ride to the Old Wachusett Public Library to turn the page of her mood. Connie enjoyed her job, loved the people with whom she worked, and the thought of spending the next eight hours doing what she loved was enough to shelve away most of last night and this morning into the closed stacks of her mind. Lately, that ability had become vital to Connie preserving her sanity.

She carried her purse and two tote bags filled with paperback and hardcover novels, holiday and home living magazines, a few copies of *Publisher's Weekly* and *Library Journal*, a budget report for the trustees, lunch, and a work notebook. She unlocked the front door to the library, stepped inside, disarmed the alarm, reset the lock, and closed the door.

Straight through a set of glass doors was the adult section of the library. Down the stairs to the right was the children's section. Connie checked the overnight book drop and found a half-dozen books along with a couple magazines and three albums (how many times did she have to remind the patrons that the book drop was for books and magazines, not albums?) which she managed to gather up and carry to the circulation desk on the other side of the glass doors. It wasn't really a desk, more like a counter, but circulation desk sounded more library-ish. She placed the books and magazines and records onto the desk, removed her own reading materials from one of the tote bags, and placed them next to the stack. If she didn't get to them, either Margaret or Pauline would check them in, and Connie was perfectly fine with that. She didn't lord it over her employees, but it was a perk of the job she wasn't afraid to use every now and then.

She passed through the work office across from the circulation desk and continued to the library director's office at the rear. Furnished with a desk and swivel chair, two wooden chairs opposite the desk, one low table with a coffee maker and typewriter, a couple bookshelves, and a single coat hook on the back of the door, it was pragmatic, utilitarian, and isolated Connie from her coworkers and the patrons. She spent as little time in it as possible. She dropped the handbags onto one of the chairs, hung her coat on the hook, and headed back to the main section.

The library didn't open for another forty-five minutes, but Connie liked to arrive at least an hour early to get a jump on the day. With the lights off and the natural light filtering through the front windows, she liked to walk through the book stacks, making sure everything was in order before the public arrived. It wasn't quite a golden moment, but it was a time of day she definitely enjoyed. The quiet of the building, the morning light casting shadows between the rows of bookshelves, the particular scents of the books and the glossy magazine covers and the vinyl albums, it was all so comfortable for Connie. Ever since she could remember, the library, any library, had been one of her favorite places.

She had her mother to thank for that. When Connie had entered the first grade, her mother started taking her to the Old Wachusett Public Library, though at that time the library had been housed in a different building only a block up the road from its present location. When the library got too big it moved to its current location, the former building now used for the Kaine Senior Center. Connie's mother had done her job of passing on the love of books from one

generation to the next. Connie used to love checking out the small red and blue hardcover books about Kit Carson and Billy the Kid and Buffalo Bill. The books were small enough for her little hands to carry without her mother's help. She had cut her reading teeth on those romanticized tales of the Old West, and had been hooked ever since, reading just about anything she could get her hands on. Although her mother was partial to the so-called classics—Dickens, Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Danielle Steele (*everyone has her guilty pleasures, Constance*)—Connie never saw the value in separating books into classics and general reading and genre fiction. If it had a good story that propelled her from one page to another, and those pages were peopled with believable characters she cared about, then the book was a classic regardless of whether it was written in 17th century England or 20th century America.

That philosophy motivated Connie to do everything she could to foster a love of reading among the younger generation. She knew that most high-schoolers weren't interested in reading the books on the summer high school reading lists. Truthfully—she would never voice this opinion to the teachers who submitted their reading lists to her—she couldn't blame them. No teenager in her right mind wanted to spend summer afternoons reading about Ethan Frome's bleak existence, the Old Man's struggle at sea with a fish, or Job's terrible trials at the hand of God. Each of these works may have a certain artistic merit to it—even *Ethan Frome*, to a lesser extent—but it was wishful thinking if the teachers thought that most high school students were reading them. If they were, then Cliff's Notes would be out of business.

For her part, Connie saw to it every summer that there was a section at the front of the library set aside for the kinds of books she thought most high-schoolers—especially boys, seeing how the girls seemed to like reading on their own—would be interested in reading: horror, science fiction, westerns, and a few superthrillers for the more literate among them. She would stock up on Stephen King, Robert Bloch, Peter Benchley, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, John le Carré, Robert Ludlum, Louis L'Amour (a favorite amongst the high school boys, due mostly in part to the shortness of his books), among others. That section of the library always turned out to be the busiest section during the summer months, and Connie was proud of that.

This was Connie's fifteenth year working at the library, seventh as its director. Her first job had been at OWPL when she was a sophomore in high school. She had worked as a page shelving books, keeping things in order, helping out at the circulation desk now and then, until she graduated from high school, whereupon she attended Smith College where she worked part-time in the library there. Four years later, in 1959, she graduated from Smith and took her degree to New York and found a job with a small publishing house. At the time it had seemed like her dream job. Reading and editing books, talking with authors and developing their talents, dining out at fine restaurants, going to the theater, meeting and marrying David, getting pregnant and giving birth to their twins Joshua and Julian. Connie had had it all in New York.

Except for one thing. She hadn't had small-town New England. As much as she enjoyed the publishing job and the nightlife and raising her family in a nice New York suburb, Connie missed the sultry August neighborhood block parties awash in the aromas of sizzling hamburgers and hotdogs on backyard grills; the sound of cool October evenings as children ran through piles of dry, crunchy leaves, bare branches creaking above them in a light breeze, all of it backlit in brilliant sunsets; the freezing January Sunday mornings spent shoveling out neighbors after getting eighteen inches of snow the night before, then spending the rest of the afternoon sipping hot apple cider and reading the Sunday paper or curling up with a book and a quilt while the neighborhood kids built snowmen in their front yards and engaged in snowball fights up and down the street.

Eventually, the simple pleasure of reading books and spending time with family and neighbors won out over the often cut-throat business of buying and selling potential bestsellers. With David's full support, Connie quit the publishing business and applied at various libraries in the New England area, hoping to land a job close to her hometown of Old Wachusett. She considered it her good fortune when a position opened at OWPL. Financially, one could've looked at it as a major step backward. Emotionally, it was a giant leap forward.

Connie opened the window blinds at the front of the library opposite the 'New Fiction' and 'New Nonfiction' shelves. She straightened the periodicals on the horizontal flip shelves behind which were concealed older issues, aligned the books on the New Releases shelves, changed the date on the date due punch-out machine at the circulation desk, walked through the rest of the adult section checking for appearance, and took a tour of the children's section downstairs. Connie had a pretty good handle on most every facet of the Old Wachusett Public Library. It was her domain.

On her way back up the stairs from the children's section she heard someone working the lock on the front door. Margaret Whitman, one of the library assistants who was also one of Connie's closest friends, was outside juggling a stack of books, a purse, and her Partridge Family lunch box. Margaret was in her fifties, but often followed the leading of the sixteen-year-old girl that lived inside her body and dominated her thinking. Connie hurried to get to the door to unlock it before Margaret dropped everything, but the door opened just as she reached it.

"Brr, it is *cold* out here."

"Here." Connie reached for the purse and lunchbox. "Let me help you."

"Bless you, my dear." Margaret didn't act like she was in her fifties, but there were times she sounded like she was in her eighties. She stepped inside, stomping the snow off her shoes.

"Ever hear of a wonderful little thing called a tote bag?"

Margaret smirked. "Believe it or not, I used to own such a thing, but it seemed too old for me. A tote bag. What, I can't carry a few books?" Margaret followed Connie into the library and dropped the stack of books onto the front desk next to the one's Connie placed there earlier.

"Glad to see I'm not the only municipal employee who hogs all the library's books."

"Margaret, that's about two weeks' worth of books and magazines I returned. You check out a dozen books every Friday and come back Monday with most of them read." Connie shook her head. "You need to get a life. Or a man. Which, if you *had* a man, you'd then *have* a life."

"Honey child, I've *had* myself many a man, thank you very much."

"Yes, well..." Connie handed the purse to Margaret but held the lunchbox away from her like a younger sister teasing an older sibling. "You also need a new lunchbox. You do know the Partridge Family isn't quite as popular as they used to be? Especially among the...how shall I say it..." Connie drummed her fingers on her chin and cast a sideways glance at Margaret.

"Hmph." Margaret snatched the tin box out of Connie's hand. "How's about you don't say anything at all, my dearest Constance."

"...the older generation." Connie smirked.

"Honey, it's not the entire family I'm interested in. It's this cutie right here." Margaret pointed at David Cassidy on the front of the box, whom she kissed with exaggerated smooching sounds while walking into the office.

Connie shook her head. "You are borderline psychotic." She turned on the light in the office and took down the current work schedule that was posted next to the time clock.

Margaret ignored Connie's comment and opened the closet door adjacent to the time clock. "Let me guess. New work schedule." She hung her coat and purse on one of the dozen hooks and

carefully placed her lunchbox on the top shelf. Checking herself in the full-length mirror hanging on the inside of the door, Margaret straightened her artificially colored blonde hair, smoothed out her yellow sweater, and tugged at her tan slacks to get them to stop clinging to her plump legs. She closed the door and turned to Connie, hands by her sides, palms out, eyebrows raised.

Connie nodded her approval before turning down the hall to her office. "Beverly called me Saturday morning and Alan called yesterday afternoon," she said over her shoulder. Inside the office she raised her voice. "They both have a nasty cold or the flu or whatever it is that's making the rounds." She emerged from the office waving a sheet of paper above her head. "So, yes, new work schedule."

"Sweetie, 'tisn't a problem with me. I could use the extra dough. Assuming you've loaded me up with additional hours."

Connie hung the new schedule and tilted her head at her long-time friend. "You need extra dough?" Connie placed her hands on her hips and grinned. "That can mean only one thing." Her eyebrows rose accompanied by an eager grin. She clasped her hands together, a schoolgirl awaiting the revelation of a secret. "Dare I ask?"

"Honey, I would if I were you." Margaret smiled and picked up a stack of new books off the processing cart and carried them to the circulation desk. Connie followed her, hands planted firmly on hips. On the other side of the circulation desk Margaret picked up each book, read the back cover and inside flaps, presumably to see if she wanted to check any of them out before the general population had a chance to get their hands on them. Apparently not interested in any of them, she inserted bookmarks imprinted with the library's hours inside the front covers.

Connie waited until Margaret was done. "Well?"

"Well what, my dear?" Margaret shrugged, her hands resting on the stack of new books.

Connie dropped her hands to her sides and issued a mock sigh.

"Oh. *That*." Margaret scooped up the books and brought them to the New Releases shelf at the front of the library. She slotted them into their places, making a show of concentrating on what she was doing. The corners of her mouth curled up, but she did not look at Connie.

"Ahem." Connie glared at her from the circulation desk, hands spread on the counter, fingers drumming.

Margaret could not keep the straight face any longer. She laughed as she shelved the last of the books, then looked directly at Connie. "My dear, you haven't asked yet. Have you?"

The fingers stopped drumming, but Connie's eyes kept glaring. "Listen to me, you incorrigible little you-know-what."

Margaret gasped and brought a hand to her chest. "You-know-what? My, the language that spews out of that potty mouth of yours."

Connie marched around the desk, exaggerating every movement. "As the director of this library, as your direct supervisor, as your *boss*, I will fire your sweet little patootie if you ever willfully withhold information from me that bears directly on your personal life, whether I ask for it directly or not."

Margaret turned to Connie, mouth agape.

Connie raised an eyebrow. "Is that clear?"

Margaret closed her mouth, nodded, then clasped her hands and bowed her head. She muttered, "All you had to do was ask, Miss Bossy Pants."

A moment passed. Margaret raised her head. Laughter sprang forth from each of them, naturally and comfortably, as refreshing to Connie as a cold glass of lemonade on a sweltering summer day.

Margaret checked the clock on the wall. “We’ve got a few minutes before Pauline gets here.” They moved to a pair of chairs across from the magazine shelves. Connie crossed her legs and leaned toward Margaret, elbows on the armrests, chin resting on her clasped hands. Margaret smiled. “I met a man.” Connie tilted her head and rolled her eyes. “Honey,” Margaret said, resting a hand on Connie’s arm, “I know what you’re thinking. But it’s different this time. He isn’t a David Cassidy knock-off. He’s the real deal. Responsible, mature, and, get this, he’s actually got a job. A real job. You could even call it a career.”

“Wow. A career even.” Connie leaned back and crossed her arms, assuming the posture of a mother interrogating her daughter after the revelation of a first boyfriend. “Mature.” She nodded her head. “What does that mean, exactly? That he’s more than half your age?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny. A regular Joan Rivers you are, my dear. It means he’s my age.” Margaret paused. “Give or take a few years.” She quickly added, “Suffice to say he’s older than all the other men I’ve dated, which should make you happy.”

Connie nodded, keeping her eyes level at Margaret. “Dating? Is that what you call it?” She unfolded her arms and rested them on the armrests. “More like one-night-standing, don’t you think?”

“Well,” Margaret said, clearing her throat and rising from the chair. “I suppose one *could* put it *that* way. If one were so inclined.” She winked at Connie on her way to the album rack.

“Name?” Connie turned in the chair, one arm draped over the back, to face Margaret who was flipping through the album collection, apparently ignoring Connie’s question. “Hello? Mr. Maturity—a name? Or do you just say, ‘hey, you.’”

Margaret held up an album and rolled her eyes. “Yes, he has a name. It’s John.”

“John...?” Connie motioned with her hand for Margaret to come out with the rest of it.

“Smith. John Smith.” Margaret slid the album back into its place.

“John Smith.” Connie pushed her shoulders back and smoothed out her slacks.

“Did I mention he’s also part Indian? I think he said Nipmuc. Or was it Algonquin?”

“Indian.” Connie cleared her throat. “You expect me to believe you’ve finally met a man—a *mature* man with a *career*—and he’s part Indian, and his name is... John Smith. Is that correct?”

Margaret flashed a smile, nodded, and continued flipping through the albums.

“When and where did you meet ‘John Smith’? Over the weekend at a powwow at the local McDonald’s?”

“For your information, Mrs. Supervisor, I met him a few weeks ago at the movies. He sat in the row in front of me.” Connie raised her eyebrows. “*Corvette Summer*.” Connie opened her mouth to speak but Margaret beat her to it. “I know, I know. Can I help it if I like Mark Hamill and he likes Annie Potts?”

“It’s not that. I can’t believe you kept this a secret from me for two whole weeks. How dare you.”

“Honey, it’s like I said. All you had to do was ask. Besides, I wanted to make sure this one was for real before blabbing it to everyone. You know, didn’t want to jump the gun, so to speak.” Margaret winked.

Connie stood and shook her head. “I’ll bet his gun’s *already* been jumped.”

“My dear, would you kindly dispense with the junior-high innuendos? It really doesn’t become you.” Margaret winked. “Besides, enough about me. What about you? How was your weekend?” Margaret flipped through a few more albums, stopped, and looked at Connie who was now standing next to the rotating paperback stands. “Things better between you and David?”

Connie slowly shook her head. “Worse.” She twirled one of the racks, checking authors’ last names. “David is more irritable than ever. He argues with me and Joshua about the most insignificant things. Like last night, which ended up spilling over to this morning.” Connie sighed. “Josh and I can’t seem to do anything right by him. He’s...he’s becoming abusive.”

Margaret had Fleetwood Mac’s album *Rumours* in hand when she shot Connie a look at that last word.

“No, no, not like that.” Connie spun the K rack of books. “Not physically. Verbally.”

Margaret placed *Rumours* on top of the row of records, let out a breath, and folded her hands on top of the album.

“Margaret, don’t worry.” Connie stopped turning the rack and looked to her friend. “Really, don’t. If it was more, I’d tell you. Believe me, I would.” She pulled out *Salem’s Lot* from the M section and put it with the K’s. “You should try Ludlum. I’m reading his newest paperback, *The Chancellor Manuscript*. I think you’d like it. Not quite as well-written as *The Gemini Contenders*, but good nonetheless.”

“I’ll take that recommendation into consideration. Is he anything like Clive Cussler? I like his stuff.”

“More like le Carré than Cussler.”

“Hmm,” Margaret responded, picking up Billy Joel’s *The Stranger* and setting it on top of *Rumours*.

Connie picked up Peter Straub’s *Julia*, which had been shelved in the wrong place, and turned it over in her hand. “Huh. I’ve been wanting to give this a try.” She held the book and gave the rack a quarter turn. “I think he’s cheating on me. Or he’s thinking about it.”

“Honey.” Margaret put down the album she was holding and raised her head. “I know I’ve said this to you before, but it bears repeating.” She waited until Connie turned to her. “David loves you. Have you got problems? Sure. Who doesn’t nowadays? Even with those problems, he loves you. I can see it when you two are together.”

Connie turned her attention back to the book rack. “That’s not what I see.”

Connie stopped turning the book rack, stepped to the circulation desk, dropped the Straub book onto it, and leaned against the desk. She faced Margaret, and for the first time in her life was envious of her friend. In her mid-fifties and single, Margaret had complete freedom to enjoy life her way. But, then again, she supposed if she thought about it long enough she could ask herself if she thought Margaret was really happy. Or was she lonely at night, going home to an empty apartment with no one to share her day with, no one with whom to laugh and watch TV? Sure, she had her dates, but...was it worth it? Life was full of trade-offs. Either you were married and happy for a while until it all fell apart and you eventually became a miserable couple, or you were single and free and lonely, pinning your hopes on the latest one-night stand.

“I see distance between us that’s growing exponentially.” Connie folded her arms and shook her head. “Great. Now I’m using math metaphors to describe my marriage problems. Of all the things to pick up from him.”

Margaret picked out one more album, *Foreigner*, and brought it and the other two to the circulation desk where she placed them alongside *Julia*. Leaning against the desk, she nudged Connie with her shoulder. “Just because there’s distance doesn’t mean he’s been drawn away by another woman. You guys have been through a helluva lot the past couple of years. You’re under stress with the budget meetings coming up, David’s trying to finish his book, and Josh is struggling through it all the best way he can, considering...well, you know.” Margaret paused before continuing. “Of course you’re going to feel distant. What couple wouldn’t?”

Connie lowered her head. "It's Teri. That good-looking hottie that teaches with him. Has to be." Connie walked around Margaret to the other side of the desk to check out her book.

"What evidence do you have?" Margaret picked up a pencil from the desk and pointed it at Connie. "Continuing with the math metaphor, how does it all add up?"

Connie knew Margaret was only trying to help. If she hadn't been such a good friend Connie would have told her to take a hike. "What I see is my husband spending a greater amount of time at work than he ever has, an analytical way of going through the motions in bed, and a gorgeous, well-proportioned colleague that could seduce pi into switching to a rational number. That's what I see." Connie glared at Margaret. "How's that for continuing the math metaphor?"

Margaret tried stifling a giggle, but failed.

Connie turned away. "What's so funny?" she said, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, honey." Margaret put a hand on Connie's shoulder. "You made a math joke, that's all. I didn't ..., oh, me and my utter lack of tact."

Margaret stroked Connie's hair with one hand, reaching under the counter with the other for a box of tissues. She handed it to Connie who yanked out two tissues, folded them, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "Thanks." She dropped the tissues into the waste basket under the counter and raised her arms in surrender. "I'm so stupid. Look at me." She dropped her arms to her sides. "I don't have any physical evidence. Still, I—"

"Shh." Margaret put a finger to Connie's lips and looked out the front window. "Pauline just pulled in and you and I both know you don't want her seeing you like this and babbling about it to all the others. Before you know it word will get around town faster than I do." That elicited a chuckle from Connie. "Go to the ladies room and compose yourself. When you're ready, come back out here and help us serve the good folks of Old Wachusett."

Connie nodded, but didn't move.

Margaret nudged her elbow. "Go."

Connie wiped her nose once more and then walked toward the back of the library.

"Hey," Margaret called after her. "Remember, he loves you. You'll get through this. Take it from me. You might not think so, but I know these things."

Connie kept walking without looking back, waving one hand in the air in salute to Margaret's words of encouragement. *I know these things*. Never married, never had any children, and she knows these things. Connie shook her head as she turned the corner and opened the door to the ladies room.

Chapter 16: David Flirts with Teri

David parked the Caddy in its usual spot. He took the key from the ignition, grabbed the briefcase off the passenger seat, hopped out of the car and closed the door. Regardless of how the morning had started, and in spite of the fact that it was so damn cold and it felt like it was going to snow, this was going to be a good day. For the next few hours David could let slide the nagging thoughts of Connie and the problems they'd been having recently and stop second-guessing his treatment of Josh in the kitchen. He could leave all that behind and do what he did best—teach the concrete logic of mathematics.

The academic building of Wachusett State College was a sprawling, three-story structure constructed of glass, concrete, and steel. Located on the northern boundary of Old Wachusett and nestled among the elms and maples and oaks, situated at the western edge of two hundred and fifty acres of gently rolling hills, the main academic building and its adjacent gymnasium provided exceptionally modern facilities of higher learning while not compromising the aesthetics of the environment. At least, that was according to the brochure.

David joined the faculty in 1970, five years after the college had been established, the same year he turned thirty-five. Prior to that, he enjoyed teaching high school math, but when the opportunity to teach at a higher level presented itself, he couldn't pass it up. His current position was challenging at times (as challenging as teaching linear algebra and calculus could be), but he'd learned over the years to adapt to the various scenarios he faced in the classroom—sleeping students, off-the-wall questions, and the occasional dope-head who thought it was acceptable to get high while solving matrices and integrals.

One of the better parts of the job was the office hours. He had plenty of time scheduled into his days to work on grant proposals, write papers for math journals, and work on his first book which still didn't have a working title. The subject was Archimedes and his unknowing use of the concept of calculus more than fifteen hundred years before it had been simultaneously discovered by Newton and Leibnitz. David hoped to finish the first draft next month so he could start shopping it around to various publishers, perhaps using Connie's old contacts in New York.

Assuming the two of them were still talking to each other by next month.

David stepped onto the cement walkway that ran the perimeter of the main building. A herd of students carrying textbooks and notebooks, leaving vapor trails of breath behind them, hurried through the entrance. One of the young men held the door for David. David smiled, the young man nodded. Inside, David passed the two elevators in the lobby and opened the door to the stairwell. He preferred climbing the stairs rather than riding the elevator. It gave him a chance to think for a bit longer before heading into the workday, a chance to clear his head of anything that would get in the way of his teaching.

His shoes scuffing and scratching on the concrete steps, David thought about this morning's argument with Connie. If only he could be as adaptable at home as he was in the classroom. For more than a year he'd grown more irritable and inflexible toward both Connie and Josh. It had started with Josh, arguing with him for no apparent reason other than to exert his fatherly

authority over his son. Josh needed authority, though. David knew that to be true, regardless of what Connie seemed to think. Children, no matter how old, needed to know who was in control.

Over the past few months, David's knack for instigating an argument with his son over the minutiae of life had spread to his wife. What had it been this morning? Something that carried over from last night, something Connie had said, the way she had said it in that accusatory tone she'd adopted lately. He reached the second floor and continued up to the third.

David was a man of logic. If A then B, and B then C, then what followed was A then C. Simple. Logical. But his life during the past few years had been anything but simple and logical. Things had happened that didn't have a clear cause and effect explanation. How many times had A happened, then B, only to have E, F, and goddamned G pop out of nowhere with no causal relationship between any of them. His unpredictable attitude toward Connie was a prime example. It couldn't be graphed in any kind of logical, linear, from point A to point B to point C fashion. It was utterly illogical. And frustrating.

At the third floor David opened the door, turned right, and headed down the narrow corridor. The concrete walls on each side were broken up by classrooms and modern artwork and faculty offices. His office was located at the far end, the mathematics department office at the midpoint of the corridor. Two secretaries occupied two desks in the front of the office, each responsible for four of the eight math professors. David waved at one of them, Claire Perkins, through the glass wall. She waved back, cradling a phone receiver between ear and neck. Students hung out in the hallway, some of them more than likely late for—or skipping—their first period class (David was thankful his first class didn't start until second period). Professors in their offices, students in the classrooms, it was business as usual for a Monday morning.

Teri Glazer, one of the youngest faculty members, as well as the only female math professor at WSC, stepped out of her office and turned in David's direction. When Teri had joined the faculty a year ago, David had wasted no time in appropriating the responsibility of showing her how things were done at WSC, things like how to enlist the secretaries' help when they were busy in the office and how to work the front office bureaucracy to her advantage. They had become close-working colleagues. They had become friends.

Lately, David felt that friendship getting pulled in a new direction. The most perplexing facet of the whole thing was that he wasn't at all sure which of them was doing the pulling. Another set of illogical circumstances that he couldn't explain, the difference being he wasn't sure he wanted an explanation.

"Morning, Teri." David tipped an invisible hat, the usual greeting to his colleagues. Teri hurried past without responding. David stopped and turned. "Teri?" She kept walking. "Teri." David hustled to catch up to her. "Wait a second."

Teri stopped and turned.

David hesitated before he spoke. "What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry, David." Teri sighed and slumped her shoulders. "I just...this morning has not been good."

For a woman who had a morning that had not been good, Teri Glazer still managed to come off looking attractive. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was a bit tousled but glowed nonetheless under the fluorescent hall lights, her blue eyes less carefree but no less tempting, her smile tired yet still simultaneously innocent and enticing. More women should have mornings that weren't as good to them as this one was to Teri.

"Come on." David gently touched her elbow. "Take a few minutes to vent." He started to guide her back toward his office.

Teri appeared to think about it before answering. "I appreciate the gesture, but I have to get textbooks from the bookstore for my first period class." She smiled and pulled away from David. "Thanks anyway."

"Hey." David touched her elbow again. "It's not just a polite gesture. If you need to vent to start your day in a better way...? Besides, the books will still be there even if you take a ten minute detour to David Schofield's decompression chamber." With his free hand, David motioned toward the end of the hall.

Teri smiled, the dimples on either side of the smile coming to life. "Really, David, I can't. I have to—"

David raised a hand in a half-surrender, half are-you-sure gesture.

"Well..." Teri shrugged. She looked at the students milling about in the halls, none of them seemingly paying attention to Teri and David. "All right. But just for a few minutes."

"Sure. Just a few minutes to unwind." David smiled and nodded. "Get your thoughts together."

"I'm serious, David." Teri raised her eyebrows like a mother scolding her five-year-old for not taking her seriously about stealing cookies before dinner. She followed David down the hall toward his office. "A few minutes. That's it. I need to get ready for class."

David unlocked the door to his office and stepped into the dark room. The only thing David disliked about his job was he had an office with no windows. Teri waited in the hall for him to flick on the light. He put his briefcase on the floor next to the desk and hung his coat on the hook behind the door. He turned to Teri. She stepped into the room and sat in the chair next to his desk. Leaving the door half-way opened, David pulled his chair out from behind the desk and sat facing Teri. He was close enough to offer a comforting touch, but cognizant enough to restrain himself.

"Lay it on me." David leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head, exercising all the will power he could muster to look Teri in the eyes and not let his gaze drift down to her well-apportioned curves that were not-too-well hidden under her tight, red silk blouse.

"First, my car wouldn't start this morning. Luckily, my neighbor was still home and he was able to jump me."

David did not possess anywhere near enough willpower to cancel out the grin that spread across his face.

Teri blushed. "I mean, he gave me a jump start. With his battery cables. You know what I mean."

David nodded and crossed his legs in an attempt to hide his excitement at Teri's blushing.

"Anyway," she continued, smoothing out her navy-blue skirt by pulling at the hem, "halfway here I realized I had left all my class notes at home. I had to turn around and go back to get them which caused me to get here forty-five minutes later than I had planned. When I did get here I found out that all my handouts for two of my classes hadn't been run off yet. Jill said I never gave them to her, even though I remember giving them to her last Thursday and specifically telling her I needed them for today's classes. Now I have to make copies of them in between classes because they're too busy in the office this morning to take care of it."

Teri leaned back in the chair, the skirt shifting over her smooth, bare skin. "Ugh." She tilted her head back and stretched her arms above her head, stretching her blouse well beyond the legal limits. She held the pose for a moment before leaning forward and looking directly at David, one eyebrow raised. "Satisfied?"

"Yes." That came out much too quickly, David thought.

Teri started to say something, stopped, looked at her watch, and hesitated before standing. “I have to get the books for my classes and get a start on making those copies.” She turned toward the door.

Surprised and disappointed, David stood with her. “What were you going to say?”

She turned to David. “Hmm?”

“You looked like you were going to say something. What was it?”

Teri, hands by her sides, looked like a junior high school girl caught putting a note in a boy’s locker and then having second thoughts about it. “Oh...I don’t know. Must have lost my train of thought.” She gave David a sideways glance as she turned and walked out of his office.

David tried to sort out what, if anything, had just happened. He tapped the door shut with his foot, wondering if he had read correctly that last look from Teri, and if so, what he should do about it. He remembered that lunch period in sixth grade when Sarah Mitchell, the prettiest girl in school, had winked at him from across the cafeteria. He remembered the flips and somersaults his stomach had done, the way his heart had started racing, how he had to rub his sweaty palms on his jeans. All because a girl had winked at him.

David picked up his briefcase and set it on the desk. He opened it, took out the graded exams, and stood behind the desk. With the exams in one hand, David caught himself wiping the other against his pants.

For one of the few times in his life, David Jacob Schofield was unsure of his next course of action.

Chapter 17: Edward Seeks Sanctuary

After going up to the second floor to hang up his coat and drop the briefcase in his office, Edward decided to spend time in prayerful solitude. He used to do that quite often in the mornings before the church secretary arrived for the day, and he hadn't realized until now how little of that he'd done lately and how much he missed that time. How much he needed it.

Edward stood in the sanctuary of Faith Community Church, the double wooden doors swinging closed behind him. The first thing people noticed when they stepped beyond the doors and into the sanctuary was the imposing pulpit at the front. Maurice 'Big Mo' Thompson, a long-standing congregant, current board member, and master woodworker had done a fine job creating the mahogany pulpit, making the entire congregation proud. It was a magnificent piece that contrasted beautifully with the white walls and ceiling and at the same time complemented the lighter-colored wooden pews. Arranged behind the pulpit were two rows of choir benches with an organ to the right and a piano to the left. On a good Sunday the sanctuary could comfortably fit three hundred souls.

Edward hobbled down the center aisle and sat in the front pew on the right. He set the cane between his legs and ran his hands along the polished wood. He thought of all the times he'd sat in church services in the front pew next to his mother while his father stood behind the pulpit and preached to his own congregation back in Albany.

Closing his eyes, he remembered sitting next to his mother. He could see her dressed in black, a veil hanging over her face, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks. He heard his father's baritone voice rising and falling and choking with emotion as he recited the 23rd Psalm. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.* His father had looked directly at Edward as he'd said that line, and in his father's glistening eyes Edward saw the inner struggle of a man who had pledged his loyalty to a God who had done nothing to prevent his newborn daughter, Edward's baby sister Ruth, from dying three days after she was born. Seven years old at the time, too young, perhaps, to understand all the nuances and complexities of such a struggle for a man of faith like his father, Edward was certainly old enough to recognize that the man he loved and respected was going through a very real valley of death.

Up to that point in his life, Edward had never felt so sad, scared, alone, and angry as he had that day sitting next to his mother, watching his father. He had told God how angry he was for letting his little sister die and for causing his mom to cry and his dad to be the way he was up there in the pulpit. He told God it wasn't fair. Later that day, after all the finger sandwiches were eaten and all the talking and crying had—temporarily—ceased, when Edward was lying in his bed in the dark, his mother nudged his bedroom door open and asked how he was doing. He didn't answer her, so she came into his room and sat on the edge of his bed. That was when Edward told his mother what he told God. And his mother, bless her sweet soul, had saved his faith in the Almighty that night. *Edward*, she had said, *that's quite all right. The Lord, he knows what you're going through. He knows all about unfairness. And he's just as sad and angry as*

you are, probably more so. You go ahead, Edward, and you tell God just how you feel. I assure you, he's big enough to take it.

When he was seven years old, after crying with his mother and talking to her in the quiet darkness of his bedroom, Edward realized that he would never in his life meet anyone as smart as his mother.

