

Overfly

A novel created in 24 hours by 23 authors
A project by John Herman



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OVERFLY

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A novel written in 24 hours, May 28th, 2011

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The 24 Hour Novel Project created and led by John Herman
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Curated by David LaMorte - NewMediator.org

Foreword

On January 11th, 2011, I received an email from Dave LaMorte that started like this:

Hi, John, I am going to be curating an art show here in NJ. Right now I want to focus on reaching out to the talented artists I know and I thought of you first. Though the show is going to be hosted at a local bookstore, there are some web components to this show. I am going to be documenting the process in a new podcast and funding it on Kickstarter. I thought of your work because I feel you have a mixture of traditional artmaking skills and social media skills.

What you are about to read is the project sparked by that initial outreach.

I gathered twenty-three authors, many of them complete strangers to each other and myself, and devised a means by which we could collaboratively produce a novel in a single day. The added detail was that people around the world could watch the creative process live in real-time via a web page where the words literally appeared on the screen as they were being written. In addition to that, I also invited an illustrator to produce the cover art in real time displayed through a live streaming video.

What I am proud to announce is that we succeeded.

To say that our novel is a bit rushed is an understatement, but the mere fact that it exists is a testament to the steadfast commitment to writers everywhere who dedicated themselves to the creation of art. Writers do not write to get famous. We certainly do not

write to get rich. We write because we cannot stop. Something inside us burns. We cannot contain the words.

What you are about to read is creativity trapped in amber.

Enjoy,

John Herman

Newmarket, NH -- May 29th, 2011 -- 10:09 AM

Chapter One

Maggie Miller knew she was being stolen.

Linda was always quiet, but Maggie noticed her mother was especially quiet. That morning the breakfast table was completely void of any conversation from her. She literally said nothing the whole morning, and no one seemed to notice.

No one, that is, except for Maggie.

Her father swallowed his eggs, and then ran out the door. Maggie's older twin sisters, Emily and Nadine, chatted about the melodramatic pitfalls of their petty high school lives. They laughed. They argued. They made up. They laughed again. All in the matter of twenty minutes. Maggie suspected the the rest of the family could disappear and the twins wouldn't notice. Neither asked their mother Linda why she wasn't speaking.

When Linda picked her up at school, Maggie was not surprised that there were suitcases in the backseat of their station wagon. This was goodbye. They were going away. The rest of the family was not invited. "I thought we'd go on a vacation," her mother said, as they sped down the highway.

Would the twins notice? Maggie pondered.

For the past six months, Maggie watched her mother Linda descend into a near ascetic lifestyle of television viewing. It started with the talk shows. Her mother couldn't get enough of them. She would sit on the edge of the sofa with a glass of iced tea, her face motionless, no emotion, no expression. She barely blinked, but her eyes moved intently as strangers emoted on the glowing screen. She watched four or five talk shows daily before she moved onto the travel shows. Hiking through the deserts of Morocco.

Tasting beer varieties in Belgium. Swimming in the Amazon. She would take a slow sip of the iced tea, relishing it like it was a fine wine, change the channel, and continue consuming the trivial pixels.

“Are we getting on a plane?” Maggie asked.

“Yes,” Linda said. “Is that okay?”

This was the only time her mother seemed hesitant.

Was it okay? What it okay to steal her daughter? Was it okay to disappear?

Linda looked at Maggie with a terribly sad look, and the girl knew she could stop it all with one word --but she didn't. Yes, she was being stolen, but she could not intervene. She loved her mother too much. She was a volunteer stowaway in her mother's breakdown. She was along for the ride. Besides, someone needed to watch out for the poor woman, Maggie thought. At least that is what she told herself.

Soon they were boarding a small passenger plane. There were only ten passengers, and frankly they all appeared to be in the process of their own personal breakdowns. Even the stewardess, introducing herself as Jo, as she lifted Linda's luggage into the overhead compartment, looked like she might have a lot on her mind. She smiled warmly as everyone boarded, but Maggie saw her sideways glances like drops off a cliff. Jo had a head of flowing red hair, not unlike Maggie's own. It made the girl feel like there was a future for her hair beyond pig and pony tails. Perhaps when she was thirteen she would cut off her hair. Maybe she would spike it like a boy.

Across the aisle, a man shifted awkwardly in his seat.

Maggie nodded at him while she peered at his nervous, jerky motions. “Is this your first plane ride?” the girl asked. She had a polite way of speaking though she was clearly precocious.

“What?” he said, though he’d heard her, no mistake about it.

“Is this your first plane ride?” she repeated.

The man took a deep breath. “Yes. Is it that obvious?”

“Not really,” she lied. On the contrary, it was very obvious. The man was sweating profusely. His dark olive skin was glistening above his furrowed brow. His long fingers tapped anxiously on the clasp of his seat belt. “It’s my first plane ride too,” Maggie admitted. She decided not to mention that she had no idea where they were all going. She hadn’t bothered to look. It was more fun this way. And she certainly wasn’t going to tell the man that she was being stolen.

Maggie imagined that she was a precious diamond, her mother a masterful thief.

“My name is Maggie,” she said.

The man looked hesitant to befriend a child, but he nodded, saying, “My name is Tony.” He glanced over at Maggie’s mother. Linda stared out the window, not acknowledging her daughter’s conversation with the stranger. “You’d think someone of my age would have been on a plane before, but no,” he said, under his breath.

“What is the special occasion?”

“That’s my business,” Tony said curtly. He regretted his tone as soon as the words were spoken. Maggie could see him chastising himself internally. “Sorry, I am just nervous,” he said, chuckling quietly, wiping a trickle of sweat from his left eyebrow.

The plane’s engine rattled to life, and Linda instantly gripped her armrest.

Maggie looked down at her mother's hand. She thought about resting her own hand on top of it, but she worried that her mother might melt beneath her fingers tips.

"It's okay, Mom," she said. "We'll have fun on our vacation."

"Thank you, Maggie," Linda whispered.

Maggie rested her head on her mother's shoulder. Almost as if the girl's head were made of a strange unknown matter, Linda grew wide eyed, before taking a breath, pulling the girl's forehead to her lips, and kissing her quickly.

As the plane taxied, Linda's eyes welled up with tears. Maggie chose to say nothing.

The stewardess strapped herself into a seat.

Tony shifted his legs awkwardly.

The plane hurtled forward causing several of the passengers to gasp.

Maggie's first take off in a plane was not what she expected. It was much louder and bumpier. She could have sworn that planes were silent in the movies. She wondered whether this plane was different. Perhaps it was someone's hobby plane, a fixer-upper as her father might say. The first few minutes felt like the small plane was attempting something it was not accustomed to. As it lifted higher and higher, the plane appeared to be yearning for the sky, desperately questioning whether it could make it. As it broke through the clouds, the plane leveled out, and, pulling herself from another drop off a cliff, Jo, the stewardess, smiled warmly. "It'll be a short flight," she said to no one in particular. She adjusted the yellow scarf she wore around her neck.

Tony nodded vigorously in response, which for some reason struck Maggie as funny. She giggled.

A half hour passed without event. Jo walked up and down the aisle several times. Maggie spent several minutes speaking with a woman sitting nearby who showed off her tan Stetson cowboy hat and an advanced GPS unit. The sound of a woman snoring several seats back caused several passengers to laugh and point. Maggie could not understand how anyone could sleep. First of all, they were flying through the sky. Second of all, it was the middle of the afternoon.

And suddenly there was a loud boom.

The lights in the cabin flickered. Maggie's hand gripped her mother's hand on the armrest.

"Everything's okay, darling," Linda said.

It was a rare moment of real motherhood. Moments later the broken woman, so clearly in a deep depression, returned to a quiet gaze out the window.

The problem was that everything was not okay.

The pilot came over the PA system with a shrill voice. "I am afraid we have been hit by lightning, folks. Came out of nowhere." There was a pause. It sounded like he was pounding on something. End of announcement.

Immediately the plane dipped. Two seats behind Maggie a man vomited in the aisle.

Whether it was the vomit or the turbulence, the tone of plane's passenger cabin was sudden chaos. Arms and legs were everywhere. Luggage was dropped from overhead as someone got the bright idea to open the overhead compartment. The only person who remained stoic was Jo, smiling as if the smile itself was keeping the plane together. That's when the pilot came on for a second announcement.

“Hello everyone. We are looking for a place to land. Things will be getting bumpy from here on out, so hold on tight.”

The plane landed in an open field. It happened in seconds. Absolutely everyone, including Maggie, thought that they were going to die, but that thought entered the mind as soon as it left the mind. One moment they were all hurtling through the sky, the next Jo was pressed up against her porthole window screaming, and then everything was still.

After the plane came to a stop, there was a moment of eerie silence.

Tony was puffing in his seat. He sounded like he had just run a marathon. He turned to Maggie. “Hey, kid, did we make it?”

Maggie didn’t answer, because she was listening to a strange sound. For the first time in a long time, her mother was laughing. It was a strange time to laugh, having faced death only moments earlier, but Linda was laughing uproariously. And it was infectious. As Tony dripped sweat, and by the smell of it, peed his pants, Maggie laughed with her mother. The two held hands and giggled.

There was a rush of wind as someone opened the emergency door. People were shouting. Several sprung to their feet. There was another wave of tumbling luggage. Despite the small number of passengers, there was still pushing and shoving. Linda stood up and Maggie followed. The two pushed past Jo whose shock of red hair was matted to her face in a question mark. When Maggie and Linda disembarked, other passengers were still milling around the plane in confusion and relief.

Linda rushed into the open air. She twirled Maggie around like it was the end of a depression-medication commercial, when the flowers bloomed and animated birds sang.

Across the field in the distance, there was a farmhouse and a twisted dirt road. An old truck was parked nearby, oddly decorated with holiday ornaments and plastic baby dolls. An antique car bounced into view. It slammed to a full stop, kicking a dust cloud into the air. Two men jumped from the car and began running across the field toward them. Linda stopped and watched them approach. She dropped her handhold on Maggie and smiled, her face beaming in the sun.

Maggie tried to re-grasp her mother's hand but Linda was lost in her own joy.

That's when the girl had a terrible thought about her mother.

Maggie got the strange feeling that their plane crash survival had altered her mother in a negative way. Her celebration of life was so strong and out of character that she barely recognized her mother. A plume of smoke rose behind them from the tail end of the plane. Several more passengers exited. The men grew closer. One wore a straw hat. He waved the hat in the air as he ran. Meanwhile Maggie had the overwhelming feeling that her mother was getting farther away. Except that she was right there. Dancing in the high grass. Smiling.

Her mother never smiled. Who was this woman?

"Is everyone okay?" gasped the first man.

The second man, waving the hat, arrived and almost immediately doubled over. He was clearly not accustomed to running.

"I think everyone is okay," Maggie said.

"Miraculously!" shouted Linda. "Isn't that just amazing?"

"Have you called 911?" Maggie asked.

They looked at each other. “Have we called what, young lady?” the second man gasped.

“Do either of you have a cell?” she asked.

“I reckon we have lots of cells in our bodies, young lady. I believe you’re just fine. If you don’t mind, then we shall check out the others.”

“Someone needs to call 911,” Maggie demanded.

“Is that a handle? I’ve got a radio in the car. Go ahead and use it.”

“Mom?” Linda wasn’t listening. “Mom, I am going to their car.”

Maggie stepped backward. She pushed the hair from her forehead. Inside her head, she said goodbye to her mother. She decided not to say it out loud. It would have been useless. Goodbye Dad. Goodbye Emily and Nadine. Maybe it was the fumes from the plane’s tail playing with her mind. She turned and ran toward the car. It was still running. The sound of the radio was buzzing through the window. As she peered through the open window, leaning through the door, she realized the car was equipped with nothing more than an old fashioned radio with a receiver. Maggie obviously had no idea how to use it. She looked around the inside of the car for a cell phone, but there was only a second straw hat and a folded newspaper.

A voice on the radio took her full attention because it mentioned a chimpanzee in space.

“A chimpanzee sent into space in a rocket by the United States has been recovered alive and well about four hundred and twenty miles from the original launching site in Cape Canaveral,” said the radio announcer. It struck Maggie that a chimpanzee was in space. How had she not heard of this? “The chimp, named Ham,” the

voice continued, “was trained to pull levers in response to flashing lights during flight.

President Kennedy salutes our American scientists as they break barriers...”

Her mother danced in circles, the smoldering plane as her backdrop.

President Kennedy.

Maggie unfolded the newspaper. The top headline: President John F. Kennedy delivers his first State of the Union Address. The newspaper was dated January 31st, 1961.

Chapter Two

The porky cashier girl reached for another package of the factory-made cookies. “You sure like Oreos, Mr. Rafferty.” She chewed a pink blob of bubble gum as she talked.

The old farmer thought she looked like one of his cows. “They’re not for me,” he said. “They’re for —.” He stopped, remembering he couldn’t tell the girl who the cookies were for; it was his cross to bear. He shook his head and then grinned like Mortimer Snerd. “They’re for my cows, darlin’. Make the milk sweeter.”

Rafferty had nearly cleaned the tiny store out of the little cookies. As he packed them into his cart he remembered a summer job he’d once had, cleaning leftover chocolate out of the inside of tanker trucks. He’d had to crawl inside the tanks with a scraper and broom. Sweat flying, boots stomping, spitting and farting, he’d cleaned every inch of leftover chocolate out of the tanks. Rafferty swore the scraps he’d swept out were what they made those god damned cookies with.

The fat girl loaded the cookies into paper sacks and watched the aging farmer as he walked out the door with them. He knew she’d be laughing about it before he got to his truck, and that she’d tell everyone she rang up for the next three days about crazy Old Man Rafferty and his cookie-fed cows. The farmer scowled. In another year or two they’d be using his name as a punchline.

Rafferty loaded the paper sacks into the bed of his Ford, propping them upright with his travel toolbox. The driver’s door squealed like a pig when he pulled it open and rust flakes pattered down on the parking lot. Rafferty stared at the flakes. The slow rot of

his truck seemed like the only normal thing in his life. He shook his head and climbed into the cab.

The truck's starter cranked the big engine into life and the radio came on. Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces." Rafferty grinned. He thought Patsy Cline sounded like 100 pounds of crybaby in a 50-pound shit sack. The song had hit the charts when Cline was in the hospital, recovering from a car accident.

"Look who's in pieces now." He laughed at his own joke and threw the old truck into gear.

Rafferty liked the road out of town and figured he could have driven it blindfolded and drunk. The little town petered out to occasional houses then to swamp land and finally to green fields. The road curved and switched back on itself dozens of times. Rafferty drove with one hand on the wheel, the other hanging out the driver's side window. Occasionally he slapped time with the music on the rusty door panel, knocking paint chips off what was left of the double-f in the "Rafferty's Farm" sign painted there.

Patsy Cline gave way to real music. Hank Williams. No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive.

Rafferty usually drove his truck at a good clip, so he nearly had to stand on the brakes as he rounded the next bend. He swore through his teeth and he fought the steering wheel for a few heart-thumping seconds before he brought his truck to a stop alongside an equally battered vehicle. He worked some saliva into the dry panic inside his mouth before setting the hand brake and putting the transmission into neutral. His balls felt tight inside his pants and he shook his left leg to loosen them up as he climbed out of the truck cab to greet the other driver.

“Having some trouble, Bert?” Rafferty said.

The other driver’s grin of recognition dropped into wariness within two heartbeats. He nodded. “Earl.”

Earl Rafferty and Bert Olson had grown up together, gotten falling down drunk together, even stood up for each other at their respective weddings. They hadn’t talked much since Rafferty’s wife took off and word got around that Rafferty had gone crazy.

Rafferty’s felt the wind go out of him. Losing Bert’s regard was like losing a brother’s love. He’d been about to offer his hand but wiped his palm on his shirt instead. He nodded at Bert’s truck. “Horse give out on you?”

Bert shrugged and spit to one side. “Transmission or some such thing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “She runs alright.”

Rafferty nodded. “You need some help?”

Bert looked at his old friend, his eyes traveling from Rafferty’s battered hat to the flowers embroidered on his overalls to the mismatched boots — one brown, the other some kind of sparkling material — on his feet. Bert’s eyes found Rafferty’s. “I reckon I got it.”

“Horseshit!” Rafferty took a step closer. “Goddamn, it’s me, Bert. I got eyes in my head!” The angry farmer thumped the hood of his truck. “I damn near ran into you coming around that curve.” He swore again and shook his head like a tired horse. “At least let me push you off the road.”

Bert nodded slowly and looked in the direction Rafferty’s truck had come from. “I guess that’d be alright.”

Rafferty grinned. “Get in. I’ll push.”

It only took a couple of minutes, with Bert in the cab of his truck and Rafferty pushing slowly from behind. They moved Bert's truck off to the side and out of danger. Bert stood by while Rafferty leaned against his tailgate to catch his breath.

“Appreciate it, Earl.”

“Always a pleasure, Bert. You need a ride back to the house?”

This time Bert took a long look at his old friend's truck. Its sheet-metal flanks and hood were piled high and deep with Christmas decorations and naked plastic baby dolls, held in place with barbed wire and baling twine. He looked back at Rafferty. “What's going on with you, Earl?”

Rafferty's heart sank again. This is where it always went bad, where the secret got in the way. He rubbed at a patch of drying pink paint along his forearm and then shrugged. “Don't know what you mean, Bert.”

Bert shook his head. “I reckon I'll wait here for someone heading back to town.”

“I can go back that way. Don't mind at all.”

Bert looked at the old farmer, trying to see past the orange and black tiger-stripe tattoo covering his face. He shook his head. “Reckon I'll wait.”

There was another five miles of road between Rafferty's farm and the near-accident site. Rafferty took them slow, letting the songs on the radio change his mood for him. He hoped he'd end the trip on something angry and hard, like Johnny Cash, but Buck Owen's “Mental Cruelty” was playing when he pulled into the long driveway.

He stopped the truck and gazed out the dusty windshield at his house.

“Can't believe she made me paint the god damned thing god damned pink,” he said, and slapped the steering wheel. The house had been white for four generations of

Rafferties. “If it were good enough for them —.” He shook his head. No use crying about it now.