Edward opened his eyes and stood. He gripped his cane and climbed the three steps that brought him up to the pulpit. He stood behind it and looked down at the pews. A wave of uneasiness swept over him as he thought of his congregants having to look up to him every Sunday when he preached to them. The days of people looking up to him were over. He pictured in his mind the people that he had come to know and love and where they sat every Sunday: the Petersons on the right and half-way back with their two little girls; the Wilburs, the oldest couple in his church, a few rows behind the Petersons; the still childless Roths on the opposite side of the sanctuary, Lucy Roth making numerous trips to the ladies' room while Edward preached.

Edward hooked his cane over his right wrist and held on to the sides of the pulpit, a captain at the helm of his ship in the eye of a storm, knowing the deceptive quietness would not last long and that the worst of the storm was yet to come. "I will fear no evil." Even though his voice reverberated throughout the empty sanctuary, it lacked the authority and power of his father's. That man had been gifted with the ability to silence a crowd whether he was reading from the book of Psalms or from the Yellow Pages of an AT&T phone book. Edward relied on technique—clever phrases, timing, alliteration, and humor—to command an audience's attention. Style, words, and feeling the pulse of the crowd. Is that what it had all come down to for Edward? He doubted his father ever preached that way, relying on human talent and effort to deliver a divine message from God.

Perhaps that was Edward's problem. He couldn't remember the last time he'd delivered a message he knew to be divine, to be directly from God. Yes, his sermons were taken from the Bible, and yes, he prepared for them, but divine messages directly from God? He remembered his father spending hours in prayer throughout the week preparing for his Sunday messages. When was the last time he had spent an hour—a half hour?—praying for one of his sermons? Edward spent years watching his father deliver personal, deeply felt messages from God, and had come away learning how to preach stylish, doctrinally accurate, yet perhaps ultimately hollow sermons.

As a teen, like most boys who thought their fathers knew absolutely nothing, he had vowed he would never grow up to be like his father. At least that was one vow Edward had managed to keep.

He stepped out from behind the safety of the pulpit and limped up the middle aisle. He was going to sit in the rear pew in quiet reflection for a little while. Perhaps he would even—. Something in the middle of a pew on the left caught his attention. He side-stepped his way between the pews. It was an open Bible. He picked it up and flipped the pages to the 23rd Psalm, hoping to find comfort in the words of King David. He knew the words to it—he'd memorized it decades ago in Miss Slattery's Sunday school class—but reading it off the page, seeing the words in black, feeling the weight of the Bible in his hands, added weight to the words. He turned a page and a folded piece of paper fell out from between the pages and landed on the wooden pew in front of him. He reached over and picked it up. It was a church bulletin that had been handed out to the congregation yesterday, listing this week's meeting times, locations of home Bible studies, current prayer requests, and upcoming events. He was about to tuck it back into the Bible when he noticed a drawing on the back of it.

It felt like a punch to the gut. Nausea roiled through his stomach and up his throat. He dropped the Bible and the drawing and latched on to the pew in front of him for fear of collapsing. The drawing lay face-up on the pew. Two anatomically-correct stick figures, drawn in black, blotchy ink, lay horizontally, one on top of the other. 'Pastor Graham' was written next to the one on top, 'Mrs. Sanderson' next to the one on the bottom. The artist left nothing to the imagination as to what he or she had wanted to portray in this crude piece of obscenity.

All Edward could do was sit in the pew and fight back the bile from rising in his throat. Minutes passed before he was able to steady his breathing and feel confident he wasn't going to vomit if he moved. He reached over the pew, grabbed the drawing, ripped the obscenity in half, ripped it again, and ripped it again, until he could no longer rip the shreds he held. He stuffed them into his pants pocket, pieces falling to the floor, and heaved the Bible across the room. The pages fluttered, scraps of notes escaped and drifted to the floor like feathers from a bird that'd been shot in mid-flight. The Bible crashed into a table at the rear of the sanctuary and landed in an empty metal offering plate.

Edward stood. He held on to his cane and shuffled out of the pew and limped up the aisle, and the only thought in his mind was that he should have called his father; he should have called him when it all started. He should have called him when he'd first felt the temptation. He should have called a long time before that, back when there had still been hope that they could have rebuilt the bridges that they had burned. That Edward had not only burned but blew to smithereens with the explosive words he'd said.

The last time the two of them had talked had been the day after Lynne shot Edward in the hip and turned the gun on herself.

Edward clenched his jaw and shoved open the doors that led out of the sanctuary. He hadn't taken two steps when he felt like he'd run straight into a brick wall. The man, his back to Edward, stood at one of the display tables on the far side of the foyer, the one with stacks of gospel tracts for congregants to take and hand out to the lost during the week. The man, one hand removing a New England Patriots hat from his head, the other lifting toward the pocket of his blue mechanics work coat, turned around.

Carl Sanderson did not smile as he dropped the gospel tract he'd been reading and reached into his coat pocket.

Chapter 18: Abby Enters The Beast

Abby tugged at the hood of the parka in a vain attempt to shield her face from the cold. She hadn't been walking long and already her nose hairs were frozen. Her gloved hands were stuffed into her coat pockets and her feet were going numb. Apparently, wearing the boots with the tassels she loved so much hadn't been a good idea. Good thing she was hooking up with Josh only a few blocks away from where she lived. As uncomfortable as it would be being with him, at least she'd be warm in the car. *It's called The Beast, Abby, with a capital 'T' and a capital 'B.'* How childish does a person have to be to name his car? For a high school senior, Josh could be real immature at times. But, then again, Abby *had* dated him, had even wondered what it would be like to sleep with him, so what did that say about *her* level of maturity.

Abby shook her head.

A single snowflake, on its own journey that would soon end, drifted down in front of her. It would land on the cold, hard ground, be lost amidst all the other snowflakes that had fallen before it, all of them left to be trampled upon, dirtied by mud kicked up by passing cars and the soles of people's boots, finally shoveled aside and out of the way. Abby would soon be in Albany where she would find herself face-to-face with the cold, harsh reality of her mother's grave. She couldn't help but wonder if she was on her way to getting muddied, trampled on, and shoved to the side by whatever life would throw at her in Albany.

No two snowflakes are alike. That's what her father had told her when she was a little girl. All of them were unique, he'd said, each created by God with a specific design. *And if He cares that much about snowflakes, Abby, what does that say about how much He cares for us?* Looking up into the gray clouds, searching for more falling snowflakes, Abby had no idea what it said about God caring for her. No idea at all.

She lowered her head to watch where she was walking as she turned the corner and headed west onto Woodlawn Avenue. The familiar growl caught her attention. She looked up and there was The Beast, idling at the curb, spewing exhaust out its tail pipe. And there was Josh, in the driver's seat.

Abby slowed her pace. She pulled her hands out of her pockets and slid them out of the gloves. She approached the idling car, anxious and unexpectedly excited. She reached for the handle on the passenger door. When she touched the cold metal, she froze. *I can't do this. I can't do it. I shouldn't do it. I should be home with my father. Why did I involve Josh? What if he's changed his mind and doesn't want to go through with it? But he's here, so he couldn't have changed his mind. What if...what if—*

The engine revved. The Beast shook.

Abby bit her lower lip. She slowly curled her fingers around the handle, relishing the cold metal in her grip, letting it bring awareness and focus and life to her entire body. She sighed, opened the door, and let the knapsack slide off her back. She pulled the back of the front seat forward and heaved the knapsack onto the rear seat. The front seat fell back into place. Abby breathed in deeply of the frigid air then dropped herself into The Beast. She grasped the inside

door handle, thought once more about changing her mind, then shut the door, sealing herself inside The Beast.

The Beast growled. It spewed out mud-stained snow from under its tires and roared up the street, carrying its two unwitting passengers to their destinies. Destinies far different than the ones each of them had in mind.

Chapter 19: Kimi on Lone Man's Walk

Kimi continued on Lone Man's Walk—she knew the name from the sign next to one of the boulders at the beginning of the path—while adjusting the splint on her wrist. She'd taken one of the tip-ups, ripped the cross-pieces apart, tore off a good length of fishing line, and fashioned a crude splint. It wasn't pretty, it was awkward, but it was all she had. She thanked The Great Spirit for providing what she needed.

As she had approached the path back on the ice, traces of The Fear still lingering in the mists of her mind, Kimi had felt a distinct sensation of being drawn in the direction she was now headed. Standing at the beginning of the path, between the two boulders, she had studied the tree for a few moments. Massive, solid, an imposing figure among the tall, skinny pines, it had towered over her, its knotted trunk and gnarled branches a testament to the years of withstanding whatever storms Nature in all Her fury and wisdom had thrown at it.

The tree reminded her of what her father said to her a long time ago. *Kimi, it matters little whether you win or lose the war. It matters more how you fight each battle, and how you stand at the end, whether in victory or defeat. Remember that, my sweet song, and you will do well in this life.*

She did remember that. And so much more.

Kimi blinked away the memory and wiped her eye. Dwelling too long on her father would not bring him back. Yet, in spite of his absence, his life was entwined with hers, and she sensed it would forever be that way. She smiled at that thought.

Her stomach growled. She needed food—a squirrel, a stray cat, even a bird. It didn't take much to sustain her strength. Hopefully she would come across an animal to kill. Kimi continued following the path that tunneled its way deeper into the dense forest, the snow crunching under her deerskin-covered feet. Ten minutes later the path opened up to a clearing. Twenty yards from the opening Kimi stopped, her eye scanning the forest for the slightest movement, her ears attentive to the faintest sound.

Silence. Empty silence in the forest. It should have been quiet with a foot of snow blanketing everything, but what she heard—what she *felt*—was total and complete silence. That frightened her.

In her eighteen years, Kimi had learned that silence in the forest was never a good sign.

She started walking again. She paused every few steps. Looking. Listening. Always and especially listening. As she got closer to the clearing, a palpable apprehension emanated from the ground beneath her feet. It rose up through the hardened, crusty snow, slithered and twisted around her legs and slid its icy tentacles into her chest. She stopped. It was not The Fear this time. It was a sense that someone was watching her.

Someone...or something.

Watching...waiting.

Kimi moved forward, each step more hesitant than the previous one, each fraught with more danger. Standing at the edge of the clearing, she surveyed what was in front of her and found

nothing unusual. There was a circular clearing covered in a smooth blanket of white, no more than fifty yards in diameter. Nothing else.

The icy tentacles curled around her heart and squeezed.

Kimi held her breath as she lifted a foot to step into the clearing. She hesitated, unable to shake the feeling that she was standing in full view of someone that had been waiting for her, and was now ready for her.

Achak?

It couldn't be. If it was her brother, and she was close enough to sense him, there would be stronger emotions swirling through her. Fear. Anger. Sadness. Now, she felt two distinct, contradictory impressions within her. One was of sitting in an open field, holding a flower, her eyes fixed on her mother who was by her side. The other was of being trapped on a rock in the midst of a wide, raging river, the night shrouding her surroundings in shadowy, violent blackness.

Safety. Danger.

Kimi let out her breath.

Whatever it was that awaited her here, it had the uncanny ability to mask itself, simultaneously filling Kimi with a sense of safety and danger. But how could that be? Kimi raised her head. Pewter clouds marched across the sky above her, darker than they were earlier. Snow was coming. Kimi lowered her head and closed her eye. Silence surrounded her. Safety. Danger. How? What could possibly...?

The Totem. That's what could do this. Whatever the Totem was, it was the only thing that could make her feel conflicted feelings of safety and danger at the same time. That had to be it. The feeling of being beckoned to this place and the apprehension and anxiety she now felt. It had to be the Totem. Her heart started beating faster. The Totem was here. In the clearing, or on the edge of it, it was here. She couldn't believe she found it so soon.

But she hadn't *really* found it yet. Even when she did, she still didn't know how to use it. Kimi gazed across the clearing, hoping she would see something that would lead her to it. She searched the edge of the clearing, scanned the trees surrounding it, and peered at the white, undisturbed snow that blanketed the open space. She wanted to enter the clearing, but at the same time felt that would be dangerous. The clearing bothered her. What if—

A noise, in the distance behind her. A high-pitched, mechanical humming.

A crash.

A scream.

Chapter 20: Kenny's Last Snowmobile Ride

“Fast enough for ya, little bro? Woohoo!”

Kenny answered by tightening his grip around his brother's waist. Despite what Robert thought, Kenny knew they were going too fast, but he wasn't going to let that stop him from whooping it up along with his brother. Today was not the day to be scared of going too fast. Black branches whizzing by—coming perilously close to knocking Kenny's noggin off—and cold excitement rushing through the veins in his slight body, this was the most fun he'd had with his older brother in a long time. He couldn't believe that Robert had asked him to go out on the sled this morning. Ever since Robert had declared to the family he wanted to be called Robert instead of Bobby, his brother hadn't spent much time with him, as if he'd come down with a contagious disease.

I'm a senior this year, Kenny. An upperclassman. Sports rallies to go to, girls to see, stuff to do. Can't spend all my time hangin' 'round the house with my little brother. Know what I mean, little man?

Yeah, Kenny knew what he meant all right. Just because he was ten—soon to be eleven, though!—and small for his age, didn't mean he was stupid. The little man got it loud and clear.

But today was different. Kenny didn't know what had gotten into Robert this morning. Maybe it was because it was the first day of winter vacation, or that the folks were gone, or that the planets were in a special alignment that happened once every seventy-six years like Halley's Comet. Whatever the reason, Kenny didn't care. Robert had invited him out on the sled and here they were, just the two of them. None of Robert's friends were around to mess things up, like that jerk Bud Hayworth who mercilessly picked on Kenny while Robert did nothing but laugh and tell Kenny to just shrug it off, or that stuck-up Corina Mueller who ignored him and draped herself all over Robert like a wet blanket whenever she could. Just the two of them, and Kenny was bursting with joy. The folks had been gone since late last night due to a family emergency in New Hampshire and were not coming back until tomorrow morning, so Kenny was going to suck all the marrow he could out of this day with Robert.

Which meant he would not allow himself to be afraid at how fast they were going. Or at the prospect of their father finding out they took the snowmobile without asking permission.

Never mind about that stuff, Kenny chided himself. *Just have fun you big scaredy-cat!*

Although, they should at least slow down a bit so as not to run the sled too hard and break something. That would be safer for the Cat, if they went a bit slower. It would also be safer for Kenny. He raised a gloved hand and tapped his brother's shoulder. Robert eased up on the throttle, slowing the machine to a crawl, and twisted his head around to look over his shoulder at Kenny.

His brother yelled above the growl of the Arctic Cat. “What?”

“I think we're going too fast.” As soon as the words escaped his mouth, Kenny winced, wishing the cold wind rushing past his face would blow the words far away behind them and scatter the letters to the farthest edges of the earth so that his big brother would never hear the cowardly thing he'd just said.

One hand on the throttle, his body twisted around, Robert cocked his head. “What’d you say?”

“Never mind.” Kenny breathed a sigh of relief. Why did he always have to be such a baby about everything? Why couldn’t he enjoy a harmless snowmobile ride without worrying about crashing and getting mangled up against a tree and dying? *I think we’re going too fast.* Kenny shook his head, disgusted with himself. No wonder Robert didn’t like spending time with him.

Robert turned back to the path ahead of them. He sped up a bit, slowed when they got to a sharp corner, then throttled up, not quite as fast as they had been going, but fast enough that Kenny retightened his grip. Robert made sure Kenny wore a helmet even though Robert himself had bypassed that necessity, but a helmet wouldn’t do Kenny much good if he took a header into a tree or a frozen snowbank. That most definitely would be a major bummer.

Kenny peeked over his brother’s broad shoulder to see where the needle on the speedometer was. No use. Couldn’t see it. Too much jostling and bucking as Robert coaxed the Cat over a bumpy part of the path. *Relax kemosabe,* he told himself. *Stop being such a worrywart.*

Robert looked over his shoulder at Kenny. “Hang on!”

Kenny leaned forward into his brother’s back and before he knew it they were not on the snow anymore. They were in the air. The couple seconds stretched into eternity as they sailed through the cold air, and then their bodies crashed into each other as they landed with a bone-shaking CRUNCH! The shocks and springs and skis of the snowmobile screeched under the impact. The treads caught the snow again and spit out a plume of white powder behind them. Kenny started to fall off, grabbed hold of Robert’s arm at the last second, and fought to keep himself on the sled.

“Woohoo!” Robert ill-advisedly took his hand off the snowmobile and pumped his fist in the air. “Yeah! How’s that for a winter rodeo?” Fist still pumping, Robert looked back at Kenny. It must have been the look on Kenny’s face that caused Robert to bring the Cat down to a safer speed. “You still with me, little bro?”

Little bro. Robert was the big guy and Kenny was the little bro. Or little man, depending on Robert’s mood. Good mood, little bro. Bad mood, little man. Funny how one could be taken as the highest of compliments, the other the lowest of insults. Little bro meant that big bro was talkin’ to ya and he was referring to you as his brother, acknowledging the relationship, even owning up to the responsibility of protecting little bro. Not so with little man. It might sound like he was calling Kenny a man, but not so. It was one thing to be a little brother, quite another to be called a little man. *I’m a big man, Kenny. You’re just a little man.* Which meant Kenny would never grow up to be a big man like his brother. At least, that’s how Kenny took it. So he was small for his age. What was the big deal?

Little man.

But Robert had just called him little bro. Kenny smiled at his big brother. “You ain’t getting rid of me *that* easy big guy!” Kenny’s voice cracked on the word *that*, both justifying Robert’s use of ‘little bro’ and betraying Kenny’s true feelings at the moment: that jump had scared the living crap out of him. Going fast was one thing. Getting airborne? That was a whole new ballgame.

Robert glanced back again at Kenny. “Sure about that? You look like you’re about to blow all your cookies and I’m in your direct line of fire.”

Kenny nodded at Robert. “I’m fine.”

Robert turned back to the path. If Robert stayed on this path, which he more than likely would, it would take them to the edge of the forest where it would open up onto Indian Head

Lake which was located right smack dab in the middle of Wachusett Community Park, a section of the much larger King Philip State Forest.

Kenny let go of Robert's waist and adjusted himself into a comfortable position. He stretched his arms, flexed his gloved fingers that were getting cold, and looked up at the clouds and wished for snow. Kenny loved the snow and everything that went with it: building snowmen in the front yard, building snow forts and having snowball fights with Scott, Pudgy, Tammy, and Ben, sledding at the golf course, sweeping out snow angels as the flakes drifted down from heaven and landed around him. Snow was the coolest thing. Pun intended.

Kenny looked straight ahead at the back of Robert's hooded head. What he would give to switch places with his brother. Treasurer of the senior class (which meant Robert got to handle all the money), straight A student (Kenny would be lucky to pass fifth grade this year), star player on both the basketball and hockey teams, and, most importantly, in good with the girls. Yeah, Robert had it all going for himself. As big a pain-in-the-you-know-what as Robert could be, Kenny still looked up to him. No way would he ever admit that to Robert or anyone else, of course. No sirree.

Robert yelled over his shoulder. "I'm gonna open her up once we hit the lake."
"OK."

The lake. Normally the thought of riding over frozen Indian Head Lake would scare the living daylights out of Kenny. Not today. He wasn't going to let it happen today. Robert knew what he was doing. He wouldn't drive across the ice if it wasn't safe. They'd be all right crossing it. It was frozen enough, had been for at least a month. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Kenny lifted his butt off the seat and chanced a glance over his brother's shoulder. He could see the open space of the lake ahead of them. Up to that point the path was closely lined with tall pine trees, the lower branches having been cut years ago to make a clear path.

Nothing to fear.

But if Kenny was honest with himself, he would admit there was a lot of stuff in this life to fear. Like working in one of the local furniture factories and feeding gigantic pieces of wood into buzzing saw blades, hoping to god you didn't lose a finger like Scott Boisvert's dad who now had only seven digits. Or being a cop and working the late shift and pulling that red Corvette over for running a stop sign, only to get shot in the face at point-blank range by one of the local druggies flying high as a kite on LSD, like what happened to the police officer that used to come to Kenny's school to talk about drugs and making right decisions.

Or watching your Dad cry like a little girl while Uncle Frank's casket got lowered into the ground last year after losing his battle with the Big C, which was enough to make Kenny wonder if his dad, Uncle Frank's little bro, also had the Big C hibernating inside his body just waiting for the right time to wake itself up and stake its claim.

There were plenty of things of which to be afraid. Snowmobiling across Indian Head Lake with your older brother should not be one of them.

They were now on the lake and Kenny figured Robert would wait until they were in the middle of it to really open up the Cat. Snow-covered Wachusett Mountain stood tall a couple miles to his left. To his right, Kenny caught a glimpse of something farther out on the ice. He blinked, squinted, and finally realized it was a bunch of ice fishing tip-ups with a couple flags waving, indicating dinner was on the other end of the line. He couldn't see anyone near the tip-ups or anywhere else on the lake. Oh well. Someone would eventually come around to collect the catch of the day.

"Here we go!" Robert lifted his butt off the seat and opened it up.

Kenny locked his arms around Robert's waist. Robert sat down, Kenny got a tighter grip, and then they really took off. Kenny felt alive. Free. Fearless. They zoomed across the ice. What a name, Indian Head Lake. Kenny had nightmares about how the lake might have got that name. He shivered in his snowmobile suit just thinking about it.

Kenny straightened, looked up, saw the gray clouds swirling overhead, then lowered his head and looked out at the frozen lake spread before them. Lone Man's Walk cut into the forest on the other side, beyond that the darkness of The Pines, that part of King Philip State Forest that shrouded the ancient Indian burial ground in solitude and mystery, that part of King Philip State Forest that Kenny and the rest of the Mountain Men Gang (Scott Boisvert, Pudgy Tomlinson, Tammy Hockland, and their newest member Ben McNally) vowed they would never set foot in.

Standing at the entrance to the forest, on either side of Lone Man's Walk, were two boulders. Next to the rock on the right was the lone sentinel, the monstrous beech tree that generations of Old Wachusett kids grew up calling the Initial Tree. It stood, alone against all the pine trees behind it, the only beech tree in the entire forest, its massive arms spreading out, its thick skeletal fingers extending ever outward and upward, seeking to grasp any wayward birds that might chance to fly within its reach.

Kenny tried to estimate how long it would take before they got to the other side of the lake, but math tended to trip him up whether he was in the classroom or on a snowmobile, so he gave up and figured they'd be there soon enough. It did seem to him, though, that when they reached the other shoreline they were going to hit land at a pretty good clip, provided Robert kept on the gas, which Kenny assumed his brother would do. And Kenny knew that where the frozen lake met the shoreline there would be a slight incline, which meant another chance for the Cat to get airborne.

Kenny tightened his grip around Robert's waist, making certain his gloved fingers were locked together.

No fear.

Robert turned his head. "What?"

Kenny leaned forward and was about to tell Robert he hadn't said anything when his brother turned his attention back to the shoreline ahead of them. Then the big guy said something that confused Kenny, something that Kenny would never have figured out even if he'd lived to be a hundred years old.

"OK, little bro. If you say so."

Robert pumped his fist and belted out another "Woohoo!" He throttled up, pushing the Cat faster, faster than Kenny had ever gone on a snowmobile. Probably faster than he'd ever gone in a car even. Robert let out another war whoop. Kenny held on, screaming at his brother to slow down. Robert either ignored him, or didn't hear him above the whine of the Cat's engine. Either way, they weren't slowing down. If anything, it felt like they were accelerating. *Is he aiming for Lone Man's Walk?* Kenny wondered. *Why would he do that? What's he thinking?*

"No fear," Kenny whispered to himself with his head lowered and tucked against his brother's back. *Enjoy the ride, Kenny told himself. Have fun, stop worrying. Big bro' knows what he's doing. Stop being a baby for once in your life!*

They approached the shoreline. In seconds they were upon it, and then they were sailing through the air, although this time they were not really sailing through it as much as flying through it, going much faster than they had minutes ago when they had got airborne. This time, there were massive, deadly obstacles ahead of them—the two boulders and the Initial Tree. It didn't matter how tightly Kenny had wrapped his arms around his brother's waist. He was

bucked off the sled and sent somersaulting through the frigid air, his little bro body tumbling and twisting, mimicking his cousin's Raggedy Ann doll that he used to throw up in the air to tease her when the families got together for reunions, arms and legs spinning and flailing out of control. That's what Kenny was now—a life-sized Raggedy Ann doll at the mercy of the laws of physics.

Kenny screamed. A moment later, he realized it wasn't his voice he'd heard.

A blue blur whizzed by him. He glimpsed his brother's upside down face, an expression of surprise and sudden, terrified recognition pasted onto it. Then came the sounds. The metallic crash and crunch and scrape of the Arctic Cat slamming into something—one of the boulders or the initial tree or a hard-packed snowbank or one of the dozens of pine trees they had been headed toward—something big enough to stop the sled dead in its tracks, followed by the echoing crack of the blue blur hitting a branch, another scream—this time it was Kenny—and finally the sickening thud of the blue blur meeting a solid tree trunk.

Kenny's body hit something, an immovable object halting his not-so-unstoppable body, knocking the wind out of him. He crumpled to the ground, the hard snow doing nothing to soften the landing. His head throbbed. His vision went haywire with white and gray and black and blue flashing in and out of focus. His head started spinning and his ears started ringing.

Snow started falling.

Kenny heard a rustling, or a muffled flapping, as if someone were waving a big, fluffy quilt above his head.

After that...everything stopped. There was...

...cold silence...

....and a wisp of a thought of what his dad would say....

.....and stillness.....

.....his eyes closing.....

.....getting colder.....

.....no fear.....

.....silence.....

And then there was...

.....darkness.....

Chapter 21: Connie, Margaret, and the Mayor's Wife

Connie hung up the phone in her office and went to the front desk. Margaret was checking out books for Mrs. Morgan, Pauline was on the phone at the reference desk, William was restacking books, and Phyllis, who usually worked in the office processing new books, was helping a gentleman with the microfiche reader. A young woman with waist-length, strikingly black hair and deeply tanned skin—a woman whom Connie did not recognize—stood browsing at the magazine and newspaper racks. Everyone was busy, but for a Monday morning, it was relatively slow. Looking out the window, Connie saw it was starting to snow, which might explain the morning's lack of usual patrons.

"Oh, there you are, Constance." Mrs. Morgan—one of only two people in the world who regularly used Connie's birth name—adjusted her red gloves and buttoned her white faux fur coat. "Perhaps you could be of assistance. I've had my name on the waiting list for *The Thorn Birds* for quite some time. Can you tell me when it will become available?" She tucked a tuft of rebellious silver hair back up under her hat and patted it to make sure it stayed in place.

"Well, let's see." Connie walked around the desk to check the reserve file.

Mrs. Morgan followed her on the other side of the desk. She leaned toward Connie and cast a sideways glance at Margaret. "Margaret said I'm fourth on the list. Is that correct?" She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "And if so, can that be *right*?" Her eyes shifted to Margaret again who was now busy with another patron, then back to Connie. "As I said, I've been on the list for *quite* some time now." She straightened herself and placed her gloved hands on the desk, one on top of the other.

Connie caught the look that Pauline—phone cradled between shoulder and ear—shot at her from across the room, indicating Margaret. Even without the look, Connie knew what was going on.

"I'm afraid Margaret is correct, Mrs. Morgan." Connie held up four index cards, the fourth one with Mrs. Morgan's name on it. "As for it being right, I'm not exactly sure what you mean by that. Rest assured," Connie nodded, placing a hand on Mrs. Morgan's gloved hands, "we do have multiple copies, and we don't allow renewals on books with waiting lists, so it shouldn't be too much longer." Connie smiled and withdrew her hand. "It is a very popular book, Mrs. Morgan." She slipped the reserve cards back into the file before Mrs. Morgan asked to see them, which would not have been out of character for her to request.

"I suppose." Mrs. Morgan huffed, tapping her red fingers on the desk. "I suppose I'll just keep waiting like everyone else. Though, I must tell you Constance, lately it does seem that I have had to wait an inordinately long time for the books I put on reserve." Mrs. Morgan adjusted her hat, tilting it just so. "I do trust that you are doing your best, Constance, and that's all the good citizens of our fair city can ask of you." She nodded. "I will wait patiently." Mrs. Morgan picked up her small stack of books. "Thank you, Constance, and good day." Mrs. Morgan said nothing as she passed by Margaret and exited the library.

"*I trust that you are doing your best, Constance. Thank you, Constance, and good day.*" Not smiling at the whispered mockery, Connie turned to Margaret.

“Margaret, if you wouldn’t mind.” Connie walked around the front desk toward the office and motioned with her head for Margaret to follow. “Pauline.” She waited for Pauline, who was still on the phone, to acknowledge her. “Margaret will be back in a moment.” Pauline nodded, and Connie caught the beginning of a grin.

Connie waited for Margaret to enter the office before closing the door. She kept one hand on the knob and the other planted on her hip. “Please tell me you haven’t been skipping over Mrs. Morgan on the reserve lists.”

Margaret started to answer, stopped, shrugged.

Connie sighed. “Margaret.” She shook her head. “You are a wonderful friend and a great coworker, and I know the history between you and Mrs. Morgan, but this has gone on long enough. I cannot have a city employee playing childish mind games with the mayor’s wife.”

Margaret snapped her fingers and pointed at Connie. “Gotcha, boss.” She was about to say something else, but stopped when she saw Connie wasn’t laughing or smiling or exuding any sort of happy vibes at all.

“As funny as it may be in a twisted library humor sort of way, and as much as Mrs. Morgan may deserve it, it nonetheless has to stop.”

In all seriousness—well, maybe not *all* seriousness, but as close to it as she could get under the circumstances—Margaret wiped the smirk off her face with one hand and said, “I will henceforth cease and desist from tampering with Mrs. Morgan’s reserve requests.” She seemed to get the message that Connie was serious, although that did not stop her from playfully rolling her eyes as she walked around Connie to leave the office.

Connie let go of the doorknob. “I saw that,” she said in a more relaxed voice. “Don’t go too far. City Hall called a few minutes ago.”

Margaret spun around, mouth agape, eyes wide.

“No, it wasn’t the mayor calling to inquire as to why his wife was getting the runaround by our resident psychotic librarian. It was Stella in the city clerk’s office. Apparently there’s a major storm coming that has the potential for ‘significant accumulation’ and the mayor is closing all city offices early. You tell Pauline that you both can leave as soon as you finish what you’re doing. I’ll tell Phyllis and William.”

“OK, boss.” Margaret opened the office door and looked over her shoulder at Connie. “Don’t forget Claire downstairs.”

Connie snapped her fingers, pointed at Margaret, and winked. “Gotcha.”

Chapter 22: Carl Questions Edward

Edward let out the breath he'd been holding since he'd come out of the sanctuary and found Carl standing in the church foyer withdrawing a metallic object from his coat pocket. Carl unscrewed the cap, raised the flask to his mouth, and swallowed. He capped it, stuck it back in his pocket, and dropped his hands to his sides. If it had been the late 19th century and they were living in the Wild West, Edward would've expected Carl to say, "Draw."

Edward cleared his throat. "Well." He looked at his watch. "I, uh, usually use this time before anyone else gets here, to, uh, spend some quiet time in the sanctuary." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "To pray. Clear my mind, get a sense of what the Lord has for the week, and prepare for my message on Sunday."

"Huh." Carl stepped toward him. "That so."

Edward scratched his calf with his cane. "That's why I don't normally schedule appointments this early in the morning."

"Does a man change over time?" Carl's arms hung motionless at his sides.

Edward stopped scratching the itch. He stared at Carl. "I...ah...." He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "I don't under—"

Carl chuckled, but didn't smile. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

Edward looked at his watch, adjusting the flexible, metal, silver-plated strap that pinched his skin.

"Ed—I can call you Ed, right? I mean, considering everything that's happened between you, me, and Jess, calling you Pastor Graham, or Reverend Graham, or whatever the hell you call yourself seems too damn formal. Don't you think?"

Edward wished Carl would move his arms or hands. He could not shake the uneasiness that came with hearing the words filled with an underlying foreboding and not having them accompanied by hand gestures or even facial expressions. Edward swallowed. He nodded. "Ed is fine, Mr. Sanderson." Edward straightened his posture, determined to show that, as angry as Carl was at him—and he had every right to be angry, with that Edward would not argue—there was a certain level of decorum needed in a situation like this to keep emotions under control.

"Good. That's good." Carl stepped closer to Edward, hands still at his sides, eyes steady, voice calm in its cadence and tone. "Now, Ed. I know you didn't expect me here this morning. I know you don't want me here this morning. I can see that. Thing is, I don't care. Tell you the God's-honest truth, I don't want to be here either. But circumstances, being what they are, dictate that I be here. There's things that need to be said, and the sooner we get on with it, the better." Carl angled his head toward the stairs.

Edward got the not-so-subtle hint. "Very well, then."

This was not good. Carl Sanderson drinking, the two of them upstairs and alone. Edward couldn't smell any alcohol, but he doubted it was Kool-Aid in that flask. Carl did not appear to be drunk, but that didn't mean he wasn't unsteady.

Edward swallowed again and tightened his grip on the cane. The warm, smooth texture of the wood that he had gripped for the past fifteen years offered a small amount of comfort, as if

conveying to Edward that, if it came to it, he could use the cane as a weapon against this man that had taken it upon himself to invade his personal, private time.

Limping around Carl and toward the stairs, Edward considered calling the police. He could ask Carl to wait outside the office while he called to check on Abby who was home alone this morning. Surely Carl would understand that and not question it. He could call the police and tell them...tell them what, exactly. *Hello, officer. This is Pastor Graham at Faith Community Church. There's a man here in my office, I think he's been drinking...no, he doesn't appear drunk...no, I don't know what he's drinking, I don't smell any alcohol, but he's got a flask. No, he hasn't threatened me. At least, not yet. Officer, you don't understand. You see, I slept with this man's wife. I—, officer? Hello? Hello?*

Edward definitely didn't feel comfortable with Carl here, but the man hadn't committed any crime. There was nothing he could tell the police that would get an officer here. Besides, did he honestly think that Carl would believe him about calling to check on Abby?

Edward climbed the stairs. Carl followed. Edward opened the glass doors to the main office, hobbled around the secretary's desk, and opened the door to his office. His briefcase was still on the floor next to the desk, his suit coat draped over the chair, the notebooks and books on his desk apparently untouched. Evidently, Carl hadn't come up here to snoop around before confronting Edward downstairs.

Not waiting to be ushered in, Carl followed Edward into the office. Carl stood a couple inches taller than Edward, was about ten years younger, and dressed in his mechanics clothes—blue Dickies, white buttoned shirt with his name sewn in red script above the breast pocket, and work boots—he was the epitome of the American blue-collar worker. Carl made no move to remove his work coat.

“Please, Mr. Sanderson.” Edward motioned to the four wooden chairs arranged in a square in one corner of the office. “Have a seat.”

Carl sat in one. Edward sat opposite Carl, resting his cane against the arm of the chair. Sitting opposite each other, Edward hoped the closeness of the chairs would calm Carl's emotions. The entire office was designed in such a way to imbue the room with an atmosphere of comfort that would encourage emotional intimacy. People did not visit their pastor to chat about the weather or sports or politics. They came with heavy hearts looking for wisdom, encouragement, perhaps redemption, and, sadly, in most cases, simple validation. To that end, every piece of furniture was a shade of light brown, the walls were painted ochre, the desk and chairs mahogany. There were a few pastoral paintings placed unobtrusively around the room, again mostly in shades of brown with a hint of light green in the leaves and grass. The lighting was subdued. One wall was lined with bookshelves holding Bibles, textbooks, commentaries, histories, Christian-living books, and biographies.

Edward looked to Carl, waiting for him to begin. He didn't, so Edward did. “Carl, I know—”

“Ed, I don't care what the hell you think you know about me, what I feel, or what I've been through. No matter what you think you know, I guarantee it's a helluva lot worse.” Carl placed his hands on the armrests, his fingers curling around the ends. “You just sit there and keep your mouth shut for once. You can do that, can't you?”

Edward did not appreciate the tone. Anger replaced his anxiety. He swallowed, nodded, telling himself that if Carl disrespected him again he *would* call the police, regardless of what Carl would think or do. Carl could be upset with him, but there was no call for disrespect here. None at all. He nodded his answer.

“Good.” Carl paused. He did not blink, his throat did not move. Finally, he asked the question. “What the hell were you thinking when you were having sex with my wife?”

Of all the things Edward thought Carl might say, this was not one of them. There was no answer for it. There was no explanation, no apology, nothing he could say that would satisfy Carl. More than that, Edward couldn’t answer the question because he didn’t know the answer himself.

“I asked my darling wife that same question. I asked her what *she* was thinking when she was having sex with *you*. Unlike you, Ed, she answered me. It was obvious she had been thinking about it. More than I can say for you.” Carl looked away from Edward, then continued with his head bowed. “Jess and I’ve been married for ten years.” Carl raised his head and narrowed his eyes at Edward, a lion zeroing in on its prey. “Ten years. We might not have a perfect marriage, but it’s been a satisfying one. We’ve done everything we know to do to make it work.” He paused. His hands worked the ends of the armrests. In a lowered voice, he repeated the four words that sounded simultaneously full of hope and fear. “We make it work.”

Edward’s mouth was dry. His palms were clammy. It wasn’t the threat of physical danger that was causing his anxiety, so much as it was the bare fact that he had no idea what to say to Carl. There was nothing he could think of that would make things right with the man sitting across from him. There was no amount of rationalization or justification that would explain Edward’s actions to Carl.

“Perhaps I didn’t ask the question in a clear manner. Let me rephrase it.” Carl tightened his grip on the armrests and leaned forward. “What, *exactly*, were you thinking when you tried stealing my wife from me?”

“Carl—” Edward’s voice caught in his throat. He swallowed, got his voice uncaught, and continued. “Carl, I had no intention of stealing your wife. I was just....”

“Just banging my wife.”

Edward wondered if his eyes betrayed the emptiness he felt in his soul.

Carl leaned back in the chair. “Did you think you were making love to her?”

Carl paused a moment, stood, shoved his hands into his work coat pockets, and hovered over Edward. Carl’s fingers worked in both pockets and Edward could hear metallic clinking noises that sounded like loose change. Edward knew the flask was in one pocket, and he assumed the loose coins were in the other.

“Did you think you were making love to my wife, and that she, in turn, was making love to you?”

Edward shifted his eyes to meet Carl’s. The man was still standing over him, and it was Carl’s posture that brought the threat of physical danger to the forefront of his mind once again. “Carl.” Edward raised his hands as if in surrender. “I don’t—”

“There’s a world of difference, Ed.” Carl moved so that he was now behind the chair he had been sitting in. Edward breathed an inward sigh of relief. “A world of difference,” Carl continued, glaring down at Edward. “I,” he pointed to his chest, “I make love to my wife.” Carl pointed at Edward. “You had sex with her. Understand?” Carl gripped the back of the chair, applying enough pressure to make his knuckles turn white. “No one except me makes love to my wife, Ed. No one.” Carl let go of the chair. The color returned to his knuckles and the rest of his trembling hands.

“Carl, I...I never said I made love to her.”

Carl gripped the chair again and leaned over it. The muscles around his eyes tensed. Edward lifted his hands from his lap and placed them on the armrests of the chair, readying himself. A

grin, shaded with a hint of satisfaction, slid across Carl's face. "It was just sex, then. Use my wife to get off on, satisfy your horny lusts, wham bam thank you ma'am, and then to hell with Jessica Sanderson and her husband. But be sure to come next Sunday and don't forget to drop a few bucks in the offering plate as it goes by and, oh, I'll see you at work first thing Monday morning, Jessica." Carl pushed away from the chair, causing it to rock back and forth and come close to toppling over. "That how it was, Ed?" Carl stood straight and took a deep breath. He strode to the bookshelves and ran his hand along the spines as if looking for a specific title. He stopped at the shelf that held various Bible translations—King James, New American Standard, The Good News Bible, the Revised Standard. He grabbed the King James and looked over his shoulder at Edward.

Edward held his head up and met Carl's indignation with his own. "It was not like that."

"I didn't ask what it was *like*. I asked what you were *thinking*."

Edward did not answer. He understood the man's anger, the jealousy raging within him, but he didn't need to sit here and take this psychological abuse. If Carl wanted to talk, that was one thing. But this was not talking. Edward started to stand.

"Sit down."

Halfway up, Edward froze. He looked to Carl, half unbelieving at what he'd just been told to do and the tone he'd been told it in, half believing that Carl was about to hurl the Bible at him. Calling the police now seemed like a good idea that he should have followed through on ten minutes ago. If he tried it now, it would only exacerbate the situation. Besides, judging from Carl's demeanor, he wouldn't let Edward get anywhere close to dialing the number. Edward glanced over his shoulder at the phone on the desk. He looked back to Carl, and for the first time in his life truly understood the cliché if looks could kill.

Edward lowered himself back into the chair. Keeping his eyes on Carl, he reached for his cane.

The same grin crept back onto Carl's face. He stepped toward Edward and opened the black Bible, speaking as he turned the pages one by one, his focus zeroed in on the book in his hands. "I've talked to my wife, Ed." He looked briefly at Edward, still turning pages, and then focused back on the Bible. "Jess and I'll get through this. I don't know how long it'll take, or how messy it'll get, but I can tell you that the two of us'll get through it." He turned a couple more pages, held his place with a finger, and turned toward Edward. "I love my wife and she loves me. We're in this marriage for the long haul, not just for one night." Carl sat opposite Edward, resting the closed Bible on one knee. He leaned forward. "It was just one night." He raised an eyebrow. "Right, Ed?"

Edward closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes."

"Figure I should ask, in case you've been lying about that, too." Carl pulled the Bible into his lap. He placed his other hand flat on the Bible's cover. He pulled one leg up and crossed it over the other. His eyes wandered around the office before settling on Edward. His fingers drummed on the black leather cover of the Bible. "Used to be you could trust a preacher of the Good Book to tell the truth."

Edward sat up to respond, but Carl cut him off. "I'm not a religious person, Ed. Never found the practical use for it. But my wife is. Has been ever since she was a kid and got confirmed at her parent's church. And that's been fine with me seeing how she never really took it too seriously. That is, up until a few years ago when she asked if I would mind if she started coming to this church. She wanted to get closer to God. I said sure, go ahead. One night, after attending for a few months, she tells me she's been born again. I say fine, honey, whatever floats your

boat. As long as you're not gonna try and guilt me into coming on Sunday mornings or give up beer or start forking over half my paycheck to the church, you can get born again as many times as you'd like. She thought that was kind of funny. She appreciates a good sense of humor. Anyway, a year ago she asks if she can take over the secretary's job seeing how the woman who had the job at the time was moving. Seeing how we needed the money, I gave her the OK." Carl paused. He rubbed a hand over his face and through his wavy blonde hair. "Ed, I had no problem with her doing any of that stuff with this church. None at all."

Carl paused again. He tried continuing. "Way I figured..." He cleared his throat, struggling to keep control. "Way I figured it, what could it hurt?" He turned away from Edward to wipe his eyes with the back of one hand. He cleared his throat again. He turned back to Edward. "What could it hurt?"

Edward closed his eyes. *Dear God*, he prayed silently, *what have I done to this man?* Edward kept his eyes closed for another moment, afraid of what he would see if he opened them. When he finally did, Carl was looking at him. That's when the full enormity of what he had inflicted upon Carl Sanderson took hold of Edward.

The anger and resentment and fear that had built up in Edward since he'd come face-to-face with Carl downstairs in the foyer dissipated. Replacing it was a feeling that—sadly—he could not remember the last time he felt for anyone: empathy. He saw himself getting up from the chair and, without leaning on his cane, wrapping his arms around Carl in a hug and allowing the tears that had been pent up for months to finally flow, bringing with them the salty taste of sorrow and repentance, sprinkled with the sweet aftertaste of the possibility of forgiveness, redemption, and ultimately reconciliation and making things right for Carl.

Unsure of what he was about to do, Edward nevertheless rose from the chair.

Carl pulled a retractable ball-point pen from his shirt pocket, clicked the top of it with his thumb, and that brief, imperceptible plastic click shattered the moment more than a bolt of lightning striking directly between the two men ever could.

Edward dropped back into the chair.

Carl opened the Bible to the page he still had marked with his finger and underlined a passage. He dog-eared the page, stood, clicked the pen, put it back in his breast pocket, and dropped the closed Bible onto Edward's lap. "It's a sad thing when a supposed man of God can stand in front of people every Sunday and preach against sin, then retreat to his office during the week where maybe he'll listen to a few people talk about their own private failures, but when confronted with his own sins he can't say nothing worth a damn about it."

Carl stood in front of Edward, unblinking, unmoving. Then a hand clenched into a fist. Edward's stomach tied itself into a knot. The fist unclenched. Edward blinked and sighed. Carl grinned as he walked to the door. He gripped the knob, pointed at the Bible on Edward's lap. "There's some good reading in that book. Good advice I might follow up on some day."

Carl opened the door and walked out, leaving the door open.

Edward stared at the blank doorway, seeing a gaping mouth that he prayed wouldn't reach out and swallow him whole. After a few minutes he opened the Bible and read the underlined words. Then, Bible in hand, he pushed himself up from the chair with the aid of his cane, limped around the desk, sat in his comfortable chair, and laid the Bible in front of him. He stared at the verse underlined in black ink, the line so precisely drawn that if Edward hadn't been present to witness it he would have sworn Carl had used a ruler.

Ten minutes later, snow falling steadily outside the office window, Edward still did not know what to make of the message—the threat?—that Mr. Sanderson had hand delivered only minutes ago.

And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

Chapter 23: Kimi Finds Kenny

Kimi sprinted the length of Lone Man's Walk, back in the direction from which she'd come, toward the sound of the crash and the scream. Her physical agility served her well on the snow-covered, infrequently travelled path, allowing her to keep her balance and hit all the footprints she'd already made on her previous trek. Her body was also adjusting to the trip through The Passage, which, even though it had lasted only seconds, affected the body such that it often took an entire day for full recovery. In certain instances, such as that Warrior who had opened his eyes while travelling through The Passage, recovery never came.

But Kimi was not like that Warrior nor the others who had experienced physical problems travelling through The Passage. Not that she was physically superior to them in the sense of being stronger or faster or in better health. Her superiority was in a different realm altogether. When she was a young girl Kimi had discovered the difference between her and the rest of her tribe.

As she ran, afraid of what she would find at the end of Lone Man's Walk, her thoughts went back to that cool autumn day when she was seven and the leaves were turning color and falling and the sun had made most of its journey across the sky to its nightly resting place. To the day she'd climbed a tree to escape a bear she'd come across while alone in the forest. Alone in this exact same forest, albeit in a different time. She would never forget that day and what had happened to her when she'd climbed the tree as far up as she dared. She had looked down. Twenty feet below, the bear was climbing the tree. Terrified that she was moments away from being eaten alive, Kimi climbed higher. Without looking, she put her foot onto a dead branch. It broke, and she fell. She bounced off one branch, tried to grab another, she kept falling and she screamed out for help and...and...help came.

For months after that day, Kimi replayed the scene over and over in her mind, sure that she had witnessed something that couldn't *possibly* have happened. She revisited the tree many times after that, climbing to the exact spot from where she'd fallen, lowering herself to the spot where she'd stopped falling, and there was no explanation other than what she eventually came to accept. The tree had caught her. It was that simple. As simple as a tree catching a person and saving her life could be. Kimi had fallen from more than forty feet above the ground and had stopped falling half-way down, a couple of feet above the bear waiting for its lunch to fall into its gaping jaws.

The tree caught her. She had tried stopping herself after bouncing off the first branch, but had been unable to grab hold of any of the branches as she kept falling. Her face and arms and hands got scraped and cut and bruised. She'd come close to losing one of her eyes to a smaller branch—it would be nine years later when her left eye would be cut from its socket—that struck a glancing blow to her upper cheek. She hadn't been able to stop from falling, and that was when the two branches moved. There had been no wind, no one else with her. The bear still below her, no birds or other animals within sight, so it could only have been the tree that snatched her from the air as a little child might snatch a play doll that had been thrown to her. A branch-hand under

each arm, twigs curling around her arms and holding on to her hands, her legs dangling between the branches suspending her over open space.

The tree *caught* Kimi.

Then the tree hit the bear. After she'd been dangling for a few moments, and after she'd regained a sense of what had happened and where she was, she looked down to find the bear. It had still been climbing, was no more than two feet away from her dangling feet, when another branch moved and struck the bear in its side, not hard enough to kill it, but more than enough to knock it out of the tree. It was as if—and this was another thing that Kimi would wrestle with for weeks following that day—the tree wanted to save Kimi without killing the bear. It only swept the bear off the branch, sending it tumbling to the ground. The bear had looked up once at Kimi and roared when a lower branch made a threatening move toward it. At that, the bear had lumbered into the forest without looking back.

A tree—a *tree!*—had moved its branches and caught her and saved her life. One of the most troubling and unexpected outcomes from that incident was the change in her brother. She had gone back to her family that day and spoke nothing to them of what had happened. She told them of the bear chasing her up a tree and her falling—she couldn't hide all the scars—but she told her parents that she landed on a branch, regained her balance, and sat and waited for the bear to eventually give up and leave. Her mother and father believed her. There was no reason not to. But, Achak.... After hearing her story, his attitude toward her changed. He never asked her about the incident, but in his eyes there was disbelief, suspicion. And...fear? Kimi had never been able to figure out why Achak had those feelings toward her, though she could now sense that she was close to understanding it a little more, once she found him.

She would like nothing more than to stop and soak in the beauty of the falling snow. Let it fall on her, around her—and in ways that she knew but did not understand—through her. Snow was cleansing, impartially blanketing everything in a sea of pure white. Snow was timeless, a lace curtain descending from the sky, settling on the ground, then disappearing back into the sky. Snow was cold, numbing the senses to everything else except itself, not allowing Kimi to focus on anything else outside of the flakes falling on her skin, cold pinpricks that centered her in the present moment.

She couldn't let her mind wander anymore. She usually wasn't this wayward with her thoughts. Kimi never had a problem focusing on—and finishing—whatever it was she was doing. Today, it was difficult to keep her mind on what she needed to do. The Passage. It did strange things to people, and maybe for her it was mixing up her thinking. *Concentrate!* she scolded herself. *Find Achak. Find the Totem. That is what is important right now.*

Kimi came to the end of Lone Man's Walk and arrived at Indian Head Lake. Again, she felt the Fear. It crept inside her. It taunted her. It warned her. Her heart started beating faster. Her breath came in shorter gasps. *Calm*, she thought. *Peace. The Great Spirit is with you. There is nothing to fear. Calm. Peace.* After a few moments, her heart rate slowed and her breathing became steady.

Through the falling snow, Kimi approached the tree that was different from the pines. A beech tree, if she remem—

The pile of clothing crumpled at the foot of the tree cut off her thoughts. Winter coat, snow pants, boots, and a lone glove separated from the pile. Kimi stood motionless, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. She stepped toward the clothing. She stopped. Knelt next to them. Extended a hand, but stopped herself before touching it, withdrawing her hand. What if...? *You*

have to do this, Kimi told herself. *You can do this*. She reached across the clothing. She tugged at a coat sleeve and lurched back when the body rolled toward her.

It was the face that caused Kimi to scream and bury her face in her hands and turn away. Minutes passed before she could uncover her eye and open it. She was still turned away from what had frightened her. She was looking at the trees surrounding the lake, at the white snow and the dark silver clouds and all she could think of was it couldn't be Achak she had just looked at. It just couldn't be. But it was his face she'd seen. As out of place as it had looked, as unexpected as it had been, it was her brother's face nestled within the hood of the coat, his head tilted at a disturbing, unnatural angle that told her everything she needed to know about whether her brother was alive or dead.

But how could it be? How had Achak come to wear such clothing? And how had he... No. something was not right. Closing her eyes and inhaling deeply, Kimi turned to face her brother. She exhaled, opened her eyes, and didn't know whether she should be relieved or more frightened than she'd ever been in her life.

The face was *not* that of Achak. She did not recognize the boy—a *boy*, not much older than her—but it certainly was not her brother. But it *had* been Achak. She was certain of it. Even though she'd looked away, she would know her brother's face and it *had* been Achak she had seen. And now it wasn't. It was someone else, and Kimi did not know what that meant for her. How could she have mistakenly thought it was Achak? Had she hallucinated? Maybe she was getting too hungry and tired and thirsty and it was affecting her senses. She always relied on her hearing more than any of her other senses, and she knew having only one eye limited her, but for certain she had seen Achak and now it was not Achak and that meant she was seeing things that weren't there and no matter *what* the reason that was definitely not a good thing.

Kimi turned away from the boy, and it was then that she saw the machine. A snowmobile. She'd learned about such machines—and many others—from the Elders and Warriors who had travelled through The Passage over the years and had shared with the tribe what they had learned. The front snow skis of this particular machine were twisted and mangled, metal pieces scattered beyond the tree with larger pieces rammed against it, and it didn't take long for Kimi to figure out what had happened. The snowmobile's tracks came from across the lake and seemed to aim straight for the tree until they stopped and simply were no more. She looked closer. Where the tracks ended was a slight incline where the frozen lake met the snow-covered shore. The snowmobile had got airborne. But...why? Why would the boy have aimed straight for the tree? He must have seen it.

A gust of wind blew hair and snow into Kimi's face. She brushed the strands of hair away and wiped the wetness from her cheeks. She turned toward the tree. It stood, unmoving against the wind and the snow and the machine that had crashed into it. Its lower branches still held inches of frozen snow. It had been unshaken by the crash. Studying the tree, something about it bothered Kimi, something...unseen that crept into her thoughts, a sense that she was seeing something that wasn't right, or...or not seeing something that should be there, or that *was* there.

She shook her head. First seeing Achak's face, now this. *It's a tree*, Kimi told herself. *There's nothing about it that's out of place. A huge, strong tree, nothing more.* And yet, Kimi felt compelled to step toward it. Her foot crunched into the crusted snow. *What is it that—*

A rustling noise. Kimi swiveled and raised her hands to shield her face and ward off an attack. She set her feet as firmly as she could on the crusty snow. She scanned the surroundings and tuned her hearing. Open space in front of her, snow-covered trees on the left and right and

behind her, gray clouds marching onward above her. She saw nothing threatening, heard nothing out of the ordinary. But there had been a sound. A—

There it was again, but this time it was different. It sounded like...like someone groaning. It came from the other side of the tree. Hands still raised, Kimi turned. She stepped around the tree. A dozen feet away, near the edge of the forest, was another set of clothing, although not crumpled like the other. A black pile that Kimi had been blind to earlier when she had been too focused on the boy and too intent on trying to figure out what had happened. She hadn't completely taken in her entire surroundings. She would be wise to not let that happen again.

More groaning. Movement. A bare hand raised itself, a shaky pale finger extending toward the gray clouds. Kimi lifted her head in the direction of the raised finger. Circling no more than a hundred feet above her was a bird. A large bird, big enough to be seen through the falling snow. A vulture, maybe an eagle.

Kimi lowered her eye to the hand. Then she looked at the face. Another boy's face, this time not Achak's. This face younger than the other one. The eyes opened. Kimi stepped toward the boy and leaned over him. The eyes blinked. He was alive. Thank The Great Spirit he was alive. She started to kneel so she could ask him how badly he was hurt when she saw his eyes widen and his mouth start to open. His finger still pointed up.

Kimi turned her attention to the sky. Definitely an eagle, albeit one of tremendous size. And it was diving straight for her. With no time to think, her reflexes taking over, Kimi fell on the boy and cradled his head into her shoulder. She ducked barely in time as it swept thunderously over her head. A second later there was searing pain in her left shoulder. Resisting the impulse to lift her head to see how badly she was wounded, Kimi curled herself around the boy to give the eagle as small a target as possible and yet keep as much of the boy protected as she could. Again, she heard the massive wings. Another slash of the talons, this time on the arm of her already injured shoulder. Kimi flinched and clenched her teeth, wanting desperately to grab at the hot pain burning her arm, yet knowing she could not. She had to protect the boy and not concern herself with her own injuries. But her resolve did nothing to prevent the cold wind and stinging snow from intensifying the pain on her exposed flesh.

She could not keep this up for long. The eagle would eventually strike her neck or head, and from the force of the blows already inflicted on her, Kimi knew she would not be able to withstand that. She had to move. In the open, Kimi was powerless.

The trees. She needed to get to the trees. They were only a dozen feet away. She could do it. She'd have to lift the boy and carry him, but she could do it. *My wrist*, she thought. *How can I lift him with my wrist and now my shoulder injured?* Not seeing or hearing the eagle bearing down on her, Kimi raised her head and whispered a prayer to The Great Spirit. She rolled to her knees and wedged her good hand under the boy's limp body. She inhaled, worked the hand of her injured arm under the other side of the boy—*Oh, Great Spirit it hurts, it hurts so much, help me to endure*—and grimaced and braced herself. She heaved the boy up and over her shoulder, and screamed as searing pain shot through her shoulder and arm and wrist.

Kimi steadied the boy against her shoulder and stood. The boy shifted, and she fell backward. The snow crunched beneath her. She opened her eye, blinked at the falling snow, focused. The eagle swooped into view. It turned, aimed, and dove for her. She had enough time to wriggle out from under the boy, and that was all. She couldn't get on top of him to shield him from the attack. His entire backside lay exposed to the extended talons swooping toward him. At the next to last second the talons shifted toward her head. At the *last* second Kimi turned away

from certain death. The talons stabbed at the snow where her head had been, leaving a deep, blood-stained slash mark.

Shoving her hands under the boy and ignoring the pain that engulfed her entire arm, Kimi hefted him over her shoulder again and stood. This time, she did not fall. She ran toward the cover of the trees, stumbled, but kept her balance. She ran a few more steps, caught her foot on a rock or chunk of frozen snow, and fell forward. The eagle swept over her head, its talons slashing at empty air. She twisted her head, looked up and behind her, and there it was, not more than fifty feet away, turning sharply in the air and coming back for her. She rose for the third time and ran. The trees were within reach, only a few feet away. She could make it. Almost there, almost—

Kimi felt the force of the blow, though it wasn't a direct hit on her body. She turned her head. The boy's hood was gone, torn from the coat. His hair was matted to his head by a dark, wet splotch. Kimi kept running. The wind howled at her, throwing snow in her face.

WHUMP!

Three more steps. She closed her eyes against the pinpricks of the snow assaulting her.

WHUMP! WHUMP!

She could do it. She *would* do it. Two more steps. More pain. More wind. More snow. The elements attacking her, working in tandem with the eagle. Everything working against her.

WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!!

One more step. One more breath.

Kimi lunged forward into the dense forest, not bothering to find the clear path that was Lone Man's Walk, not needing to. She didn't worry about getting slashed by the protruding branches that pointed their razor edges at her. She didn't have to. The branches parted as she ran, creating a clear path, closing in behind her as they settled back to their original positions as if they hadn't moved at all.

In the open, Kimi was powerless to defend herself against such an adversary as this eagle. But, surrounded by trees? That, fortunately for Kimi and the boy, was an entirely different matter.

Chapter 24: David and Ted Brimfield

David entered the classroom. He dropped the exams and notes onto the metal table at the front of the room and did a quick head count. Half of his twenty students were present, the other half no doubt using the cold weather or a weekend hangover as an excuse to skip class. Their loss, not his. Of the ten who dared show up this morning, only one had done well enough on the exam to earn an A. After that there was one B, one C, six Ds, and one F.

“Professor Schofield?” Amy, in her usual front row seat, raised her hand, but didn’t wait for David to recognize her. “Are we getting our exams back today?”

Leave it to the A student to ask the question with the obvious answer. David sat in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “Yes, Amy, you are getting your exams back today.” He nodded at the stack. “They’re right here.” He smiled at Amy, who lowered her hand without any hint of embarrassment. “You may all come up and get your exams. As per usual, they are arranged in alphabetical order.”

The students, well-versed in the procedure, formed an alphabetical line according to last names, and took their exams from the table. Only one of them did not open his blue exam booklet to look at his grade. Ted Brimfield crumpled his into a ball and threw it across the room, swishing it into the small metal trash can at the back of the room. He then slouched into his desk.

David lowered his hands to his lap. “Not happy, Mr. Brimfield?”

“Everything’s peachy, Professor Schofield.” The young man didn’t even try hiding the sarcasm. “Just peachy.” Ted slumped further into the seat and began drumming a pencil on a black spiral notebook.

“If you used that notebook to take notes more than you use it for drum practice you might actually pass a test or two in my class.” David crossed his arms, waiting for a snide reply. None came. Ted had shown promise at the beginning of the semester, but then it was as if he’d hit a wall. He stopped taking notes, started failing quizzes, and now he hadn’t passed the last two tests. Productive use of Mommy and Daddy’s money.

“If any of you wish to discuss your exam, you know my office hours.” David stood and picked up the top folder from the stack. He forced a smile. “Now class, let’s take a look at the exponential function today, shall we?” He picked up a piece of chalk from the chalkboard rail and drew a set of coordinate axes on the black board. “Allow me, in summary, to draw the functions we’ve covered so far this semester. First, we have the—”

The door opened and Teri Glazier poked her head into the classroom. “Excuse me, Professor Schofield.” She motioned for David to join her in the hall.

“Excuse me, class.” David followed Teri into the hall. As he closed the door, someone in the class whistled. He could take one guess as to who it was. “What is it, Teri?”

“Just got word we’re closing early today.”

“What?”

“Seems there’s a sizable snowstorm headed our way.”

“Snow? What snow?” Teri pointed to the window at the end of the hall. It was snowing, all right. “You’ve got to be kidding.” His classroom had an outside wall full of windows that

overlooked the front lawn of the campus and he hadn't even noticed what was brewing outside. "It's snowing. It's New England. And you're serious. He's actually calling it?"

"This," Teri pointed at the window, "is just the beginning. It's supposed to keep snowing for the next twelve to twenty-four hours and accumulate substantially, possibly up to a foot or more. Mr. Alexander is canceling all classes effective after this period." David shook his head. "Hey, what can I say, chief?" Teri bit her lower lip and flashed a smile.

"You could say that it'd be nice if the current president of this fine institution grew a backbone. Does he know this is New England?" David shook his head again and looked in on the class through the wire-enforced window in the door. "A little snow and we're canceling classes. This is the fifth time this semester." David nodded toward the classroom. "How does he expect us to do our jobs and actually teach these kids? Next thing you know we'll be canceling spring classes when it gets too warm."

David opened the door to his class.

"Hey, chief." He turned back to Teri. "Ease up a little, OK?" Out of sight of the students, Teri winked at David before striding down the hall. David watched her, wondered what to make of the wink, and entered his classroom.

Ted shook his head and whistled, his hands folded on the desk.

"You have a comment you'd like to share with the class, Mr. Brimfield?" David stood at the front of the room, rolling the piece of chalk in his hand.

"Yes, I do, but I'll save it for later in the Student Commons area." Ted grinned, then added, "No offense."

David rolled the chalk in the palm of his hand, tossed it into the air, caught it, and started weaving his way to Ted's desk. "Mr. Brimfield, I usually allow a certain degree of latitude in my classroom as far as proper decorum and etiquette are concerned, but there is a distinct line between what is acceptable and what is not. You, my friend, have flirted with that line on numerous occasions."

David stood over Ted, tossing the chalk into the air, catching it, tossing it.

"Today, by the inference you made with your whistling, you have crossed that line. Be assured, this is the last time that will happen." David stood over Ted for another moment before Ted looked up at him and turned his head toward the front of the class.

Smiling, David walked to the front of the room and turned to his students.

"Our esteemed president of this fine educational establishment has canceled classes due to impending inclement weather." In unison, the students looked toward the bank of windows overlooking the expansive lawn that fronted the college. "Apparently, we have a rather significant snowstorm approaching. Technically, classes are to be dismissed after this period. I, however, see no reason to detain you any longer today."

Sighs and smiles filled the classroom.

"When we next meet, I expect that you will have read the next section on exponential functions and have completed the appropriate exercises."