Rafferty felt a thousand years old as he opened the door and slid out from behind the wheel. A friendly woof failed to startle him and he dropped his hand to to his side, finding the top of the dog’s head, right where it should be. He looked down at the hound and swore.

The dog was purple, like someone had dropped the poor thing in a bucket of paint. He knelt and looked into the dog’s eyes as he scratched both of its ears at the same time. “Sorry, boy. She just gets it into her head and does it.” The hound looked up at him, brown eyes so loyal it almost brought tears to Rafferty’s own. He slapped the dog on its ass. “Get on, Shep. Go on down to the barn.”

The dog loped off on its mission. Rafferty stood up and stretched his back. He took two steps toward the house before he remembered the cookies, then turned back and grabbed the paper sacks out of the truck bed. He made one more stop, pulling two books out of the truck cab.

At least the kitchen looks normal, the farmer thought. He stomped his boots on the mat before pushing through the screen door into the darkness beyond. Rafferty pumped himself a cool glass of water before putting most of the cookies into the pantry.

One of his mother’s china-blue plates was still drying the rack and Rafferty grabbed it on his way to the table. He gave it a swipe with a dishcloth and then set it down in the center of the rough, broad table. There were six chairs: one for Rafferty, one for his wife, one each for their two sons and daughter and one for company. The kids

were all grown now and none of them were much interested in farming or even paying a visit, it seemed.

Rafferty pulled a jackknife out of his pocket and worked his thick fingers to open the blade. The knife was as sharp as gossip and it opened the package of cookies as quickly as a kiss. The farmer counted out a dozen Oreos and arranged them on the plate. Then he took his seat.

“You get on out here,” he said.

Rafferty stared at the table, moving his eyes from seat to seat. The chair he was in now used to belong to his daddy, John Rafferty. In those days, little Earl sat three chairs to the right and kept his elbows off the table and dirty feet on the floor. Nowadays, it was just him. Sitting at the head of the table, presiding over no one.

Almost.

Rafferty counted the cookies on the plate. Eleven. He nodded.

“Alright, I know you’re here. Make it so I can see you.”

A light flashed to his left and his wife, Pearl, was there. All her attention was on her cookie and she seemed oblivious to the fact her flowered housecoat was on fire. The first time Rafferty saw her this way he’d panicked and tried to put the fire out. This time he just scowled. “I’ve seen that one before. Got any more?”

The flames disappeared, as did the housecoat. Pearl grinned through cookie crumbs, daring him to comment on the fact that she was now naked and covered in blood. It coated her slumped shoulders and dripped off her sagging breasts onto the table. Only her face was clean.

Rafferty shook his head. “Seen that one, too.”

He blinked and his wife shed 40 years. Now she was 16, the age she was when they started dating, and still naked. Rafferty's brain stalled for as he looked at her smooth, taut skin and remembered the Harvest Dance and the spring day, eight months later, when they'd broken each other in up on the Ridge. He swallowed and forced himself to shake his head again. "How about just Pearl."

Pearl, now the right age and wearing a flame-free housecoat, reached for another Oreo.

Rafferty looked at the thing that used to be his wife. Despite what everyone in town believed, that she'd left him and moved back north, that she'd gone west with an old flame, that she was buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the back 40, Pearl had never left the house. Refused to leave the house. And the thing that got inside her 10 years ago, wouldn't leave, either...

Rafferty pursed his lips. It had been a simple thing, and over quick. She'd been snapping beans on the front porch when whatever happened happened. He'd heard her scream, just once and short. By the time he'd run from the barn to house, Shep barking beside him, it was over. The bowl full of snap beans was scattered across the floor and Pearl had something else behind her eyes.

She still talked sometimes. The first time, just after it happened, she laid down the law. If anyone came out to the house, Pearl would die — and so would the visitor. If Rafferty failed to do as she demanded, no matter how strange the command, Pearl would die. If Rafferty told anyone about Pearl, Pearl would know, and Pearl would die.

Pearl could do amazing things now, not just make herself look different. She'd turned Shep purple with a thought. A couple of years ago she butchered 20 head of cows

without laying a finger on them. She could have turned the house pink on her own but she liked making Rafferty work. Rafferty believed she killed him once, and then brought him back. He dimly remembered a time he got drunk and shouted. Pearl's eyes burned with rage and Rafferty burned, too, he thought. There was still a big scorch mark on the pumpkin-pine floor in the living room.

Mostly she just sat there, grinning at nothing. Sometimes it seemed like she forgot to exist and then vanished for an hour or a day.

Rafferty used to think Pearl was still in there; it was the only thing that kept him from trying to kill her. The real Pearl had always liked Oreos and, sometimes, the jokes she played, the things she made him do, seemed like something the old Pearl would've liked. One night, about six years ago, he'd woken from a sex dream to find her, looking 16 again, caressing his penis with her mouth. He'd been afraid to move, terrified she'd bite down or even tear it off. He just lay there with his fists clenched, staring at the ceiling, as she licked and sucked. It felt too good and he relaxed. Just when he was sure he was going to pop, she stopped. He looked at her face then; she was back to looking like old Pearl. She'd laughed and vanished, leaving him with a head full of bees and a hard on a cat couldn't scratch. Rafferty had needed to go down to the barn that night. That's what reminded him of Pearl. She'd always been a cock tease. A lot of nights, when they were courting, he'd come home from a date and have to go straight to the barn.

Rafferty looked at the thing that used to be his wife. "I think I know what you are."

The farmer made a long arm and snagged the books off the countertop. Rafferty was not an educated man but he could read as well as the next; he'd spent a lot of time in the town library over the last couple of years. It was another thing the people in town held against him, not going to the library as much as what he read.

He showed Pearl the first one. He tapped the title. “‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’ by Jack Finney. It’s about these things from outer space that can look human.” He put the book on the table and showed her the second. It was thinner, more a magazine, printed in lurid colors. Rafferty pointed to the title. “‘Tales from the Crypt.’ There’s a story in here about a woman who is taken over by a demon.” He placed the book on top of the first one.

He looked at Pearl, his wife of more than 40 years. “Which is it?”

Pearl grinned, which didn’t mean anything, and stared, which meant nothing.

“I don’t think you’re Pearl at all any more.” He slammed his fist on the table.

“What do you think of that, missy?”

Pearl grinned and Rafferty waited. His blood pounded in his ears, his heartbeat so loud inside his head he almost missed a roar growing outside. Pearl heard it first, she — no, it— tilted Pearl’s head up and to the right as if it could see through the ceiling, the second floor and the roof.

The sound built from the east and crossed to the west, making the glassware in the cabinets vibrate and Rafferty’s teeth ache.

“Don’t you want to see who it is, dear?” Pearl said.

Rafferty glared. “This isn’t over.”

Shep met him at the door. The purple hound trembled and cowered, its tail between its legs as Rafferty shoved him out of the way. He looked west and had time to see an airplane with two propellers descending into his back field.

“Come on, Shep.”

The dog beat Rafferty to the truck but it took two shouted commands and a not-so gentle prod with a work-boot toe to get it into the cab. The old truck started on the first try, and was soon bumping along the rough-cut road to the back of the property.

Rafferty drove slowly to avoid rocks and holes but the plane came into view in minutes. The farmer let the truck stall as he braked to a halt.

The plane was intact, roughly parked in the field. The passengers were climbing out, hugging each other and kissing the ground in relief.

Rafferty cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey!” he shouted. His voice, trained by years of yelling across fields to hands and herds, carried easily. “You folks alright?”

A man in uniform, probably the pilot, Rafferty thought, looked up and waved. He shouted back. “We’re alright! By God, we’re alright!”

Rafferty and the pilot walked toward each other over the rough field. Rafferty stuck his hand out as soon as he got close enough. “Earl Rafferty.”

The pilot extended his hand, then hesitated when he saw the tattoo on Rafferty’s face. “Captain O’Hare. Where are we?”

Rafferty jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “My farm. Bluff Oaks. Where were you headed?”

“The Keys.”

“Little off course, ain’t you?”

The pilot rubbed the back of his neck. “We were hit by lightning. I barely got her down in one piece.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“Not badly.”

Rafferty rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m glad you folks are OK.” He pointed west. “Town is that way, about 12 miles.”

The pilot nodded. “Do you have a telephone I could use. I need to report this.”

The farmer shook his head. “No phone. There’s one in town.” He jerked his thumb again. “You can take my truck. There’s a road on the other side of the plane that will take you right to the outskirts.”

The pilot nodded. “Is there a place nearby the passengers can stay?”

Rafferty shook his head. “No. She’ll ki —.” He shook his head again. He had to end it. This couldn’t keep happening. “You’re not welcome here.”

“There are women and children on the plane.”

Rafferty put his face close to the pilot’s and bared his teeth. “I said y’all ain’t welcome, and I mean it.”

The farmer walked to his truck and let Shep out of the cab. The purple hound raced to the plane, circling the survivors with its tail wagging like a fan blade.

Rafferty yelled. “Shep! You get back here.”

As the dog raced back, Rafferty reached back into the truck’s cab and pulled his shotgun from the rack. He pumped it once, loading the chamber.

He showed the gun to the pilot. “You see this?” The pilot nodded. “The key is in the ignition. Town is that way.” Rafferty pointed west with the muzzle of the gun. “You can leave the truck at the police station. I see you coming the other way, I’ll shoot you on sight.”

Shep pressed against Rafferty’s leg and growled, sensing the farmer’s tension.

Rafferty glared at the pilot. “You don’t want what I got.” He held the shotgun in both hands. “Now get these people off my property.”

The farmer clicked his tongue to get the dog’s attention and turned to walk back to his house, and his wife. Since the shotgun was already out, maybe he’d give it a try.

“Let’s go, boy.”

The old farmer walked down the road and the purple dog followed.

Chapter Three

An astounding flash and crash, as of the universe’s fuse blowing, threw Ellen Greeley out of green luminous sleep and into the jet’s disintegrating cabin. The plane bucked, plunged; the flimsy tube she and all these other souls inhabited at 30,000 feet flexed like a whale sounding. Travel litter smacked her in the face, the screaming was unearthly, superb—and then the cabin lights strobed on, off, on again, revealing heaps of people clenched together in a kind of desperate love, wedged in the aisles and rows, accretions of arms and legs and open mouths tossed up and down. Her seatmate, a fat, inoffensive mouth-breather who’d assiduously kept his elbow from her armrest, vomited into the aisle, sat back as if he had corrected the plane’s violent illness himself, and all will soon be well.

This is bad enough, Ellen thought, worse even than the séances that had, on occasion, derailed into poltergeistic mayhem in her back parlor—she'd seen the scarred maple floor undulate as something monstrous propelled itself through some layer of ether in the crawlspace—but it was nothing in the face of the collapsed ectoplasmic rope extruding from her navel that she'd woken to, this thing snaking out of the band of her sweatpants and rooting blindly upward.

Oh Jesus, she thought, *not now, not now*.

The years she'd spent straining, running, crawling away from the place where she was born. Her gift had fallen upon her like a stroke when she was three, a sudden opening-out of her already acute vision; she'd quickly realized that she was seeing creatures and folks and depths nobody else was seeing. She didn't doubt that Bluff Oaks itself—tainted, fragrant, built of crumbling stucco and stuck with shedding palm-trees—had had something to do with it. The town had seemed to lie indolent, grinning, turning over plans of its own for her in its mind. Well, Bluff Oaks and her dead mother, too.

Ellen had gotten out of there as fast as she could, quitting school at fifteen to consult with those quiet beings visible only to her. They were the ones who'd helped her along, showing her the cards about to fall, the horses about to win, the insides of bad men's heads before the men themselves even knew the specifics of their ill intent. She'd gotten by—and then prospered, a tall gangly girl who'd grown willowy, blunt and serene, much like those wavering shapes who'd cared for her so well. She'd become their daughter, really, and not the offspring of poor Moira Greeley—a distracted woman with a head so stuffed with visions that she scarcely registered the men who came and dallied with her, leaving a few crumpled bills on the nightstand or a gallon of milk in the fridge, as if that

were a fair exchange. Only Dr. Colon—Doctor Nathan, Ellen had called him upon his encouragement—had stepped into the house now and then with the air of a benign housekeeper and dosed Ellen’s mother, pressing his thumb to her wrist and attending with reverence the fluttery pulse there. Dr. Nathan’s remarkable moustaches had spoken volumes to Ellen; he had brought her into this world, they seemed to say, and he, too, would keep her safe there.

Ellen had found her way to New Orleans after that, set herself up in the séance business—she did not tell fortunes, she did not read the silly Tarot—and soon developed a reputation as a dependable conduit to the other side: a spectacular stunt vehicle, in fact, one who routinely gave her clients a heart-stopping ride. And now here she was, on a possibly doomed flight to Miami, where she’d been booked in a faux-Victorian theater for a two-week run of public seances, levitations and mind-reading shows. The news of her death would shake her devotees, she supposed; they’d hunch over their planchettes and beg the empty air to take her shape, speak in her voice. Well, she wouldn’t show up. Ellen thought she’d probably just go visit all her quiet wavering caretakers, sit and rock with them on some splintered porch in sourceless light and forget all about this raw injurious world and its sad people.

Ellen scanned the flickering cabin for someone who was serenely still, someone unaffected by the crazy G-forces of the jet’s freefall, the flying debris, the mounting smell of shit. One of her people. They would know how this is going to end; she just wanted to know, like she’d want to know which side the doors will open on if she were riding the Metro. Either side was fine. She just wanted to know.

There are two.

One was a sweet-faced man in a soot-black suit perched inside a sprung overhead compartment. His feet, clad in black carpet slippers, were crossed like a ballerina's; he swung them idly in the chaos, waiting for her to call upon him.

The other was an auburn-haired girl, caught somewhere short of adolescence and still mired in a child's inarticulate wisdom, who gazed over the seat back directly in front of Ellen.

The girl was watching the ghost of Ellen's umbilical cord with interest, as if she had seen this before and knew its behavior to be pleasantly unpredictable. The two of them watched Ellen's umbilical cord stretching away, out of the foundering jet and into a depth of air, then down and down, spiralling like a misfired rocket toward Moira Greeley's untended grave—or toward the scuffed white office where Dr. Nathan mixed the compounds that will calm her.

But then Ellen saw the girl's fingers, tipped with chipped pink polish, ferociously gripping the seatback. She's holding on. That's why she seemed still. It was as if she'd overcome the plane's violent motion by sheer force of will, so that she could watch, undisturbed, the eerie spectacle unfolding in the seat behind her.

The man curled like a cat in the overhead bin spoke softly, his voice carrying somehow over the ungodly racket.

"Oh honey," he said. "I'm afraid you're going to have to go."

Ellen knew better than to ask him if he could do anything; he couldn't. His kind could only warn her. It was up to her to make the best of what he told her. And she already knew where it was she had to go. That ghostly umbilical cord tethered her to

Bluff Oaks, thousands of feet below; the town was reeling her in, after all these years, and all she'd done to snap the bond between them.

Ellen's eyes met the girl's. The kid's gaze was frank, dispassionate. "We're going there, too," she said. "My Mom and me. Maybe I'll see you there."

A cartwheeling briefcase's wicked corner caught Ellen in the left temple then, dispatching her to blackness.

The cemetery was familiar to her, but seemed to have both grown and shrunk: the cedars in their lugubrious groves were taller, but the whole place seemed cramped and poky now, as if she'd gained some altitude in viewing. And of course she had; she was taller, and had since seen many vaster expanses than this: deserts, plazas, hazy views from mountains. She straightened up, and the cemetery's fringe of live oaks rippled and slumped. She pressed cold fingers—the only evidence of that nightmare plane ride—to her forehead, and felt better. She'd never been one to baby herself.

Last time she'd stood here she'd been fifteen, poised to leave. She'd tried to speak to her dead mother in confidence, but it had seemed unwise to confide in someone situated permanently on the wrong side of Bermuda grass. Ants had mined the plot's surface; hundreds of tiny fumaroles had erupted through the stiff grass. She hadn't stood there five minutes before the ants found her ankles. She'd hitched a ride out of Bluff Oaks that night with a nice old couple heading home from an Amway convention.

Her mother's modest gravestone—a marble tablet Moses might have tucked under his arm, paid for by a sympathetic and genuinely bereaved Dr. Nathan—was sinking now, undermined by those busy ants. Black lichen streaked its face; its epitaph was

nearly illegible, a strange phrase chosen by Dr. Nathan that Ellen had never understood:

Dropt like a Pearl from some Diadem.

Ellen, dizzy again, reached for the stone's warm shoulder to steady herself. To her utter astonishment—she felt a stab of the old disillusionment she'd felt so often in her mother's precarious care—the stone gave under her weight, tipping backward with a smooth hydraulic sigh.

A black shaft plunged straight down into the earth at the stone's foot, right there where her mother's head should have been. The void breathed the scent of something teeming, live, alien—the smell of beetle carapaces big as buffalo rugs, giant furred insect legs. There was a ladder going down into darkness, a homey contraption built of plumber's pipes.

Ellen didn't let herself think about whether it was a good idea or not. The sweet-faced man told her that she has to go; she went.

The ladder's powdery, oxidized rungs were cool against her palms.

Chapter Four

“There goes another one,” Ed thought. “Rushing off to their job. Having real life experiences.” He was sweating from the heat of the afternoon, and the sun bouncing off the cars parked on the street wasn’t helping. The thunderstorm that had just rolled through was intense, but didn’t cool off the temperature after it passed. It was unusual heat for this time of year, a fortnight shy of Valentine’s Day. His chair, this spot on the sidewalk, was his domain. Ed had planted himself in this position in front of the coffee shop years ago. His sacred space at Java Jungle.

As each day passed he watched people come and go. They were all passengers on a journey, and he spent his time dreaming about their lives. He didn’t want to think about his own life, which was too painful. He wondered how they got through their daily obligations, their jobs, their chores. It all seemed too much for him, and what fascinated him was how it seemed pain-free for them. “If they can do it, why can’t I?” But he couldn’t do it. Too many years had gone by and by now the inertia had set in like cement. “This is good. No obligations for now. I get to watch everyone else’s journey instead of dealing with my own. And some day when the universe decides I’m ready, I’ll connect again.”