Groans.

"All of them."

Deeper groans.

David picked up the stack of folders, looked over his class, pasted a smile onto his face, said, "Have a fantastic day everyone," and left the room.

Chapter 25: Big Earl Feeds The Beast

Josh pulled into Earl's Texaco, saw Big Earl saunter out the front door, and wished to hell that he'd gone to a different gas station. The thought of having to deal with Big Earl hadn't even crossed his mind. The problem was that Big Earl—even though he was the proprietor of Earl's Texaco—liked serving the customers himself whenever he could and he loved to talk. Which was to say he'd stand there running his mouth long after the number dials had stopped rolling and your tank had been filled, the motor in his mouth going and going and going.

All Josh wanted to do was gas-n-go. He didn't feel like hearing about Big Earl's latest failed adventures ice fishing, or his pathetic attempts to snag Susan Potter for a date—the guy was the same age as Josh's old man, you'd think he'd've hooked up with *somebody* by now!—or how he, in his younger days, would tear this city up, cruisin' through the center in his Chevy, picking up chicks. Who the hell cared how tight Big Earl and the old man were, or what Big Earl once did in the glorious days of his youth.

And that, right there, was what *really* made Josh curse himself for not thinking far enough ahead and gassing up somewhere else. Earl knew Josh's father. Best of friends. Big Earl liked to talk, and it wasn't out of the realm of possibility for him to call Josh's father at the college to inform him that his son and former girlfriend were cruising around in The Beast on a snowy day. Snow was indeed falling, but it wasn't anything Josh and The Beast couldn't handle.

Josh turned toward Abby. She hadn't said word one since he'd picked her up, even when he pulled into McDonald's to get breakfast. She had sat there, stone-cold silent, not even casting a glance at Josh. So he had gone into the golden arches by himself, ordered a couple egg sandwiches and OJs, thinking he was doing a good thing getting breakfast, figuring they'd need food in their stomachs if they planned on driving straight through all the way to Albany. All he got when he returned with breakfast in hand was a grunt and a nod. It was odd, because when he picked her up, she at first seemed kind of excited. A bit jittery, but in a good way, like a kid going on the roller coaster for the first time. Happy to be finally doing it, but just a little bit skittish at the prospect of what *could* happen. It hadn't taken long for Abby's excitement to turn to—Josh glanced at her—to *this*. Whatever *this* was.

Josh considered driving past the pumps and on to a different filling station, thinking maybe Big Earl hadn't recognized him. Big Earl motioned for Josh to pull in next to the pump that he was leaning against. Great. So much for that thought. He'd been made. Just friggin' great.

Josh pulled up to the indicated pump and looked across the seat at Abby and asked her if she was all right. Judging from her response of “just fine,” she was not. He shut off the engine, opened his window, and turned to see a big face inches from his. It wasn't fat, and it didn't have a bulbous nose or anything like that, it was just big. Like everything else about Big Earl.

“Mr. Schofield.” And here came that fake reverent tone Big Earl liked to use with Josh, whether due to his friendship with his father or out of plain old obnoxiousness. Big Earl wiped his hands on a greasy rag hanging out of his pants pocket. “What can I do ya for?”

That was *another* reason Josh wished he hadn't stopped here. How many times did he have to hear the ‘What can I do ya for?’ talk. Who the hell *talked* like that? Big Earl said it every time,

annoying the hell out of Josh every time. Couldn't he talk normal instead of pretending to be... what, cool or something? 'What can I do ya for?' Give it a rest already.

"Fill it up, Big Earl. Regular." Josh felt silly using the Big in front of the Earl, but that was the only acceptable way to address Big Earl Tomkins. And Josh had never been, nor ever would be, in any mood to push the envelope on *that* subject. You don't tug on Superman's cape, spit into the wind, pull the mask off the old Lone Ranger, and you certainly don't mess around with Big Earl, whether or not he was your father's best friend (which, in point of fact, might be even *further* reason to not mess around with Big Earl). You just didn't do it.

Before Josh could roll up the window, it started. "Hear there's a storm headin' our way." Earl twisted off the gas cap and stuck the nozzle into the filler pipe. He wedged the gas cap into the nozzle handle and came back to Josh.

Josh looked out the windshield at the falling flakes and wondered how the guy could be so smart. Nothing to do now except go along with it. "How much we supposed to get?" Josh looked at Big Earl, without really looking at him.

Big Earl raised his cap and looked to the sky, squinting his eyes. "This one's fixin' to be a biggie."

According to Big Earl, every storm was always "'fixin' to be a biggie." Although the man was frequently wrong on such meteorological matters, that didn't stop him from continuing his prognosticating.

"Hope not." Josh didn't know what else to say.

Big Earl gave The Beast a once over like he was mentally undressing a good-looking woman walking toward him on the street. He leaned into the open window and nodded at Abby who only continued looking straight out the windshield. "Yup. Seein' how you're drivin' this here fancy set of wheels, and I know your father ain't exactly in favor of you sittin' behind *this* wheel"—he patted the steering wheel with one of his claws—"especially in winter, and especially with a storm on the way." Big Earl stared at Josh without a hint of a smile.

Josh focused on the steering wheel, cleared his throat, and smiled as he looked up at Big Earl. "Yeah, well, I'm surprising him today."

"He'll be surprised all right when he finds out you took The Beast out of hibernation for a spin in the snow. They call off school? Didn't hear any cancellations on the radio."

Josh looked back at the pump. Only half filled. "Winter vacation this week." Josh didn't offer anything more, hoping Big Earl would drop it.

"Ah." Big Earl scratched his head. He adjusted his cap and leaned harder against the driver's door.

Josh cleared his throat again. "I'm taking Dad out today. Just a... you know, father and son thing. We haven't exactly been seeing eye-to-eye lately, so I figured I'd take him out to eat, talk things out."

"Takin' him to lunch?"

"Yeah."

Earl straightened up and looked at his watch. "Kinda early for lunch, don't you think?"

Josh swore to himself. *This guy is unbelievable.* "I wanted to gas up first, then check in with my work and see if they needed me early today."

Big Earl looked across Josh, at Abby. "She surprisin' your father too?"

Josh felt the blood rush to his face. Or was it draining? Whatever the blood in his face was doing, he felt it and he was sure Big Earl could see the effects of it. He looked back at the pump. The guy had to have the slowest pumps in the world. He looked at Big Earl. "Abby? No. I'm

just...I'm just bringing her to...to the church." *Yeah, there you go. Good recovery.* You're back on track. "Her father had to go in early today, and she got bored at home, so she's going there to do paperwork and stuff. So...um, yeah...that's why she's—"

Big Earl planted a bear claw on Josh's shoulder and squeezed. "Calm down, Mr. Schofield, calm down, before you give yourself a full-on myocardial infarction." (One good thing to say about school, Josh actually knew what 'myocardial infarction' meant, though he was more than a bit surprised to hear Big Earl use it in a sentence.) The hint of a grin morphed into a smirk on Big Earl's face that conveyed the message, *Jig's up, Josh my man. Can't pull a fast one on Big Earl.*

Josh was about to answer the unspoken accusation, but Big Earl beat him to it. "I can smell a lie a mile away." Big Earl's grin-turned-smirk took on the full glow of a morning sunrise that thought it was surprising the world with its brightness, but was, in essence, only fooling itself. "I know exactly what's going on." Big Earl winked, and Josh knew—he didn't know *how* he knew, just that he *knew*—he had nothing to worry about. "Sure, you're bringing your dad to lunch, but you figured you'd take The Beast out for a little spin beforehand. Probably thought it'd be fun driving in the snow, maybe go to one of the vacant lots at the industrial park and spin out a few donuts, have some fun." Big Earl grinned, nodded at Abby, and with a raised eyebrow which made his cap rise, said again, "Have some fun."

Josh didn't know if he should be embarrassed or angry by the implication. He thought for a moment, then held his hands up in surrender, and went with his gut that told him not to correct Big Earl's assumption. "Big Earl, you got me dead to rights, man. *Dead to rights.* Why did I even try hiding it from you?" Josh looked back at the pump. Finally. "Oh, hey." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "Looks like it's all filled."

"No need to be so nervous, son. I know how it is." Earl jerked the nozzle from out of The Beast's hindquarters and hung it back on the pump. He screwed the gas cap onto the filler neck and wiped his hands on the greasy rag. He leaned in close to Josh and lowered his voice. "Thing is, you forget I was young once and used to create some fun of my own." Big Earl elbowed Josh in the shoulder. "If you know what I mean." He glanced at Abby, then pulled away from the window. This time he planted both of his bear claws on the window sill and spoke in his normal volume. "Just be careful. Hear me? Don't do anything stupid, like getting yourself pulled over or wrapping this beauty around a tree." He slapped the door on the word 'beauty,' causing Josh to jump in his seat. Abby didn't move. "Hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you. Loud and clear." Josh fished his wallet out of his back pocket. "Here." He forked over a ten-spot and a fiver. "Keep the change." He looked up at Big Earl. "Thanks for not saying anything to the old m—, to my father." He was tempted to wink, but instead tapped into the same will power—seemed like he had an abundance of that this morning—that had prevented him from clicking his heels earlier.

Big Earl nodded and stepped back. Josh turned the key, thankful to feel The Beast's engine rumbling again, and pulled away from the pump. He exited the lot and glanced at the rearview mirror.

Big Earl stood next to the pump and shook his head as The Beast pulled away.

Chapter 26: Carl Has Second Thoughts

What the hell was he doing? Was he *seriously* going to let that prick of a preacher off the hook? Carl took another swig from the flask. He held the liquid anger in his mouth before swallowing it. He twisted the cap closed on the near-empty flask. Carl relished the power he held in his hand. The power that he could feel burning its way down his throat, into his stomach, and through his blood. Maybe there was more to this drinking thing than he had ever realized. There were feelings and thoughts rising up inside him he never felt before, the chief one being a deep, burning anger that was acid in his stomach, eating away at the inner lining, looking for a way out.

Oh, I'll give you a way out, my friend, Carl told it. *Don't you worry about that.* Carl patted his coat pocket, the one that had the *other* metal piece that gave him more power than he'd ever felt in his life. *Don't you worry about that at all, Carl, you old dog. Your time's comin, yesiree it's comin, and when it gets here, you best be ready for it and all that follows. You'll be ready, won't you, Carl?* Damn straight he'd be ready. *Damn straight.*

For the past ten, twenty minutes—had it been longer?—Carl had been sitting in his truck in the unplowed parking lot of the abandoned Chair City Manufacturing building, the engine idling, window rolled down, snow piling up on his arm draped over the door. He'd been thinking about all that had happened back at the church and what was going to happen if he left it as it was. The preacher had lost his job at his precious church, but he'd sure enough find another gig in one of the surrounding towns like Westminster or Hubbardston or one of the backwater places like Phillipston or Royalston.

The one thing that Carl would not be able to stand, the one thing he simply could *not* allow, was the preacher finding a job close to Old Wachusett. What would that say to the world about Carl Sanderson and the kind of man he was? Carl knew damn well what it would say. He might as well drive around Old Wachusett in his shitty-brown Ford with a sign hanging from the ass end that read 'I'm Carl Sanderson, take anything you want from me—including my wife—'cuz I won't fight for it. Everything's fair game!' Hell, Carl knew that's *exactly* what everybody and his mother-in-law would be thinking. *There goes Carl, hey, did you hear how the preacher stole his main squeeze? Carl, me and the boys were wondering, could we maybe borrow your wife tonight, you know, for a little go 'round? Gee, Carl, we always knew you were a pushover, but come on, isn't this pushing it a little far? Get it...pushing it? Get it, Carl? Pushing it!*

Carl got it, all right. He patted the bulk in his coat pocket again. He more than got it. He got it so much that he had pulled a few strings with one of his buddies in the Old Wachusett Police Department, who in turn pulled a few more strings to shed light on the background of Mr. Graham the goddamn preacher man. Come to find out, the good preacher formerly of Albany, New York, ain't so good after all. Yeah, Carl got it all right.

He might not be much in Old Wachusett—hell, just a diesel mechanic for Lashua's Oil who went home to his wife every night with grease stains under his nails and smelling like oil—but he was an honest man earning an honest day's wage, tryin' his damndest to keep his head above water and hold his marriage together. So far, he'd been doin' an all right job of it. Been with

Lashua's since straight out of high school, first pumping gas, then doing maintenance around the place, learning all he could from the guys in the garage that worked on the delivery trucks, earning his way up the ladder. Married ten years this summer, been faithful all those years, never once looked anywhere else to get his tank filled or his furnace lubed and running hot. The guys at work respected him, his wife loved him.

Carl hacked up a wad of phlegm and launched it out the window.

That had all changed. He could already see it in the guys at Lashua's, the way they looked at him, tip-toed around him, afraid to say anything the past few weeks. He was certain they found out before he had. Soon he'd hear the whispers, and before he knew it he'd be the butt of every sex joke that circulated around the garage.

He unscrewed the cap on the flask, gulped, and screwed the cap back on. He twisted it too much and stripped the threads and the cap just spun and spun. *Shit. Ain't that ironic. First time doin' some serious drinking and I break the damned thing. What a screw up. Ha! Get it, fellas? Screw up. Ha!* Carl flicked the cap out the window and watched it land in the snow.

The bigger point of the whole thing, much bigger than his reputation at Lashua's, was his marriage. He was damn-well determined to save it, but how the hell was he supposed to do that if that prick of a preacher found another cushy job in the area? Hell, Jess had already screwed the man once, what was to stop her from trying it again to see if it was as good the second time around? Nothin', that's what. Before Carl could say ten Hail Mary's she'd be goin' back for seconds, and thirds, and then it'd be sayonara, Carl baby, I'm hittin' the road and goin' on a revival tour with the preacher prick hallelujah and pass the wafer and the wine and the lubricating oil!

Carl picked up the flask and emptied the rest of it, the last few drops feelin' smooth and easy as they flowed down his gullet. He tossed the empty flask out the window and watched it land next to the cap that was now buried under a dusting of snow. Comin' down at a pretty good clip. Good. Carl didn't know why it was good that it was snowing, didn't really care, but there had to be one good thing about today so it might as well be the weather.

He felt the weight in his coat pocket. He'd brought the gun along with the hope of scaring the preacher, show the bastard that Carl meant business. But Carl hadn't done that. It was as if he'd forgotten that he'd had the gun with him back in the preacher's office. Or maybe he had chickened out, too afraid of what might've happened had he dared pull the piece on that no-good-for-nothin' prick.

Carl looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror. He looked like a man who needed a good pep talk. That being the case, and with no one else around, he was the man to administer such a talk. "Carl, my good man, that prick took something that belonged to you, something that you held dear to your heart. Safe to say you plan on doin' somethin' 'bout that?" Patting his coat pocket, feeling the weight in it—and the power—Carl grinned and answered the mirror. "I surely do, my good man. I surely do."

Carl put the truck in gear. The wipers swept away the snow. He was going to do his own sweeping away soon enough. He turned the truck around and headed back the way he'd come, oblivious to the storm enveloping Old Wachusett, while slowly yet certainly succumbing to the one brewing inside his head.

Chapter 27: Abby Simmers Inside The Beast

We might not even make it to Albany, Abby thought, looking out the window. The snow was falling heavier and faster and the wind was kicking up and sending the snow drifting, which, although Abby couldn't drive yet, she'd lived long enough in the Northeast to know that drifting snow and driving did not mix. Not at all. There was no way, no way, Josh was going to risk driving all the way to Albany. She didn't know exactly how far away it was—she thought about getting the road atlas from her knapsack—but she knew it usually took her and her father between an hour and an hour-and-a-half to get to Boston (back when he used to take her on day trips to the big city) and that Albany was farther away than Boston. No way was Josh going to risk driving all the way to Albany. No *friggin'* way, as Josh would say. Yup. Her trip to Albany was going to get nixed before they'd even got out of town.

Abby glanced at Josh. She could ask him if he intended on trying to make it all the way, and judging by the way he'd been trying to get her to talk he would answer her truthfully and sincerely. Honestly, when she'd got into the car—sorry, The Beast—a part of her had thought that perhaps they *could* talk, maybe work things out. But the despairing part inside her had drowned out that hopeful part. Now she wasn't too interested in talking to him at all. She was content to sit and stare out the window and let Josh drive as far as he wanted to. All he was doing, after all, was giving her a ride. That was it. They were not an item any more. It was over, they were done with it. She had no delusions of them getting back together again, and she had no desire to get back together.

Absolutely none.

Nada, as Josh would say.

She cast another glance his way and caught him looking at her. He quickly turned away.

The Beast turned left—god, she was actually thinking of the car as if it were a living being—and its rear wheels slid across the road. Josh's hands scrambled across the steering wheel to get it back under control, adding to Abby's doubts about completing the trip and causing her heart to sink deeper into her stomach. She stared at the snowflakes assaulting the windshield. That's what life was right now—a full-on frontal assault, but from all sides.

Life, and her father, and Josh...and here she was again doing what she never *ever* would have done a year ago—making excuses for herself, blaming all of her problems on others, absolving herself of any responsibility. But it *was* her fault. Should she have gone out with Josh and run the risk of getting dumped? No—her fault. Should she have put her father on such a high pedestal where she thought he could do no wrong? No—her fault. Should she have allowed herself to get sucked in by Jessica Sanderson's obviously insincere offer of friendship? No—again, her fault. *Guilty, your honor, on all three counts.*

Three false starts. Disqualified from the race.

But at the same time, it wasn't *all* her fault. Josh was cute and charming, her father had once been a good man, and Jessica had seemed genuinely interested in being Abby's friend. Three false starts against them, too. Maybe that made it all even-steven.

Abby stopped thinking about her life and what a shambles it was. She glanced at Josh. He wasn't looking at her this time. Good. Just the way she wanted it.

Good.

She turned her attention to the road ahead and to the whirling snow rushing at her.

Chapter 28: Richard—Is it Safe?

A knock at the door. Then another one. The third—the loudest—jarred Edward from wherever his mind had wandered off to. He picked up the pen he dropped and straightened his tie. He sat up in his chair. “Come in.”

The door opened and Richard Leland poked his head into the office. “Is it safe?”

Edward had been trying to clear his mind of the unexpected encounter with Carl, while at the same time trying to gather his thoughts—which were helter-skelter right about now—to prepare for the coming Sunday’s sermon. In spite of all that, he surprised himself at still being able to recognize that Richard was throwing him an opening line.

Edward cleared his throat, deciding to go along with his friend. “You talking to me?”

Richard stepped all the way into the office and closed the door. “Is it safe?”

Richard’s way of helping people through difficult situations was to sprinkle in healthy doses of humor, but it surprised Edward that Richard chose right now, under these circumstances, to perform their time-honored charade. “Is what safe?”

Richard sauntered over to the cluster of four chairs, picked one up, and situated it in front of Edward’s desk. He stood next to the chair, one hand resting on its back, the other hidden in a pocket. “Is it safe?”

Edward leaned back in his chair and raised his hands above his head in a questioning manner. “I don’t know what you mean. I can’t tell you if something is safe or not unless I know specifically what you’re talking about.”

Richard moved between the chair and Edward’s desk, set both hands on the desk, and leaned toward Edward. He whispered, “Is it safe?”

Edward slowly stood. “Tell me what the ‘it’ refers to.”

Richard held Edward’s stare. He sighed and lowered his lanky frame into the chair. Smoothing out the wrinkles in his pants, he looked around the room as if searching for a particular object. His eyes came full circle and settled on Edward. “Is it safe?”

Edward held his stance. “Yes. It’s safe. It’s very safe.” He limped around the desk, using its edge for support, and bent down so his lips were inches from Richard’s ear. “It’s so safe you wouldn’t believe it.”

Richard stared straight ahead. He clenched his fists. He turned toward Edward who was still at his side. “Is. It. Safe?”

Edward shook his head, straightened, made his way back behind the desk, exaggerating every movement, thinking about the irony of the words he was about to speak. “No. It’s not safe. It’s very dangerous. Be careful.”

Each man stared at the other. Moments, perhaps even a full minute, passed. A smile cracked Richard’s face. He unclenched his fists, loosened his tie, and crossed his legs. “Well done, my thespian friend. Well done indeed.”

Edward unrolled his sleeves and buttoned his cuffs, wondering if there was more to the scene they’d just reenacted than the lines they’d recited. Richard was a man of direct words. However, the past few weeks, being as troublesome as they’d been, Richard had seemed cryptic

at times. Edward didn't know if he was reading too much into everything his friend said, or if the foundation of their friendship had shifted beneath them, each man trying to figure out where he stood with the other.

"Thanks." Edward gathered his notes that were scattered about the desk. "Not sure I hit all my lines, though."

"If memory serves me correctly, I do believe you hit every one of them. Nailed it, as they say in the business."

"Is that what they say?" Edward put his sermon notes in the briefcase and snapped it closed.

"How should I know?" Richard shrugged and clasped his hands together in his lap. "I just watch the movies. I don't make them."

Edward stood. "It's not like *Marathon Man* is that old. It came out, what, two years ago? '76 I think. And that particular scene is still fresh in my mind. Hoffman and Sir Laurence. Doesn't get any better than that."

Richard smiled.

"You picked quite a time for a visit." Edward nodded toward the window. "I was getting ready to leave before I get snowed in here."

"If you would indulge me a moment or two." Richard motioned toward the chair behind Edward's desk. "I won't keep you long." Edward sat down, not knowing what to make of the wall of formality Richard was now erecting between them.

"As much as I enjoyed our little acting exercise just now, I do need to talk shop with you, and the sooner the better. Hence my visitation on such a day of questionable weather." Richard glanced at the closed door that separated Edward's office from the outer office. "I trust you have no appointments scheduled today?"

Edward looked at his friend, considered cracking a joke, but thought better of it. "You trust correctly." He couldn't shake the feeling that Richard was sizing him up, like they were two boxers meeting in the ring for the first time, circling one another, each searching for an opening.

"Ed, I've known you a long time. Fifteen years ago I was the first to welcome you to this community and to our church. I chaired the pulpit search committee that recommended you to our congregation. There was no doubt in my mind back then that you were a gift to us from the Good Lord above at a time when we needed someone like you."

Edward shifted in his chair. He adjusted his tie, smoothed out his sleeves. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. He felt like he was about to be hit by a sweeping left hook.

Richard cleared his throat and continued. "A lot has happened since then. You've gone through your share of rough patches. There have been residual issues stemming from your wife's death, you've had the unenviable task of raising a daughter on your own, not to mention dealing with the occasional crisis in the church, all while performing your pastoral duties." He paused. "There have been difficult times, but I stayed by your side, even when others did not. I never doubted your faith in God, Ed, or your trust in Him, so I knew that, at best, you would always do the right thing. At worst, you might do the wrong thing, but—and I never doubted this point—you would do the wrong thing from right motives. I always knew that."

Richard leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "That is, up until this...this thing that has happened." Edward grew more uneasy, another bead running down his neck. "I know we, as a board, have discussed with you the affair and its ramifications not only on you and Abigail and the Sandersons, but also on the congregation and the community at large. You and I have talked about it, though not as much as I would have liked. Perhaps there will be a time for that in the near future."

Richard leaned back and crossed his arms. For the first time since Edward had met the man, Richard appeared to be at a loss either for what to say, or how to say it.

“Ed...you hurt us. Deeply. Jessica, Carl, Abigail, the church board, the congregation. Even the community. You hurt all of us.” Richard uncrossed his arms and placed both hands on the armrests. “Most disconcerting of all, and perhaps most damaging in the long run, you hurt the kingdom of God. You hurt the cause of Christ in this city. The grief and pain you have brought to this local body of Christ is deep, it is wide, it will impact our efforts in this community, and it may take years to heal.” Another pause. “And I am not at all convinced that total healing is possible.”

Richard checked his watch. He stood. He looked at Edward, who thought about speaking his mind, but the look on Richard’s face told him now was not the time. “The decision by the board to accept your resignation was made soberly and prayerfully after seeking God’s wisdom.”

Richard picked up a picture from the corner of the desk. It was of Abby and Edward standing in front of the tree house they had built together. He gazed at the photograph for a few moments before shifting his eyes to Edward.

“After all that,” he said as he returned the picture to the desk, “I still fear the fallout that is to come.” A few moments of silence, not of the comfortable variety, occupied the space between the two men as they looked at one another. Finally, Richard spoke. “And I continue praying that the board made the right decision.”

Edward had nothing to say.

Chapter 29: The Iron Stairs

Even though it was snowing harder now than when he'd gone into Wackowski's Variety, ten-year-old Ben McNally had a world record to break and that's why he ran through the back lot, zig-zagging between the Fords, Chevys, and Dodges—he was getting good at recognizing makes and models—clutching the paper bag with 'Wackowski's Variety' printed in red and blue on the side. Inside the bag, Ben's favorite lunch: Wonder Bread, tuna, Campbell's chicken noodle soup, and Tri-Sum potato chips.

All he had to do was run home, and do it in record time.

His mom had started letting him run food errands near the end of summer and, for the most part, Ben had risen to the challenge. Except for that one dropped bottle of Coca-Cola that smashed all over the back lot last week, Ben hadn't lost any other food.

Jumping over the snow-covered divider in the middle of the parking lot, Ben was looking to beat his best time of ten minutes and thirty-five seconds. Most times when he ran to Wackowski's it was either a Saturday or Sunday or holiday when he didn't have school. On those days, his mom would be waiting at the door, watching the kitchen clock, cheering him on as he ran as fast as he could down the street toward their brand new apartment. She once joked with him that he never knew when he might have to use those speedy feet of his to outrun someone who was up to no good, seeing how they were the only black family not just in the neighborhood, but in all of Old Wachusett. Ben had sensed, due in large part to his mother's forced laugh, that she wasn't really joking. He knew what she meant. His grandfather had filled him in on the history of people of his color in America. Ben even wondered if the reason she sent him on these errands was to train him for a time when he might need to run, but Ben didn't think his mother had anything to worry about. He'd made a couple of good friends at school, and all his teachers treated him kindly.

But today his mom wouldn't be waiting for him. She was in bed sick, and even though it was the first day of winter vacation, she'd made Ben stay home rather than let him play with the other kids in the neighborhood in case she got really sick (throw-up sick!) and needed him to call the doctor or wipe up the puke.

All he had to concern himself with was cutting through the snow-covered scrub that had overgrown the abandoned B&M railroad tracks, cross said tracks without tripping over the rails and ties buried under the snow, sprint up the three flights of rickety iron stairs (thirty-six stairs in all that ran through a copse of trees and led up to the street he lived on) without tripping and face-planting himself into a snowbank, turn the corner onto his street, and sprint the last two-hundred yards to the finish line that was the front door to his first-floor apartment. And the sooner the better, 'cuz man, his 'nads (one of a multitude of strange and colorful new terms he'd learned from his newfound friend Duane) were turning into ice cubes out here. Not to mention the fact that it was snowing a lot, and if they were gonna get dumped on today Ben wanted to be home to make his army of snowmen before Grandpa came to check up on them. Grandpa always liked pulling up to the apartment to a hearty greeting from Ben's legion of snowy Storm Troopers.

Folding the top of the grocery bag and tucking the package under his arm like a football, Ben cut through the scrub. He made it over the tracks, bobbed the bag, headed toward the iron stairs, and that's when he stopped. Sitting on the second landing of the iron stairs, both smoking, both wearing their trademark worn leather jackets, dirty jeans, and scuffed-up work boots, were the two obstacles that just might prevent a new world record, and in its place give Ben a black eye or a fat lip. If he was lucky.

Ben had never personally had any interaction with the Scanlon twins, but he knew who they were. When his family had moved to this neighborhood, Ben's new-found friend, Duane (whose family lived above the McNally's on the second floor), had warned him about Louie and Clem. They were fourteen, both in the seventh grade after staying back last year, both a load of trouble individually, not to mention that when they got together it was like the evil version of the Wonder Twins. They'd give each other high-fives, thereby activating their Wonder Twin powers, and proceed to torture their victim. They seldom picked on more than one boy at a time, and when they did they never picked on kids that had even the slightest chance of standing up to them. They were the classic bullies; mean when it was one-on-one, outright vicious when it was two-on-one. Ben had asked Duane what they looked like, and Duane had said not to worry, he'd recognize them sure enough when he saw them.

Not many days after that warning, Ben had seen them. Luckily, Louie and Clem hadn't seen him, and since then Ben had been smart enough and lucky enough to avoid having any run-ins with the Scanlon twins. They knew he existed, Ben was sure of that—he did, after all, stick out in a community as white as the Wonder Bread in the Wackowski's Variety bag—but for whatever reason, he'd been able to keep out of their sights.

Until today.

One of them motioned toward him. Ben looked to his left, to his right, saw no one in sight, looked ahead at the iron stairs. Louie and Clem Scanlon. Sitting, smoking, watching, and waiting. Now watching him. Two vultures with their hunched shoulders and beady black eyes focused on their prey which, thanks to Ben not paying attention, had wandered right into their nest. Or trap. The world record for getting home no longer seemed important to Ben. Getting home with all his teeth intact was now the goal.

He weighed his options. His options were found lacking. A crazy thought burst into his head. *Why don't I just go right by them? I haven't done anything to get them mad at me. I don't have to be afraid of them.* His mom was always telling him how he needed to stick up for himself, don't let no one push him around. Yes, walk away if you can, but if you can't, then be courageous and stand up for yourself. Maybe now was not the time for running. Maybe it was a time for being a man and standing up for himself. He could turn tail and run, and he might—*might*—be able to outrun them. In the end, though, in the grand measure of things that mattered, what would he gain by running? If the world was as tough as Grandpa made it out to be, then Ben didn't see the point in running away from his first potentially dangerous encounter with the neighborhood bullies. What better time was there to test his mettle?

Ben gripped the grocery bag tighter. Zipped up his winter coat. Looked up into the falling snow and adjusted the wool cap on his head. Before he started walking directly toward the iron stairs and Louie and Clem Scanlon, Ben stuck his tongue out to catch a few of the falling white flakes as if nothing in the world was wrong, like he was a gunfighter on Gunsmoke taking a final drink before the shoot-out. He caught dozens of flakes, not just one. It was snowing harder and the wind was picking up.

He took the first step toward the iron stairs, hoping his mother's advice was right. Then he took another step, and another. He shivered as he got closer. Closer to the Scanlons. When he got to the first flight he walked straight up without hesitation, gripping the cold metal railing—*don't worry, mom, I don't need my mittens, it's not that cold out* (yeah, right!)—not looking any farther ahead than the next stair, counting each as they passed under his boots. Three flights, twelve stairs in each flight, thirty-six in all. Then he was home free. He counted the stairs, keeping his thoughts focused on what he needed to do at the moment, which was get to the top of the first flight. Six, seven, eight...nine...ten...eleven...twelve.

He got to the landing at the top of the first flight and looked up at the second flight ahead of him. Louie stood, took the cigarette out of his mouth, and flicked it over the railing and into the trees. *Don't worry, Ben encouraged himself. He's just gonna move out of the way. That's all.* Twelve stairs down, twenty-four to go. That's all. He reminded himself to not look them in the eye. Look down. Count.

One...two...three...

Another crazy thought entered Ben's mind. Maybe it would be a good idea to introduce himself, kind of break the ice with the Scanlons.

...four...five...

That crazy idea was quickly jettisoned when he remembered that scene from *War of the Worlds* where those three guys approach the Martian machine waving a white flag, hoping to make friends. They get obliterated by the Martian death ray. Yeah, maybe not a good idea to try to make contact with alien life forms.

....six....seven....

I don't acknowledge them, Ben thought, and they keep their fists to themselves. Simple, really, when you looked at it that way.

Louie had a different idea. He turned to Clem and offered up his hand for a high-five, which his brother promptly met with a hearty *smack!* The Wonder Twin powers were now activated. Next came the look in his eyes that said all sorts of things, 'hello' not being one of them.

"Look what we got here, Clem. Lunch delivery." Louie grinned. "Didn't know the slave boys worked this far up north."

So much for just walking by them. *Just don't do or say anything stupid*, Ben told himself. No sooner had his brain issued that warning when his ears heard his mouth say, "Hi, guys," and his ears sent the words up to his brain and his brain could not, for the *life* of it, figure out *exactly* where those stupid words had come from. Heck, it hadn't even detected the crazy thought that had initiated the launch sequence of those crazy stupid words that had somehow, beyond its wildest dreams, so casually and fatefully slipped out of his crazy stupid mouth.

"Hi guys?" Louie backhanded Clem on the shoulder. "Get this, Clem. 'Hi guys.'" Louie stepped down toward Ben. He stopped three stairs up from him, planting his feet on stair number eleven, and crossed his arms. He glared down at Ben. Louie, the king of the iron stairs, and Ben the lowly peasant who was trespassing through the royal palace gardens. "Goin' where"—*this was not good*, said Ben's brain to all his adrenal glands—"nigger queer bait?"

Nope, not good at all.

Although Ben hadn't had any direct experience with the Scanlon brothers, he'd been an eyewitness on more than one occasion to what they'd done to other kids. Louie was the talker, the initiator of the teasing and the taunting and the name-calling, using every swear word Ben had ever heard and a lot more he hadn't. It seemed that Louie liked the sound of his own voice and got a sort of high off the tears and fear that he could elicit from others.

Ben cleared his throat. "I'm going home. That's all. Just going home."

Louie mocked him in a high-pitched voice. "'I'm going home. That's all. Just going home.'" Louie shook his head and laughed. It wasn't an evil laugh, just an everyday, having fun, laughing at a good joke kind of laugh. And that scared Ben all the more. He removed his free hand from the railing, afraid the accumulating sweat would freeze his palm to the ice-cold iron railing.

Clem stayed where he was, sitting, puffing out smoke rings that quickly dissipated into the falling snow, staring. Louie stopped laughing. "Guess what, *boy*? You ain't goin' nowhere." Ben said nothing and did nothing, unable to speak or move. "Hey. Hear me? I'm talkin' to *you*, you little faggot shadow boy." Ben nodded, his head acting on its own accord. Louie pointed to the grocery bag. "Whatcha got? Mommy's booze? Or tampons and douche bags? That would be funny, don'tcha think, Clem?" He turned to his brother and punched him on the shoulder. "A douche bag, carrying a grocery bag of douche bags. How 'bout that, huh?" Louie laughed again. Clem stayed put, a live grenade waiting for his brother to pull the pin.

Ben didn't know exactly what Louie was talking about—he had a vague idea of what a douche bag was from the pieces of talk he'd heard between his friends—but he knew Louie's tone well enough. Ben's luck had finally run out. He turned his head slightly, glancing down the flight of stairs.

"Go for it, pussyboy." Ben turned back to Louie who was grinning, arms now down at his sides, fists clenching and unclenching. "See how far you get." Louie spit over the side of the rail. "I'll even spot you a head start. Shit, I'll spot you a head job *and* a head start. How's *that* for good sportsmanship?"

Ben's legs started trembling. There was no way he could outrun Louie on a clear summer day, never mind through the snow, even if he ditched the groceries. And if he didn't get back home soon, his mother might come looking for him, and if she found him being picked on and intervened on his behalf, that would only make it worse for him with the Scanlon twins, not to mention that his mom would put an end to the grocery runs. He definitely did not want either of those two things to happen. He clutched the bag closer to his body.

"Hey, Clem." Louie didn't look at his brother when he spoke, his eyes instead zeroing in on Ben. "Wanna bet the girl wets herself right here?" Clem smirked as he blew out a cloud of smoke and shook his head. He seemed to like letting his brother do all the talking. Their *modus operandi* seemed to follow a pattern of Clem letting Louie flap his gums before he stepped in to take over and do most of the pushing and shoving and hitting. Louie the talker, Clem the hitter. What a combo.

Clem was bigger than Louie, had a crew cut to offset Louie's shoulder-length hair, and looked a heckuva lot meaner. If Ben could talk himself out of this with Louie, he might stand a chance of escaping.

"Look, guys, I don't want any trouble. I only want to get home." It sounded so weak and pathetic, but there was nothing else to say. And yet his mouth kept moving and words kept spilling out. "Please? My mom's sick and she's expecting me home by now, and she's probably getting ready to come looking for me."

Louie stepped down a stair. "I'll bet you piss your pants in the next ten seconds. Then when mommy gets here she'll have to use one of them douches in the bag to clean all the piss off your dirty, smelly panties and your natty pubic hair. That'd be fun to watch. Don'tcha think, Clem?" Louie smiled, but there was no mirth behind it. It was as if Louie was speaking English and a foreign language at the same time, half the words making sense, the other half hiding secret, dirty meanings behind their strange sounds.

Ben glanced to the left and the right. Still no one in sight. The snow was falling harder, the wind was kicking up, and the air felt a heckuva lot colder. Ben's throat was dry, his hands were cold and wet with sweat, and his bladder was very close to amusing Louie.

Two stairs. That's what separated Ben from annihilation.

Movement way off to the left caught Ben's attention. Two or three blocks away, high above the row of apartment buildings near the center of the neighborhood known as The Hub, was a big blotch in the sky. A big blotch with wings. It was flying in their direction. It looked like a bird, had to be a bird, but if it was that far away and Ben could see it through the snow, it had to be humungous, the biggest bird he'd ever seen in his life.

Louie stepped down another step. One stair now separated them.

Ben did not register Louie's movement. The thing coming at them wouldn't let him. It was jetting at them, each flap of its massive wings sending swirls of snow spinning off each side of it, a living jet approaching them at Mach 1.

Clem stood and stepped down next to Louie and nudged him. Louie said, "What?" and Clem pointed at the bird. Louie said, "So what? It's a bird. Big deal."

Clem shook his head. "That ain't nothin' like any bird I ever seen."

Louie looked at Clem. "Hell you talkin' 'bout? It's a bird for cryin' out loud." Louie turned toward the bird again and started to say, "What's the—"

That was as far as he got. Like that, it was on them. The three of them ducked. It swooped over them, its massive wings kicking up snow around them. It rose, swept out a wide turn, and headed toward them again. It appeared it was going to get much closer on this pass. The three boys did more than duck this time. The Scanlons dove up to the landing, each using the railing as a guard against the incoming attack.

Ben did the opposite. Instead of diving, he fell. Backward. Down the stairs. The Wackowski's Variety bag with the red and blue lettering sailed through the air and snow, spilling the bread and tuna and soup and chips. He tumbled down a couple steps, managing to grab the railing and stop himself before he broke any of his appendages. Having at least the presence of mind to stay low, Ben raised his head high enough to look for the bird. He couldn't think of any birds around Old Wachusett that grew to be *that* big.

Looking up, he saw Louie and Clem hunkered down on the landing at the top of the second flight. Neither one of them dared move. Ben swung his head left, then right, searching the sky. The snow fell harder and faster, as if a mini-storm had kicked up within the larger storm. The wind howled and flung the snow into his face. He struggled to keep his eyes open, looking up to the Scanlons. He still had to get away from them, regardless of what the bird did.

Louie sat up, brushing snow off his jeans.

Clem, staying low, looked at him. "Are you crazy? Get down"

Louie pointed at the tuna and bread and chips on the snowbank. "Goin' to collect that queer fairy boy's lunch." Simultaneously, a grin spread across Louie's face, and a look of frozen horror appeared on Clem's who was pointing to the sky, trying to speak, but nothing coming out. Louie looked where his brother was pointing. Which is to say, he looked directly above Ben's head.

Ben didn't have time to look up before the black shadow swept over him, bringing a chill with it that was deeper than the darkest, coldest snowstorm he'd ever experienced in his young life. The shadow rocketed up the stairs. One more flap of the massive wings—WHUMP!—before it slammed into Louie. And grabbed Louie. And lifted Louie. Ben blinked, not believing—not *wanting* to believe—what he was seeing. Louie screamed. His arms and legs flailed at the falling snowflakes. The bird—the *thing*—that carried him didn't dip, didn't sway,

didn't waver at all from its flight path, like it was carrying a mouse instead of a human being. It rose above the tree tops, disappearing into the vortex of swirling snow. Louie's screams grew fainter... fainter... until there was nothing, nothing but the falling snow and howling wind.

Ben waited a moment before he got up. He ran and tumbled and scampered and flailed his way down the iron stairs, tripped over the last one and twisted his ankle and cried out as he mashed his chin into a patch of frozen gravel at the bottom of the stairs. He turned over onto his back. Clem, apparently forgetting all about Ben, was running up the last flight of stairs. Ben winced as he swiped snow and pieces of gravel and blood off his chin. He searched the sky for the bird and Louie, but couldn't see anything except whirling flakes and gray clouds. *What just happened? What was going on?*

A scream. Louie's scream. Ben craned his neck, his head tilted as far back as it would go. High above him the bird was diving. At him. He scrambled to his feet, ran a couple steps, slipped, and fell. Louie's scream was getting louder. Ben looked up again, and that's when he came to the horrible realization that it wasn't the bird that was diving at him.

Ben got up and ran. He tripped, this time over the scrub, tripped *again*, this time over one of the humps that was one of the B&M rails, and looked back as he sat on his sore rear end.

For the rest of his life, Ben McNally would regret looking back. Less than thirty feet away, Louie fell out of the sky. His body smacked into the hard-packed snow. That is what happened, but no words would ever adequately describe what Ben witnessed, what his brain had to struggle to even begin to make sense of. He would suffer nightmares for the rest of his life, slow motion instant replays of that one instant of time when he looked back and saw Louie Scanlon fall out of the sky.

The dark shadow swept across Louie's body, grew wider, and Ben, paralyzed with fear, watched as the shadow crept up the iron stairs. Clem—poor, helpless Clem Scanlon—was two steps away from the sidewalk when the shadow overtook him. Then Clem was gone, his body yanked high into the storm.

Ben couldn't tell if it was his own screaming, or Clem's, the howling wind, or something else entirely that pierced his soul at that moment.

Ben got up, ran toward Wackowski's Variety to call his mother, and thanked God he was lucky enough to have fallen on the stairs, thanked God for his clumsiness which might very well have saved his life.

Months later, Ben would learn it had been much more than just luck or clumsiness that had saved his life.

Chapter 30: David and Teri Get Hot in the Caddy

By the time David left the warmth and familiarity of the academic building and entered the cold curtain of falling snow, the storm had intensified. He'd had a few things to do in his office before leaving and he hadn't expected it to be this bad already. With the exception of a few cars at the far end, the parking lot was vacant. He started across the lot, head lowered against the wind-driven snow, and remembered when he, Connie, and the boys would spend hours in their backyard during snowstorms, plopping themselves onto the snow and fanning out snow angels, rolling up gigantic bottoms and abdomens and heads of snow for snowmen, stockpiling snow balls for their epic battles (David and Josh against Connie and Julian), and lying in their red plastic sleds while gazing up at the snow falling into their eyes, ending the snowy days by cooking hotdogs on the outside fireplace and making s'mores in semi-darkness, the light reflected off the snow from the fire and the moonlight providing all the illumination they needed.

At the Caddy, he opened the driver's door and got in, dropping his briefcase onto the passenger seat. He started the engine, reached behind for the brush and scraper on the rear floor, and got out to take care of the snow and ice that had accumulated on the windows. Minutes later he was pulling out of the parking space. Across the lot, a woman standing next to a car with its hood propped up waved at him. It was Teri. When he turned the Caddy in her direction she put her hands in her coat pockets and started jack-hammering up and down. David pulled up next to her and lowered his window.

"Trouble again?" He glanced at her car.

Teri nodded. "It won't start. Just like this morning. One of the students tried jump starting it a few minutes ago, but I guess I must have really killed the battery this time. Not even any clicking noises like this morning." Teri stopped the jackhammering and stood with her hands in her pockets. She shrugged her shoulders and offered up a sheepish grin.

"Let me give it a try. I'll pull the car around and—"

"No, David, don't. It's no use. I don't want to waste any more time out here, I'm cold, and I'd really just like to get to a motel here in town and deal with it tomorrow. Can you give me a lift? I think there's a motel down the road a mile or two, isn't there?"

There was a motel not too far away, and it was wise of Teri to choose that rather than try driving twenty miles to her home in Leominster. It looked as though Alexander had made the right call after all as the snow showed no signs of letting up anytime soon. It was coming down harder now, and the wind was starting to swirl it around them.

"Yes, there is. Get your stuff and I'll give you a ride."

Teri nodded and turned toward her Honda. David watched her open the back door and lean in to get her bags. He knew he should look away, but he did not. He watched the snowflakes fall and land on her golden hair and found himself lost in thoughts of 'what if'. Teri was attractive. Any wife would be justified in being jealous if her husband worked with a woman who looked like Teri. Any wife except Connie. Teri had nothing on her. Connie was more attractive in a self-assured way; she was wiser, mature, and secure.

However, given the current state of affairs in his marriage, maybe a little jealousy would be a good thing. Maybe he *wanted* Connie to be jealous. Teri turned and caught David looking at her. She smiled, and he returned it.

Teri opened the rear door to the Caddy and placed her bags on the floor. She closed the door, David moved the briefcase to the rear seat, and Teri got in the car.

“Thanks, chief.” She pulled her coat inside and closed the door. “I owe you for this.”

David looked at her. He quashed the joke that came to mind as he put the car in gear. Before driving out of the lot he put the Caddy in park and turned to Teri.

Teri arched her eyebrows. “What gives?”

“Why don’t you stay at my house?”

David thought he saw one corner of her mouth turn upward, but then quickly lower itself. “You know, that’s a generous offer, and I appreciate it, but I can’t do that. It’d be too much of an imposition.”

“No.” David shook his head. “No imposition at all. Save a few bucks and stay at my house tonight.”

“But....” Teri bit her lower lip.

“But, what?”

“Come on, David. I’m not naïve, and neither are you.”

David turned in his seat to fully face her, resting an arm on the steering wheel. “All I’m saying is there’s no sense in paying for a motel when we have a spare room you can stay in. Connie can cook up a nice warm meal and tomorrow we’ll pick up a new battery for your car on our way back here.” David looked out the windshield at the falling snow, then back at Teri.

“You’re sure this will be OK with your wife?”

“Don’t worry about her. She enjoys company.”

Teri gave a resigned smirk and rested her hands on her thighs. “Guess I really owe you now.” She leaned forward to warm her hands by the vents, and when she did her coat slipped off her leg, revealing the blue skirt hiked up her thigh. David stole a glimpse before looking away and pulling out of the lot.

The two of them rode in silence, the cadence of the wipers marking off time. David couldn’t tell if it was a comfortable silence between two colleagues who had worked together the past year, had grown to be good friends, and didn’t feel the need to force a conversation, or two people that had only ever interacted with one another within the professional context of academia, now forced out of their comfort zones and unable to carry on a normal conversation.

Teri continued warming her hands. David fidgeted in his seat. Finally, he thought of something to say.

“You had Ted Brimfield last year.”

“Ah...yeah, I did. Why?”

“At the beginning of the semester he was a good student. Paid attention, took notes, got mostly B’s. He’s done a complete turnaround since we got back from Christmas break and now he’s flunking my class.”

“Hmm....” Teri sat back in the seat, placing her hands on her skirt, tugging at the hem.

“That’s not too surprising.”

David glanced at her, then focused back on the road. “Why do you say that?”

Teri shrugged. “Well, with his home life the way it is, it’s just not surprising he isn’t focused on solving quadratic equations.”

“His home life?” David slowed the Caddy as they approached an intersection. He eased it into a left turn.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t understand.”

“His father left the day before Christmas. No warning signs. The guy left a short note written on a napkin saying he would always love them but he couldn’t do ‘this’ anymore. Now it’s Ted, his two six-year-old sisters, and his mother.”

“How do you know this?”

“I asked him.”

David cocked his head. “You asked him?”

“Um, yeah.”

David tapped the brakes, turned right, tapped the brakes again, and stopped at the light. He turned in his seat toward Teri. “What did you do? Pull him aside one day and say, ‘Hey, Ted, your old man still living with you?’”

“No, David, that’s not what I did. After the Christmas break I noticed he wasn’t the same person as at the beginning of the semester, so I invited him to my office and I asked him what was going on.”

“How did you notice that? He’s not in any of your classes.”

“I see him in the halls every day.” Teri paused. “I pay attention.”

The light turned green. David faced forward and eased the Caddy across the intersection.

“David, you’re not a stupid man, and you’re usually more observant than most professors, which makes it all the more unbelievable that you didn’t notice the drastic personality change in one of your own students.”

“I did notice.” As soon as he said it, David knew he’d responded too quickly.

Teri turned back in her seat, looking straight out the windshield. “Ted is considering quitting college so he can get a full-time job to support his family.” She glanced sideways at David. “Did you know that?”

David paused before answering. “No.”

“Huh.” Teri glanced out the side window. “So, if you did notice the changes in Ted, why didn’t you say anything to him?” She turned toward David. “Why not ask him about them? Maybe you would have found out about him quitting school.”

“Teri,” David cast a look at her then focused back on the snowy road, “it isn’t my job to pry into my students’ personal lives. It’s to teach them mathematics, not be their therapists.” The words came out more forceful than he’d intended, but Teri’s attitude was getting to him.

Moments passed before Teri responded. “In case you didn’t notice, my job also is to teach my students mathematics. But, I also pay attention to anything that might hinder the teaching process, and for me, that includes what happens both inside and outside my classroom. If I see, or even suspect, that something might be hindering one of my students, or even former students, you can be sure I’ll find out what it is. I consider that part of *my* job.”

Where was this coming from? The last thing David had expected was to get into a verbal sparring match. It was bad enough he got this at home from Connie. The wipers continued beating out their cadence, marking more silence between them. The snow fell. The wind blew.

“Teri, listen. I didn’t—”

“You used to be the same way, David. You used to care for your students. Remember how you would take them, two at a time, to lunch in the cafeteria to get to know them? You treated them like they were your own—” Teri caught herself, paused, then continued in a different

direction with a softer tone. “I know that—” She stopped herself again, closing her mouth and shaking her head.

“Know what? That I used to care for my students, as if I now don’t? What?”

Teri crossed her arms. “Never mind.”

David slowed as the car in front of them fish-tailed. He looked to Teri, his brow furrowed. “No. Say it.”

Teri paused another moment before speaking. “I know that what happened with Josh affected you in ways that—”

David jerked the Caddy out of line and cut across the right lane, ignored the blaring horn from behind them, and shot into the parking lot of the L’il Peach convenience store. He swerved into a parking spot and slammed the car into park.

“I know how I used to teach.” He turned in his seat and leaned on the center armrest. “I know how I now teach. And I know how what happened to my son affected me. You know nothing.” David turned forward, put the car in gear, and looked straight ahead. He backed out of the parking spot, spun the wheel, and shot the Caddy back into traffic.

Teri reached into the back seat for her bags. “You can drop me off at the next corner. I’ll—”

“Teri, don’t be silly. Look around you. Where are you going to go in this mess?”

Teri did look around. There was nothing besides the convenience store. They were not yet in David’s neighborhood, they were far away from the motel, and it appeared the storm was just getting started. She released the bags and let them fall to the rear floor.

Silence blanketed them the rest of the ride to the Schofield house.

Chapter 31: Connie and John Smith

Connie sat at her desk working the budget numbers. This was the only part of the job she didn't like. No, it wasn't the only part she didn't like. It was the only part she hated. Connie's forte was running the everyday operations of the library: setting work schedules, planning events for schools and storytimes for stay-at-home-moms, ordering new books, working the floor with the others and interacting with the public. Those were the things she liked about the job, the things that made her excited to come to work every day, because she never felt like she was working when doing those things.

The budget, however, was a different matter entirely. That was all work to Connie. Not that she couldn't work the numbers—none of that left-brain/right-brain mumbo-jumbo—because she could. She simply didn't like to work them. That was it. But, as she knew when she signed on for the directorship, it was part of the job description, and she carried out her budget responsibilities without complaining, knowing full-well that, overall, she had the best job anyone could have.

Needing a break, Connie put down the pencil and rubbed her eyes. The DJ's tinny voice spoke over the end notes of the John Denver song to segue into the next one in the line-up—“Baby, Come Back” by Player. How apropos. Hands covering her eyes, elbows on the desk, Connie felt like she was going to cry for the second time this morning and she really, *really* wanted to be done with the crying thing.

Margaret, she thought as she rose from the chair and turned off the radio, *you better be careful what you're getting into with John Smith. Are you sure? Because if you're not—*

No, she told herself as she began pacing the office, *stop it. Stop it right now. You were sure on that sultry summer night at Anthony's Pier 4 in Boston when David had taken your trembling, sweaty palm into his. You were the one who was sure when he lowered himself on bended knee and produced that small black box that held all your dreams and desires. Your future. You were the one who had been sure when you answered him yes, yes, yes!*

Until two years ago, Connie had been sure of everything. Then everything changed. Everything shifted. Everything came crashing down in that cataclysmic earthquake that had shaken her family to its very core on that July 4th. But, in spite of that, she and David and Joshua had survived. They had survived it by staying together.

But now—

A noise. Connie stopped pacing, stood in the center of the room, and tilted an ear toward the doorway. A faint rapping. Connie was the only one left in the library, the front door was locked, and all the times she had spent alone before and after hours in the building she could not remember ever hearing any similar sound. Maybe it was—. Another sound, this time it was five raps. Someone knocking? She left her office, passed through the processing room, and turned the corner toward the front entrance. She saw two things that startled her, one of which was completely natural for her to see on a February morning—although the degree of it surprised her—and one of which surely was not, and it was this one that had startled her and caused her to bring her hands to her mouth and draw in a breath.

The first was the storm. It was snowing, which is to say it was getting perilously close to blizzard-like conditions. She could barely see the fire station across the street, and could not see any of the post office or City Hall buildings a block up the street from the fire station.

The second thing, the one that was not natural for her to see standing outside the Old Wachusett Public Library in a blinding snow storm in 1978 was a deeply-tanned man with long, black hair wearing what appeared to be animal skin clothing adorned with multi-colored beads and feathers. Not only was it not natural for her to see such a man at such a time standing on the other side of the glass door, there was something else not natural, but Connie couldn't pinpoint what it was.

The man smiled. Connie looked over her shoulder, looking for...what, a person standing behind her? She turned to the man outside. He motioned for her to come to the door. He took hold of the handle and gave it a shake, pointing at it.

Embarrassed by her behavior, Connie lowered her hands and approached the door. She put her hands on the handle and lock, but did not unlock the door. "May I help you?" she said through the glass.

The man pointed into the library then cupped his hands around his mouth. "May I come in?" "I'm sorry," Connie pointed to the notice taped to the glass. "We're closed. The storm."

The man nodded. "I understand," he yelled above the howling wind. He pointed again at the inside of the library. "May I come in?"

Connie's internal alarms sounded. What was this man doing out in a storm dressed as an Indian? Why was he determined to get into the library?

The man yelled, but Connie, who had been staring at the man's beaded and feathered necklace, did not hear what he said. She shook her head to clear the momentary lapse in attention. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Still smiling, he cupped his hands to his mouth. "I asked if Margaret was still here."

Margaret? Why would he...wait. Holy cow, wait a minute. *Did I mention he's also part Indian? I think he said Nipmuc or Algonquin.* John Smith? The man standing in the blizzard was Margaret's new man, her mature man with a career, the Indian whose name happens to be John Smith?

"Is Margaret still here?" The man showed no signs of irritation or frustration at Connie's unwillingness to open the door. "I thought I might catch a ride with her."

"No," Connie said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, she left early because of the storm." Connie shrugged and smiled.

"I was out walking and got caught in the storm." Something about the man bothered Connie. It wasn't his behavior or what he was saying, it was more like—.

"Could I use your phone to arrange for a ride? I have no way of getting home."

Connie, ever mindful of being in a situation where she was alone with a man who was also a stranger, was no less mindful of that now as she dug for her keys in the pocket of her slacks. What were the chances of a rapist or strangler posing as an Indian to gain access to a public library claiming to know Margaret on the same day Margaret had professed meeting a man who claimed to be an Indian? Maybe in a low-budget, made-for-TV, ABC movie of the week, but not in real life.

Before she knew exactly what she was doing, Connie unlocked the door. The man stepped back, allowing her to swing the door open. He stepped into the entryway. Connie closed the door, hesitated before locking it, realized she was being silly, and inserted the key into the cylinder and turned it. When she pulled the key out and turned to face the man, his long, black

hair flowing over his shoulders and ending midway down his back, it was revealed to Connie—and that is *precisely* how it felt to her, a revelation—what had bothered her about the man while he had been standing out in the storm.

Upon that revelation, Connie felt colder than she would have had *she* been the one standing in the blizzard.

Chapter 32: Kimi Hides Kenny

Kimi ran. More accurately, she moved as fast as nature would allow her to with a boy slung over her shoulder, a broken wrist in a splint, and a bad ankle that was getting worse now that Kimi had to run for her life. She limped and stumbled and scampered, the branches parted for her, and she was grateful to The Great Spirit for that. Since that time when the tree had saved her life, Kimi had, in times of danger, whether from animal or man, been in similar situations when the forest acted as her friend. Her protector. When the forest acted as if...as if it were alive. And it did not matter which forest it was. Whenever Kimi's life had been threatened and she was close to a forest—it had never happened with a single tree—the forest acted on her behalf.

Pain burned in her wrist and shot up her arm. Even under cover of the trees, the snow assaulted her and the wind shrieked and buffeted her. If she had not been able to get under the cover of the forest and away from the—

WHUMP!

She turned to the left, toward Lone Man's Walk. There it was, no more than thirty feet away, flying only a few feet above the path, its wings kicking up plumes of snow and clipping the branches that hung over the path, breaking off wooden tips and sending snow to the ground. The wind sliced through Kimi and the snow whirled about her, but nature's fury could not drown out the noise the great wings made as the eagle flexed its muscles. Kimi thanked The Great Spirit that the forest was thick enough to prevent the monstrous evil from following her directly.

But she could not stay in the forest forever, especially under these conditions. She could not fight the animal on her own, she could not leave the boy and try to outrun the eagle in the open, but she also could not go on like this for much longer. She was tiring and weakening, and if she stopped, the eagle would certainly work its way through the trees to her and the boy.

The boy most likely needed the attention of a physician. Kimi knew there was a place a few miles from the mountain where such people worked, but that was much too far for her to go no matter how much the forest helped. She was still the one doing the running. Besides that, the forest did not, as far as she remembered, go all the way to the white man's hospital. She needed to find a safe place to leave the boy. She had not seen any blood when she picked him up, and judging from the occasional groaning coming from him he did not seem to be in danger of dying. If she could find a place for him, a shelter that would protect him from the storm and keep him warm for a day, she could leave him, do what she had come here to do, and come back for him if necessary. She would trust The Great Spirit to protect the boy.

But where to hide him? It had to be a place where the eagle would not only be prohibited from reaching him, but a place where the eagle would not be able to see Kimi leave him. A place where—

Kimi stopped running. The momentum of the boy's body carried her forward, and she fell facedown onto the snow, the boy landing on his back. She wiped the snow from her face and covered him with her body, expecting an attack. There was none. She brushed more snow out of her eye and raised her head. If she had taken three more steps she would have been exposed in

the clearing, the same one she had come across before hearing the crash and the scream. Three more steps and the eagle would have swooped in for the kill.

Kimi looked left, expecting to see the massive wings and outstretched talons coming at her. Nothing. She looked behind her, then along the path. Nothing. To her right. Still nothing. Where could it... Kimi raised her eye to the sky. It was there, she could barely see it through the snow, circling the clearing above the tree tops. Kimi rose to one knee. Her other knee and lower leg absorbed the cold of the snow, the shock of it focusing Kimi's attention on her present situation.

The eagle above her circled the clearing. It had made one complete journey around the circumference, not once entering the space above the clearing, as if an invisible electrified fence had been erected at the perimeter and extended to the tree tops, warding off the flying menace.

Kimi watched the eagle as it continued circling the perimeter. It was still as high as it had been, still circling. Kimi looked at the clearing, wondering what she had stumbled upon that, evidently, would not allow the eagle to enter its airspace. She also wondered if she had just found an answer as to what to do with the boy. If she was wrong, she, or the boy, or both of them would most likely be torn to shreds within the next few seconds. But there was nothing else for her to do. She got down on one knee, carefully lifted the boy onto her shoulders, and stepped forward until she was at the edge of the clearing.

She looked up at the circling eagle.

She prayed to The Great Spirit.

Kimi closed her eye and stepped out from the protection of the forest and into the white storm, into the safety and danger of the open clearing.

Chapter 33: Edward Tries Leaving the Church

After Richard left, Edward turned off the lights and locked both his and the church's main office. At the top of the stairs, he looked out the window at the storm. He should not have stayed so long. He did not look forward to the ride home. In good weather it was only a ten minute ride, if that. Today? He'd consider himself lucky if he didn't slide off the road and end up having to call a tow truck.

He limped down the stairs. At the bottom he looked around the foyer, looking for anything out of place. His eyes stopped at the double doors that led into the sanctuary. Sanctuary. What he wouldn't give to be able to declare 'sanctuary!' and keep himself holed up within the four walls of the church. Let the battle rage on without him. He was tired. Yes, he knew it was mostly of his own doing, but he was tired nevertheless. Maybe even more so.

He turned to the window by the front doors. The snow was blowing and swirling. *She's out there. Oh, dear God, she's out there. I need to get home. I need to—*

Call home. He should call home first, because that's probably where she was. Abby was smart. She wouldn't risk her life in a storm like this no matter how intent she was on visiting her mother's grave. She had acted impulsively this morning, but she would have come to her senses and made it back home where she would now be, in their house safe and warm. Edward dropped his briefcase and coat on the floor. He hobbled up the stairs as fast as his lame hip would allow and unlocked the main office. He picked up the secretary's phone and dialed.

After twenty rings he hung up. He waited a moment before redialing. *Come on, Abby*, he thought. *Pick up the phone. I know you're home, pick up the phone, let me know you're all right.* Twenty more rings with no answer. He hung up. She could be in the bathroom. She could be sleeping. It was unlikely, though, that she would sleep through forty rings as there was a phone in his bedroom that she could hear, even with her bedroom door closed. She would answer the phone, she always did. Unless...unless she thought it was him calling and she didn't want to talk to him. But in a storm like this she would know it might be an emergency and she would answer it no matter how upset she was.

He dialed a third time. On the thirteenth ring Edward turned an ear toward the office door thinking he heard what sounded like the door in the foyer opening. "Come on, Abby." He willed her to answer the phone. No answer after twenty, twenty-five, thirty rings. He dropped the receiver onto the cradle. Even if she had been in the bathroom she would have answered the phone by now. Which could mean only thing: Abby was not home. He turned to the window. She was out there, in the snow and the wind and the cold, alone. And it was Edward's fault.

He had to get home. He left the office without thinking to lock it, too focused on Abby to think about such a trivial thing right now. He got halfway down the stairs when he felt a chill in the foyer. At the bottom of the stairs he discovered the source.

Edward staggered backward, his heel bumping against the bottom step. He grabbed hold of the railing to steady himself. "Carl. I wasn't expecting to see you."

The entrance door was still slowly swinging closed, allowing the gusting wind to carry in a blanket of snow and unfurl it across the floor. Carl's Patriots cap and work coat and work boots

were covered in white. He didn't bother to brush the snow off his coat or stomp it off his boots. Instead, he reached for the door, waited another two seconds for it to click closed, and set the lock with a key he produced from his hand like a magician who'd been doing such sleight of hand tricks for years—no flash, no showing off, just doing something he'd always done, but knowing the simple action would elicit a response from his audience.

Edward blinked. "Where did you..."

"What," Carl said, holding the key up between two fingers. "This?"

Edward looked at the key, the locked door, and Carl.

"My, my, how quickly we forget. My wife. She's the—sorry, was—the church secretary. Having a key to the church goes along with the job. Guess she forgot to turn hers in when she got screwed out of her job."

Edward sniffed at the cold air. "Have you...are you drunk?" Carl answered by shaking his head. Snow fell to the floor. "I smell alcohol."