It was Sophia Jacobs who kept pulling him back into his own reality. She could be like a nippy dog sometimes, sniping at him about things he knew were wrong but couldn’t control. His bathroom, for one. Sometimes in the evening Sophia would check on Ed at his home, usually on the days she wasn’t working a shift at the Java Jungle. She found the stench in his house unbearable. She always assumed it was his dog’s hygiene issues, until the day she had to use Ed’s bathroom and found urine on the floor. It was as

if he wasn't even trying to aim for the bowl. The fact that he never cleaned it disgusted her and she let him know it.

“But Sophia, it's too much work.”

“Too much work to aim? Mr. Delahanty, I'm not getting on you about the cleaning part. I'm getting on you about the fact that your urine only has about two feet to travel and you can't pull it off.”

Ed ignored what she said most of the time because he was transfixed by her beauty. Blonde, in an all-natural way, not a peroxide bottle way. Perfectly straight teeth. And a great chest. But he was stuck, unable to think sexual thoughts. Depression. It can be a killer.

The coffee shop was on a corner and stuck out like a beacon in the town. It was the place to go when social connections were needed, which made it all the more ironic that Ed chose this spot, this sacred space, so many years ago, since Ed had the inability to connect with anyone except his dog. It was his casual, guarded friendship with Sam Lowe, the shop owner back then, that led him to this space. Sam didn't ask for anything from Ed, which is how Ed liked it. *Don't ask, because I won't give* was the vibe that Ed gave out. Sam was a good guy and left this lifetime all too soon, and Ed longed for him every time he had to interact with the current shop owner, Sam's son Darren.

“Ed, the cola. You spilled it on the sidewalk again. I can't keep hosing it down every ten minutes.” Darren was a wreck. Too much on his mind, and running this coffee shop was like running a stress marathon every day. “If they would all just go away. Stop coming. I can get out of this mess. There must be an escape route somewhere.”

But it was Ed who wanted to escape the most. Inside his mind, he was paralyzed. It was as if someone turned on a switch years ago that froze his ability to communicate. From his sacred space, he watched these passengers float by on their life journeys. It wasn't always like this, though. There was a time when Ed was a fully-functioning citizen. A soldier in World War II. Filling the bombers with projectiles and running backwards as they took off, giddy with the excitement from the roar as each amazingly-built piece of machinery thundered down the runway.

Ed knew when it all turned for him, and it was a different kind of amazingly-built machinery that he tried to block from his mind every day. He couldn't, though, and the thoughts still infiltrated his head. The dreamlike quality of his thoughts almost make it feel like it never happened, but he knew it did. And it happened over and over.

The bathroom window. That's where it kept occurring, in the middle of the night. He would get up to piss and they would be hovering there, out the window, just above the trees. Distracted from his duty at the bowl, he would go to the window and feel the cool night breeze. The only noise he would hear would be the wind through the trees and maybe a car off in the distance. But the flying machines would be silent. In a dreamlike stupor, Ed would climb out the window and onto the small roof below to get a closer look. There were bodies in the windows of these machines, but they were small bodies. They didn't seem human. And the machines brought back memories of when he was a boy, when again, during the deepest part of the night, he would awake to activity outside his bedroom window. Back then, he would watch these machines fly past the house, almost in parade formation. And no noise then, either.

It was all too much, and he could track the feelings of being paralyzed to the first encounters with these flying machines. In the beginning, it was his legs. They felt stuck in a miry clay. After years of worrying, he finally let it go, and things started to improve. He was able to lead a normal life. First it was school, and then the service. And Brenda was the stream of light that pulled him through.

“Flaccid tadpole paws.”

Darren was having another fit. A verbal seizure, Ed thought. Lately, Darren had been having these seizures not just on a daily basis, but on a minute-by-minute basis.

“Sloop bat dinger.”

“Darren, maybe you should sit down for a few minutes. I can handle it for awhile. I got this.” Sophia was not only beautiful, but endearing. Everyone loved her.

Ed didn't much care if Darren was indisposed, as long as Sophia kept serving him the Maynard Cola. He was addicted to it, and the first cola sip of each day was what he imagined junkies felt on their first hit of the day. Clarity... translucency... nirvana.

Rather than pay for each hit of cola at each serving, which would be too time-consuming for all, considering his habit, he had a running monthly tab that he paid from his disability pension. His tab was never too high because Ed hardly ate anything except an occasional chicken salad sandwich. He survived on the locally produced cola that he pissed out at home.

Darren's verbal state was puzzling these past few weeks, and the fear started to creep in for Ed that this coffee shop, this nirvana, might disappear if Darren couldn't keep it going. “Another crazy one,” he thought. “At least I'm not the only one in Bluff

Oaks.” Ed heard a rumor that Darren’s girlfriend had recently left him, but he tried to deflect it from his mind, because it was leading his thoughts back to Brenda.

“It wasn’t my fault.” This had been Ed’s mantra for years anytime he thought of her. “It’s heredity. It’s circumstances. It’s a condition. It wasn’t anything I did.”

Brenda had been the last person that Ed connected with. They had met at a support group, and it was the scoop on Brenda’s knee that caught Ed’s eye. He had the same scoop, on the same knee. A scar that mysteriously appeared when he was a child, but he had no memory of falling or cutting himself there. The only cut on his knee that he remembered came when he was a boy and he tripped and fell running from a bumblebee that was chasing him, but that scab had healed with no scar. Besides, it was the other knee where his scoop appeared.

“I see you have one, too.”

“Sorry?”

“Your knee.”

Brenda looked down at her knee where Ed was pointing. She glanced at his knee and the connection was made. Both didn’t speak for a long time, but studied each other’s faces, trying to remember if they’d seen each other before. Vaguely. Maybe. Or was it imagination. The coincidence was too much, though, and they both realized that this scoop meant something. They were put together for a reason, in this place, at this time. It had taken years of grappling with it, but they both finally agreed to make an appearance at this support group meeting, on this night, and they took it to mean that these scoops were not a coincidence.

“I don’t remember when I got this.”

“Me neither.” Ed was comforting, and he didn’t know where it was coming from.

“Did you grow up in Bluff Oaks?”

“Albermalt.”

“That’s not anyone near here.” Ed couldn’t imagine how they could have a similar experience, yet have lived so far apart from each other.

“They travel far, apparently. And fast.”

“Do they come to your bathroom window?”

“My bedroom. But not through the window--through the wall.”

Ed couldn’t imagine this. He was starting to feel like he was unraveling. Bad enough he had his own demons about alien life forms visiting him from hovering ships, but physically traveling through solid material was incomprehensible.

“Sandwich today?”

Ed snapped back to where he was on the sidewalk outside the Java Jungle.

Sophia was standing before him, blocking the sun, relieving his tired eyes. If only she could relieve the heat as well, and his sweating.

“No. No. Tomorrow. But some water for Gretta.” Ed loved Gretta and doted on her. His one companion, the only connection he could make these days, was with his dog.

“How about I get her the chicken salad. She needs the protein.”

“Fine, that’s fine. She’ll like that. She loves chicken.”

Sophia left, and the bright sun returned to Ed’s eyes. He continued to watch the passersby, waiting for that one in particular, that next passenger in life that he could

connect with again. Once he connected, he would be back from the subconscious dead. And maybe he could finally clean his bathroom.

A deafening, whirring roar in the sky startled Ed. It sounded like a plane, but Bluff Oaks had no airport. For a moment he thought it was *them* again, this time coming for him in full daylight. Over distant treetops he caught a glimpse of metal glinting in the sun, but as he pulled Gretta's leash to get her moving so they could run, he realized it wasn't the type of flying machinery used by his visitors. It was a plane, but not like any other passenger plane he'd seen before. It was sleek and almost other-worldly, and not the disc-shaped machinery from his experiences of years past. This craft was flying low and fast as it approached the town, and was making an abominable noise. "This is definitely not them. They've never made a sound."

The plane rapidly approached, and Ed was frozen in his chair. Paralyzed legs again. It flew over his head so low that he could see people in the windows. Real people, this time. One woman had both hands up against her porthole and made eye contact with him as the plane flew over the coffee shop. Her expression was of both terror and resignation. She had red hair, and seemed to be wearing a uniform with a yellow scarf. The stewardess. He felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that he would be the last person she connected with. The plane descended behind him, and Ed waited for the explosion--but it never came.

"Did I dream that? Or am I in a hallucinatory state?" Ed hadn't been sleeping much lately, and found that not sleeping made him feel like he was in another dimension, not of this realm, and one outside his earth form. It hadn't happened frequently, but when it did, it was difficult to determine if he was dreaming or awake. All the caffeine in

the Maynard Cola didn't help. He was beyond help when he was awake for thirty-six or forty-eight hours at a time. And this was one of those times.

Sophia was now standing next to him and offering the chicken salad to Gretta.

"Did you see that?"

"What?" Sophia cared about Ed, but was usually leery whenever he seemed a little off. And he seemed off.

"The plane. That just flew overhead."

"There's no airport here, Mr. Delahanty."

"I know, but you didn't hear that?"

"No, sorry." She went back inside, hoping that Gretta would eat the chicken salad. She always worried about Gretta's welfare, given Ed's condition.

Ed was convinced it must have been an insomnia-induced hallucination. There was no plane. He should just go home and sleep. As soon as Gretta finishes getting her protein, he'll leave.

A lone figure came around the corner at the end of the empty sidewalk, but Ed ignored it. He wasn't about to get himself in a state of am-I-or-am-I-not hallucinating--he simply ignored it--until the figure became closer, and Ed recognized the red hair and the yellow scarf.

The woman slowly walked down the street that was filled with late-50's Buicks parked along the curb. She stopped at each one, peering through the windows. Ed waited for her to get closer. She hadn't had her final moment, after all. She was real, right here. But what happened to the plane?

She slowly approached Ed, taking in his unkempt appearance and slicked-back hair. She seemed to be in a daze.

“Where am I?” She felt as if she was watching everything unfold in 3-D.

“Bluff Oaks.”

“Where is that?”

“Florida.” Ed was hesitant to ask her any questions. He still didn’t think she was real. But he wanted her to be real. He felt the connection with her through the plane’s window. And that feeling hadn’t happened in a long time.

“Does Bluff Oaks live in a time warp?”

“Not sure what you mean.”

“These cars. They’re all antiques.”

Ed didn’t understand. “These cars are only ten years old or so.”

The woman looked back at the cars. She was exhausted, and confused. The emergency landing had taken a toll on her emotionally. She had thought she was going to die on the plane, but instead it landed in a field. “I’m not sure what’s going on.”

Ed couldn’t hold back any longer. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“The plane. What happened to it?”

She realized that this was the man she connected with from her window. The person she thought would be the last soul that she would lay eyes on. “We landed in a field. We’re okay. It’s all very confusing.”

She felt an instant connection to this man because of the trauma they shared for that short moment as the plane descended over Bluff Oaks. She had heard that when

people go through stress, they form a bond, and she felt it with this man, regardless of his physical appearance.

“I’m Ed Delahanty.”

“Jo. Jo Beck.”

Beyond their emotional bond, Ed was attracted to her body. She was in great shape, and seemed to be in her late 20’s, but a certain crinkle around her eyes gave away the fact that she was probably ten years older than that.

Ed’s age was attractive to Jo. He was older than her, and it surprised her that she would feel a connection to anyone not close to her own age. In fact, she had a tendency to get into relationships with men younger than her. Men who would abuse her emotionally. And her last young man, who had abused her physically.

“Where are the others?” Ed asked. “There had to be others. Where’s the pilot?”

“I don’t know. It’s all so confusing. A group went one way, I came this way. I had to get away from the plane, that field.”

“Were you looking for me?” Ed thought he would never say those words again to anyone before he died.

“I guess I was.”

“I’m here.” It felt safe for him to say that.

She felt there was something other-worldly about him, about this street, these cars. She was in a dream state. There was something not right.

It was the wall calendar that she could see through the coffee shop window that set off her inner alarm. January 1961. “That can’t be right. This just isn’t right.” She was dizzy.

Ed saw the color leave her face. “You don’t seem well.”

“What year is this?”

He thought her stress might have given her amnesia. “Sixty-one.”

“It’s not.”

He was patient. He knew the hallucinatory feeling she must be having now, he’d had it many times. “I’m afraid it is.”

“When I got on that plane this morning, it was not 1961.”

“Christ,” Ed thought. “Time travel.” He couldn’t handle this right now. He knew the plane had looked different. More modern. He didn’t put together that it was from the future until now.

Ed had seen the future fly over his head. He wanted to go home now, leave Jo behind, connection or not. He wanted to forget this woman. This was more proof that things never worked out for him. Brenda had committed suicide. He lived with that guilt for years, even though it was her inability to cope with her continual abductions, and suicide being hereditary in her family--it was not his fault. But he always felt he could have done something to prevent it. He needed to walk away now with Gretta, and not look back, so that he wouldn’t cause any damage to Jo, who would only get hurt because she has time traveled to him. Ed knew it couldn’t get more complicated than this. Two weeks before Valentine’s Day, and he would be gaining and losing the passenger he’d been waiting for, all in a few minutes.

Sophia stepped out from the shop, and felt the air had changed. There was a smell of electricity, and it seemed to be coming from this woman in strange clothing standing with Ed. It made Sophia uneasy, so she returned inside and retrieved Darren from behind

the counter, who was sweeping up the coffee grinds he had just spilled because of another verbal seizure. Those words in his head that he kept hearing. One outburst followed immediately by another, and the grinds had gone flying, and now Sophia was grabbing his arm and dragging him out front.

Darren smelled the electricity as well. There definitely was something wrong on this sidewalk. His skin began to tingle and he began to sweat. “Bluff Oaks has never felt like this before,” he thought. It had changed. Since he couldn’t adapt to change, he didn’t like this feeling. He glanced at Ed for reassurance, who was looking at the sky.

“Where is the future? Why did it return to Bluff Oaks?” Ed knew that the present, as they all knew it, was gone. This wasn’t something they would recover from. According to Jo, there was a plane-full of people from the future who have landed here, and these new passengers were going to turn the town on its axis.

Chapter Five

Randy wasn't aware of where he was or how fast he was going until he saw the lights flash in his rear view mirror. "Great, just what I need. Just let me go home for fucks sake." The officer was quickly by his side, flashlight in hand, spotlight on his face.

"Do you have any idea how fast you were going?" she asked. Her voice was young and kind. It gave Randy hope that he would come out of this with a warning.

"No. I had no idea. I was just trying to get home." He couldn't bring himself to make eye contact. He fixated on the steering wheel hoping she would go away.

"You were going 65 in a 20 mph zone. There are kids out here. Do you have kids?"

Randy paused before answering. "Yes, I do."

"Well then I would expect you to be more careful, especially on these back roads." She walked off to run his plates and information. Randy wondered why he was in such a rush to get home anyway. Today had been an awful day. One of hundreds he'd had in the past few years. Going home wasn't going to make him feel any better.

Getting drunk would. That was when he realized he didn't give a shit anymore. He wanted to get anywhere but here.

"I ran your information. You've never had a speeding ticket before? Having a tough time today, huh? I'll be kind today. Just a warning. Keep the speed down. I catch you again and I won't go easy on you."

Randy was left with panic and relief in his chest. He rested his head against the soft leather of his steering wheel as the police officer's tail lights faded into the distance.

It wouldn't be long before his dream car, a blue BMW convertible, would be taken. It's

not as if the purchase ever made sense anyway. Who buys a two-seater when you have children? Rachel had the mini-van. She was the responsible one. It was his hard earned money, he figured. Time to have a little fun. Now it was all coming to an end.

Lost in despair, Randy put the car in gear and decided to make the final drive home. He pulled in front of the house that was once filled with light and warm happy sounds of children. He listened intently for children refusing to go to bed until he came home. Rachel, busy cleaning the kitchen, exhausted from chasing a 5 and 10 year old all day, would put the dish towel on her shoulder and go upstairs once she heard tiny feet making a riot so loud it could rival that of elephants in stampede. The foreclosure sign swayed in the breeze breaking his attention from the windows. The ghost of Rachel going up the stairs to put the kids back in bed was in his mind. “How could I have been so stupid,” he thought.

After Rachel’s death he couldn’t get his mind around making the payments. On anything. She had always handled the bills. How could he have been expected to get caught up with her book keeping while planning a funeral for three? Now he wished he had fought harder to keep the house. Fought harder to keep the one place where all of his memories were stored. What is left for a drunk that doesn’t pay his bills? Not much. The whiskey called louder. It was time to head to his new home, a dilapidated 4-bedroom house on the other side of town.

He stopped the car at the base of the dirt drive. There was a man waiting for him with paperwork in his hand. “That can’t be good,” said Randy as he turned off the car and walked up to him. Despite the heat, he had on a suit, as if dressing nice would make what

he was about to do any better. Randy could see the sweat on his brow and wondered if he had sweat through his jacket. How long had he been waiting here?

“Are you Randy Harper?” the man asked brandishing a clip board ready to check off his latest accomplishment.

“Yes, why? Who are you?”

“I am here to take your car, Mr. Harper. You haven’t been making payments.”

“I’m aware of that. Shouldn’t you have given me some notice about this?”

“The notice is in your loan papers. I have a copy here.” He hands over the paperwork.

“I see. I guess there is nothing I can do about this.”

“No, I will be taking the car with me now.”

“How long have you been waiting? You look a bit warm, want to come in for a drink?”

“No. I will be leaving now. Have a nice evening Mr. Harper.”

“Not even a sorry or a thank you for the invite? You are cruel and rude,” snapped Randy.

“Just doing my job.” The suit man, as Randy would later think of him, jumped in his car, seemingly excited to be able to drive it and took off. Randy was left staring at the driveway occasionally swatting at mosquitoes, while not even realizing they were there.