"Oh." Carl cocked his head. "Were you asking me if I was drunk? Or were you asking me if I'd been drinking. I could've sworn you asked me if I was drunk, to which I answered no. If you'd asked me if I'd been drinking, well, of course I would've answered yes, because I *have* been drinking. But I can't afford to be drunk now. I've got something to say to you, and I need to be *damn* sure you understand me. Yes to the drinking, no to being drunk. I always answer questions truthfully, Ed. The truth may hurt, but as my daddy used to say, honesty is the best policy. I'm sure, Ed, that your daddy must have told you the same thing somewhere along the way. Maybe you weren't listening too well that day." Carl waved a dismissive hand. "Enough of that." He dropped the key into his coat pocket. "Let's get down to brass tacks, as my daddy also used to say." He then inserted his hand into the other pocket and Edward watched as Carl massaged whatever was concealed inside it.

Edward stepped backward. Unable to catch himself this time, he fell. He sat down hard, cracking his elbow on a stair edge. Numbness spread up to his shoulder and down to his wrist.

"Yeah, you might want to sit down for this." Carl smirked. "We've got business to discuss, and I guarantee you that one of us isn't going to like the deal that we're about to make."

Chapter 34: Josh Leaves Abby

As The Beast slogged through the streets of Old Wachusett, Kansas sang about sailing toward the Point of Know Return, followed by Styx who welcomed everyone to the Grand Illusion, then Foghat extolled the virtues of being a Fool for the City. Now Lynyrd Skynyrd lamented about being a Free Bird and how that free bird cannot change, whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa, and this bird you'll never change.

Josh felt like anything *but* a free bird right now. He couldn't say that he had been looking forward to driving Abby to Albany, but he at least thought it might be a little bit of fun, you know, being with the girl he'd gone out with and all. Yeah, it wasn't lost on him that he was the one who had broken it off with Abby—dumped her, to use her way of putting it—but he'd had his legitimate reasons, and he thought that maybe today they could use the ride to patch things up. Not that he thought they would start going out again—he certainly had no illusions of that happening, although he couldn't say that *that* thought had never crossed his mind—only that maybe they could at least be friends like they once had been.

Josh coaxed The Beast into a left turn and headed west toward Route 2. The rear wheels skidded. He steered into the skid, steadied The Beast, and breathed a little easier. For now. The snow was falling much heavier than it had been even a few minutes ago and it certainly did not look like it was going to ease up any time soon. It was also starting to drift, which made the driving even worse. There was no way they could make it to Albany today. Not in this mess. Abby wasn't going to like that one bit.

Hell, he'd agreed to drive her—although that was *before* he knew it was going to snow like there was no tomorrow—the *least* she could do was carry on a conversation. But no. He'd tried small talk. He'd bought her breakfast. He'd even apologized—again! All he got from her were sideways glances. Yeah, like he couldn't see those. Other than that, she just sat there staring out the windshield, occasionally turning to look out her window. Although, for a brief moment a few minutes ago, it seemed like she was about to burst into tears. She'd glanced at him, pretended to cough, and turned away to look out her window. Her shoulders had started shuddering up and down, the way shoulders do when girls cry, and he thought for sure it was all going to come out, that all the emotions of the past few months would come spewing out of her like one of those junior high science experiments where vinegar and baking soda come frothing out of the mouth of a papier-mâché volcano.

But that hadn't happened. Abby had composed herself, turned so she was facing the windshield, and that's the way she was now: sitting ramrod straight, staring straight ahead.

A bird flew across the road twenty yards ahead of them, a bird big enough to make Josh's hands flinch on the wheel. Not enough to steer The Beast into a skid, but enough to set Josh's heart racing. It had come from the left and dove toward the road, then flew straight up until it disappeared into the swirling snow. Josh craned his neck to search for it. The rear wheels slipped again, causing Josh to focus back on the road as he regained control of The Beast. *What the hell was that thing? An eagle? Or owl? Whatever it was, it was huge.*

“We’re not going to make it.” Josh turned to Abby at the sound of her voice, all thoughts of the bird flying out of his mind. Abby hadn’t moved. She had spoken, but hadn’t moved, and for a moment Josh entertained the thought that Abby hadn’t spoken at all and he was now hearing *her* voice in his head in addition to his brother’s. “Are we?” He saw her lips move this time, which caused a slight sigh of relief to escape Josh’s mouth.

“No, we’re not.” Josh winced as Abby’s shoulders slumped and her body sank into the seat. “I’m sorry, Abby. It’s bad out here and I can’t risk smashing up The Beast. My father would kill me.”

Abby shook her head and rolled her eyes. “The Beast. Is this car all you ever think about? My god, Josh.”

Don’t take the bait, Josh thought. Let it go. She’s upset about lots of stuff. Her father, her mother, you. You gotta let her have that one.

Josh slowed The Beast and tightened his grip on the wheel. “I’m out here in this stuff with you, aren’t I?”

Abby looked at him and shook her head again, saying nothing.

“What?”

“It’s always about you. *You* don’t want to risk damaging *your* precious car. *You’re* giving me a ride. *You* dump me because *you’re* tired of me. It’s all about *you*.”

“Is that why you’re upset? Me breaking it off with you?”

“No, Josh. I’m not upset about that at *all*.”

“Abby, that was months ago. I apologized. What more do you want?”

Abby sat, hands in her lap, hood scrunched up around her neck hiding her cheek, hiding any reaction from Josh.

“You think it was easy for me?”

Abby turned toward him.

“You think I *wanted* to break up with you?” He glanced at her, not wanting to take his eyes off the road for more than a second, but also wanting to make eye contact with her. “You make it sound like I went out with you, played with you for a while like a toy, and tossed you aside when I got bored with you.”

“Uh, yeah.” Abby crossed her arms and nodded her head. “That about sums it up.”

Josh shook his head. “Unbelievable.” He turned right onto Cold Spring Road, carefully considering what he was about to say. He wanted to tell her the truth. *But, here’s the thing idiot—she’s not going to believe you. Why should she? Voices. That’s the truth, and that she definitely will not believe. Cut your losses and let it go!*

“Abby, I’m going to tell you something. It’s going to sound weird, believe me I know, but it’s also going to be the truth.” He looked at her. She looked at him, one eyebrow raised as if to say, *I’m listening. I’m skeptical, but I’m listening.*

Josh turned back to the road and cleared his throat. He squeezed the steering wheel, flexed his fingers, then squeezed the wheel again. The snow coming at him looked as though the flakes might penetrate the windshield and pierce his heart, hundreds of miniscule needles inflicting both physical and emotional pain on a level that, until now, Josh had not experienced. He kept The Beast as close to the trees on the right so he didn’t slide into the other lane.

“About a week before Thanksgiving I...I...”

Abby, her eyes on Josh, waited for him to work the words out of his mouth.

“About a week before Thanksgiving I started hearing voices. Wait. That’s not right. I started hearing a voice, but I heard the same voice on different occasions. That’s what I mean by hearing

voices.” He cast a nervous glance her way. Now both eyebrows were raised. “I know, I know. Believe me, I know how it sounds. Imagine how it sounds to me. The whole thing is weird. This voice, it...I can’t even say it. You’re not going to believe me.”

“Try me.”

So he did. “The voice was Julian.” He looked at her. She looked away. “My bro—.”

“I know who Julian is. I may be naïve, Josh, but I’m not stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were stupid.”

“Didn’t you?”

“See?” Josh shook his head. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Come on, Josh. Julian’s voice? Really? You can do better than that.” Abby shook her head. “You know, I actually thought for a moment that you were going to tell me the truth. Maybe tell me the name of the girl you got interested in. Or what it was about me that turned you off. Or—”

“Stop!” Josh glared at her. He turned back to the road and steered The Beast into a left turn, carefully accelerating up the incline. When he got to the top of the hill he would turn it around and head back to Abby’s place. “I *am* telling you the truth. It started one night when I was listening to music with my headphones on. One minute I’m listening to Rush’s 2112 album, the next I’m hearing Julian’s voice in my head. *In my head!* Do you know how freaky...how scary that is? Do you?”

Abby paused before speaking. “What did he say?”

“He told me to bring one of his books with me the next time I visited him.”

“Which one?”

Josh hesitated. He hadn’t thought Abby would ask that question. It was an innocent enough question, and the answer would certainly not be lost on her. “*Crime and Punishment*. Said he wanted to have one of the nurses read it to him.”

Another pause. “That, Joshua Schofield, is a load of crap.”

That word, ‘Joshua,’ more than the substitute swear word, told Josh everything he needed to know about his chances of convincing Abby of the truth.

The Beast reached the top of the hill. Josh steered it to the side and angled it to make the turnaround in one sweep, but he had to be careful he didn’t—*oh, shit!* The front end of The Beast kept going forward instead of turning in the direction of the front wheels. Josh hit the brakes—which he *knew* was the wrong thing to do, but that didn’t stop his reflexes from taking over—taking all control out of his hands. The right front wheel slid off the shoulder of the road. The front end crunched over a slight snowbank that bordered a shallow runoff gully. The left wheel followed the right over the banking. The Beast lurched forward, slid a few more feet, then stopped, coming to rest at an angle pitched forward, both front wheels spinning in air, the belly of The Beast resting on snow and gravel.

“Shit.” Josh looked to Abby. “You all right?”

Abby nodded, still gripping the door handle and bracing herself against the dashboard.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just fine.”

Josh slammed the shifter into reverse and gave The Beast some gas. The rear wheels spun. The Beast didn’t budge an inch. He slammed the shifter into park, rested his head against the headrest, and closed his eyes. “Shit,” he said, accenting the word by head-butting the head rest, and doing it three more times with the accompanying, “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

Abby waited a few moments before saying, “What do we do now?” Her tone was softer than it had been the whole ride.

“Nothing, Abby. There’s nothing we *can* do.”

“Josh,” an even softer tone, “I’m sorry. I just—”

“I get it, Abby.” Josh opened his eyes and lifted his head off the headrest. He turned to Abby. “Believe me, I get it.” The words sounded weird—ironic—coming from his mouth in light of the conversation they’d just had. *Believe me*. That was the whole problem in his life right now. No one believed him. Not his parents, not the doctors, and now not Abby.

Josh opened his door.

“What are you doing?”

“Something. I don’t know what, but I’m doing something to get us out of this mess.” *Which mess, Josh? There’s more than one, you know. And you’re to blame for all of it.* Maybe he could flag someone down, although, now that he thought about it, there hadn’t been too many cars he’d seen since they’d turned onto Cold Spring Road. Most people had probably used their common sense and headed home as soon as the snowfall had started in earnest. Unlike Josh, who apparently *had* no common sense of which to speak.

Perhaps his father was right after all.

Josh got out of the car and started to close the door when—

WHUMP!

—he heard the sound—

WHUMP! WHUMP!

—but never saw the wings propel it straight toward him—

WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!

—nor the talons extended out from the brown and black feathers that ripped through his jean jacket, sliced through his skin, clamped onto both shoulder blades, and hoisted him off the ground. He did, however, feel the pain. Boy, did he ever feel the pain.

The great bird lifted Josh into the blizzard. He looked down at The Beast. As he started to black out from the pain, he saw the biggest, blackest dog he’d ever seen. It approached the driver’s door of The Beast and looked inside. He heard a high-pitched scream. Then, just as he *did* black out, he could’ve sworn he saw two bright, fire-blue eyes peering up at him, penetrating through the fading whiteness. He could sense, in an extra-sensory-perception kind of way, a grin hidden behind those glowing eyes.

Chapter 35: Edward and Carl and...

“We need to talk.” Carl kept both hands in his coat pockets. His voice, although a bit slurred, was as calm as if he was casually visiting a neighbor, his demeanor as if he and Edward did this sort of thing all the time. Two friends sharing a friendly chat at the church. Chat-at-the-church time with Pastor Graham.

Carl was obviously planning to get back at Edward, but right now Edward had a more pressing need on his mind—Abby. He needed to find his daughter. He looked out the window. It was still snowing heavily. He needed to get home and get home fast.

“Carl, we talked this morning.” Edward rubbed his elbow which still smarted. “There is nothing else to say, and I must get going.” Edward started to pull himself to his feet using his cane and the stair railing.

“Not so fast.”

“Carl, I don’t have time for this. I have to—”

“Sit down.” Carl didn’t move when he said the words.

“Excuse me?” Edward stopped halfway up.

“Sit. Down.”

Edward had never been in a fight his entire life, but he’d just as soon punch Carl in the face as take any more of the man’s attitude. “No.” Edward rose fully to his feet, leaning on his cane. “I don’t know what makes you think you can come here, uninvited, and start issuing orders.”

“Huh.” Carl put a hand to his mouth, drummed his fingers on his lips. “I thought this was a public building, being a church and all, and that anyone could come here.” Carl stopped drumming and raised an eyebrow.

Edward leaned forward on his cane and shook his head. “I don’t have time for games, Carl. My daughter may be in danger stuck in this storm and I need you to leave so I can leave. Right now.”

Carl chuckled. “You know, Ed, you put my wife in danger. As long as you’re here, she’ll continue to be in danger.” Carl pulled one of his hands out of his pocket, reached behind his back, scratched it, and returned his hand to the pocket.

Edward thought about the words Carl had just spoken. *You put my wife in danger. As long as you’re here.* What did that mean?

Edward looked up at Carl. “Jessica.”

“What about her?” Carl stared at Edward for a moment. A smile spread across his face. “Oh. You think...you think I hurt her.”

Edward held Carl’s stare, unsure what to do or think.

Carl looked down at his feet as he shuffled them from side to side. “I may not be as refined a man as you, what with you bein’ a pastor and all, but I’m not a barbarian. I love my wife.” Carl looked at Edward. “I would never do anything to willingly hurt Jessica.”

Carl was definitely drunk. Not falling-down drunk, but capable-of-doing-anything drunk. He was starting to slur his speech and shuffle his feet. His body was swaying. It might come to Edward forcibly removing Carl from the building. He tightened his grip on the cane. All things

being equal—which they weren't—Edward knew he was physically inferior to Carl who was younger and in much better shape. If Carl didn't want to leave, what could Edward do about it, short of calling the police?

“Carl, what do you want from me?”

Carl grinned. “Now we're gettin' somewhere.” He withdrew his hands from the coat pockets and folded his arms across his chest. “I want you to leave.”

Edward blinked. “Leave? That's what I've been trying to do.”

Carl shook his head once. “Leave. As in leave Old Wachusett. As in pack all your things and move your sorry ass out of our fair city, out of our beloved Worcester County, out of our dear state of Taxachusetts.”

Edward laughed. Not out of mirth, but out of incredulity. It was the only response that came to him. Carl was joking.

“Are you....” Edward switched his cane from one hand to the other. Anger rose within him. He did not care anymore about any perceived danger he may be in. Then a realization struck him. “You're serious.”

Carl stood unmoving. Unsmiling. Unblinking. His arms remained crossed.

The two men looked at each other. Edward swallowed. He could not work the dryness out of his mouth. All the years of pastoring and counseling and being mentored and doing mentoring had not prepared him for this situation. *Demanding* that he move. The arrogance. The absolute pride and arrogance exhibited by Carl was stunning. That angered Edward even more.

He stepped toward Carl. “How do you expect me to do that? I can't just pack everything up and move out of town. My daughter and I...my life...it's here.” Edward jabbed his cane into the carpet. “Our school, our church, our friends...everything. It's all here in Old Wachusett.”

“Yeah.” Carl stepped toward Edward, uncrossed his arms, and jammed both hands into his coat pockets. “I know. So's my wife. She's right here. That's why it's not only the right thing, hell, it's the only thing for you to do. You owe me that much.”

Edward hobbled toward Carl. “Carl, think about what you're saying. About what you're asking of me.”

Carl shrugged his shoulders. “I have.”

“You can't expect me to move just because you say I should. That doesn't make any sense.”

“Makes about as much sense as you screwing my wife and thinking you could get away with it, Mr. Teddy Kennedy.”

“What? What does Ted—”

“It's over!” Carl closed his eyes and shook his head. “This whole thing is over. The affair, your time here at this church, your living in Old Wachusett. It's all over, Ed, and you know it. Face the truth. For once in your pathetic life, face the truth.” Carl opened his eyes. Edward, not understanding what Carl meant, started to move, but was interrupted by Carl. “If you can't,” Carl withdrew a hand from one of the pockets, “I can help you face it.”

Edward gasped when he saw the gun. He stepped back from Carl, holding to his cane like a drowning man grasping a life preserver. “Carl, wait a minute.” He held up a hand. “You don't—”

“I'm tired of talking, Ed. Tired of all of this.” Carl swept the gun above his head before bringing it to bear upon Edward's chest. “Tired of you, tired of being taken advantage of by those in power. I'm tired of the powerless always feeling powerless.” Carl stepped toward Edward, the gun still leveled at him. “Guess what?” He waved the gun at Edward. “I'm not

feeling powerless anymore. In fact, I'm feeling like I've got all the goddamned power I need right at this moment."

The fear and uneasiness Edward had felt this morning didn't compare to what he felt now. His heart raced. The hand gripping the cane began twitching. The pain in his hip flared. His vision grew cloudy, Carl swimming in and out of focus.

"Ed, it's time for you to shut the fuck up and get the hell out of town before I issue you a one-way ticket to your eternal destiny."

Edward was sweating. His T-shirt stuck to his chest and back. The cane was now slippery with sweat in his grip, his other hand twitched in dead air, and his knees were weak. He started to sway. He felt his body start to—

Edward probably would've crumpled to the ground in another moment if the door hadn't opened and let in an arctic blast of snow.

Both Edward and Carl snapped their heads toward the person who had stepped into the foyer.

Edward's long-time friend. Richard LeLand.

Chapter 36: Abby and the Big, Bad Wolf

Abby screamed. Then her mind went crazy.

Josh! Oh my god, Josh! Oh my god, where is he? Did I...? Did I really see what I saw? Did a bird pick him up and fly away? What happened to him? Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, what's happening? What's...am I dreaming? Am I—

The dog, the absolutely huge, massive, muscular-beyond-belief dog turned and looked at her. When she saw the blue glow of its eyes, Abby screamed again.

Every muscle, every nerve-ending in her body froze, and not from the blast of arctic air and snow that was rushing into the car through the open driver's door. Abby stopped screaming. The monster dog exhaled a stream of vapors from its mouth, and that was when Abby remembered. The silhouette that had startled her on the street. It was here. Inches from her. Though not a silhouette. A black, hulking mass of fur and muscle. Staring at her.

The door! Open the door! Abby's hand flinched toward the door handle, her entire body ready to turn away from the animal staring at her, when she caught herself. No sudden movements. That would only provoke the animal. She looked out the windshield, afraid of staring at it, challenging it. Her pulse quickened. Her hands clenched into fists. Sudden movement might indeed spook the animal, but she couldn't just sit here and do nothing. She flexed her fingers and slowly turned toward the animal. Its lips parted in what appeared to be...a grin? A mocking *grin*? But that couldn't be true. It just could not be true.

A car. She needed a car to go by, to stop, for someone to stop and help her, to get out and help her and scare this animal away. Certainly if the animal—was it even a dog? It was too big to be a dog...a wolf?—certainly if this wolf saw another car pull up it would leave. Right? But there were no other cars. None. She needed to do something. Josh was gone, raptured up into the sky by...by a *bird*, and this dog/wolf/who-knows-what was standing there, showing no inclination of going anywhere.

It was cold, and it was getting colder. Abby's hands were going numb, which scared and confused her. It was cold outside and the driver's door was open, but her hands shouldn't be feeling this cold this fast. The car's heater was still on and blasting hot air but her hands were still—

The car's heater was on. Josh hadn't turned off the car when he'd gotten out. The car was still running. The car was still *running!* Abby looked to the animal. It hadn't moved. The blue eyes stared at her, boring into her as if probing deep inside, as if.... No. No, she could not accept that thought. She couldn't accept any of this.

It winked. The animal. The dog. The wolf. Whatever the hell it was winked at her. Its right eye in slow motion like it was exaggerating the act, like it was...like it was conveying a message to her. Like it was trying to communicate with her.

"No!" Abby screamed at herself as she started crying, not caring anymore about startling or provoking the beast. She hugged herself, squeezed herself to gain control of her thoughts. "No. This isn't happening. This is *not* happening. Animals do not wink. Animals don't do that."

Not giving a damn anymore about what the creature's reaction would be, Abby whipped her head around to look for cars approaching from either direction. There were none. Cold Spring Road was not a well-travelled road even in normal weather. Josh was gone. No cars. No one to help her.

She was on her own.

Then she would have to act on her own. If no one was coming to her rescue, she would rescue herself. Slowly, calmly, she reached behind her for the army knapsack. She could use it as weapon. She reached for it, felt it, grabbed hold of one strap and pulled it between the seats while keeping her eyes on the animal. It did not move. It watched her. Its eyes followed her movements, but it did not move.

Outside the vehicle the snow fell and the wind blew. If Abby didn't get out of here soon she was going to be stranded in a blizzard. It wouldn't take long for Cold Spring Road to become completely impassable. What then? *What then is the simple fact that you're lunch meat for this thing staring at you, so get your rear end in gear!*

Abby had the knapsack on her lap. She could get out of the car, try running into the forest, using the knapsack as a weapon if she—

Wait! What am I thinking? The car's still running. A minute ago I was going to reach over and put it in gear. What made me stop thinking that? The wink. It distracted me. I'll drive away. It's that simple. I'll drive away.

Abby inched her body toward the shifter with the idea of sliding her foot over the console hump and onto the gas pedal. She would simultaneously shift into drive and stomp on the gas. She didn't have a driver's permit—hadn't even taken the test yet—but she knew enough about driving from watching her father and Josh that she was confident she could master the act of giving it gas, shifting, and steering, even if it was going to be done from the passenger seat. All she had to do was put enough distance between her and the animal and she could then...and she could...and she....

Horrible, depressing, hope-stealing realization sank into Abby's heart, punching it with a cold fist of fear. She couldn't drive anywhere. The car, the almighty powerful Beast, was stuck in the snow. Josh hadn't been able to get it out, and neither would she be able to. Why hadn't she thought of that? Why hadn't she remembered that?

Up until this point, Abby had been too scared, too confused and dazed to cry. Now she wasn't too anything. The tears formed, she feebly fought them, but they overwhelmed her and flowed down her cheeks. *Stop it*, she told herself. *Get it together. You've got the knapsack, you're a runner, maybe, just maybe you can outrun this thing and make it to safety.* Abby shook her head and laughed at herself. What was she thinking? Outrun a wolf in the snow?

The animal moved. It's massive, thick-furred head bobbed once. A wink. A head bob. Something was not right. Not right as in not normal. As in this animal, there was something about it—other than its massive size—that made it not normal...made it not...animal-like. It was ridiculous to think such a thing, but there it was. Staring at her, winking, nodding, and Abby was faced with something that she realized may not be what it appears to be. Why hadn't it attacked her yet? Why hadn't it left? Why was it standing there, not moving, just staring at her? And what about Josh? How could a bird appear out of nowhere and lift Josh into the air and fly away like that?

With no warning, without any kind of foreshadowing or preamble whatsoever, the script of Abby's life had been changed. She woke up this morning planning on going to Albany, New York no matter what it would take. Now, she found herself face-to-face with this animal terror,

with Josh being swept away before her eyes, with this storm that came out of nowhere, all of it surreal, and yet...all of it, she sensed, somehow fitting together. Abby felt like a character in a novel that had been going about her business, doing and saying what the author wrote her to do and say, and on a whim the author had decided to change the storyline, change the setting, change everything, and plop her in the middle of this fantastical new story and setting just to see what would happen.

Abby looked at the animal. It stared back at her. The icy fist that had gripped her heart reluctantly loosened its hold on her. That was the best way she could explain it, because that's what it felt like—a cold fist letting go of her heart, releasing her from the fear that had enveloped her only moments ago. Abby looked to the animal again. Terror that was there moments ago was now replaced with relief. But that's impossible. *How...what's happening to me? Why am I feeling this way? I should be afraid. I should—*

Abby's right hand moved toward the door handle. Her hand took hold of it, opened the door, and her left hand gently took hold of the knapsack. *Why am I doing this? This is crazy! I can't do this. What am I thinking?* Her body slid out of the car, not bothering to turn the car off, her mind not caring that it was still running; that point of fact simply did not matter right now. Her feet found purchase on the snowy embankment that the car had settled on. Her right hand closed the door while her left arm hoisted the knapsack up and over her shoulder. Her right arm put itself through the other strap of the knapsack. Her feet transported her body around the back end of the car, careful not to slip and fall underneath it. On the other side of the car, Abby's eyes focused on the blue orbs staring back at her. Her mouth said, "Thank you," and she did not know why her mouth said that. Her feet moved her toward the animal. Her right hand extended itself toward the animal and stroked its black, furry head.

The animal grinned, winked, and nodded once.

Abby's body hitched up to get the knapsack in a better position on her back. Her feet positioned themselves next to the wolf—her mind had determined, once and for all, that it was a wolf—so that her hands could do what they needed to do, which was to grab hold of the wolf's fur around its neck. Then her left leg lifted itself up, her right leg pushed off from the snowbank, her left leg hoisted itself over the wolf's back. Her right hand stroked the fur under the wolf's neck. Her left leg gently prodded the wolf's hindquarters. Her entire body lay itself along the back of the wolf. Her head lowered itself to rest atop the wolf's neck.

Her eyelids closed.

In the next instant, she felt the wolf back away from the car and turn around.

Then the wolf, with Abby riding atop it, was running, a black blade slicing through the curtain of white that fell from the sky.

Chapter 37: Carl Improvises

Carl dropped his hand, slipped the gun into his work coat pocket, and stepped back as Edward stretched a hand toward the man who had just thrown a goddamned monkey wrench into his plans. What, did he have a great big neon sign nailed to his back that said ‘Kick me when I’m down’? What the hell was he supposed to do now? *Play it cool, Carl my man. Just play it cool.* Play it cool he would. He’d watch the preacher, make sure the prick didn’t try anything stupid. One wrong move and it’d be adios, baby. No more Sunday sermons, no more screwing other men’s wives.

“Richard. What, ah, what brings you back here?” Edward and Richard shook hands.

“I thought I’d come back and see how you were making out getting home. It’s bad out there, and that Impala you’ve got is not going to make it through the snow. It’s already blowing and drifting out there, and we should get going as soon as possible.”

Richard looked to Carl, obviously not immediately recognizing him. Figures. Fucking church people. To hell with the pagans. We’ll just keep to ourselves, take their money, screw their wives, and give ‘em the heave-ho in the end. Carl put a hand on his coat pocket, feeling the reassuring bulge (the proverbial ace up his sleeve) that gave him power and would ensure that this time the pagan would not get the heave-ho.

“Carl,” Edward said, finally turning his attention back to him, “this is Richard LeLand, one of our distinguished board members. Richard,” Edward turned to Richard, “this is Carl. Carl Sanderson. Jessica Sanderson’s—”

“Yes,” Richard interrupted and extended his hand. “Yes. Hello Mr. Sanderson.”

At least the guy had the common decency to refer to him as Mister. Carl would give the guy that much.

“Is there anything I can do? Anyway I can assist here?” Richard looked out the window at the storm. “I gather you two were discussing the personal matter that concerns both of you, and I don’t want to, in any way, seem insensitive to that, but there’s a bad storm out there”—he stuck his thumb over his shoulder—“and we do need to get going, Edward, if we have any hope of making it home before the roads become impassable.”

Personal matter. Not affair, or adultery, or fornication—isn’t that the correct church word to use?—or fucking thy neighbor’s wife. Personal matter. Like they were discussing a misunderstanding or carrying out a financial transaction. Personal matter. *Oh, yeah, it’s personal all right. It’s about to get even more personal with you, Mr. Fucking Distinguished Board Member. You may get a chance to see just how personal I can get if you don’t turn around, walk out that door, and haul ass pretty goddamned soon.*

And Carl would do it, too. He’d do *anything* to save his marriage. He had always considered himself lucky to have snagged a find like Jessica and he sure as hell wasn’t about to let anyone, especially this holier-than-thou preacher, steal her from him. Carl had done everything in his power to get Jessica’s attention before they’d started dating, to convince her to go out with him, to get up the courage to ask her to marry him, and to treat her right and proper as his wife. And

he would do anything and everything to keep Jessica from leaving him, no matter what it cost Carl or anyone else.

He was prepared to show the good pastor exactly what he knew about the preacher's past, along with anyone else who wanted to know what skeletons were in the pastor's closet. Carl patted his other coat pocket and smiled. The *other* ace up his sleeve. Which, now that he thought about it, he might as well pull out now. All the better to have Mr. Distinguished Board Member here to witness justice carried out in an appropriate manner.

Carl slipped his hand into the pocket and pulled out a folded manila envelope. He held the envelope out to Edward.

Edward made no move to take it. "What's that?"

"It's part of the deal I mentioned earlier. You know." Carl glanced at Richard then nodded at Edward to take the envelope.

Edward looked to Richard, then to Carl, before taking it.

Carl kept one hand at his side, the other inside his coat pocket. He watched Edward open the envelope and pull out a sheaf of papers. He watched as Edward flipped through the copies of newspaper articles and police reports. He smiled when Edward wiped a hand across his forehead.

Edward slowly raised his head toward Carl. "You son of a bitch."

Richard's head snapped toward Edward. "Edward!"

Clutching the papers and envelope in one hand, gripping his cane with the other, Edward advanced on Carl. "You'll never get away with trying to blackmail me, you bastard."

Richard stepped in front of Edward. "Gentlemen, let's calm down. Ed, what's this all about?"

Edward dropped the papers and envelope. He leaned on his cane, lowered his shoulder, and shoved Richard to the side. He raised his cane and swung it at Carl's head.

Carl stepped back and ducked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gun. He aimed it at Edward. Richard threw himself at Carl. Carl fired the gun twice.

The sound reverberated in the church foyer.

Three men fell to the floor.

Chapter 38: David and Teri Headed for Trouble

David half steered, half slid the Caddy into the driveway. The car made a valiant effort at climbing up the incline, its wheels spinning in the accumulating snow, but eventually it settled for making it only half-way up. David gunned the gas, saw it was no use, threw the shifter into park, and set the parking brake. The Caddy slid backwards a couple feet before coming to rest inches from the end of the driveway. That would have to do.

“Sorry for the inconvenience.” He didn’t look at Teri when he said it. She didn’t respond. As rude as he’d been to her, he couldn’t blame her. Like a lot of things that came out of his mouth lately, he hadn’t intended to say the things he’d said to her, nor had he intended to adopt the tone he had. He opened the door and eased out of the driver’s seat as the snow blew around him, white flakes falling onto the black leather seat cushion. He closed the door and steadied himself against the car as he made his way around the front end, watching where he placed his feet. The wind drove the snow into his body, stinging his face.

David looked up at a passing car and regretted it immediately. His feet slipped out from under him and he fell. His legs slid completely under the front end of the Caddy. He struggled to stand, and when he finally worked his way out from under the car, he brushed the wet snow off his coat and pants. Finding secure footing on the crusty snow at the edge of the driveway and lawn, David extended a hand toward Teri who was opening her door.

“I can manage.” Teri exited the Caddy holding on to the door with both hands, apparently taking her cue from David’s fall. She left her bags in the car and closed the door. She took one step and slipped, but caught herself before she fell.

David offered his hand again. “Here. Take it.”

This time, Teri took it. Together they inched their way up the edge of the driveway where the crusted snow gave better traction. They leaned into the wind-whipped snow, stepped, slid, stumbled. Their arms flailed once, twice, and by the time they made it to the front steps the two of them, like two children playing in the snow, couldn’t hold back from laughing any longer.

David opened the front door for Teri. In the entryway she brushed the snow off her hair and coat and turned to allow David to enter the house before she did. She caught him scanning the neighborhood.

“Afraid of what the neighbors will think?”

David snapped his head around. “What? What do you...oh. About us? No. What is there for them to think?”

Their eyes held each other for a moment before Teri shrugged off her coat and handed it to David. He slid his off and hung both of them on the coat rack next to the door. David took off his shoes and motioned for Teri to do the same. “If you don’t mind. I prefer not to track in the snow and sand. Makes it easier for Connie to clean.”