All of this at the tail end of dusk. It seemed fitting. It wasn’t like the rest of his day had gone any better. After months of that scumbag Brian Maynard riding his ass and spreading lies about him at work, he had finally had his last say. The file on Randy Harper was finally thick enough to fire him without concern over a lawsuit. How proud

Maynard must be today, thought Randy. He has finally brought my life to a screeching halt. Randy made his way to the front door after the mosquitoes became too numerous to ignore. They must have smelt his blood for miles, he thought.

The wooden stairs of the front porch creaked with every step. The house was so old the front door no longer fit into its frame. The house had sunk into the marshes long ago and the wood was hanging on for dear life. It was a large house, but very little of it was usable. The roof leaked into the top floor bedrooms when it rained. In Florida when it rains, it means it. Most of the time the top floor was soaked through, and when it was warm it reeked of mold. A far cry from the glistening hard wood floors, tiled kitchen and bathrooms of his old house. Randy figured this place was one tenant away from becoming a crack den.

Randy went into the kitchen to make himself a whiskey and cola. Maynard cola. It was the favorite drink in town but Randy could never stomach the stuff on its own. His whiskey mix was 3-parts whiskey and two parts cola. Over the past few months the ratio had changed. Tonight it was 5-parts whiskey and a dash of cola. "Here's to you Brian Maynard, you piece of shit." Randy drank the first drink in two gulps and slammed the glass down on the counter. The cabinets rattled like they were about to fall off the wall. Randy chuckled at his sad state of affairs as he poured himself a new drink.

The night grew darker, the drink did its job and Randy's mind started turning things over and over. He went out on the back porch carrying the whiskey bottle in one hand, and the glass in the other. He never wanted to see another Maynard cola again. The one thought that plagued him every night was the last night he saw his son Martin alive. He had come home from work early to have dinner with his family. A rarity, since

he usually worked late at the cola plant. He expected the kids to be playing in the living room while his beautiful wife worked in the kitchen. Rachel was in the kitchen, he could tell she was upset as soon as he walked in the door. His five year old August was at the kitchen table coloring in her favorite coloring book. She looked up and smiled and said “Hi, Daddy!” not even noticing she had a face full of marker. The sight made him laugh. His daughter was a goofball that could take the tension out of any situation but Rachel didn’t even smile.

“What’s wrong?” He finally asked after having hugged August and wiped the marker off her face.

“How many times have we warned Martin about wandering around the underground tunnel system.” Rachel didn’t turn from the sink. She leaned against with with both arms looking down into the drain as if it held some secret.

“Plenty of times, why?”

“He spent the afternoon playing with his friends. He came back all banged up. Scratches on his face, blood on his jeans. He’s terrified. I kept asking where he was, what happened to him but he wouldn’t answer me. He just kept staring.” Rachel started crying and couldn’t continue.

“Was he in the tunnels? Did he tell you what happened? IS HE OKAY?” Randy yelled. The suspense was killing him. He didn’t wait for an answer, he ran upstairs to Martins room. Rachel followed him.

“He’s is fine. But he won’t talk. His friend Bobby told me he got a head of them in the tunnels.” They both walked into Martin’s room at the same time. He was lying on the bed with his back to the door. Randy put his hand on his shoulder to have him roll

over so he could look at him. He was obviously banged up pretty bad, his eyes were filled with tears.

“What happened Martin. Please tell us.” pleaded Randy. “You’re safe now.”

“It was nothing. I went running in the tunnels like Bobby said. I fell. They couldn’t find me... I had to come walking out to them. I was scared, Dad.”

Randy could tell from his son’s face that that wasn’t all that had happened. He decided not to press the matter and wait until morning. All he could think to do was hug him and tuck him in bed. Martin did not want to eat. Although concerned, Rachel and Randy decided it would be best to leave him be for the evening.

The next day Martin was slow moving and quiet. To be expected, thought Randy. Rachel decided to drive the kids to school that day instead of having them take the bus. That ended up being the worst decision of their lives. Rachel always took the highway one exit to avoid the slow moving back road traffic. She was the most impatient driver he had ever known. She made fun of his fancy car but it never had a scratch on it. Her minivan had scratches, dents and one day carried the side-view mirror from another car all the way home. The accident wasn’t her fault, he kept saying to himself as he started drinking whiskey from the bottle. “If only I could find that fucking van,” he muttered as he got up to get a fresh bottle of whiskey from the kitchen cabinet.

He didn’t so much as open the cabinet as trip into it, knocking the door onto the floor. The loud crashing noise almost startled him out of his drunken stupor but the next bottle was waiting for him. “Jameson, I should have named my son Jameson.” he mumbled to himself as he tried to aim his hand into the cabinet and grab the fresh bottle without dropping it. Proud of his success, he attempted to open the bottle while walking

back out to the porch. Stopping to undo the plastic cap and using the door frame for support, he noticed something different about his porch. It was no longer there. Instead a bald headed man with a long black leather jacket was standing neatly on a hovering board, hands clasped together at his waist, patiently waiting for Randy to notice him.

“What the fuck?” Randy exclaimed as he dropped the bottle of whiskey into the abyss that was once his porch. “Who...you...hover man?” he pointed his finger accusingly but nearly fell out of the door frame doing so.

Hover man smiled at him with sympathy as one would for a child that has dropped his ice cream cone on the sidewalk. “My name is Zoltar and I am here to ask for your help.”

“My help? You need whiskey?” Randy pointed down to where the bottle might be as if he was going to try and get it.

“No, thank you. I need you to help me take care of someone you might know.”

“Who?”

“Brian Maynard.”

“Ha! Do I know Brian MayNERD. Who doesn't know that shithead. He owns half the town.”

“Yes, he does have a lot of control. I wish to take it away from him. Care to help?”

“How can a drunk like me help? I can barely stand.” He burped loudly and almost fell over.

“You weren't always a drunk. You were a good father and husband.”

“How the fuck would you know hover man.”

“My name is Zoltar.”

“What ever you say freak man.”

Zoltar bowed his head in frustration. How does one deal with a drunk angry man?

“We’ve had our eye on you for a long time. We’ve been watching out for you. We know what Maynard has done to you.”

“You’ve done a hell of a job watching out for me. I just lost my job today. That was the one thing I was holding out on to get my life back. The job sucks. Selling cola. Who gives a shit right? But the bonus? The bonus would have really helped. Why didn’t you help me with that Zoltan? Are you here to give some money?”

“It’s Zoltar, and no. I don’t have money for you. I would like to help you get back some power though.”

“Power. Like super power?”

“Kind of.”

“Where are you from Zolty?”

“Zolt... nevermind. It’s not important. I am from the future. The power I want to give you is from Brian Maynard.”

“The power of getting my job back.”

“Trust me, you don’t want your job back. Do you know why you lost it?”

“MayNERD ass made that pretty clear in the rumors about my stealing and other crap.”

“None of that was true of course. You knew the secret ingredient. Or at least he feared you did. If he kept you around long enough he could find out what you knew.”

“I don’t give a shit about the secret ingredient...I don’t even like the stuff. Give me a break. I’ve had too much to drink. I’m going to bed.”

“Randy. You didn’t know because your son never told you.”

“What did you say? How do you know my son?”

“I never knew your son, but I know what happened to him in the tunnels.”

“Did you hurt him you bastard?” Randy lunged for Zoltar but almost fell. Zoltar swiftly moved to the doorway to save him from the fall.

“You need to calm down Randy. I did not hurt your son. Maynard did.”

“How?”

“Maynard was stealing the special ingredient from the tunnels. Your son stumbled on him that day and Maynard went after him. Your son was quick and smart and managed to escape. As he ran Maynard called out that if he ever found him he would kill him.”

“That’s why he was so scared. I didn’t help him...”

“How could you have known? You know the accident wasn’t Rachel’s fault. I heard you muttering it. You have known all along that it wasn’t an accident. Maynard sent a hit man after your family.”

“My god. My family. Why didn’t he just kill me?”

“He needed to know what you knew. He kept you around for two years. He followed you. He used your devastation as a means of undoing your life. You can get him back now.”

“I really don’t see how that’s possible.”

“We need to stop Maynard from going into the tunnels. He is stealing vital nutrients from another life form for his cola. After your son caught him he had to be extra careful. He started using a car he’s had in storage over at the plant.”

“The pickup truck?”

“No a 1953 Buick Roadmaster Skylark Convertible Coupe. It has a special power to make you invisible.”

“Wow, that would be cool to have.” Randy burped loudly again and collapsed in Zoltar’s arms.

“I can see I have my work cut out for me.”

Randy woke up on his couch with a headache so bad he couldn’t lift his head. He could smell bacon in the kitchen and wondered if Rachel was cooking him breakfast. Then he opened his eyes and realized that he was in the crappy old house and his life was not the nightmare he had hoped it was. Zoltar came into the room with a cup of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs. It was still dark out.

“So, there really was a bald guy out on my back porch?”

“Yes. Eat.” He pushed the plate into Randy’s hands before he’d even had a chance to sit up. “We need to get moving before it is light out.”

“Where are we going?”

“To steal Maynard’s car and get you out of town.”

Randy wasn’t sure if he had actually helped steal the car. All he remembered as he was driving out of Bluff Oaks was holding on to Zoltar as they flew on his motor board to the plant, and breaking a window to get in. The alarm went off and while Randy stood there panicking and waiting for someone to take him away in handcuffs, Zoltar

went to start the car. He drove it over to Randy and yelled at him to get in and drive while he went and got the garage door open. Now Randy was driving down the highway past the police cars racing in the other direction. He wondered how long it would be before the make and model of the car was all over the air waves. He realized he was soon to be in trouble again and started drumming the steering wheel muttering “Great plan Zoltar. Great plan.” Randy slowed down, got off the highway and started driving on the back roads. Hung over and paying more attention to the rear view mirror than to the road ahead, Randy failed to see the red light or the traffic starting to move through the intersection. Unfortunately, they didn’t see him either. The car was invisible.

Chapter Six

"This isn't right. This isn't right at all," Europa MacQuirt said, her eyes darting around the open field looking for any clue to their whereabouts.

She looked back at the plane parked in the middle of the field, then at the deep tire tracks that eventually turned into a shallow gully where the front wheels had snapped off and the nose took a dive into the soil during the emergency landing. She tried to recall the situation up there, but it had happened so fast and was now slipping from her memory like a dream.

She forced herself to organize the facts that she knew. They had been flying from Atlanta to Marathon, in the Florida Keys, and she was supposed to be on vacation. She remembered the nice flight attendant who had brought her a coffee that tasted like an imitation, water mixed with coffee flavoring or something. She had enjoyed it, but she missed the coffee on the road, the type that's been sitting on the burner for eight hours at some forlorn truck stop in the middle of no where. The flight attendant had brought her a second cup and the captain had begun to speak through the intercom. He said they were still 45 minutes out from their destination and that he was expecting "some turbulence." She remembered over looking several large thunderheads out the window of the aircraft and feeling apprehensive. She was used to being on the ground, driving. The air was no place for her.

Several minutes later, the cabin was in upheaval. Overhead compartments exploded with bags and jackets. Every shutter Europa felt through her seat was punctuated with a loud and jolting thud, as if the plane had struck a hillside at 20,000 feet. She remembered the gentlemen in the seat next to her, the photographer fellow,

making use of an airsick bag. Then there was a flash and silence. Now she was here. The pilot was no where to be found.

"This isn't right," she repeated to herself.

"Of course it's not right, but what are we going to do about it?"

Europa snapped out of her daze only having caught the last half of that sentence.

"Pardon?" She looked for the question's owner and saw that it was that heavy, photographer fellow that she had been sitting next to. He was sitting on the ground pulling up grass.

"What are we going to do? Aren't there supposed to be cops here or something?"

"I don't know. Maybe they don't know that we've gone down." She glanced around at the other passengers milling about. "We've been here for well over an hour now. Maybe we should try heading into town, see where we are."

"Maybe we should just stay put." the photographer snapped. "That's what you're supposed to do right? *Stay put.*"

Europa dismissed his rudeness and walked over to him.

"Where are my manners?" She extended her hand towards him. "I'm Europa MacQuirt, Roper for short."

"Gary," the photographer replied. "Gary Savage." He shook her hand. "Ow! You got some grip on you, lady."

"More history is made by-"

"Battles, bills and proclamations. Yeah, yeah, I know." The photographer extended his hand once more. Roper helped him stand up. She turned over his name a

few times in her brain. She could have sworn she had heard of him. Maybe a story on the radio.

"I've driven all over the south and ain't ever seen this place before."

"Well, the South is a big place, grandma. How could you've seen every part of it?"

"MungoMaps."

"Huh?" Gary raised his eyebrows.

"MungoMaps. I work for them. I'm a driver."

"What? You mean you're one of those people who drives around with a GPS all day."

"Yes, sir. Improvin' the accuracy of maps every day."

"Yeah, well, it's to bad that we don't have that GPS right now."

Roper's eyebrows raised in surprise as if something had just bit her.

"I do!"

"What?" Gary asked, only half paying attention now.

"I have my GPS! My 'good buddy.'"

Roper turned her attention back towards the plane. Someone had cracked the luggage compartment already and a few people were already clawing around the pile of luggage like raccoons through a trash heap.

Roper jogged over to the pile and began her own digging. She couldn't believe how heavy some people packed; some of the suitcases felt like solid blocks. She was used to packing light, a true traveler. As she began setting aside suitcases and bags, she could hear something floating up through the pile. Music or a video. Something. It sounded like someone had left their iPod on with the speaker blasting. She caught site of her red and

white, striped suitcase. Curse her luck, the bag was, of course, at the bottom of the pile. She lifted off one last heavy, black roller bag and tugged out her suitcase. The sound was now louder and she realized it was coming from her bag.

"That's weird," she said to herself as she pulled the bag over to side of the plane and sat in the wet grass.

The sound emanating from the bag had a rhythm to it now, just one noise over and over again. She unzipped it, flipped open the lid and began shuffling around her clothing, toiletries and the one DVD that she had brought for the inevitable rainy day, "Smokey and The Bandit." The noise was louder now as she felt the plastic case of the GPS underneath her clothes. She plucked it from the bag, now knowing exactly what the sound was despite its muffled nature through the case. A sound that she had heard thousands of times.

She cracked the case and was greeted with, "RECALCULATING... RECALCULATING..."

"How did you get turned on there, good buddy?" She turned the device over in her hands a few times as if she might find what had triggered it. On the screen was just the beige background of a place without any roads and the word "RECALCULATING" across the middle of the screen.

She poked around the touch screen trying to access any of the menus, but they would not open. She pressed and held the power button on the side hoping to reset it, but the device refused her demand.

"Is that a GPS?" A sweet voice asked.

Roper looked up from the stubborn electronic box to see a pretty, auburn haired girl.

"Hello little one." Roper extend her arm straight out and the little girl shook it. Roper spared her the usual hand-crushing. "Yes, it is."

"Does it know where we are?"

Roper gave the little girl a half-smile. "Nope. It's lost. Lost for good, maybe."

"How does a GPS get lost? Isn't it supposed to help you find places?"

"Yes, mam, but it seems like my good buddy here is really confused. Maybe it got struck by that lightning that we saw."

"Why do you call it good buddy?"

"You're a curious little thing. Well, that's his name. Good buddy. We've been all over the south, he and I and he rarely steers me wrong."

"Oh. My Mom's is a girl. I call her Linda."

"That's a pretty name. Speaking of which, what's yours, little miss?"

"Maggie."

"Mine's Roper, nice to meet you, Maggie."

The little girl blushed and kneeled beside Roper's bag. "Is this your hat, Mrs. Roper?" The little girl picked up a tan Stetson hat out of the red and white striped suitcase.

"It is." The little girl put it on and the visor flopped over her eyes. "You know what it's from?"

"No."

Roper grabbed the DVD. "You see this?" She tapped the on Burt Reynolds' face on the cover. "This is my favorite movie."

"Hey, that's your hat!" Maggie exclaimed.

"Sure is, young lady. It's an exact replica."

Maggie took the hat off and handled with a new sense of care, as if it were fragile.

"It's a fun hat."

Roper smiled and nodded.

Maggie placed the hat back in the suitcase. "Can I see, Good Buddy? Please?"

"Sure, a lot of good he is doing me." Roper handed the GPS to the little girl and started digging through her stuff. She needed a bathroom break and hoped there was something in her bag to wipe with.

"Hi, Good Buddy."

"HELLO."

It took a few seconds before Roper realized the GPS had spoke. She turned back to the little girl and ran what she had heard through her head again. Had it really spoke?

"Hi, Good Buddy. Can you tell us where we are?"

"RECALCULATING. OTTO."

"What? We're where?"

Roper had frozen. She watched, stricken with confusion.

"OTTO. NAME. OTTO."

"I thought it was Good Buddy?" Maggie asked, turning to look at Roper.

"OTTO," the GPS' robotic voice rang out.

"Where are we, Otto?" Maggie asked, her voice perfectly polite.

"CLOSE."

"Close to wh-"

"Hey! Is that a GPS?"

Both ladies looked up from the strange business at hand. A pale, wiry, dark haired, young man came jogging over from another group of strangers he had been talking to.

He repeated the question when he stood, towering over Maggie trying to get a glimpse of the touchscreen.

"Yes," Roper said, shaking off her initial horror. "But I think it's broken. Maggie, can I have that back please?"

Maggie handed the GPS back to Roper who once again started fiddling with it. But nothing worked. The word "CLOSE" remained on the screen and Roper became frustrated.

"The damn thing was just talking a minute ago. Maggie what did you do?"

"Nothing. I swear. I was just looking at it."

"Here." The dark haired boy stuck out his palm. "I'm pretty good with electronics."

Roper reluctantly handed over the GPS. He took it and began trying most of the things that Roper had already tried. He struggled for a few minutes and eventually pried open the battery compartment.

"You don't mind if I try this, do you?"

"Be my guest," Roper replied with a dubious look.

The battery didn't come right away, the dark haired man had to perform near surgical movements with his finger nails to pry it out. When he had it out, he checked the screen. It was dark. Satisfied, he put the battery back in and booted the device up. There were a series of logos and eventually the same beige screen and the word 'RECALCULATING' across the middle of it. He pressed every button on the screen but nothing worked.

"I think this thing is toast," he said and offered it back to Roper.

"TOAST. LIKE. YOU. GARY."

The dark haired man stood stunned.

"What did it just say?" Roper asked, the color had drained from her face.

"Toast like you, Gary," Maggie repeated in her best robot voice.

"Are you Gary?" Roper asked. She could see the panic in his eyes.

"What? No. No. Of course not. My name's Tony." He thrust the GPS back towards Roper, as if it were a matter of life or death that she take it. "It's obviously busted. Maybe the voice command thing is all messed up." He thrust it again and Roper took it. "I think a few of us are going into town soon. You guys might wanna come with."

"Duly noted, Tony. Thank you," Roper said.

Tony nodded and strolled away gazing at his shoes for a moment before rejoining the original group of people he had been talking to.

When he was out of ear shot, Roper looked at Maggie, "That was strange."

"What, Mrs. Roper?"

"This thing doesn't have voice recognition."

"RECALCULATING."

Roper milled around the landing site with the other survivors. There was a lot of discussion. A lot of questions. People wanted to get organized, go into town, but there were others like Gary who wanted to stay. One flight attendant said she would stay and wait for the authorities, while everyone else went into town.

The only question now was, which way to go? The sun was sinking deeper into the west and they were losing traveling time with every announced concern.

"The pilots are obviously already in town! They'll bring the police!" Someone screamed.

Roper tried to stay out of it as best she could. She wanted to take action now, but she knew how these things worked. Groups of people rarely made swift decisions and it reminded her of why she liked working alone. Just her and the road, Good Buddy deciding where she was going to turn next. Her entire day had been mapped out before her.

She walked around the field staring at the GPS, hoping that it might catch a signal. The thing was just jabbering non-sense now, saying "NO REST," "BLUFF OAKS," and it activated the anti-theft protection twice whenever Roper got near Maggie's Mom, Linda Miller.

She pocketed the thing in frustration, muffling its drivel. She used her eyes for a change. There was an old, white, weather-beaten farm house out in the distance that

looked abandoned. Surely, someone would have come out there by now if they had seen the plane crash, right? thought Roper.

"RECALCULATING."

She continued to scan the landscape and found a young woman sitting on a stump at the edge of the wooded area, on the south side of the property. Roper hadn't seen her since everyone had piled out of the plane. As she walked towards the woods, she noticed the young woman seemed to be staring at something in the distance and then would look down at her lap. As she got closer, she could hear light sobs coming from the woman.

"Are you okay, miss?" Roper asked.

The young woman didn't respond. Roper put a comforting hand on her shoulder. The woman took in a sharp breath and jerked away from the intrusion.

"Oh! Sorry... I didn't see you there." She turned to Roper, her eyes bloodshot, accentuating the pallor of her skin. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"No problem, miss. I don't believe we've met, I'm Europa MacQuirk. Roper for short."

"Ellen." There was another straight-armed handshake that might have yanked Ellen's limb from its socket if Roper shook any longer.

"What wrong, miss? We'll be going into town soon. I'm sure we'll find help there."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"RECALCULATING."

Roper cocked an eyebrow. "I don't follow you."

"See that house?" Ellen gestured toward the dilapidated monstrosity on the horizon.

Roper nodded.

"That's the Rafferty place."

Roper's eyes widened and her jaw was agape.

"You- ya know where we are?"

"Know?" she choked out through a sob. "I grew up here. This is Bluff Oaks."

Roper didn't know what to say. She was shocked, then angry. "You knew this whole time?! You gotta tell these people!"

"RECALCULATING."

Ellen started crying again.

"Oh, jeeze! Hold on, miss." Roper retrieved a Kleenex from her backpack and handed it to Ellen. She felt bad for upsetting her. Screaming at a waifish, young thing like her hadn't been the virtuous thing to do. "I'm sorry. I should not have yelled."

"No, you're right. We need to get going."

"Listen, miss, don't worry and don't be afraid. We're all in this together and we'll be okay."

"They're going to kill me when they find out that I've been holding out."

"DESTINATION FOUND: HOME. SETTING DESTINATION."

"What the-?" Roper pulled the GPS out of her pocket and looked at the screen. Most of the screen was blank except for a red path heading East, right for the farm house and beyond it to a town called town called Bluff Oaks.

"You had a GPS?" Ellen exclaimed. "And I'm the jerk?"

Roper shrugged. "It wasn't working before."

Roper scrolled further up the path on the screen. The destination flag pin was placed next to the one street on the entire map.

"Wait! Can I see that?"

Roper handed the GPS to Ellen. "Do you know that place?"

"I think it's Doc Colon's house..."

Roper watched Ellen look at screen, then her eyes traversed the space between her lap, the field, then the farm house. She did this multiple times, then stood up from the tree stump and moved out into the field. GPS, belly, field, then farm house again.

"It's the same," Ellen whispered.

"What's the same, miss?"

Ellen's head snapped to look at Roper. "Nothing. Sorry, it's nothing."

Roper eyed her suspiciously and put out a hand. Ellen placed the GPS in her palm.

"Well, at least you don't have to admit you we're holding out." Roper gave her a half smile then turned to the large group of people standing next to the plane and waved the GPS in the air. "Hey everyone! It's working! It's working!"

The crowd rushed over and Roper donned her Stetson hat. She was going to lead these people into town. This was her moment.

"Okay everyone. According to the GPS, there is a town to the East called Bluff Oaks. If we start walking now, we can make it before sundown."

There were several voiced agreements and a few more concerns, but after a few minutes everyone grabbed what they wanted to carry and started walking.

"Stay close and lets roll everyone."

"OTTO. IS. COMING. HOME."

Chapter Seven

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” thought Oscar glumly. Which was too damn bad. It would have been nice if every so often there was something different in his world. Magic, say. Or at least some saving strangeness that wasn’t the same old, same old routine that had been crushing his soul since he had locked himself into the prison that was the A-OK Cigar & News.

“We’re down to three boxes of Hoyo de Monterreys,” called Brad Thompson from the walk-in humidor. “And I’m opening the last box of Partagas shorts now.”

Partagas were Irwin Moose’s smokes. Oscar would have to break the news to him soon. But first he had to decide what brand to switch him to. Had to be Dominican. Hemingways?

“You want me to order some more, Mr. Colon?”

“They’re Cuban, *Bradley*.” Oscar knew that Brad Thompson didn’t like to be called Bradley, but if the kid wanted some respect, he needed to learn his cigars. “You can order more just as soon as you get President Kennedy’s permission.”

The bell over the door rang and through the door of the shop came a clutch of boys, four or five of the little brats. They scooted past the counter where Oscar sat and made straight for the magazine racks. Oscar sighed. Now he – or someone -- was going to have to watch them. It was one thing when they pulled issues of *Superman* or *Archie* or *Detective* from the comics rack, but another when one of them went up on tiptoes and slipped the latest *Playboy* from the top shelf. If he let that go on, he’d be hearing from their parents. He looked at his watch. Time for the 3:07 beer break.

“Thompson,” he called, sliding off the stool behind the cash register. The shop tilted for a moment and then straightened. He tried to remember when he had taken his last beer break. 2:17? 2:43? “Watch the counter?”

Brad Thompson appeared at the doorway to the humidor, chin tucked against the top cigar box in the teetering stack he was carrying. “Coming.” He stepped through and put a hip into the door. It closed with a sucking sound. “Sorry I took so long. I get lost in the smell in there.” The kid grinned at him as he set the boxes down. “We’re going to have to tell Mr. Moose,” he said, hefting the last box of Partagas.

“Sure. I’m going out back,” said Oscar. “Keep an eye on the rat pack.” He paused at the magazine rack where the kids were kneeling, squatting and sitting. One by one, they looked away from their reading and turned their bright faces up toward him.

“This isn’t a library,” he said.

“We know that, Mr. Colon,” said the Rollins kid. Tyler? Taylor? “We’re going to buy something, don’t worry.” He uncurled his fist and showed Oscar two sweaty dimes.

“Okay then. Make sure you do.” He reached past the kids and snatched the latest copy of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* off the shelf.

“Hi Gwen,” he said to his imaginary girlfriend, stacked in the corner of the back room. Windowless and still, it was his favorite part of the store. The concrete block walls resisted the heat of the day and the heavy sense of failure that clung to the front of the store. It was a temporary space, filled with things that needed to be elsewhere. Boxes filled with Hershey bars and *True Romance* magazine and cans of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. The trash. Oscar and his girlfriends. He staggered over to the refrigerator and

opened the heavy door. An array of cans and bottles greeted him: Miller High Life, Piel's, International Silver Bar and Tropical. "What are we having, my dear?"

Gwen gleamed at him in all her glass and metallic splendor, but as was her custom, said nothing. The vixen.

"Be that way," he said and snagged an icy cold bottle of Tropical Ale on the second try.

He settled back on the broken-backed couch and admired his artwork. Gwen was only four feet tall, but then she wasn't finished. She was built of his empties, cans mostly, crushed to form legs and torso. Her left breast was a Miller quart and, when he was done with this Tropical, it would become the other. Arms made of cans strung on picture wire dangled from her shoulders, green Rolling Rock bottles he had collected on his trip to Pittsburgh were her gloves, although why she would need gloves in Florida was a mystery. But then all his girlfriends were mysteries, their secrets adrift on seas of alcohol.

Oscar had yet to sculpt a head that satisfied him, no matter how hard he drank, which was why he never kept a girlfriend once he was finished with one. There were six of them down in the basement, Doris, Liz, Debbie, Janet, Ava and Kate. But then God had taken seven days to create Eve, or was it the world? Oscar couldn't remember. His brother would know. His brother Nathan was a doctor and knew everything. Nathan said Oscar was an alcoholic. Oscar said he was just a drinker, like their dear father, and that his brother should mind his own business. Wasn't that right, Gwen?

Gwen kept her own counsel. Oscar couldn't really blame her. It was hard to talk when you didn't have a head. He chugged the rest of the quart, turned the bottle around

and aimed it at her chest. One step, two steps and *there*. It slid into place nicely. Oscar clapped for himself. Usually things didn't go that well when he tried to place pieces of his girlfriends in the afternoon. Things tended to fall off or fall down. Mornings were better, before the changeover from coffee breaks to beer.

He sank back onto the couch and looked at his magazine. He didn't know why he carried *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the store. Nobody read it but him. That was because nothing in it ever actually happened. Bad enough that the stories weren't real. Worse that they were *impossible*. Like the cover of this issue, some blue naked alien creature dancing inside a bubble. Boy? Girl? You couldn't tell. And there weren't any authors he recognized. Brian Aldiss? Ron Goulart? Come on! Where was Heinlein? Now there was a guy who could make you believe in things. Like Ray Bradshaw – no, Bradbury.

He needed another beer. Oscar looked at his watch but for some reason the hands were all squirmy like worms. He closed at five, but Bradbury Thompson could handle that. *Bradbury Thompson?* The joke bounced around inside his head and made him laugh.

Gwen thought it was funny too. But when he heard her laughing, he knew he was in trouble.

All her edges had turned into curves and she had a head now, which was why she could laugh like she was real. She was more beautiful than all those women on the beer coasters they gave you in bars put together. Blonde hair that curled just below her jawline, a smile that threw sparks, lipstick the color of sin.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said, taking a step toward him. He closed his eyes and tried not to hear the clanking as she came into his arms. She had a yeasty, sour, sorry smell, that was as familiar to him as the inside of his eyelids. She was impossibly smooth and his hand slipped down her back like a bead of condensation.

“What’s happening?” he whispered.

“What do you want to happen?”

Oscar Colon didn’t know what to say. When had what he wanted ever mattered? He felt as if one of his pulp magazines had opened like a trap door and he stood tottering on the edge of something astonishing. It might be Oz down there. Or Hell. But he was in no condition to navigate a break with reality, especially one with a woman’s curves and an alcohol kick.

“I don’t feel so good,” he muttered into her shoulder.

She pushed away from him and held him at arms’ length. “Of course you don’t. That’s why you made us.”

“Us?”

“Come on, silly.” She took the dead fish that was his hand in hers and tugged him toward the basement door. Oscar let himself be led.

The stairs into the basement were crude treads with no risers. Gail flicked on the light. “You better go first,” she said. “They’re not mad at you, just a little disappointed.”

His other girlfriends lay where he had dumped them, although they were more artfully arranged than he remembered. They posed a little like the centerfolds in *Playboy*, except that their transformation from steel and glass to flesh and bone was incomplete.

Janet had beautiful bare legs to the knees but her thighs were crumpled and rusting in

the humidity of the basement's dirt floor. Doris was almost completely womanized except for her eyes, which were the brown glass bottoms of Budweiser bottles.

"Excuse us for not getting up," said Ava, "but you're not drunk enough."

Kate pulled a virgin can of Miller High Life from her boyish hip and offered it to Oscar. "You can fix that," she purred. "We'll make it worth your while."

"No, no, no," said Gwen. "He hasn't got time to fix anything just now. He's all mine and we're going to the ball."

"Ball, you say?" Poor Debbie was hard of hearing, being comprised of almost all containers except for one dainty foot.

"Let them go." Doris fixed Oscar with her glass stare as she reached behind her and fumbled at the latch of the door into the darkness the crawl space where the water heater and oil burner were. "He'll be back now that he knows the way things are."

"He'll be back when I'm finished with him," said Gwen. "And not a moment before." She dragged Oscar across the basement toward Doris and at the last minute, stopped, pivoted holding him by one arm and swung him toward the crawl space. He stumbled over Doris and pitched headlong through. He tried to brace himself for the impact with the water tank but the crash never came. Instead he skimmed across a polished marble floor into light as intense as Broad Street at noon.

"Safe!" called a voice, thick with drink, hoarse with laughter. "Nice slide, sport."

The wisecrack got a polite titter from some of the other party-goers as Gwen reached down to help Oscar to his feet. She dusted his tuxedo coat off and straightened his bow tie. "I'm afraid he's had a bellyful."

"So have we all," cried someone in the crowd.

“That’s why we came.”

Oscar blinked owlshly at the swells in their evening clothes and the beauties in their gowns. They were gathered in a grand ballroom. Gilt-framed mirrors the size of billboards hung on the walls. Crystal chandeliers tinkled above them; an elegant man noodled Gershwin songs on a Bösendorfer piano next to a fountain that gushed

Oscar approached the edge of the fountain, dipped a finger into the flow and sniffed. “Beer?” he said.

Gwen took his arm and nodded proudly. “You like?”

“What is this place?” he said.

“It used to be part of the tunnels that the rich folks built under the town to escape the summer heat. But nobody was using it, so we moved in.”

“But none of this is” He put a hand on her shoulder to steady himself.

“You’re not real.”

“So?” She shrugged. “You tried reality and it didn’t work out. Isn’t it time you moved on?”

They were all staring at him, waiting for his reply. Not for the first time in his life, Oscar Colon was confused. “I need a drink,” he said.

Chapter Eight

The man who called himself Tony pressed the gun firmly into the middle of his mouth until it replaced thought, as if a clock had stopped inside of him.

He stared into the mirror.

In the reflected room, the Other Man said, "Breathe."

And he exhaled, into the humid air of the room so similar to the Other Man's - with its thin mattress, and the low water-stained walls. The Other Man sat up straighter on his mirrored mattress and announced, "A stopped clock tells the time twice a day. Tinnitus is caused by prolonged exposure to trauma. Blue is the complement of orange. Your name is not Tony."

Tony did nothing, waited, calmly as The Other Man assumed a posture of dignity on his mirrored bed. Of pure detachment and focus. "What was two is now one, tick tock tick tock, with two long hands, and one dead clock." The Other Man continued on. "Life's a bitch and then you die, in a field, or in the sky. Bye bye. Red and yellow and blue, all true, all true...if your name's not Tony, then who is who?"

The Other Man slowly lifted his legs from the floor of his reflected room and stretched out fully on his bed, still with his mirror-image gun lodged firmly in his face, one perfectly duplicated hand firm around the trigger, and his other hand now drumming little tattoos upon his stomach. "Five or ten or fifteen, see? What difference can this make for you or me, one Tony, one Not, the knot is free, the knot is free, five and ten and fifteen, see?"

Tony did not move, did not blink. He concentrated on his own hands, cramped now and growing numb, and thought of nothing but holding the gun steady.

* * *

The timing couldn't have been better, the situation more tailor-made for what Gary needed than right at the moment the plane went down. Up to the moment he had boarded the flight, he had willed himself into a state of noiseless calm, into an inner formless white plain over which his rigorously disciplined mind stood sentry. He had been living like this for a month, with each day growing less and less distinct and more withdrawn until the morning arrived that he would take his seat on the flight.

While the plane ramped up for takeoff, Gary had allowed his inner calm to notice a dot upon the white blank expanse his mind had made. The dot grew larger, more defined. The dot stretched, became more insistent, and spoke. A girl. Another passenger. Had he flown on a plane before? Where was he going? Was it a special occasion?

The sentry in Gary's mind made up simple small talk for the girl, and resumed surveying the sheer horizon of unblinking void.

The girl was persistent, undaunted. She wanted a name. Gary was caught off-guard, his body beginning to fidget, his control of the white expanse tilting as the plane continued down the runway. He instructed the sentry to answer, and it dutifully replied.

“My name is Tony.”

The plane rose, and as it did, Gary allowed more and more dots to gather and form on the edge of his will, ones he had stored for this moment, carefully raised like hothouse flowers. “My name is Tony,” he said to himself, as the cabin illuminated suddenly with fierce white light and the pilot, from somewhere far away, spoke of a place to land.

* * *

“Fifteen years ago,” The Other Man yawned, “Fifteen Yous to go, oh no oh no, is Tony at home? Say not so, hey nonny nonny and billy goats groan! Three cannot be divided, except by one, but the one is divided on what’s to be done!”

The Other Man was on his feet, walking in thought by the side of his mirrored bedside, the gun now independently facing his head, suspended in mid-air and emitting tiny puffs of smoke from the barrel as The Other Man paced. Frequently he would leave the mirror surface altogether, only to re-appear to face Tony directly.

“Why so glum, chum?” The Other Man continued, “donta read the papers?” At this, The Other Man laughed.