“Sure, chief.” Teri bent over and took off one shoe. “Anything to make the wife’s job easier.” She tilted her head up at David, winked as she took off the other shoe, and dropped them both on the rubber mat under the coat rack.

David put his shoes next to hers, unsure how to take that last remark of Teri's. Had there been sarcasm in her voice? She had never disparaged Connie before, and he found it hard to believe she would do so now, especially in his home. Still pondering the comment, he led her through the hallway and into the house.

David stopped at the doorway that led into the living room and turned to face Teri. "Truth be told, it's me who's the cleanliness freak. Not Connie."

Teri planted her hands on her hips and tilted her head.

David looked at her. For a moment she looked like a pouting teenage girlfriend trying to decipher what was going on inside him, what his true motives were for inviting her to stay at his house. *What are my motives?* David thought. *I'm just helping out a colleague who otherwise might have been stranded in the middle of a snow storm. It's completely innocent. Connie would understand. I'm only helping a colleague in trouble.*

David entered the living room and turned to face Teri. "I need to set something straight." He put his hands together, extended his index fingers, and held them to his chin. "I had no business saying what I said in the car. I like working with you, and I can appreciate the differences in our teaching styles." David lowered his hands to his sides, palms out. "I snapped at you. I'm sorry."

Teri smiled. She brushed strands of blond, wet hair away from her eyes. "It's OK. You're under a lot of stress right now. I get it."

David nodded, started to turn to sit on the leather couch, but stopped when he felt Teri's hand on his shoulder. It took every amount of self-control he possessed to not jump out of his skin. He turned toward her.

"Thanks." She held onto his shoulder a moment longer before letting go. David glanced at his shoulder, as if looking for a residual effect, then smiled at Teri and turned toward the couch. He felt relieved...and, disappointed?...that all she said was thanks.

"Wow." Teri did a three-sixty, taking in the room. "You know, I hadn't figured you for the high-tech sort." She checked out the entertainment center that housed the television, stereo components, and one of those new VCR contraptions. She ran her hand over one of the towering floor speakers that flanked the setup. Her eyes widened at the leather sofa with matching love seat and recliner. She ran her fingertips along the arm of the loveseat, as if she were teasing it. Was she teasing him? "Funny. You work with a guy for a year, discuss quadratic equations and sine and cosine and polynomial functions, and you hardly know anything about what his interior decorating tastes are like."

"Well, this is it." David swept out an arm like a model on The Price is Right showing off the latest prize and spun himself down onto the sofa. He immediately felt ashamed for showing off. "It's not much, really. Rather Spartan I think, yet it's...comfortable." Then he felt embarrassed for his obvious backtracking.

Teri slid into the loveseat that sat against the opposite wall from the sofa. She looked out the window and nodded at the falling snow. "Wonder how much we're in for." She continued watching the snow, opened her mouth as if to say something else, apparently indecisive as to what it was she wanted to say.

David noticed her indecision and, feeling awkward, filled in the silence. "Seems to be picking up even more. There's at least three or four inches out there already."

More silence followed. David crossed his legs, spread his arms out to his sides, his palms flat on the leather cushions, and he looked to Teri. "Josh will probably be let out of work early today. He'll call Connie for a ride. In the winter I don't let him drive his car so he usually walks to work or takes the bus, that is if we can't give him a ride." The words hung in the air. Leave it

to a math professor to utter a non sequitur. Did he intend the statement as a warning? And who, exactly, was he warning? Teri, or himself?

“Where are my manners.” He uncrossed his legs and sprang from the sofa. “Do you want something to drink? We’ve got tea, milk, soft drinks, juice, what’ll it be?” He took off his sport coat and waited for an answer.

Teri massaged the loveseat armrests, moving her hands back and forth over the leather. She looked to David and crossed her legs. David expended a good amount of effort to keep his attention on Teri’s face. It was difficult, but he succeeded in not embarrassing himself. Teri smiled. “Surprise me.”

In the kitchen, David opened the refrigerator. A chill ran down his spine. His palms were sweaty. He was acting like a teenager with a pretty girl in the house for the first time. He grabbed a paper towel from the rack above the sink and wiped his hands. He tossed the towel into the trash, reached into the refrigerator, and lifted a glass pitcher of tea from the middle shelf. In one fluid motion he closed the door with his foot, spun around to place the glass pitcher on the island, and dropped it. The pitcher crashed to the floor and shattered, spilling tea everywhere and sending shards of glass skittering across the floor.

Teri came running into the kitchen. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Fine, I’m fine.” David stood over the mess, sighed, ripped off half the roll of paper towels, and knelt to sop up the mess. “Just dropped a pitcher of tea.” He looked at Teri. “That’s all.” He soaked up the tea. “How the hell did I manage this?”

Teri knelt beside him. She touched his shoulder, and for the second time in less than five minutes shivers coursed through David’s body.

“Hey. You all right?”

David stopped in mid-wipe and looked over his shoulder. Teri kept her hand on his shoulder, and even started massaging it.

“Are you?”

David looked into her eyes, and not for the first time he willingly acknowledged the excitement and fear of the thoughts that flew through his head, of the possibility of what could happen between them. He’d toyed with the idea more than once, especially recently, and he’d picked up signals from her on various occasions. Given that, he’d never seriously thought that anything would ever happen between them. It was always just fun stuff—casual, harmless flirting that happened all the time in workplaces where members of the opposite sex worked closely together. It was nothing to be concerned with.

But now—Teri kneeling next to him, the warmth of her hand on his shoulder, the closeness of her body to his, her musky scent teasing him—he truly feared the potential that lay before him, and he was not at all sure how he would respond if things progressed in a certain direction.

David turned from her to finish the task of cleaning up the tea and broken glass. “Of course I’m all right.” He stood, forcing Teri to remove her hand, a sopping pile of paper towels in his hand dripping tea. He dropped the pile into the trash, but hadn’t moved fast enough to prevent Teri’s hand from trailing down his arm, to his hand, and brushing his fingertips. He knelt to finish cleaning the remaining mess. Teri knelt next to him and picked up the bigger pieces of glass. “That’s a funny thing to ask, Teri.” David did not look at her as he threw away more wet towels and knelt to the floor for a third time. “All I did was break a glass and spill some tea.” He sopped up the rest of the tea and picked up a couple more pieces of glass. “That’s all. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Teri dropped the glass pieces she was holding in her hand. They clinked and tinkled on the tile floor. She retreated to the living room.

David picked up the pieces Teri had dropped, threw them and the last of the wet paper towels into the trash, and got the broom out of the closet. He swept the area, nudged the remaining glass pieces into the dust pan, and emptied them into the trash. He put the broom away and leaned against the island with his arms crossed. She was coming on to him. Her touch was more than an innocent, friendly gesture.

David, get hold of yourself. You're not in junior high anymore. This is the adult world, you can handle this like an adult. But that's what excited and scared him at the same time. He knew how most adults—at least most of the adults *he* knew—would handle this situation.

He pushed off from the island and approached the living room. He poked his head through the doorway. “That last remark, by the way, was meant to be funny.” He waited for her to laugh. She didn't. She sat in the middle of the loveseat, hands at her sides tapping the seat cushions, legs uncrossed, skirt pulled to her knees and tucked under her legs. She stared at the opposite wall.

David pulled the rest of his body into the doorway and leaned against the wall. “How about tea mixed with shards of glass? Would that surprise you?”

No response. Teri pushed up from the loveseat and marched to the bay window. The snow, driven by the wind, fell at a slant.

“That was meant to be another joke,” David said from behind her.

Teri pivoted to face him. Like a panther on the prowl, her head lowered, eyes boring into him, red and blue silken fur shimmering in the gray light of the bay window behind her, deliberately placing one paw in front of the other, Teri approached him. When she got to within striking distance, she stopped and narrowed her eyes. Her lips moved, and when she spoke the words came out in a sultry whisper. “What are you doing?”

David shifted his body and pocketed his hands. “I'm not doing anything. Just trying to make a couple jokes. Lighten the mood. I thought that maybe—”

Teri stepped toward him. “I'm not playing this game, David.”

David straightened and shrugged his shoulders. He dug his hands deeper into his pockets. “What game?”

Teri crossed her arms and raised her head. “You'd have to be stupid or naïve to ask that question. Of all the things you are, stupid is not one of them. Naïve, perhaps, maybe even confused, but not stupid.” She stepped closer, as close as she could get to him without their bodies touching.

David knew he should move away from her—a large part of him, the logical part, screamed at him to do just that—and yet, he did not move away. He stood there, hands in his pockets, heart beating so loud he could hear it reverberating in the room, and he did not move away from her.

“When's your wife coming home?”

David swallowed. It took a moment for the words to bounce around in his head before he grasped the meaning of them. His wife. Constance. When would she be home? Of course. She'd more than likely be let out early, just as he'd been from the college. In fact, she might even be on her way home right now. But what was he worried about? Nothing was happening. He had brought home a colleague with car troubles. That was all. It was nothing more than that.

David pulled one hand out of his pocket and looked at his watch, as if that would tell him what time she was due home. “She usually gets out at five.” He looked over Teri's shoulder and

nodded toward the window. "But judging from the weather she'll probably be let out early. She'll pick up Josh and then she'll be home. Probably any minute now."

David thought he saw a flash of disappointment in Teri's eyes. Then a smile crept across her face. She raised a hand to her chin and tilted her head. "What are you thinking, David?"

"I...I'm not thinking anything. I mean, I'm thinking about my wife driving home in the snow. Thinking about where's the best place to get a battery for your car tomorrow. That's, that's about it."

"Do you hear yourself?"

"What?"

Teri narrowed her eyes. "David, what do you desire?"

Leave it to another math professor to offer up another non sequitur. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "Desire?"

"Yes, David. Desire. What do you desire right here, right now, more than anything else?"

"Teri, I don't know quite what you—"

Teri held up a hand and pressed a finger to David's lips. "Don't." The smile remained on her face, but underneath it was the current of electric anger and resentment mixed with anticipation and excitement. "Of all the things you could say right now, don't say that." She removed her finger.

Her finger on his lips had been the closest any female, besides Constance, had ever been to David since his wedding day. He fought to keep his composure. "Say what?" He held his hands out, palms up, shoulders shrugged. "Teri, I don't know what you're talking about. Desire? I don't know what you mean by that."

It took five seconds for Teri's eyes to change. It was as if a storm, darker and deeper than the blizzard outside, had formed inside her and looked to escape through her eyes. "The hell you don't." Teri spun away from him and strode back to the bay window.

David knew exactly what she'd been asking. He knew exactly what he'd wanted to say. But he had been too...afraid. Embarrassed. Nervous. He had wanted to answer her truthfully. He checked his watch. The storm had been going for quite some time, the mayor surely had closed all the city offices by now, which meant Connie was more than likely on her way home.

"Teri, I'm sorry. If I led you on, I'm truly sorry."

"If?" Teri turned on him. "Damn you! If? Do I look like a child?" She planted her hands on her hips, put all her weight on one foot, and continued. "You invite me to your house under the guise of helping out a poor woman stranded in the snow, knowing your wife isn't going to be home, and you say 'if'?" Teri glared at him.

In spite of what Teri had just said, all David could think about was her standing by the bay window for the entire neighborhood to see. For Connie to see when she pulled up to the house.

Apparently, he conveyed his thoughts more than he intended to. "What?" Teri turned toward the window, then back to David. "Always concerned about appearances. Hell, David, you've flirted with me at work in front of others and now you're worried about someone seeing me in the window?" She shook her head. "A bit late in the game for that, don't you think?"

"Flirted with you?" David pushed away from the wall and approached her. "I never...if you construed anything I did as being flirtatious, I'm sorry. I never intended that."

Teri raised a hand and approached David. "You bastard. You—"

She stopped herself, dropped her hand, and crossed the room to the loveseat. Before sitting down she turned to David and waved a dismissive hand at him. "I'm not one of your star-struck students you can charm into submission in your classroom." She dropped herself into the seat

and burrowed into the leather. “I know when a man is leading me on, and damn it David, you were. Even this morning with that stupid pretense of letting me vent in your office.” She turned her head aside and crossed her arms. When she spoke, she did not face David. “Even here, in your house.”

David stood in the middle of the room. Teri spoke the truth. That, more than anything else, scared the hell out of him. He thought of things to say, of apologies to offer, but that would be an admission of what he’d done, and he couldn’t do that. Admitting it would make it real. As long as he didn’t admit to it...what? *Then it wouldn’t be real? How delusional can you be? Of course it’s real. She’s sitting here right in your living room. It’s real, damn it!*

He glanced at Teri. She turned to him and dropped her hands into her lap.

“Why the *hell* did you do this to me?” She paused, but David at least knew well enough not to answer. “Is it a game with you? Is that it? Flirt with the younger female math professor, jerk her around for a while, watch her get all giddy like a high school freshman enamored with the senior football captain, then drop her like a dead weight and leave her dangling in the wind as she hangs from the noose she herself tied? Is that it? Tell me. I deserve the truth, if nothing else.”

She moved one hand to an armrest and drummed her fingers. She crossed her legs. The dangling foot marked out the time.

David backed up, felt for the sofa with his leg, and lowered himself into it. He sat with his hands in his lap, a schoolboy sitting in the principal’s office trying to figure out the right thing to say, knowing that anything he said could and would be used against him. The truth. That’s what she wanted. He owed her at least that. He knew that, of course. It wasn’t a matter of knowing what he owed her, or of knowing what was right and wrong. It never had been a matter of simply knowing.

“Teri—” David rubbed his hands together, trying to compose his thoughts before he continued. “Teri, if this whole thing had gone anywhere, what do you think would have been the final outcome?”

“Final...?” The drumming stopped. The marking of time ceased.

David stopped rubbing his hands and leaned back into the leather cushions. “Did you think there was ever any possibility of me leaving my wife?”

Unmoving, Teri’s eyes blazed at David. “You *bastard*.”

David turned to look out the bay window. The snow was coming down heavily, swirling, blowing from east to west. It looked like it was shaping up to be quite a Nor’easter. Not much different from the kind of storm that was brewing in his own living room.

“I never said anything to you about leaving my wife.”

“You didn’t have to. Everyone in the math department knows you’re not happy in your marriage. You haven’t done anything to hide that fact. It’s written all over everything you do. What the hell was I supposed to think?”

“I don’t know. I never—”

“You never, my ass.”

David rose from the sofa and ran a hand through his hair. “Teri, I’m sorry.”

Teri stood and stormed out of the room. A few moments later a door slammed, the sound coming from the direction of the bathroom at the rear of the house.

In the kitchen, David removed a dish towel from the rack, wet it under the sink, and started cleaning the counters. How had he screwed up so badly? Did he really think he could flirt with Teri all those times with no repercussions? What had he been thinking? He scrubbed at the nonexistent stain. Moving down the counter, scrubbing stains that weren’t there, David fought to

regain control of his will. He stopped scrubbing, threw the dish towel into the sink, and leaned against the island. He heard the water running in the bathroom down the hall. He needed to make it right with Teri. He thought about what to say, what to do. When he turned to go back to the living room he felt a cold draft that he hadn't noticed earlier. He looked around the kitchen, checked the window above the sink to make sure it was closed, which it was.

He turned toward the door that led to the garage. It was open a crack.

David started to close it, but stopped when he caught a glimpse inside the garage. He opened the door all the way.

The Beast was gone. *What the hell?*

Josh. He was working today, but he was supposed to walk to work and Connie was going to pick him up on her way home.

He had taken The Beast. Against David's firm, clear command not to drive that car in the winter, Josh had taken The Beast.

David grabbed the phone receiver off the opposite wall and dialed the Old Wachusett Public Library.

Chapter 39: Connie, John Smith, and History

His hair. Connie realized it was the man's hair—along with the feathers on his necklace, the tassels hanging from the animal-skin sleeves, and the loose-fitting clothing he was wearing—that had made her feel uneasy while he had stood outside the library, outside where the wind was howling and blowing the snow all over the place. The man's hair and feathers and tassels and clothing hadn't moved at all. The wind had no effect on them, as if he had been standing in a vacuum bubble that had protected him from the elements. There was no snow on his shoulders or hair. His clothes did not appear to be wet. Nothing indicated he had been standing in a blizzard only moments ago.

A shiver ran up Connie's spine.

"Thank you." The man extended a hand. He held it out, waiting for Connie.

Connie shook her head, cleared her throat, and shook the hand. *I must have imagined it. His hair had to have been blown by the wind and I just didn't notice it.* But she couldn't reconcile the fact that there was absolutely no snow on him. What explained that?

"I am eternally grateful to you for your kindness."

"You are welcome. Although, you don't have to be eternally grateful. The 'thank you' was enough." Connie smiled, and John Smith smiled back.

"So." Connie turned toward the main section of the library and John Smith followed. She spoke over her shoulder. "Margaret shared a little bit this morning of how you two met. At the movies, was it? *Corvette Summer*, I think she said."

"Yes." John Smith's answer was precise and clear. "That was the movie."

"She's a young girl at heart." Connie led John into the processing room and pointed at the phone on one of the desks. "You probably figured that out for yourself already."

"Yes," John nodded and smiled. "One of the most effective ways to live life—remain young at heart."

Connie stood to the side as John approached the phone and picked up the receiver. He dialed the number and looked around the room, holding the receiver to his ear. She thought about the odd aphorism about remaining young at heart, odd not in that the saying itself was odd, but odd in that this man whom she had known less than five minutes would say such a thing. She had been the one to mention that Margaret was young at heart, so maybe it wasn't a big deal—*it's not a big deal, so calm down*—but it just seemed kind of...odd.

Connie poked her head around the doorway to look outside. She wondered if she would be able to get home. Mother nature had unloaded eighteen inches of snow on Old Wachusett two weeks ago, and in spite of the admirable job the municipal employees and independent plowmen had done of clearing the streets of snow, there were still mammoth snowbanks on every street and mountains of snow at every street corner, so much so that there was no place for the workers to put the snow from a storm such as this. The plowing would be rough going today, which meant the drive home would be that much more difficult. She lived only five minutes away, but if she couldn't get out of the parking lot, that didn't matter much. Perhaps she should call David to have him come pick her up on the way home from the college, assuming he had been let out

early. Even if he hadn't, she could stay here and do more work until he came by to get her. She would call him as soon as John Smith was done with the phone.

She turned back into the processing room and leaned against the doorway. Mr. Smith had hung up the phone and had in hand a book from the new book cart. A funny thought struck Connie. She didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable being in the library alone with a stranger. A male stranger. That, too, along with the aphorism, she found to be odd. Connie wasn't by any means a nervous person who was always looking over her shoulder for an approaching rapist or kidnaper, but at the same time she was appropriately cautious. She knew to never put herself into a situation that could turn dangerous.

But didn't this qualify as one such situation? Why wasn't she the least bit wary of being alone in a locked building with a man she did not know? She couldn't explain it. If one were to ask her right now what she was thinking by not taking more precautions, she would have said that she didn't feel any were necessary. And that would be the absolute truth. She did not feel, in her intuitive gut, that any precautions were necessary. Even though she relied more on her intuition while David followed facts, Connie was surprised at the lack of uneasiness she felt right now.

Should that in itself be a cause for concern? Maybe she should—

“—be possible to visit it?”

Connie blinked, realized she had been staring into space, and pushed off from the doorway. “I'm sorry. I must have been daydreaming. What did you say?”

“The direction of one's future often lies in the power of dreams.”

“Um, yes, sure.”

Trying to recover from the embarrassment of being caught not paying attention, along with another odd saying uttered out of nowhere, Connie pointed at the book in John's hand. Its title was *A Brief History of New England*. “I consider myself a student of history,” John said as he opened the book and flipped through its pages. “Writing a book chronicling the history of New England might prove to be an intellectually stimulating exercise, probably more so than reading such a book. I had asked if you have a local history room in your wonderful library, and if so, might it be possible to visit it?”

“We do.” Connie thought for a moment before answering the second part of John's question. “Did you speak with Margaret?”

“No.” John placed the book back onto the cart. “She did not answer the phone. Perhaps she is not home yet, or is currently indisposed.”

Indisposed? Connie fought back a chuckle at the word. Who talked like that today?

“I will call back in a few minutes. Meanwhile, well, I do not wish to belabor the matter, but the local history room. Might it be possible...?”

The room was located at the rear of the library. Before Connie could register any uneasiness about bringing John back to the privacy of the local history room she found herself walking down the main section of the library. John followed her. She took her keys from the front pocket of her slacks, unlocked the door, and flicked the light switch. The fluorescent lights buzzed to life and illuminated a small square room with two round tables in the center, each with two chairs flanking them. Three of the walls were lined with volumes of local history: property tax assessment books, high school yearbooks, dozens of copies of four different local history books written by former residents (two deceased, two living), diaries written by founding members of Old Wachusett, old street listings going back to the beginning of the century, and other historical volumes. The fourth wall had shelves designed to hold maps of varying shapes and sizes.

John walked around the room, his head tilted, index finger tracing the spines of the books.

“Looking for anything in particular?” Connie stood by the doorway.

John nodded. “I am, indeed.” He continued on, not offering any further information.

“Perhaps I could help you find it.”

“A book written by a local historian who specialized in Indian myth and folklore originating from this part of the land.”

“The land?” This time Connie could not keep her musings to herself. She chuckled at the use of the archaic language.

John turned to her. “I made you laugh.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really—” Connie covered her mouth with one hand and held up her index finger with the other. It took a moment for her to compose herself. When she did she lowered both hands and looked directly at John. “It’s just that I’ve never heard anyone speak the way you do. ‘From this part of the land?’ It’s...it struck me as funny, that’s all. I’m sorry if I offended or embarrassed you.”

“No offense taken.” John moved along the wall toward Connie and motioned to one of the chairs. “Please, sit down. I’d like to ask you a question, if I may be so bold.”

Connie nodded her head and sat obediently, perfectly at ease within the confines of the tiny room with a complete stranger. She did not notice that John, as he made his way behind her, quietly closed the door. He walked around the table, stood behind the chair for a moment, then pulled it out and sat down. The feathers on John’s necklace caught Connie’s attention. She studied them, observing the brilliant colors: red, green, blue, yellow. The beads, which she had noticed before but had not got a good look at, now appeared to be miniature heads of various animals: there was an owl, an eagle, a bear, a raccoon, and a wolf among others that Connie couldn’t quite discern.

“What do you fear?”

Connie blinked at the question. She raised her hands to her eyes and rubbed them. She felt as though she’d been asleep for days and was now waking up. She lowered her hands to the cold table and looked at the man sitting across from her. The man named John Smith. Connie felt a stirring inside her, something awakening within her...an awareness of an inner struggle.

“What did you say?”

“What do you fear?”

Connie looked at John Smith. Electricity surged through his long, black hair. Sparks traveled from the top of his head, out of his scalp, and down the individual strands of hair and out the ends. Sparkles of dancing light fell to the carpeted floor. The temperature in the room dropped. John Smith exhaled, and vapors drifted away from his mouth. Connie couldn’t figure out how the cold from outside had seeped into the local history room.

She pushed away from the table to get out of the room, but before she could stand hands flashed from across the table and clamped onto her wrists. Cold hands. Dead hands. Connie tried pulling her wrists free, but they did not move. The cold vise grip around each of them tightened.

“What do you fear?”

Connie looked into his eyes. The coldness numbing her hands faded into the background when she saw what was in his eyes. The irises turned color, roiling from red (had they been that color all along?) to orange to yellow to green to blue before turning to black night, matching the color and depth of the pupils. Then Connie gasped. In the center of the eyes, clearly set against the black backdrop of the pupil, she saw a boy suspended in midair. His legs dangled, his arms flailed. Blood stains spread down his back and chest. Something sharp and silver-metallic

gripped both shoulders, causing the flow of blood. Connie saw nothing else. Not what the silver-metallic things were, not what was holding the boy in the air, not what was happening to him.

But there were two things she knew from what she did see.

The boy was her son, Joshua. And Joshua was in grave danger.

“You are correct. It is Joshua. And he is in grave danger.”

Connie jerked herself out of the trance or daydreaming or whatever it was and focused on the man gripping her wrists, not looking into his eyes, but at his neck, at the feathers and beads.

“He is in danger.” John loosened his grip on Connie’s wrists. “As are you, your husband, and everyone else living in Old Wachusett.”

Connie started shaking. “Who are you?” She drew away from the table. Her voice quivered. “What...what are you?”

“I am—”

Connie stood and leapt to the door. She yanked at the knob, turned it, yanked it again. The door did not open. She fumbled for her keys. *Why the hell do we have a lock on the local history room door?*

“Constance—”

Where are my keys? She stuck a hand inside her pocket, feeling for the metal key ring. She found it and pulled it out. *Come on, come on, come on!* She looked behind her as she found the key and stuck it into the lock. The guy was just sitting there, not moving, not doing anything.

“Constance, please...” He motioned to the seat she had been sitting in.

Screw that, she thought as she turned the key, turned the knob, and still was unable to open the door. *What the hell? Did I have the wrong key? What....* She pulled the key out, looked at it, it was the right one. She jammed it back into the lock and turned it and—

“Constance, enough! No more of that!”

The phrase froze her in place, one hand on the knob, the other holding the key. That phrase. Only one other person in her entire life had ever used that phrase, in that tone, to stop her from doing something wrong, from back-talking, from acting in a rebellious manner, from being disrespectful.

That phrase had only been spoken to Connie by her mother.

She turned to John Smith.

“You must sit. You must listen.”

He waited.

She took the key out of the lock, put the key ring back into her pocket, and slid into the chair. “How did you know...those words...how...?”

“You must listen if you wish to survive, if you wish to save everyone you know and love.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. In time, you will. For now, know this. I asked you what you feared. I know what you fear. What’s happened between you and David—you fear him leaving you for someone else. Your son, Joshua—you fear him growing further and further apart from you and David.” The room was grew colder. Connie shivered. “My dear Constance,” John Smith continued, “there are many things you fear, some of which you are aware. Many of which you are not.”

John leaned toward her, his eyes focused on hers. “You fear me—I am something you have never encountered, and you fear that.” He paused, and one corner of his mouth turned upward. “And perhaps you should fear me. Depending on your willingness to follow what I tell you, perhaps you should.” He paused again. “I will tell you what you should fear the most.”

Connie worked her throat. She closed her eyes, wanting to do something, *anything*, but unable—*unwilling?*—to act. She opened her eyes and looked at John, but not at his eyes. Never again at his eyes.

“You should—you *must*—fear for your son. He is in more danger than all of us combined. His life, more importantly for all of us, his destiny hangs in the balance. He is being sought by two entities that wish to use him; one for good, the other for evil. These two entities will stop at nothing to find him. They do not know who your son is, or what importance he plays in the future history of this land and this people, and that is the only advantage we have. They do not know of his significance. But they are still looking for him for other reasons, and when they find him it will not take long for either one of them or both of them to discover who your son truly is. When that time comes....”

For the first time Connie heard fear in John’s voice. She felt it coming from him, a wave of emotion that quickly dissipated.

“When that time comes, and if it is the wrong entity that first discovers your son’s true identity, all will be lost. For me and my people, for you and your family, and for all who now inhabit this land you call Old Wachusett.”

John pulled away from Connie. “Do you understand what I have told you?”

Connie shook her head once, then nodded, first vigorously, then tentatively. “I saw,” she pointed at his eyes, “I saw him in your eyes. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew it was him, it was Josh. He is in danger, but what—”

“Constance.”

“What?” The word came out a hoarse whisper.

“It is not Joshua.”

Connie drew back. She tried to ask the question “What?”, and she moved her lips, but the word did not come out.

“Yes, it was Joshua you saw. And yes, he is in danger. But it is not him of whom I now speak.” John placed his hands on the table, palms down, fingers spread, his eyes fixed on Connie. “It is his twin brother.” He paused again. “Julian is the one being sought, and he is the one you must fear for if we do not do what needs to be done. Listen to me. I must now tell you—”

Connie’s eyes closed, her mind shut down, and her body slumped and slid off the chair. The last sound she heard was the distant ringing of a phone.

Chapter 40: Kimi, Joshua, and Achak

Kimi arrived back at the mountain's summit. She was now doubled over and gasping for breath. When The Passage was open it appeared as nothing more than a slight discontinuity in the scenery, as if a slit had appeared in space, blurred at the edges. In a blizzard, it would be impossible for anyone, even Kimi, to find it by sight.

Thank The Great Spirit that Kimi did not rely on her sight when it came to matters of such importance. In addition to causing a visual disturbance, however slight, The Passage caused an auditory one as well which was even more difficult to detect for most people. Kimi was an exception. The Passage did something to the air around it which caused a kind of auditory blur, similar to a visual one. Even in the howling wind that now surrounded her, she should be able to detect it.

Kimi straightened, her breaths coming easier, and tilted her head. She closed her eye. She was wet and cold, the driving snow finally beginning to penetrate her deerskin covering. Now sleet was stinging her face. She listened. Her hearing did not amplify every sound around her. It acted selectively, bringing sounds she wanted to hear to the forefront of her mind's ear, allowing her to locate their source. She turned her head slightly, took three steps with her eye still closed, and stopped. She opened her eye and looked to the right.

There it was. She had to narrow her eye to see it, but it was there. A slim crack in space that blurred the snow falling near it, invisible to anyone who wasn't looking for it. She had no way of knowing how long The Passage would remain open. In the past it had never stayed open for longer than one journey of the Sun across the sky. If it closed and she missed it, that would be bad. Really bad. Because in the past The Passage usually waited for months before reopening. That, also, would be really bad.

It could also wait years. And no one, not the Elders or Warriors or Achak or even her father had ever discovered how to open The Passage.

The snowfall continued to intensify. She could barely see twenty feet in front of her, and she was afraid. She hadn't known what else to do, so she had gone back to The Passage, running the entire distance from where she had left the boy in the clearing. She had gone back down Lone Man's Walk, onto the ice where the blood stains had already been covered with a fresh blanket of white, through the forest and up the mountain to where she was now. She had run as fast as she could, as fast as the storm and her ankle would allow her to run. Her ankle had started hurting again, but she had thanked The Great Spirit that it wasn't enough to halt her progress. Her wrist still burned with pain, she was hungry, and she was tired.

And afraid. Very afraid.

Kimi had known it would be difficult to find Achak and the Totem, but she thought The Great Spirit would have guided her to at least one of them. That had not happened. The task now seemed impossible. She was at a loss as to what to do. She could try building a shelter like she did for the boy and wait out the storm. But what if it lasted into tomorrow? And what if The Passage closed before then? She had to leave. She had to go through The Passage before it closed. But if she did that, then Achak would remain in the New World, free to carry out

whatever insidious plan he had concocted, unabated by her efforts to stop him from his madness. She was confused.

WHUMP!

Kimi's head snapped up and her body reacted accordingly—arms positioned themselves in front of her in a defensive move, feet spread themselves apart, legs bent at the knees. Her body had readied itself for—

WHUMP! WHUMP!

—whatever was coming.

She knew what was coming. But...did she?

WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!

As her head tilted up and her eye narrowed to peer into the spiraling whiteness, she did know. Not *what* it was, but *who* it was.

As her mind processed the revelation that could have come only from The Great Spirit Himself, and her eye searched through the storm for Achak, something slammed into her back, knocking her to the ground. The weight on her back drove the breath out of her lungs. She pushed against the weight, but it was too heavy. She pushed again, and pain flashed out of her wrist and up her arm, preventing her from trying again. But she needed to breathe. She needed to get up. She needed to—

Calm. Peace. Focus.

She closed her eye. She focused on her lungs. She heard them inside her body and commanded them to take in air. Nothing. She pushed all other thoughts—snow, wind, noise—out of her mind. She focused on her lungs. They opened. Cold air rushed into her mouth and nose, into her body, life-sustaining breath filling her being. She tried getting up again, this time strong enough to move, but not enough to move the weight off of her. She closed her eye, inhaled, and pushed again. The weight moved. It rolled off her back and onto the snow. She got to her knees, looked at what was next to her, and scrambled backward through the snow on her hands and feet and rear end.