Tony was immobile on his bed, shining with sweat, the hand holding the pistol inside of his mouth completely forgotten - a stone within a stone. The back of his throat was swollen with the effort of keeping the gun in place and his emotions in check.

Fifteen years...

The Other Man was now playing with a toy airplane, while his pistol recreated a smoky descent punctuated by childish sound effects the Other Man was gleefully providing. “Down we go, so far to the ground! The fields are vast for miles around! Where will you go, Tony Boy, the headlines know....”

At this, The Other Man winked and dropped the toy plane hard on the floor, capering as it bounced awkwardly across the floor and outside of the mirror frame. “Still having trouble, I see - naming what you know and what you believe. That gun is no help, nor will it be. For - have you guessed it? - it rhymes with G! For am I you and you are.....” The Other Man collapsed on the other side of the mirror in hysterics, his sides heaving with laughter.

Tony's damp hand slipped and the gun went up hard against the inside of his mouth, the sight tearing the inside of his cheek. Instantly he regained control, re-positioning the pistol and setting his weight more firmly into the mattress springs. He shrank his mind into the throbbing ache in the side of his face, filling it with mental static.

Glare. His whining cackle grew into a steady, insect-like drone that began to heat the gunmetal inside Tony's mouth, searing it into his flesh.

Afternoon light, gauzy and indistinct. The pale geometry of evening rounding its edges. Tony blinked, and placed his hand down upon the mattress, flinching as it came into contact with something small and sharp. Rough shards of glass covered the floor, his bed, with more embedded deeply into the walls, flashing long arcs of prismatic color along the ceiling and into the corners of the room. He tried to move, and his muscles sent out a deep angry warning. His clothes were stiff, sour with expired sweat and the inside of his mouth tasted flat and thick with blood. He stood, and fell back immediately onto the floor, wincing with the effort and feeling a fresh break of nausea crest in his throat.

The gun lay at the foot of his bed, the barrel facing outward into the room and away from where he stood. Tony followed the crooked angle of the barrel to the far wall, into which a damp page from a newspaper was impaled by a long, lightning-edged sliver of glass. And around it, spread out in larger circles that left the page and continued onto the wall, one word had been written: HEED.

It had been easy to disappear. Tony had enjoyed himself at first. He amused himself cataloguing and indexing all the wondrous new dots which now were crowding upon the stark plain of his mind. He would spend the day wandering the streets, or in parks, unspooling himself hour after hour and cheering on the parade that marched behind his eyelids. He made up new siblings, new occupations, precious memories that were as ephemeral and slight as the children who ran past him, laughing.

He found work soon enough after the exodus from the plane crash; there was always another diner or warehouse or janitorial position that he could land, where no one noticed him and where he could be left to himself for long periods. He cultivated a dead space around him that erased the parts of the world that didn't suit him, appearing kind to people he couldn't avoid, or slightly dull to others, whatever it took to keep his isolation immaculate.

He worked diligently, rarely sleeping or making time to eat except for the energy to do the menial tasks that would guarantee another round of pay. At night, he would lie awake, manipulating imaginary family members, or reshuffling the places he had never visited until the dots had all adhered into an unbroken, and thickly interwoven line. Over time, he felt himself-as-Tony grow completely, undeniably solid. It had been fifteen years since Tony had staggered from the shattered cabin with the others (the little girl!) and he had seen to it that his former life was as unrecognizable to him as it was to anyone who would cross his path now. Tony exhaled, and gazed inwardly at the sentry who now patrolled the cliffs above a dark, deep and gently rolling sea where once a horizonless void had stretched within him.

The newspaper page throbbed in Tony's vision - a simple announcement of a wedding.

GARY HEED AND SUSAN AUTRE

TRINITY CHURCH, 3PM

“Honor the Bringer Of Light”

Tony felt a slight breeze behind him and turned just as a glass shard from the wall behind him slowly stuck itself into the space where he had just been reading. The air hummed again as a smaller piece of glass cut through the armpit of his shirt and pierced the page. Tony flinched as two jagged spikes launched themselves an inch to either side of the shard holding the announcement to the wall.

He lurched sideways, panting, and kicked himself backwards until he had reached the bed again. He pinned himself flat against the wool of the blankets while the embedded shards lifted themselves from across the room and methodically spat themselves into the wall where he had just been standing. A shape began to emerge around the newspaper page, a rough-cut rectangle.

Shards from every corner of the room were now lazily lifting themselves through the air to create what was now an unmistakable form etched in jagged glass upon the wall.

A subtle pressure began to make itself known in the room, a slight suffocation Tony could feel building within his ears and within his chest. He sat up, fighting for balance. The pressure increased, and Tony watched as the outlines of the rectangle turned dark, the edges of the glass shards visibly flattening into an opaque band that

began to arc in slow, sluggish movements around the border the form had made upon the wall.

The rectangle bulged and flexed, and its borders increased, the dark band spreading onto the floor and then out in small, searching lines across the ceiling. The pressure in Tony's chest was monstrous now, his breath coming in quick, short blasts.

The room began to dim as the dark lines crossed and re-crossed one another, swallowing up the ambient light until the room itself appeared to shrink in upon itself. The far wall of his room was completely black now, with portions of the floor and ceiling surrendering their hardness and shape. The dark lines had grown until entire patches of the room began to wink out, and Tony could see nothing, feel nothing but that hideous weight and the void that carried it through his bones.

His mind had retreated into a cramped, faint speck that bounced and drifted at random, without will, without purpose. Images arose and enveloped him, caressed him in an endless flow - a house, a yard, a car speeding past with a woman beaming at the wheel. He pressed his will against them and marvelled as they broke like iridescent waves around him and moved on. His mind constricted further, piercing layer upon layer of conjured sounds, some who were now forming speech, some now herding themselves into color, angle and line. The world around him coalesced, brightened and his mind steadied upon a dim point of light that began to shine through the bombast of faces, words, and sound.

The sound of trees, of wind. The sudden vertiginous knowledge of the earth buckling under to the demands of gravity's force. Tony's mind noted an oval window

where a woman and a small child lay heaped against each other, the woman smiling absurdly.....

The room was dark, but defined. He lay upon the bed, spent. The air around him was dry and tinged with a warm wind blowing in from an open window. Yellow bands of sunlight spread across the wall opposite from where he lay and illuminated a mirror in which he regarded his reflection. He raised his head, and his reflection did the same. He dropped his legs to the floor and the mirror reproduced his movements exactly. He raised himself up and went to the mirror. He paused, and then lifted the mirror from where it lay against the wall and gazed behind it for a moment. "Enough - you're not getting a better opinion. Not today, Gary old chum, not today."

Chapter Nine

Local lore says that the baseball field George M. Dallas Memorial Middle School is haunted by the ghost of eleven-year-old right fielder Jimmy Smith, something about his soul not being able to leave this plane and continue to the next since he left so suddenly and in such a way that could be avoided. It was simple math really: lightning storm plus baseball equals incredibly bad idea. Not that a lightning bolt killed him - that was a freak line drive off the bat of a tall red headed left-hander. Jimmy didn't have time to react; he didn't see it coming in the rain. The sound of bat to ball was distorted by the storm.

All Jimmy remembered of his last moments alive was wondering why the game hadn't been called or at least had everyone waiting in the dugouts until the thunder and lightning stopped. Then bam. He was floating over his body watching his coaches and teammates surround his now lifeless body. He could see parents starting to stand up on the bleachers, just starting to realize that something bad had happened. Jimmy could not help but think that his death could have easily been avoided. How was his coach going to explain to his parents why he'd died? "Well Mr. and Mrs. Smith, there was only an inning and a half left to play and it wasn't raining too hard yet, we just thought it would better to let the kids play out the game than wait for the rain to stop." Jimmy's ghost rolled his eyes.

In the two years he'd been dead, Jimmy spent a lot of time wondering why he had to stay on Earth rather than go to some place that he'd always been told dead people end up. Maybe it had to do with how easily he could actually still be alive, how he could be a freshman in high school now, how maybe, just maybe he could have told Samantha McMillan that her hair looked really nice when she wore it up in a pony tail.

Jimmy spent most of his afterlife, however, at the Little League field. He'd stand at home plate, pretending he was at Yankee Stadium, or Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, sometimes even Fenway Park, the imaginary crowd chanting his name as he swung a bat made of air. Hitting a home run over the left field fence every time.

Now that he was dead, Jimmy liked to watch the baseball games from atop the home team's dugout. A place he was constantly told to get down from when he was alive, because you never know; he could have fallen off and broken his neck. He was there; the grass stained knees of the Little League uniform he wore everyday against his chest on top the dugout, watching like he always did, during the first game of the season. He watched, unable to stop it as the fast ball sped toward Taylor Rollins right eye. As soon as the ball left the pitcher's hand, Jimmy knew that something horrible was going to happen. It may have had to do with the fact that Taylor had the incredibly bad habit of closing his eyes before swinging the bat.

Taylor was easily the worst baseball player on the team, but the regular right fielder had conjunctivitis and wasn't allowed to play that day. So there was Taylor Rollins, eyes squeezed shut, swinging away at a ball that was sailing directly at his eye. Taylor had no idea that if he simply ducked, or played with his eyes open, his death, much like Jimmy Smith's could have extremely easily been avoided.

Jimmy saw the body of Taylor Rollins fall to the ground, falling mostly over home plate, the bat rolled slowly to the backstop, Taylor's eyes still squeezed as tight as they always were. But above the slumped body, Jimmy noticed, Taylor was still standing; elbows pulled tight against his body, bat on his shoulder waiting for the next pitch to come.

The crowd gathered around slowly, much like, from the way Jimmy remembered it, they had when he'd died. Jimmy watched as his old coach stood over the second body of one of his players. For some reason he didn't really seem all that concerned about it, maybe somehow the kid was still alive, but Jimmy didn't see how that was possible as the kid's ghost was standing over his body.

"Hey!" Jimmy yelled. "Hey kid at bat, open your eyes!" As Jimmy yelled he realized that Taylor probably couldn't hear him, too much noise around him. Jimmy crawled to the edge of the dugout and jumped down from his perch, a move that would have easily broken his ankle if he had a real body. But Jimmy thought, if there was clearly a crowd around him, why wouldn't the kid's ghost open his eyes.

Jimmy waited until the ambulance came and took Taylor's body away, perhaps an hour, maybe two. It was dark out. Jimmy wasn't exactly sure how time worked anymore. Since he died everything seemed to move in slow motion some days and a million miles an hour other days. Everyone had disappeared to wherever they go after they watch a kid die on a baseball field, home, Jimmy guessed. He wasn't really sure. He hadn't thought to follow anybody after his own demise.

"Hey," Jimmy repeated, tapping Taylor lightly on the shoulder. "You can open your eyes now. It's all over."

"I've only s-s-swung twice, though." Taylor stuttered. "I have one more to go. Then I can go back and sit again. Just one more time." Taylor took a deep breath and swung at a ball that he was never going to hit, never going to be delivered.

Jimmy watched as Taylor slowly opened his right eye and started to turn toward the dugout. Jimmy scanned Taylor's face for realization of what had happened to him,

but the kid just turned and started walking to the dugout without any acknowledgement that the scene around him had changed from when he closed his eyes.

Jimmy ran after him, calling out. “Wait, don’t you want to know what happened?” He leaned against the fence that protected the dugout from the rest of the field from the stray foul ball, wouldn’t want someone not paying attention to get hit with a ball.

“I struck out,” Taylor explained. “Just like every time I go up to bat.”

“You died,” Jimmy said, his fingers wrapped around the wire, his nose and mouth pressed against the fence. “You were hit by the ball and died. Right here.” Jimmy pointed to his right eye. Taylor instinctively touched his eye where Jimmy was touching his.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Taylor laughed. “I was just at bat. I swung three times, and sat back down. I didn’t have time to die.”

“Between swings two and three,” Jimmy said matter-of-factly. “There was, like, two hours, plenty of time to die. If you had your eyes open you would have noticed.”

“I don’t like watching the ball,” Taylor explained defensively. “What if it hit me, I wouldn’t want to watch it hit me.”

“With your eyes open you could have completely avoided dying, actually,” Jimmy chuckled. “Keep your eye on the ball, it’s kind of the first rule of baseball, but that why I’m here too. Look away for a second and the whole game changes.”

“What do you mean ‘here?’” Taylor asked. “This is the baseball field. This is exactly where I was before.”

“Yeah, it is, except now, no one alive can see or hear you.”

“But I can talk to you.”

“That’s because I died two years ago,” Jimmy smiled as he pointed across diamond to right field. “Just over there. Thunderstorm. I don’t really know what happened, because I couldn’t see what was going on because of the rain.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Taylor said, scrunching his face and chewing the inside of his lower lip and he thought. “You can’t be Jimmy Smith. You can’t be. That’s impossible.”

“Possible,” Jimmy laughed. It had been a long time since he’d talked to someone who could talk back, the feeling was completely euphoric. It was nice to not feel lonely all the time. “Completely one-hundred percent possible.”

Taylor shook his head in disbelief.

“Then believe it’s a dream,” Jimmy suggested, that’s what he had done in the early days of his afterlife, pretending it was all a dream. “A dream where I’m the only one in the world who can hear or see you.”

“More like a nightmare,” Taylor rolled his eyes.

“Imagine only having the baseball field to talk to for two years,” Jimmy said. “It was almost a miracle that you got hit in the eye.”

“Miracle.” Taylor whispered.

“Probably not for you,” Jimmy laughed. He couldn’t stop himself from laughing at everything, even things that weren’t exactly what anyone else would call funny. “But for me, finally having another person to talk to, miracle.”

“Stop laughing,” Taylor complained. “If I really am dead then there isn’t anything funny about it. There’s nothing funny about being dead.” Taylor pulled his knees to his

chest on the bench, gripping them tightly with his arms, each hand clamped tightly to the opposite elbow and started to cry.

“Sorry,” Jimmy said. He let go of the fence and walked into the dugout and sat down next to Taylor, his feet dangling awkwardly just above the ground. “I know it’s not funny. I cried a lot too after I figured it out. But at least you have someone to talk to. I didn’t have anyone, until you that is.”

“So what do you do?” Taylor asked, wiping his face quickly as he turned to Jimmy.

“What do you do when you’re dead?”

“I play baseball,” Jimmy answered, kicking his feet, his toes dragging across the dirt. If he’d been a solid person the dirt would have been kicked against the wood at the bottom of the dugout. Instead Jimmy’s shoes left the dirt unmoved. “I like to pretend that this is a big league field, like I play for the Yankees or something. I don’t know - it’s something to do. It’s kind of a boring life when you’re the only one in the world who knows that you even exist.”

“Sounds fun,” Taylor said, with about as much sarcasm as an eleven year old could express.

“But,” Jimmy grinned. “Now that I think about it, there is something we can do. I’ve been waiting for someone else to come along. It’s kind of a two person job.” A slightly evil smile grew across Jimmy’s face. “Want to go to The Bowl Bowl tonight?”

“If it’s that or pretend to be a baseball player,” Taylor sighed. “I’ll take wandering around town in the middle of the night.”

Taylor did not like the looks of the smile on Jimmy's face, but Taylor wasn't about to be picky about the kinds of friends he had to hang out with. Especially if Jimmy was right about being the only person in the universe that could see and talk to him.

Jimmy jumped up off the bench and grabbed Taylor's arm. "Well come on then. We've got some ghostly mayhem to perform!"

Reluctantly, Taylor let Jimmy pull him to his feet, and off toward the entrance to the underground tunnels directly behind the center field fence.

"We're not supposed to go down there," Taylor whispered as Jimmy led him to the uncovered entrance to the tunnels.

"Who's going to tell us we can't?" Jimmy laughed again.

Jimmy entered the tunnels, pausing at the bottom of the stairs that led into a grand entrance way, he listened for the sound of Taylor's cleats on the stone stairs, when he heard nothing he turned and yelled up to the surface. "It's not like anything worse than what's already happened to you today," He yelled.

Jimmy swore he could feel Taylor rolling his eyes as he started to make his way down into the tunnel.

"Come on!" Jimmy yelled. He wished he could pull Taylor after him, but he felt that would only slow them down, and it was extremely important that they make it to The Bowl Bowl before sunrise.

"What are we going to do at the bowling alley anyway?" Taylor whined as the boys navigated the dimly lit caverns looping around a large fountain and a door the supposedly lead to a library, but Jimmy had never bothered to look inside that door, considering he couldn't grab the door knob.

“Oh, Taylor,” Jimmy said through a tight-lipped smile, we’re going to be playing some pranks on that guy who’s always bowling.” Jimmy negotiated his way up through the exit to the tunnels behind the automatic pin setter and let his hand drop down to help Taylor up and into the alley.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Taylor replied anxiously. “I don’t think everyone will like it ever much if we start messing with people, especially if no one can see us. Won’t they think they’re going crazy?”

“Oh,” Jimmy said, that slightly evil smile growing across his face again. “That’s exactly why we’re going to do it. I mean, what’s the point of being dead if you don’t get to have a little bit of fun with the living.”

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Chapter Ten

It is as certain as death and taxes that nothing so occupies the mind as does lost love. The sweet remembrances of sweet and intimate parts are ever present of course; their smells, their shapes, their vibes, how they caress, are caressed, where there's hair and where not, how they felt on the nose, the tongue, the mouth, the shoulder, the shin, how it felt to be embedded within. But almost deeper, nay not almost, indeed deeper by far are moments, times, sharings, distances resolved, discoveries, amazements profound wonderments as one fell more completely into the oneness two had created. And as if those were not mind-filling enough even while simply managing the minutia of life, cleaning out the rest rooms, mopping the floor, arranging properly the seats around the tables, there was the constant unanswered nagging of why, and where did it go wrong, and how did it happen and where were the clues to the disintegration which must have glistened like flares around a semi changing a rear tire on a dark night, where the hell were the warning bells that at some time must have shrieked at ear splitting levels "This is ending!"?