Another body. Another boy, this one older than the others, lying in the snow on his stomach, head turned toward her. Red stains covered his upper back, holes torn out of the clothing at the shoulders. His chest moved. He was alive. Kimi crawled to him and reached out to roll him over, but as she was about to touch him her brother spoke from behind her.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

Kimi jumped to her feet, flinching as she landed on the bad ankle, hiding her splinted, broken wrist behind her, not wanting Achak to notice she was injured. She couldn't afford him that advantage of knowledge.

She raised her head, held her good hand in front of her, and looked at her brother through the swirling snow.

He was not the Great Eagle she had seen. The white head, brown and black wings, and silver-metallic talons were gone. What she saw was her brother standing before her, his arms crossed, long, black hair blowing in the wind and snow, brown eyes narrowed at her, his facial features reminding her of what she once looked like with two eyes.

She hated him. Ever since that day long ago. The day he cut out her eye.

Kimi spoke through clenched teeth. “He looks like he needs help, no thanks to you.”

Achak uncrossed his arms and held his palms out and shrugged his shoulders as if insulted. “What makes you think I'm not helping him?” Achak looked at the boy lying in the snow. “Oh. The blood on the back. You blame that on me.” Achak turned his attention to Kimi. Through the

blowing snow she saw the grin on his face. “Why waste time on silly games? You’re right, sis. He does need help. But you’re not the one to give it to him.”

“Sis? You speak like one of them.”

Achak stepped to the side, toward the boy. “Way I figure it, if I’m gonna defend these people and protect their land, I might as well learn a little bit of their language and culture and have fun with it.”

Kimi opened her mouth to answer Achak, but then closed it. The Passage. It sounded different, the blurring now a deeper pitch than a few moments ago. It was getting ready to close.

Kimi switched her focus to Achak, hoping he didn’t notice anything. The Passage was about to close. What did that mean for her? She couldn’t go back and leave Achak here. And she could not stay here as she could not defeat Achak under the present circumstances. She was weakened. He seemingly had discovered the ability to skin-walk, and there was no way for her to fight against such power. Not without the Totem. Had Achak found it? Was that how he had gained the ability to skin-walk?

“Cat got your tongue, sis?”

Kimi summoned her strength and moved toward her brother. “You cannot win this, Achak.”

“My ever optimistic, yet clearly deluded sister, how wrong you are. Do you not know that the good guy always wins?”

“You do not have the backing of the Elders, you have no Warriors to fight for you, and The Great Spirit will not grant you success.”

The wind howled around them, kicking up snow at their feet and swirling it between and around them. Kimi was getting colder. Achak appeared to be unaffected by the drop in temperature.

“Allow me to correct you on a few points, Kimi.” Achak held up a hand and raised a finger. “One, I don’t need the backing of the Elders. I escaped from their hold and got through The Passage without their backing, didn’t I? Both those feats were supposed to be impossible. And yet,” Achak spread his hands out in front of him, “here I am.”

Kimi shook her head and looked at the boy on the ground. His hand moved. That meant he would be regaining consciousness soon and that meant more danger. There was no telling what Achak would do to him if the boy tried fighting back. She glanced beyond Achak. The sound of The Passage was getting deeper. Time was running out.

“Two,” another finger raised, “take a look around you at what’s happening. I don’t need Warriors when I have this.” He waved his hands above his head, but Kimi did not know what he meant. “Three,” a third finger, “I can do whatever I want without seeking the so-called Great Spirit’s permission.”

Kimi stared at her brother. She was at a loss as to the meaning of what he had said. He did not need Warriors? Take a look at what’s happening? All she saw around her was forest and snow. She could see nothing else in the storm except for—

The storm. *But that’s impossible*, Kimi thought. That would mean Achak’s knowledge was much deeper than Kimi had expected. That her brother had discovered ancient secrets even The Elders had doubted existed. That Achak, if what she was thinking was true, might indeed possess the power to do whatever he wished.

The air escaped Kimi’s lungs. She fought to get it back, bringing both hands to her chest. *Calm. Peace. Fight The Fear. Do not let it defeat you. Fight it!*

“I see that a sudden realization has come upon you, my dear sister.” Achak chuckled. He stepped toward her. “It’s truly amazing what one can accomplish by manipulating the elements,

all by the force of one's will. Truly amazing." He took another step toward Kimi and extended a hand toward her. "It's yours for the taking, sis. If you want it."

Fight The Fear! Do not let it defeat you. Do not let him use it against you. Do not give in to it!

Kimi stepped back and shook her head. "No, Achak. No."

"Yeah, I figured as much. What the hell, thought I'd give it a try, you know with me saving your life and all so many years ago. Thought you might finally be grateful. Guess not."

Kimi couldn't waste any more time. She had to decide quickly what to do. The boy on the ground moaned and moved a leg.

"Gratitude? For what. For this?" Kimi pointed to her empty eye socket. She looked to the boy, looked beyond Achak to The Passage, looked back to Achak. "You say you saved my life." Kimi paused to compose herself. "You blinded me. *You owe me* my sight. *You owe me* the beauty I once possessed. Can you give those things back to me, Achak? Are *those* things mine for the taking?"

"I will forever regret what I did to you, Kimi, and I may even regret the day I saved your life, but save it I did. You cannot deny that. And if I had to do it again, I would. I would do anything, *anything*, to save your life, my dear sister."

The boy started to rise. The Passage's sound deepened and intensified. Soon, Achak would also be able to hear it and know what was happening.

"You will not twist the truth to fool me. I will not allow it, Achak. I will not give in to it."

"Kimi, you mistake Truth for Fear. Do you not see that? The two often feel the same, but they are not. Your life is ruled by Fear, not Truth. It is you who have twisted the two so that you no longer can discern one from the other."

She needed to decide. She needed to move. Talking with Achak was not doing anything but wasting time. She had to do something. *Anything*. But she was frozen, unable to think clearly.

From her left came a black shape out of the swirling gray whiteness. It slammed into Achak and sent him hurtling through the air and crashing into a tree. He fell to the ground. Kimi dove for the boy, got her hands underneath him, and praying to The Great Spirit, she used all her strength to lift and drag him toward The Passage. She cried out as her wrist flared with pain. Her ankle protested, twisted, and pain shot up her leg. She stumbled. She got up. She dragged the boy who was now moaning and trying to get himself free from her grasp.

"No!" Achak sprang up.

Kimi turned in time to see Achak's arms and legs morph together into massive wings. His head became that of an eagle, brown and black and white feathers replaced his skin and clothes. Achak flapped his wings and shot toward her. With one last heave Kimi lifted the boy and dragged him toward The Passage, but before she could step into it Achak roared at her, ripped the boy from her hands, and flew into The Passage and disappeared. Kimi dove after him and the boy, but she was too late. The Passage had closed. She landed on the cold, crusty snow.

Chapter 41: The Truth about Lynne

Edward sat on the floor, his back against the wall, legs splayed out in front of him. Carl lay six feet away, unconscious. He had smacked his head on the floor when Richard had fallen on top of him. Richard now lay next to Edward, his head resting on Edward's lap, his stomach bleeding from two bullet holes not more than two inches apart. Edward had taken off his shirt, rolled it, and was now pressing it against the holes, doing his best to stanch the flow of blood. It seemed to be working. Both of Richard's hands covered Edward's hand. Edward's other hand caressed his friend's head.

Edward had tried getting up to use the phone to call for help, but Richard, grabbing Edward's arms and pleading with him to stay, had not let him. As if Richard knew that it wouldn't matter. Edward had also tried apologizing to Richard, but Richard, speaking through a horrible gurgling sound, told him to stop doing such a thing and to simply speak the truth. Edward looked down at his friend with a puzzled look, unsure of his meaning. Richard motioned with a trembling hand to the manila envelope and the blood-stained pages that littered the floor.

After moments of looking at the blood and the papers and turning the words over and over in his mind, Edward understood. The truth. *The truth will set you free.* That's what Edward's father had always told him. Maybe it was time to be set free. One hand pressing his blood-soaked shirt against Richard's stomach, the other hand caressing his dear friend's head, Edward started telling Richard the most horrible, hurtful truth hidden inside him—that being the truth behind his wife's suicide. He started with the confession that Richard was his dearest friend, the one person he could always count on. He continued with what was written on the pages on the floor, speaking out loud to his good friend and telling him...

...the truth. I owe you that much, Richard. I owe you that much.

I don't know why—and I'm sure the mental health experts have a technical name for it—but I remember everything leading up to the moment it happened. Everything immediately after that is a blur. I know how that sounds, I know, but it's the truth.

That day, I pulled into the driveway, turned off the ignition of our Oldsmobile, and had trouble getting the key out of the ignition switch. I sat in the car for ten minutes wrestling with the key. Ten minutes. How could I have known that ten minutes could cost a number of lifetimes? Finally, I managed to wrangle it out without breaking it off in the steering column.

I got out of the car. I took a deep breath of the rain-cleansed fresh air. The afternoon September shower left the front lawn sparkling with millions of raindrops glistening on the blades of grass. The driveway was still wet, a faint mist rising from it as the puddles evaporated under the glowing sun.

I shut the front door of the car, opened the rear door, and grabbed my briefcase. I remember thinking that I should just leave it in the car, but then decided against it as I had paperwork and notes inside it that I needed to finish that night for the upcoming board meeting and next week's sermon. When I lifted the briefcase it bumped the head rest of the front seat. One of the clasps must not have been latched closed because the briefcase popped open. My Bible and sermon notes and files spilled onto the rear seat and floor.

It took a few minutes to gather up the papers, put them into their proper order, and place them neatly into the briefcase. How many times I've wondered, lamented the possibility, of what may have happened, how things may have turned out, had I left the briefcase in the car, or had I not cared so much about making sure my sermon notes were in the right order at that time.

Nevertheless, I made sure I latched both locks on the briefcase.

I closed the rear door. I stood straight, briefcase in one hand, suit coat draped over my arm, and surveyed my neighborhood. A couple of children were riding their tricycles in the driveway across the street; Mr. Whitaker—the eighty-year-old who was in better shape than I was—was mowing his front lawn; a single-engine Cessna buzzed overhead, heading toward the airport on the southern edge of Albany.

It was a wonderful day to come home early.

I headed toward my house, anticipating the sight of Lynne playing with my two beautiful little girls. As I sauntered up the driveway swinging my suit coat and briefcase, and before I reached the stone walkway, an odd impulse overtook me. Odd only in the sense that I had never felt such a thing before in my life, at least not that I can remember. I felt the need—yes, I use the word 'need'—to remove my shoes and socks and walk across the wet grass. Knowing what you know about me, you may find it strange that I complied with the impulse without hesitation. I impulsively removed my shoes and socks and placed them on the walkway next to the flower bed that Lynne had meticulously planted and cared for.

I strolled across the grass, the wet blades tickling my feet and lodging themselves between my toes. I felt my pant cuffs getting wet as they slapped against my ankles, and it did not bother me in the least. The experience was refreshing in a childlike way.

I approached the front door. I wiped my feet on the welcome mat on the front cement step, which didn't do any good because the mat itself was still soaked from the rain. I opened the door and, as quietly as possible, slipped inside and gently eased the door closed, hoping I could surprise my girls. The door latch clicked into place.

I stood on the wood floor which had been warmed by the sun shining through the narrow, block glass windows on either side of the entryway. I listened for voices. I heard none, yet remained still. Perhaps Lynne and the girls had seen me pull into the driveway and were now playing hide-and-seek with me, as they often did. Without moving I visually searched the front hallway and living room. Evidence of the day's activities were scattered about the room: two baby bottles, one half-full, the other empty, both on the floor next to the couch; an open Cat-in-the-Hat book face-down on the middle cushion of the couch; bibs and pacifiers on the coffee table. I pictured Lynne, sitting on the floor, feeding, reading, caring. Taking care of my baby girls.

In a word, mothering.

For the most part, Lynne enjoyed being a mother. At least, that's how it had appeared to me. Lynne had gone through a difficult time—stress, post-partum issues, things like that—but nothing the two of us couldn't handle together. During those times especially, Lynne enjoyed the early afternoons immediately following lunch when naptime arrived. It gave her a chance to rest. She needed a lot of that.

I moved from the warmth of the sun's rays to place my briefcase in its usual place on the floor next to the phone table. I put my keys in the ceramic Christmas mug (one of Lynne's favorite possessions) on the table, and crept silently up the carpeted stairway, hoping to glimpse my beloved girls in the blissful state of napping. I paused on each step, the fabric of the sun-

warmed carpet massaging my feet, and I listened. I heard an occasional intake of breathe, or whimper, and attributed them to normal sleeping sounds.

I loosened my tie and continued climbing the stairs. Half-way up, I paused. I don't know why, but I thought of the photograph Lynne had on the night stand on her side of the bed. It was of Lynne when she was ten years old, standing next to her mother who lay in a hospital bed. I thought of what it must have been like for Lynne to have grown up with the constant visits to the hospital, never knowing when her mother might come home, and when she did come home, never knowing when she would need to go back.

At that precise moment, I was startled from my thoughts by a noise that did not sound normal, that did not belong within the context of my wife napping with our baby girls. It was nothing more than a whimper, or a muffled cry, and yet I knew that that sound, like an alien invader, did not belong in my house.

That sound propelled me up the rest of the stairs. At the top, I listened for the briefest of moments before turning to the right toward our bedroom.

What I saw next filled me with untouchable terror I will never be able to purge from my soul.

Lynne was standing next to our bed, her back to me. She had a white pillow in her hand. Abigail and Ruth were lying next to each other on our bed. Abigail flailed her arms and legs as if recently awakened. Ruth lay as still and heavy as a sweltering August night. The black gun seemed to float on the white bed covers, less than a foot away from Ruth's tiny, motionless feet.

Afraid to move, I whispered Lynne's name.

She grabbed the gun off the bed, turned, and leveled it at my chest.

"What are you doing here?" Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her long red hair was matted to her cheeks and forehead. She gripped the pillow in one hand. The gun shook in her other. Her neck shone with perspiration.

"I...Lynne...what...what are you doing?" I held out my trembling hand. "Lynne, give me the gun." I stepped toward her.

Lynne motioned with the gun for me to back up. "Don't come closer. Swear to God, Edward, I'll kill you." She wiped her forehead with the white pillow.

I stopped. "OK, Lynne." I held up my hands in surrender. "OK. I'm not moving, not another inch." I glanced at Abigail and Ruth on the bed. "Lynne, give me the gun, then we can figure this out. OK, Lynne? Let's...let's just try to figure this out. Give me the gun."

The gun shook in her hand. "Figure this out?" She gasped for a breath. "How many times have we prayed, Edward? How many shrinks have you secretly sent me to, how many visits to the mental ward does it take for you to realize we are never going to figure this out. I'm not getting any better." Lynne backed up until her leg bumped the bed. She lowered herself next to Abigail. She kept the gun aimed at me while she switched the gun and pillow from one hand to the other. She lowered the pillow to Abigail's tiny, peaceful face.

"Lynne." I stepped closer. "What are you...I won't let you—"

Lynne dropped the pillow onto the bed, next to Abigail's head. Then she caressed Abigail's hair, as if admiring it for the first time. More tears fell from her cheeks.

"Lynne, this is not the way to solve this." I wanted to do something, desperately wanted to do something, anything. Lunge for the gun, make a move to grab Abigail and Ruth, something, anything, but I didn't dare risk it.

She turned to me, her hand stroking Abigail's hair, the gun aimed at me. "We are way beyond trying to solve this. This isn't solved by one of your tidy little sermons where you can put

all the Bible verses together and make a pretty picture and everything turns out roses. My god, haven't you figured that out yet?"

I tried to swallow, but my mouth and throat were a desert. I slowly raised my hand and wiped the sweat from my eyes. "Lynne, let me hold your hand." I reached out my hand toward hers. "Give it to me. Not the gun, your other hand. You can have the gun, but I need to hold your hand."

"See? You think I'm crazy. You think I'm so out of my mind that I'll just give you my hand, totally oblivious to your scheming to make a grab for the gun." Lynne grinned. "I may, indeed, be crazy, Edward, but I'm not stupid." She shook her head, her eyes staying on me. "I am not stupid."

"It's not the gun I want. It's you. Just you." I glanced again at Abigail and Ruth, trying to think of a way to get between them and Lynne.

"What about them?" Lynne nodded at the girls. "Don't you want them?"

"I still have them. I'll always have them. Right now, I don't have you."

"What do you have, exactly, Edward?" Lynne waved one arm above her head, indicating her surroundings. "All this? Us?" Lynne lowered her arm and shook her head. Her eyes searched mine, looking for something to grasp. "What you have is a lunatic wife who inherited the crazies from her mother and who, in all likelihood, passed them on to her own beautiful daughters. That's what you have." Lynne rubbed her forehead, not taking her eyes or the gun off me. "Oh, yeah." She stopped rubbing her forehead. "There's one other thing you have." A laugh escaped from between her lips. "How could I have forgotten that?"

I didn't know what she meant, and it didn't matter to me at all right then. "You are not crazy, and you did not pass anything like that to our daughters. Look at them." I stepped toward Lynne and pointed at Abigail and Ruth, two precious little girls created out of our love for each other. "Go ahead. Look at them. See for yourself." Lynne shifted her eyes to the girls then quickly back to me. "Do you have problems? Yes, of course you do. Just like the rest of us. We all—"

"Don't you dare do that, Edward. Don't lump me with the rest of you. You have no idea what goes on inside my head. The voices, the jumbled thoughts. You have no idea." Lynne's voice took on a darker tone with that last statement, determination replacing panic.

"Lynne." I stepped closer. "We can—"

"No more talking." She tightened her grip on the gun as she reached for the bed. It was a white envelope that I hadn't noticed, resting on the pillow on the opposite side of the bed. She took it and held it out to me.

"What is this?" I took it from her hand. She snatched her hand away without answering. The envelope was addressed to Lynne, no return address. There was no stamp on it, which meant it had been dropped off at our house by whoever wrote it. It had been opened already. I looked at Lynne as I pulled out a single piece of lined paper. Before I unfolded it my stomach twisted into a knot.

I knew what it was.

I looked at Lynne. She looked at me.

I unfolded the paper. Written in blue ink in a flowing script of smooth-rounded letters was a letter that could come only from a woman's hand.

I skipped to the bottom of the single page and read the signature. My heart started racing, both hands started trembling uncontrollably.

“Lynne, I can explain this. Nothing happened, I swear. She and I...nothing happened between us, I swear it. If you just listen, we can...we can work through this. We can—”

“We can what? Figure it out?” Lynne shook her head. “I don’t think so.” She picked up the pillow from the bed, keeping the gun and her eyes on me. “I’m tired, Edward. I’m done with it. I will not allow my daughters to go through what I and my mother have gone through. And I won’t allow myself to go through the humiliation of what you’ve done to me. I won’t.”

Abigail started crying. Lynne turned her head. I took another step closer, but Lynne noticed it. She whipped her head around. “Back up.” I didn’t move. Her grip on the gun steadied. “Now.” I saw her finger on the trigger tense. I stepped back. Her finger relaxed. Abigail cried louder. Lynne didn’t turn toward Abigail. She kept her attention on me.

I prayed for an opportunity.

It came when Abigail stopped crying. Lynne turned toward her, the gun lowered slightly, and I lunged for it.

I almost got the gun out of her hand before she squeezed the trigger.

The bullet shattered my left hip. I collapsed to my knees. Blood seeped through my clothes and spilled onto the white carpet. I fell to the floor. I remembered a Scripture about our sins, red like scarlet, becoming as white as snow. I saw the scarlet stain on the white carpet. My sins, all I’d done to deserve this, God’s punishment, Abigail and Ruth and Lynne about to pay for my sins.

Lynne lowered the pillow and covered Abigail’s face. I struggled to get up, but collapsed again to the floor. I knew I was close to blacking out...or worse. I looked up at Lynne. She was staring at Ruth, still smothering Abigail with the pillow, and it was then that I saw the full terrible truth.

Ruth wasn’t moving.

Her arms hadn’t moved at all since I’d entered the bedroom, and neither had her legs, or her tiny feet. I watched her chest. It did not rise, it did not fall.

I tried to speak, but no words came out.

Lynne, weeping, her entire body trembling, lifted the pillow from Abigail’s face.

“Lynne...” I tried again to move, but was unable to support my weight. I pressed both hands to my hip, trying to stop the bleeding. I tried again to speak, again nothing came out. My breath was slipping away, darkness creeping into the edges of my vision.

Lynne dropped the pillow. It fell to the carpet. Lynne sat on the bed, between the girls, the gun in her hand held between her legs, her head lowered.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to be thankful, to thank God for saving us, to thank Him for the miracle of life and His coming to our rescue...

...but...Ruth...

Was Abigail still alive? Had Lynne held the pillow on her face long enough? It hadn’t seemed like it, maybe there was still hope for Abigail...maybe....

I looked at Lynne, and she looked down at me. Tears fell from her cheeks, onto the white carpet, inches from my blood. I focused on Lynne’s face, and I saw pain and sorrow and regret. Her mouth moved, and I think she said something, and it looked like she said, “I’m sorry.” I looked into her eyes, and in that eternal moment, in that black hole of time, all I felt for her was love, a different love I’d never felt for anyone in my life.

Then my focus widened, my vision grew sharper, and another brutal truth unveiled itself to me. Lynne had the barrel of the gun resting against her temple. Her finger started to squeeze the

trigger. I struggled with everything I had in me to get to my knees. I reached out for her. Her lips moved again. "I'm sorry, Edward. I'm so sorry."

Her finger squeezed more. Against my will my eyes closed. I fought to open them. The room exploded.

I reached out for my wife one last time before everything went black...

...and that was the last recollection Edward had of that day. Done with the truth, Edward looked down at Richard. His eyes were closed. His throat worked. Edward's hands were wet and sticky. He looked at them. Blood was seeping out from between Edward's fingers.

Tears ran down Edward's cheeks and dripped onto his hands and mixed with his friend's blood. He could feel Richard's chest heave once, stop moving, and heave again. Richard coughed up blood.

Edward closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Richard. God, I'm sorry. I don't know what—"

A slight squeeze of Richard's hand. Edward opened his eyes. Richard looked up at him. His eyes were empty. The color was gone, the life was gone. Richard's chest was no longer moving.

Edward hung his head and cried and thought back to the day he watched his wife die and he cried out to God and asked how much a man was supposed to endure, how much misery and pain could one man be expected to carry in one lifetime.

Edward thought of Abby and asked God to tell him where his daughter was and reassure him that she was safe and that everything was going to be all right, that everything would be all right.

Edward lowered his head and kissed Richard's forehead. Then he closed his eyes, slumped to the floor, and cried himself to sleep, cradling Richard's head.

◇◇◇◇

After sleeping and dreaming for more than twenty-four hours, two men on snowmobiles who had been looking for people stranded in the storm spotted Edward's car in the parking lot and decided to see if there was anyone inside the church. They found Edward with Richard's head resting on his lap.

They did not find Carl Sanderson.

Epilogue: Tuesday, February 7, 1978

To say Julian saw everything would be literally untrue. If you were to speak in figurative terms, which Julian would certainly appreciate, then you probably could get away with saying that he saw everything that fateful day that was the beginning of the February blizzard. He saw things that you saw: Kimi coming out of The Passage and appearing atop Wachusett Mountain; Carl stopping at Mister Donut; Abby confronting her father; and his brother, Joshua, reading a passage from *A Separate Peace*. He saw these things not in a linear fashion, as you or I might see a movie at the Orpheum Cinemas in the center of Old Wachusett, but rather like a dream, multiple images flashing before his eyes in and out of sequence, his mind left with trying to make sense of it when he awoke. For when Julian saw these things, he was sleeping. Julian slept during the daytime. It was at night when he was awake. Such was the blessing and the curse of his unique sight and his physical limitations.

Other things Julian saw, things you didn't see:

Greg Horton's body discovered by snowmobilers who thought it would be fun to go for a joyride in the storm of the century, never suspecting they would be the first residents of Old Wachusett to discover evidence of the evil that had visited their once tranquil city;

Tony Cunningham waking up to his girlfriend's screams and stumbling upon Linda Horton sprawled on the front steps of their apartment and then spending the next twenty minutes sitting in the newly fallen snow and weeping over her before someone found him and called the police;

The wolf—the same wolf that had earlier taken Abby upon its back—finding Kenny in the makeshift igloo that Kimi had built for the boy in the center of the clearing. The wolf at first had been hesitant at entering the clearing, but seemingly upon further reflection—if such a thing were even possible for an animal—overcame any reluctance and sniffed out the boy, licked him awake, and carried him on his back to the boy's house, dropping him off at the front porch before anyone came to the door;

Ted Brimfield eating supper and reading *Mad* magazine by flashlight while his mom and twin sisters played the fun and exciting pop-o-matic game Trouble by candlelight (they lost electricity soon after supper) then going to bed and dreaming that a frighteningly huge eagle had crashed through the window in the parlor, flown into his sisters room, and ripped their sweet, precious bodies to shreds, only to wake up to his mother's screaming, evidence that he hadn't been dreaming;

Ben McNally playing Monopoly with his mom, dad, and grandpa, Band-Aids on his chin, happy to be safe at home after the 'incident' at the Iron Stairs, relieved that his mom had bought the story of the Scanlon twins stealing the groceries, thinking that maybe the 'incident' at the Iron Stairs with that humungous bird-thing hadn't really happened in the first place, thinking that maybe he had slipped and fallen and dropped the grocery bag and he had needed a story to tell his mom and that's what he had come up with. At least, that's what Ben was *hoping* had really happened;

David Schofield calling his wife at the library half a dozen times, coming to the conclusion she had left and was stranded on the side of the road in the middle of the blizzard, but then finally getting her on the phone and finding out that she had simply fallen asleep while going over the budget numbers. Her quavering voice had alerted David that something was wrong, but Connie assured him it was no big deal, she would tell him once she got home, which wouldn't be that night because she'd heard on the radio that roads were impassable. She would spend the night on the couch in the break room, eating food left in the refrigerator and cupboards. David didn't have to worry about her, she was a big girl, and she could take of herself. She asked if David and Josh were all right at home. David said yes. He didn't want to upset Connie any more than necessary, so why bother telling her Josh had taken The Beast out for a spin in a blizzard. Besides, David could handle that issue on his own once Josh returned home. He didn't mention Teri staying the night—she would sleep on the leather couch downstairs, David upstairs in his own bed, the two of them staying as far away from each other as was physically possible—as he had decided to wait until the morning to deal with that. David told Connie he was sorry about the other night, Connie said she was too, and they hung up the phones;

Kimi trying to enter The Passage as it closed behind Achak and Josh, but failing. Kimi trying over and over to summon The Passage to reopen, but failing at that as well. Kimi running into the forest on Wachusett Mountain, the branches parting for her as she disappeared into the swirling, wild whiteness;

Carl Sanderson waking up hours after slamming his head on the floor of the foyer at Faith Community Church, seeing the carnage he had wrought, and leaving through the front door of the church.

There were also many things that Julian did not see—as I said, he could not see everything—some of which he could not have cared about less. But, there were things he did not see that he was interested, very interested, in seeing. Things that he felt—*knew*—were important to see.

Who were Kimi and Achak, and from where had they come?

Where had Carl gone after leaving the church?

What had happened to Clem Scanlon, the one carried away by the eagle?

But the things that Julian needed most to see, feeling it was a matter of urgency, maybe even of survival, were the following:

Where had Achak and Joshua gone after they disappeared from Wachusett Mountain?

Who was John Smith?

And why, despite numerous attempts, was he unable to see what had happened to Abby after she had climbed onto the back of the wolf? She, and the wolf, had disappeared as soon as she had settled onto its back. The wolf had later reappeared in his dream, but not Abby. How was that possible? And why?

Julian could see many things others could not, in spite of the restraints on his wrists and ankles that kept him confined to the bed in his institutional room while he slept during the day, in spite of being bound in a wheelchair at night and left to watch television while everyone else in the institution slept. Yes, in spite of these physical limitations, Julian saw lots of things others did not.

He often saw things *inside* others as well, things they themselves could not see.

Like the turmoil his family had been going through the past two years since that fateful July 4th, since that terrible basketball game. Julian saw the emptiness in his mother's life. The

coldness in his dad's heart. And, perhaps most painful of all, the hidden guilt deeply ingrained within his brother's soul.

One more thing Julian saw. He saw it standing in the blizzard, its branches unmoving, defiant against the storm that raged around it. The image lasted only a moment before it faded, but Julian had the impression that, however such a thing were possible, the Initial Tree *wanted* Julian to see it. To take notice of it. As if that would be important, however obscure it now seemed.

After Julian fell asleep the day after the blizzard, he slipped into the nightmare he'd first experienced almost two years ago. Like the fire in that dream, this new vision grew to horrifying and unexpected proportions. If he could have awakened himself and uttered forth words, Julian would first have screamed. Then he would have told whoever was there to listen that he, and everyone else who lived in Old Wachusett, would soon be consumed by what was coming for them.

End of Totem—Day 1: Scars

Thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer?

Thanks
C Michael Lorion

More Acknowledgments

Stephen King: When I was in junior high back in the early '80s, I bought my very first novel which was the Signet (anyone remember that?) copy of *The Stand*. It was the cover that attracted me to the book (that absolutely frightening combination of the Dark Man's eyes with the crow's beak), and it was King's storytelling that got me hooked on The Stand for the entire school year in 7th—or was it 8th?—grade (that's how long it took me to read that mammoth sucker!) *The Stand* and Stephen King got me hooked for good on reading. Thanks, Uncle Stevie!

Peter Straub: A couple years after reading *The Stand* and everything else I could by King, I picked up Straub's *Shadowland* when I was in high school and discovered there was someone else out there who could scare the daylights out of me. *Shadowland* opened my eyes to a new type of horror, and I can't really put it into words here, so I won't even try. If you've read the book, you know what I mean. If you haven't, what are you waiting for?

Dean Koontz: A couple years out of high school, while on vacation in Vermont with my extended family, an aunt and uncle suggested I read one of this guy's books titled *Watchers*. I read it, and I discovered still another way of experiencing horror. This is one of the few novels, along with the two mentioned above, that filled me with sadness and joy at the end of the story. Yes, I actually cried at the end of this one. Read it, and you'll find out why.

Robert R McCammon: I read McCammon's *They Thirst* when I was in high school and thought it was a great vampire story, but it wasn't until I read *Boy's Life* as an adult years later that I realized what a truly gifted storyteller McCammon was. Every time I read it, that story fills me with wonder, nostalgia (even though I was born in a completely different decade than the main character), and a deep longing to experience my childhood all over again. Hey, sounds like a great idea for a story. Hmm...

F. Paul Wilson: *The Keep* is one of the scariest books I've ever read.

Orson Scott Card: On the recommendation of a friend, I read *Ender's Game*. First science fiction—after avoiding the genre for years—I ever read. Been reading sci-fi ever since.

Lawrence Watt-Evans: Avoided fantasy—especially dragons!—for the longest time. Read *Dragon Weather*, which I had originally bought for my wife as I thought she would like fantasy. Been reading fantasy ever since.

Robert Ludlum: *The Bourne Identity* (loved those three-word titles) got me hooked on spy-thrillers (superthrillers, as they were once called).

Tom Clancy: *The Hunt for Red October* sunk its teeth into me, showing me just how exciting a submarine story could be when done the right way.

Christopher Golden: *Strangewood*. Wow! Just...wow.

Dan Simmons: *Summer of Night*—A book to be read, devoured, savored, and treasured. I've read it twice, will probably read it at least a half-dozen more times before I die. Love those kids.

Charles L Grant: *The Nestling*—A bit more subtle than King or McCammon, but no less frightening, and all-together creepy.

I could go on and on (some of you will say that, at this point, I already have), but the above writers have influenced my reading and writing in ways that, in some cases, I'm only now discovering.

About the Author

C Michael Lorion has worked as a librarian, automotive parts clerk, teacher, and newspaper delivery driver. A few years ago he resigned from his teaching position to pursue the crazy idea of writing a novel. He lives in a small central Massachusetts town with his lovely wife and six of his seven wonderful children.

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