Darren wrung out the table rag under running hot water, and sloshed the rag again and wrung it out again as he pondered how it could be that Purdue had split with him. Sure, they argued. They were people of passion. They disagreed about half of everything. They both rejoiced in their uniqueness. Wasn't that rejoicing more important than the fact of disagreement? About the interpretation of facts? Wasn't the very substance of love that it bonded when mind and passion conflicted? He wrung the rag again. He noticed the water was losing its sting, it was cooling, he had run it so long the hot water was exhausted. Now he had to shut it off and wait a half hour before he'd have anymore.

He walked out from behind the bar into the small room that constituted the coffee house, the Java Jungle, and walked among the tables carefully scrubbing each round table top and then wiping the seat of each of the wire back chairs. For some reason his mind gravitated to the work, studying each table top for dried stains, the slops of creamed and sugared coffee gelled and stuck with more tenacity than the plain, and for several minutes of golden respite he analyzed that phenomenon. As he got to the little corner where risers formed a small stage he smiled realizing he had cleared his mind of her and her abject absence from his life these past four days for perhaps five minutes. Then, without thoughts at all he wiped down the metal microphone and stand, wiped the shells of the bass and snare drums, the high-hat, the cymbal, wiped the seat of the stool, wiped the two folding chairs resting against, the wall.

He sat on the stool, adjusted it, picked up the brushes and noodled a bit. Shush-a-shush-a-shush, shush-a-shush-a-shush, shaboombidy-pat Bam Bam, shaboombidy-pat Bam Bam, Bambaddy BAM BAM WAP!

"Oh, well - that oughtta make you feel better." The mastery of Purdue's sarcasm tingled like a badly played violin. He looked toward the door, off to his left, but no one had come in. Must've been his imagination. He'd been thinking about it all too much. But there had been an actual voice, he would swear to that. He dropped the brushes on the stool as he rose and walked back behind the bar. The lights on all three urns had gone out meaning they were ready for brewing.

Darren opened a package of Swing's Mocha Java, poured it into the brewing bag at the top of the first urn, opened the hot water spigot into the one gallon metal pitcher,

moved to the next urn, poured a bag of Swing's French Roast into it and set the water running into another metal pitcher and did the same at the next one.

Not that I have anyone to swear to, he thought as he poured brewing coffee into the first urn, and fresh hot water into the second. He would pour the one hundred eighty degree water through the grounds four times per urn to brew the coffee appropriately. Now that he'd managed to get his mind onto something else he dove into the subject. It was his agnosticism that had driven his life, in fact. Perhaps the single, if there could be a single most point of contention between him and Purdue was his mocking demeanor, his resolute unwillingness to be at all tolerant of believers.

"And not just believers in God, for Heaven's sake, believers in *belief!*"

There was no doubt, there could be no doubt in all this universe that he had heard that. Right out loud. Purdue. Purdue's voice to be precise. The "Heaven's sake" and the "*belief!*" had actually echoed a bit off the wall on the other side of the room. He turned, he turned around, twice. She was not here. No one was here. Except himself. Darren Lowe. Alone. He poured two more pitchers of brewing coffee into urns and walked out to see if the door to Java Jungle was even unlocked so some one could have come in. To see if Purdue could have come in. Come in and hidden somewhere. Hidden somewhere where she could listen in to his mind and reply to him out loud.

"Listen to what you just said. Listen to your mind and reply out loud. Do you really *believe* something like that?"

That is how women argue, though isn't it? Conflating things that aren't germane. Just making emotional stabs that do half make sense but draw us away from the subject at hand.

"Which is what?"

Which is whether or not you've managed to get into this place with the door locked, and try to beat up on me like this. Fuck, what am I nuts? Whoa, he managed to get himself under control, out of this imagining of some voice and actually thinking back to it as if he were in conversation. His damn imagination was working overtime. He continued pouring brewing coffee through the brewing bags, shaking off this uncomfortable feeling, this feeling that he was behaving weirdly. Just to be sure, he walked to the end of the bar and flipped on all the lights of the coffee shop and stepped back out into the full room and walked slowly around. He stopped and stooped several times to look under the tables, through the legs of the wire backed chairs and around the pedestals the little round tables sat on. The place was empty except for him.

"It's my imagination," he said right out loud, "my damn imagination. Goddamn, I miss her." He walked back, turned the lights back out, then on an urge flipped them back on, looked carefully around, turned them off again. Satisfied he checked the urns, they were fine, then reached below the counter and pulled out the candle bottles, two in each hand at a time. Several needed new candles; as he reached below for replacements her goddamn voice did it again.

"It's just like you to say something nice like that, but spoil it using that curse."

"Oh, for Christ's Goddamn sake will you shut up with that? You aren't even here to hear me for Chrissakes, I got stuff to do, busy important stuff. Go the fuck away, you're only a figment anyway, a goddamn figment. I gotta get these candles out there before the night crowd gets here."

“Be careful you don’t knock off the wax around the top when you put the new ones in, you always knock half the wax off when you put a new candle in.”

He grabbed one of the wax-dripped Chianti bottles from the counter and swung it over his head ready to smash it on the floor, but held instead, caught himself, breathed deeply, let his arm down, gently, returned the bottle to the counter.

“You don’t exist. I’m not hearing you, I’m not talking to you.”

He grabbed a paring knife and trimmed a candle base, tried it in one bottle, it fit first try, grabbed another candle. He replaced all the stubbies and carried the candle bottles to the tables. Whatever it had been, his imagination or some extra-worldly phenomenon, it was true to her. Wonderful as she was, always he thought of her as wonderful, she could be an unmitigated bitch. She could nag and complain about everything and anything when she was piqued by some action or misaction by him. He recalled that was part of what he loved about her. She was relentless about herself.

What the hell had gone wrong? He had thought of theirs as a tight relationship. He thought they were more together than any of the other relationships he knew. He had no inclinations to chase other women. So far as he knew, and he thought he knew, she had never played around with anyone else. She had a bit of unwarranted jealousy, but that had been a source of some degree of pleasure, pride for him. Now that he thought about it, it was really her insecurity, not his behavior that gave rise to it. They liked the same music, had similar taste in other arts, and where their tastes diverged they were able to understand each other and talk about why they liked or disliked what they did.

Standing beside the last table he had set a candle bottle on he toured her paintings, hanging from there to the stage. Abstractions, representatives, some mishmashes of

realistic and non, but all of it spoke of rare discipline, personal integrity. Once a local printer had wanted her to produce a line of stationary, with a design of hers overlaying a corner of each sheet. It had seemed like a good idea, but he had wanted to direct the designs to reflect what he considered contemporary trends. He spoke of fairly large bucks, but she turned him down, it violated her artistic standards. Just one more reason why he loved her

As he heard the stairway creak with steps and the key click into place at the door he realized he hadn't heard from Purdue for several minutes. He cursed himself briefly that he missed it now. Apparently thinking well of her kept her at bay.

"Don't count on it, you bloody coward." Purdue whispered in his ear.

"Get the hell out of here you miserable bitch!" he shouted as Sophia Jacobs, his waitress, stepped into the room.

"Oops," Sophia said, and pulled the door shut.

"Not you, not you!" Darren shouted. He wove through the tables and pulled open the door, looking directly into Sophia's bosom, since she stood on the bottom step of the staircase. Her black leotard top made ample certainty of what it contained, all of which was flesh.

"What's going on, Darren? Is some one here already?"

"No, no one's here, Sofe. I was talking to Purdue."

Sophia tossed her long, golden Indian braid as she snapped her head in question.

"No one's here, you're talking to Purdue? What are you talking about? The phone's around the corner."

“Oh, I didn’t mean that, not *to* her, at her, I mean, not at *her*, at her in my head. She’s in my head.”

“Oh my stars and garters, Darr, you’re still trying to figure it out? She didn’t appreciate you, that’s all, she’s a selfish, self-involved, self indulgent bitch. Let her go and find yourself some one who will care.”

“Goddamnit, that’s just not true, Sofe, she’s a wonderful girl, and she loved me very much.”

“If she loved you so much why’d she leave you?”

“Goddamned if I know, I just can’t figure it out.”

“Well, are we going to have a coffee shop tonight or we going to figure out why Purdue left you? I suggest having a coffee shop is more important right now; you can figure out why she left you after we close tonight.”

“Fair enough. Forget her. We’ll be having people before long.”

“You’re not going to do that so easily, believe me,” Purdue said.

“Did you hear that?” Darren asked. To assure himself Sophia knew he was addressing her he looked directly into her wantonly blue eyes.

“Hear what? No. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Purdue just spoke to me, said I can’t forget her that easily.”

“Well, of course I didn’t hear it, she’s only talking inside your head.”

“Well, yeah, that’s what I thought, but I hear her out here in the real world.”

“That’s why you were shouting at her when I got here?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s not happening out here in the real world, so stop making believe it is. My

great stars and garters, people will think you're nuts."

"Don't listen to her. I'm as real as you are. She's just trying to get your zipper down," Purdue said. Darren felt his face contort; he'd never thought of straying, but Sophia was an enticing beauty. He had not actually put that thought into language, and it occurred to him Purdue had not read it. Could not.

The door opened again. Zinger Johns bopped in. "What's the haps, Cats?" he jabbered. He grabbed Sophia around the waist, twirled her in place, released her, stuck out his hand palm up for Darren to slide his hand over, and sashayed over to the little stage. A moment later he leaped up from the drummer stool. "You been playing my drums again, man! Dammit, if you're gonna play my axe, man, put the stool back to my height, willya please?"

"Sorry, Zing, got a lot on my mind right now."

"He's thinking about his ex girlfriend, Zing." Sophia said.

"Thinking about your ex-girlfriend'll drive you crazier than a chef, man. You know a chef's the only thing crazier than drummer, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, Zing, I know. But I am beginning think I'm not thinking about her, I'm beginning to think that she's in my head."

"And just how would those be different from each other, my man?"

"You're exactly right, Darr. I'm in your head. Physically. I don't know how. I think God did it."

"DON'T TELL ME GOD DID IT GODDAMIT!" He shouted.

"What the hell you talking about, man?" Zing asked.

"He thinks she's talking to him. He hears her." Sophia said.

“Jesus fucking Christ he *is* crazier than a chef. He’s crazier than a chef and a drummer combined. Hey, man, ain’t nobody here but us chicken’s” he cocked his head, split his face with a huge grin and added “And we’s fixin’ to go out. Darr, old friend, losing your squeeze is tough but you are going boogledywhoops here. I think you gotta let her go. Stick to Maynard Cola, man, lay off the Town Tavern.”

“I really don’t care who did it, or how, but I am sitting here inside your head, I don’t even know what I’m sitting on, it feels like a node, I think, and it’s dark in here, and I’d love to leave, but I don’t think I can until I understand what’s going on between us. I love you so much and I hate you so much right now, and you were so horrible when we fought last week that I just couldn’t ever forgive you, and I was stewing about what to do and I dozed off and woke up here.”

“Now, that’s the dumbest shit I’ve heard in a long time,” Darren said. “Except that it sounds like what’s happening to me.”

“Who you talking to, me or her?” Zinger asked.

“Which her?” Sophia asked.

“Her her.” Darr said. “You guys take care of the shop for a while. I got something I got to get off my mind.”

Chapter Eleven

The rough concrete of one of the third floor windows of the Maynard Cola Factory pressed into Gary's plump fingertips and reminded him he was still alive. His Nikon, a constant partner since he found his first camera in his mother's belongings after her death, hung around his neck. He was tempted to bring it to his eye and capture a photograph of his last view of the world--more ugliness--an apt reflection of everything that was him. But he was too afraid to let go. He was so tired of fighting. His chest and belly rolled with a sigh and he let the tears fall. Time to surrender. He had seen death just a week before. Time snatched it away and brought him to a time where his photos would never be anything but light on a screen.

Here there was no W.O.W to hide away in. No place to pretend he wasn't the dumpy 34 year old he knew himself to be. That big woman, Quirky or something like that, couldn't even get her GPS to work and she was a GPS expert. Now he knew why. No satellites in 1961. And his chance at doing something good, at showing he was okay, 50 years out of his reach. Gary snorted back a noseful of snot and shifted his weight on the window sill. *Shit, he wasn't even born yet.*

The small plane that somehow brought him from the digital age here to 1961 had been carrying him to the first public showing of his photographs, self-portraits taken from reflections he could not seem to love and so broke into pieces or distorted into monsters. It had taken all of his courage to put two of his pictures on the Internet. He hadn't expected anyone to actually see them. There was a part of him that just needed to share the pain they represented for him. Someone saw them and tracked him down. The pictures went viral and there were demands for more. It made him raw, angry, thrilled,

and full of a kind of anticipation he hadn't felt since the days before his brother was due home from the Gulf. His brother had never come home and somehow Gary knew that the hopes riding on his new found fame would never arrive.

He dreaded the show and invested every fantasy in it. He'd even gone out and bought a new jacket from the local big and tall store. Still, the idea of his own image plastered over and over again on sterile white walls made him want to vomit. He could feel the sweat under his arms drenching his t-shirt as the plane rumbled toward the Florida Keys. The man next to him shifted his slight and immaculately dressed frame uncomfortably and Gary knew his deodorant wasn't cutting it.

"I'm a photographer," Gary blurted out. He held up his camera as if offering evidence.

The man made a small noise of affirmation, nodded politely and delicately rubbed his nose.

"I was on NPR a couple weeks ago--Morning Edition. Gary Savage." This information was greeted by a blank stare. "With Scott Simon."

"Don't know it," The man said. He picked up his magazine and began intently reading.

It was raining outside, and the plane dropped slightly. Passengers gasped and Gary felt his stomach knot up again. Why had he told Scott Simon about his brother and his mom. It was supposed to be a light piece, an interview about art. In the plane with the rain pounding down, the keening of the wind was less powerful than the reverberations in his memory of his mother's grief they day they heard his brother had been killed in the Gulf. He was ten when they got the news. His mother, a diabetic, took to her bed that

day, and he had spent the next 17 years caring for her. She hated him and he hated himself for not being Peter, for not being the one who had died.

He started taking pictures a week after his mother finally passed away. It took him a week to go into her room. In her closet he found a chest full of old pictures from before the Peter had gone away. The Nikon was tucked into one corner and still had a roll of film in it. He had it developed and kept one picture with him. It was a shot of his brother, 10 years his senior, pushing him on a swing. Peter was clear and beautiful the way Gary remembered. Gary was a blur of color and light. It was this photo that opened Gary up and let out the grief two weeks after the weight of his mother's anger exited this world for a world far more powerful and dangerous.

He dumped the chest of photos onto her bed, smiling photos of the three of them making it on their own. *No Dads need apply. The three musketeers.* And screamed as he threw them, tore them, crushed them in his fist. He smashed his hand into the mirror where a photo of Peter in full uniform was held by yellowed scotch tape. It was then he stopped, pain and blood soothing, soft in the mess of grief, and saw himself for the first time--a million pieces of Gary cut, divided. The picture of Peter hung limply from a mirrored shard. He picked up the Nikon from the bedside table where he had nestled it away from his fury, and took the shot.

When the plane began to roll and spin out of control Gary's stomach started pitching again. He never meant to share that story, not with anyone. He was such a dumbass. They were probably inviting him to Florida just to make fun of him. There was a bright flash of light and blast of thunder that shook the plane. Gary leaned into the aisle and threw up. Others reacted to the plane's movements, which were getting increasingly

frightening, with screams and panic. His first thought when he had finished throwing up was that they were going to crash. He would not have to do the show. He leaned back in his seat and felt nothing but relief. This time it would be him. He took out his camera.

Death. He would photograph his death. In the small airplane window Gary's round reflection and grey eyes looked out at the scene. He moved the camera to the flesh of his belly, looked down at the strange doughy young man framed first by the small round window and then by the digital screen of his camera. *Ugly as shit*, he thought to himself. He brought the camera to his eye and looked through the lens instead--a man with a camera, a purpose. There was a loud screeching sound, a man bellowed in pain, the plane rocked, Gary took the camera from his face and locked his gaze with his reflection as he pressed the shutter. There was a stab of love, sharp, narrow and quick. The plane bucked, twisted. He was thrown against the seat in front of him. His camera swung up and hit him in the jaw, then dropped back to his chest. Everything was quiet for several moments before people started to groan and shift. The first to speak was the flight attendant. "Is everyone okay?" Once again, Gary was alive. He hated himself for it. "You should be the one who is dead," his mother screamed. "You." He closed his eyes and brought his hand to his jaw. It was tender. He pushed his fingertips against the bone and gasped in pain.

"You okay?" the little man asked.

"Yeah." And thus began the unwinding of bodies, seats, luggage, oxygen masks and other sundries. They had landed in a farm field, a favorite subject for many photographers, but Gary was more interested in the shining pieces of metal that reflected

an eye or the bruise on his jaw. He spent several minutes taking shots before a heavysset woman came over and started talking to him.

It took a while for everyone to figure out that the plane might be the least of their worries. The pilot was gone, the Quirk lady's GPS wasn't working, and when they finally found the town, Bluff Oaks, Fla., the wake-up call didn't take long. Either they were on some kind of movie set or some scary shit was going on. When the realization dawned on him that they might actually have travelled back in time, the circumstances were so strange he thought maybe it was one of those *Back to the Future* moments where he'd be able to change everything and make the ugliness that oozed into his life after his brother died go away. Then he heard one of the other passengers say that maybe it was some kind of elaborate reality show. Like *Lost* but with real people.

It was not a strength of Gary's, being a part of a group. He was the first to wander off. His reflection blinked at him from a plate glass window. With his eye on the image in the window, he moved away from the group of befuddled crash victims until the chrome frame of one of the chairs in the coffee shop cut his face in half. He held the camera to his chest and took several shots, changing his angle slightly to maximize the light. A young woman washing the table distracted him. He looked up from his camera to see her waving to him through main street reflections. She beckoned him inside with a big smile. Quickly he looked away and shuffled off in search of another shot. His jaw throbbed. He felt the weight of his dumpy jeans and the wetness of the sweat stains beneath his arms.

"Hey, mister! Come back. Are you okay?" The young woman's voice came closer and he felt fingertips on his arm. "Come on. You look like you could use a cup of coffee." Her voice was sweet and Gary thought that if her hair were woven together he

would be able to see himself in its golden mirror. He didn't dare look into her face for fear that he would vomit again. "C'mon," she said again, "c'mon." She guided him toward the coffee shop.

"I'm a photographer," he said holding up the camera.

"Cool. I'm going to get you a nice cup of coffee and some ice for that cheek of yours. Where'd you get that bruise? Where're you from?"

"Plane crash."

They'd reached the coffee shop. She wasn't listening. "Sit. I'll get you coffee." She sat him in the chair next to the window. As he waited he took a few shots of himself from the other side of the window. He framed his image on the screen and stopped to examine it. Something behind the eyes made him hesitate. He turned on the flash and shot obliterating the daring that had taken over his visage for the briefest of moments.

The sound of argument distracted him and he turned around. The waitress was arguing with an older man, clearly the owner of the shop.

"You can't invite every bum you see on the street in for a cup of coffee!"

"He's not a bum; he's a photographer."

"A photographer? Seriously, c'mon!"

"He needs help. Just a cup of coffee."

Gary got up and left. It was 1961 and he was alone. For the first time since the crash, it hit him that once again any hope of goodness in his life had been snatched from him. The showing was gone, 50 years from now he would be 81. No one would believe he was the man in the photographs. He cradled his camera in his right hand as he walked down Bluff Oaks' main street and pressed the fingertips into the pain of his jaw with the

other to remind himself he was alive. So much for second chances. He was “Toast” just like the GPS said. Just like his mother had said for so many years. “Toast in 1961, Toast in 2011.”

He was thirsty and hungry. He took a Snickers bar from his pocket and unwrapped its gooeyness. A large dome structure came into sight. Huge neon letters flashed *The Bowl Bowl*. Buoyed by the sugar rush, Gary made his way to the door and walked inside. Girls in short skirts moved from lane to lane with large trays of cola and french fries. The sound of pins dropping to hardwood filled the warm air, and men’s voices whooped victory or groaned defeat. Gary made his way toward aisle 13, which stood empty. The floor was polished to a shine, and two large black bowling balls lay on the rack. He stared into one of the balls. His face was a pink smudge punctuated by three dark abysses. He leaned in to take a shot and then another. He stepped back and turned the ball a little. The sounds of the men drifted in the back of his consciousness. Now one eye fell deep into one of the holes, now the other.

“What the hell are you doing to Moose’s balls, you bum!”

“I’m just....Hold on...” Gary turned the ball again and took another photo.

“Get your hands off the goddamn ball. What are you, some kind of nutjob? Did Harry send you? You trying to mess with our best player’s game?”

Gary finally looked up. The man didn’t look too mean, just pissed off. He had a kind of fatherly look to him with graying hair and a tall, lean physique.

“I’m a photographer.” Gary leaned in to move the ball and take another photograph.

“I said get your hands off the goddamn ball.” The man grabbed the camera from Gary’s hands and tore it from his neck.

“Hey, give that back!” Gary’s voice cracked in panic. “Give it back.”

The man held it up out of Gary’s reach. “You want this?” he said. He swung the camera and brought it down on one of the metal bars of the rack. “You’re a goddamn spy. Think you can come in here and give away our secrets like some Commie.”

Gary screamed as the man slammed the camera down again. “That’s a state of the art digital camera. That cost me 1500 bucks, you asshole. Give me the fucking camera.” He was crying. The man hesitated and Gary grabbed the smashed camera and shoved the man out of his way as he dashed for the door.

It was pitch dark before Gary reached the outskirts of town and saw the cola factory. He had nothing left. The camera was crushed. The screen smashed. Sure, maybe the card had been saved, but that didn’t matter. There was no way to develop the photos, no way to view them, no way to work with them. The darkness pushed in around him. There was a hum of insects in the night air. Snot and tears coated his mouth as Maynard Cola’s sign flashed into sight.

Much as he tried to push his mother’s voice from his head it came. “You deserved it,” his mother’s voice taunted, “You were never any good. Your brother, now, he would have known how to take a real photograph, not those creepy things you do.”

Gary ran. Ran from the voice, from the doubt. He ran with the camera in his hand, and when he came to the brick walls of the factory, he took in the sweet smell of caramel and pressed his face to the permanence of the walls. “I am not bad!” he screamed at his

mother's voice. "They liked me! They liked my work." His voice quavered and he let himself fall to the pavement. "They would have loved me."

Gary lived for almost a week on the grounds of the factory and in the woods nearby. He drank colas and stole from the waste bin behind the cafeteria. On Sunday the hush of the factory gave him a final peace. He decided on the back windows facing out over the garbage. It wasn't hard to get inside. He'd watched the workers come in and out and knew which doors stayed locked and which were often left open. Security was not what it was in his day.

Gary gripped the sides of the factory window and swallowed back a reflux of bile as his mother's voice reverberated through his mind, and the image of her large body spread before him on the alley way below. "Just do it already, you worthless piece of shit."

"Go away," Gary screamed. The eyes, big as garbage can lids, narrowed, the lips curled, and she and her flowered robe with as many stains as flowers popped out of existence. A pigeon startled up from one of the second floor windows of the cola factory. Gary tipped back in surprise and his camera slid across his chest.

His body went loose, and he fell. His reflection in a puddle of water came up to greet him and he felt his poor beaten camera flying boldly before him.

He woke face up on dry ground. His camera was centered on his chest, and all around him were photographs. He sat up and picked up one of the pictures. They were his. They were beautiful. In this one a young man framed by an airplane window with his face full of love and compassion. Over there on his left side three black circles adorned

his darkened and curious brow. There were pictures of an eye or the crimson of bruise. He loved them all.

“Look at this one.” Gary looked up into a young man’s face.

“Peter?”

“Look at it.”

It was him in the photo. Gary. The last reflection he saw of himself in the puddle. He was a blur of light and color and there beside him was Peter clear and solid as day.

“Remember?” said Peter.

Gary pulled the old photo of him on the swing from his wallet and showed it to Peter. “I remember.”

“Come. I have something to show you.”

Gary took his brother’s hand, and the factory was gone. He looked up to see The Bowl Bowl, aisle 13. He felt a twinge of fear.

“It’s okay. I’ll take care of you.”

They walked down the aisle and through the pins into a passageway that led beneath the town. Peter opened a glass door and beckoned Gary into a great room lined with mirrors and filled with light. There were others here he had seen before and he was not afraid to greet them. He smiled hello and saw reflected in the mirrors light and happiness.

“Ready,” said his brother.

Gary took off his camera and set it on a bench.

“Ready,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

“No, Margaret, no calls this morning.”

“But sir,” the secretary said, “it’s Principal Fredericks, and he says it’s--.”

Urgent, yes. “I’ll take it.” At least it wasn’t his wife.

Fredericks. Maynard had given him an IOU, good for any favor big or small, to cover his poker debt two Thursdays back. It seemed the man had decided to call that favor in. Maynard snatched up the phone, leaning forward onto his mahogany desk with the other elbow.

“Brian, how are you?” came Principal Fredericks’ booming voice. “Caught you at a bad time?”

“No, no.” *Let’s get this over with, whatever it is.* “What can I do for you?”

“I hate to put this to you on such short notice--”

No, you don’t.

“--But our eighth grade class’ guest speaker canceled at the last moment. I thought the students might enjoy hearing from a pillar of the community such as yourself, in his stead.” A pause, pregnant for the first time and just as nervous, filled the phone’s silence.

Dr. Brian Maynard, genius chemist and holder of the Maynard Cola Secret Formula, let his shoulders slump in relief. This was nothing, a mere trifle, a blip on his radar. Fredericks could have asked for so much more, and Maynard’s sense of honor would have bound him to agree. Luckily for Maynard, Fredericks wasn’t much of a cola drinker.

“Yes,” he said quickly, forestalling any last-second additions to the request. “Yes, I’d be happy to speak to your class. When is the talk scheduled?”

A quick pause; Maynard envisioned Fredericks glancing up at a round wall clock with red cartoon hands that indicated the time. “Can you be here in twelve minutes?”

Not wanting to consider the loss of his 1953 Buick Roadmaster Skylark Convertible Coupe, Maynard demanded his secretary’s Studebaker and peeled out toward George M. Dallas Memorial Middle School. The time out of the office gave him a chance to mull over his personal life, which hadn’t had much attention lately. His wife would say it had received no attention whatsoever. He made no apologies for his choices, though, as they had made both of them very wealthy. And had given Maynard more power over this town than any one man below God himself should possess.

Once at the school, Maynard adjusted his tie and jacket cuffs as he walked down the scuffed linoleum floor. Running a few last-minute topic concepts through his head, he reached for the smudged door knob and pushed it open, entering the classroom just as the short, plump teacher, Mrs. Gilman, was telling the students that there had been a sudden change in the speaker for the day.

The smells hit Maynard the strongest, taking him back in time a couple of decades. Shaved pencil flakes, chalk, unwashed teenager, dusty berber carpet, and that funny smell that only seemed to occur in older buildings used for teaching purposes: Sunday Schools, colleges, worn high schools. Surely a good third of the odor was composed of used eraser fragments.

The students turned to follow Maynard with their eyes as he strode up the side of the classroom toward Mrs. Gilman. The teacher stood next to a table displaying some marshmallow-and-toothpick molecules. Sucrose, if he wasn't mistaken. Some students, shirts neat and collars even, showed admiration, even awe, at his presence in their school. Others, slouching, doodling, were less impressed. It didn't matter. They all bought his cola. They were his. It was impossible to be less than completely confident, knowing that.

"Thank you for coming, Dr. Maynard, especially on such short notice. Class, your full attention, please." Mrs. Gilman stepped to the back of the class and slipped into her office, leaving the door ajar.

Maynard unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat on the corner of the table, carefully shifting the marshmallow-molecules aside. He began to speak on the topic of qualities needed to run a successful corporation like Maynard Cola, but even though he kept eye contact with most of the students, he could tell it was merely politeness on their part.

Until something flared in his mind, unexpected, uninvited:: recognition. Startled, enraged recognition. Struggling to keep his face neutral and his mouth completing coherent sentences, Maynard reached out, searching the students. To his utter shock, he couldn't tell which student was directing such rage at him.

For the first time in nearly thirty years, Brian Maynard felt the pure, invigorating chill of fear. His voice stuttered to a stop. Struggling to cover his gaffe, he cleared his throat.

"This is boring. We wanted to hear Mr. Winter tell us about treasure hunting," a boy complained, trying to be anonymous in the back row.

“Ooh, yes,” squealed a girl, her face hidden behind the bushy ponytail of the girl in front of her. “Treasure is ever so much more exciting than running a cola company.”

Maynard stared hard at them; had one of them directed the burst of rage at him? Oh, the girl was Stephanie Potter, daughter of a local dentist. He could see her face now. There was no way her father would have allowed her enough cola to be the sender of such anger, not at her tender age. And the boy, Hank Gordon, had a father who worked in Maynard’s bottling plant. A father who understood company loyalty.

What did it mean that he couldn’t tell who had contacted him? He hadn’t altered the formula, not in twenty years. None of these children were anywhere near that old. What did it mean?

“Hey,” added a freckled boy on the right side of the room, “do you know anything about the secret tunnels, Dr. Maynard?”

“The...what?” A spike of pure alarm shot through him. His mysterious observer picked up on it, too, filling his mind with a pure red malevolence, the likes of which Maynard had never dared to consider possible. Its effect on his nervous system nearly dropped him to his knees in front of the class. Adding insult to injury, the unseen detractor shot a burst of smug amusement into his mind. Maynard was heavily outclassed, and he knew it. The worm of fear in his belly twisted more tightly.

“You know,” Freckles continued, “those not-really-secret tunnels that everyone says are somewhere under the Bowl Bowl. They’ve been down there forever. People go in, they don’t come out, monsters live in there, you know. The cool stories. Do you know if any of them are true?”

Most of the students were leaning forward now. Maynard could feel the intent of their minds, though even combined, the power was a mere fraction of the attack he'd just experienced.

“Well, yes, I know a...a bit about them. I've, er, actually been down there a handful of times.”

“Get outta town,” a blond boy said, leaning back in his chair and smirking. “Where's the entrance, then?”

“Well, it's a secret entrance. I found it myself, when I was about your age,” Maynard said.

“What's inside it, then?” a pert strawberry blonde asked. “Is there really treasure, like Mr. Winter keeps looking for?”

Curiosity. His observer wanted to know how he thought of his spoils, that which he had taken, unaware that there was anyone from whom to request permission. “It all depends on what you're looking for. One man's moldering Gilded Age haven is another man's treasure, after all.”

“So there's really mirrors and statues and carpet down there?” Freckles asked.

“Yes. It's quite striking, in an unearthly way. Especially the gardens.”

“Gardens of what? Mushrooms?” The class giggled.

“Work up the courage to search for your own entrance, and who knows what you'll discover down there?”

Murderer. Trespasser.

Maynard's mouth opened of its own accord, but he stopped himself before words began gushing out, word which, once spoken, would ruin his life, both financially and socially. Probably legally as well.

The rage was back. *Murderer! Thief!*

But he couldn't. He dared not! It had been his secret for over two decades. How did the mysterious student, whom he couldn't locate even with his acute sense, even know that the secret existed, let alone have an inkling what it was about?

The students were staring at him. "I want you to imagine a place," he found himself saying. "A place both grand and glorious, both alone and abandoned. A place whose time has come and gone, over and over again throughout history. Each time it was used, it was beloved. It was revealed in. And then, something happened to take it all away. It is a place that glitters in the darkness. It is a soul that sings in the depths. It is a reminder that all things must die, and that life must be grasped tightly, must be protected from the hands of death, must be revealed in. For mortals must succumb to mortality, every time. Life is what you will it to be, and those who will the hardest live the hardest."

Where had that come from? He had stood up from the desk. His hands were outstretched in beseeching ardor. The class stared at him in awe.

That is my life you speak of, came a defensive presence in his head. Not in so many words, but in the form of a concept shared between minds. Maynard was used to the weaker version of such a feeling, when he'd probe one of the executives during board meetings, and sense the idea the man was about to mention, then say it first. But this was far stronger, far purer.

I know of your secret ingredient. How did you get it? The thought flashed into his mind like lightning.

I can't tell you.

I already know what it is. Admit your thievery and murder, or face dire consequences, the likes of which your planet has never seen!

If I tell you, I will lose all I have!

A wave of white-hot fire swept across the plane of his mind's eye, scorching town after town from existence, leaving Florida a smoking wasteland. His wife, his employees, these students before him, all died in horror. And yet the destruction did not slow. Georgia, the entire South, the Eastern Seaboard, the whole continent, all vanished in white-hot flames. Soon, the world itself was burning.

All you have will indeed be lost. I will make sure of it. Confessing the truth to me, as your accuser, is your only hope of salvation. Have you murdered my children?

"I...found a cavern," Maynard said, his throat dry, his tongue sticky. "Below the fancy rooms. A walled-off area from an earlier age. There was a...being...there, in some sort of gooey webbing. I thought it was dead, at first, but then I saw these shapes beneath it. They seemed to have different ages; some were old and dusty, and others new and shiny. They looked like metallic cloisonné eggs."

The class listened, spellbound. The mystery presence in his mind waited, anger ebbing and crashing against the meager levees in Maynard's mind.

"I took one. Opened it, with difficulty. It had a strange white substance inside, and it seemed to hum on a frequency I couldn't quite hear."

White?

You know I can't lie to you.

“Wow, Dr. Maynard, did that really happen?” breathed one of the girls.

“Not likely,” said a round boy with horn-rimmed glasses. He adjusted them on his nose with a gesture full of self-importance. “If there were eggs like that lying around, don't you think someone would have found them by now? Just another story to add to the mystery of the tunnels, right, Dr. Maynard?”

“Sure,” said the blond boy with the slouch, “unless that egg goo is part of his secret cola recipe!”

All of the girls squealed in mock disgust as the boy mimed drinking from an egg the size of his head and made sloppy slurping noises. The boys laughed. Mrs. Gilman, hearing the noise and likely assuming that Dr. Maynard had finished speaking, came back out of her office and thanked him again for stepping in, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he'd said little on his own topic and too much on another.

Maynard accepted the teacher's thanks, then slipped out of the classroom and sat in a chair next to the drinking fountain across the hallway. His head was ringing as if he'd just been standing in front of an enormous speaker system, and the sound had suddenly cut out.

The mental voice found him there, though it was quieter now. *You are still a thief.*

...*Yes.* He thought it safer to admit to that one up front. *But who...what...are you? I don't understand--how is your ability so powerful?*

Images and sensations flashed through his mind, most exotic and alien. Strange faces, odd topography, sorrow for a lost creator, now alone and trapped, her body on autopilot. He finally recognized the image of the pile of eggs he'd found on the floor in

the hidden cavern so long ago. One of them cracked open on its own. Maynard realized he was viewing the image as a memory held by his conversation partner.

But the eggs are unfertilized! he protested. There's nothing of form or function within the white substance! I tested them for years!

Every thousandth egg performs spontaneous mutation into male gender, auto-fertilized. A failsafe for the species. The albumen in both fertilized and unfertilized eggs contains the ingredient you extract. I needed to be sure you were not murdering my children. We are all that remain of our line, and our homeworld politics are...complicated.

He thought he'd gotten his head wrapped around what he'd been doing all these years, but the alien presence inside his head shook him up as badly as when he first realized that he was dealing with actual eggs, and not a fruit or a mineral or anything else.

Children? Your children?

Post-production fertilization, combined with delayed zygote inception. They will hatch when it is safe. And soon, that time will come.

Maynard leaned forward, slamming his forehead against his palms in devastation. Was this his fault? Had he caused it? Had he made it worse? What would this new revelation mean for Bluff Oaks, its citizens? Was there more than just a psychic connection between the humans who had consumed his cola and these...Others?

Had he set in motion the deaths of everyone he knew and loved?

The classroom doors opened with the ringing of the bell, letting students out for lunch. Maynard stood up, watching the students from Mrs. Gilman's class pass by.

Though many nodded and thanked him for coming to speak to them, one boy gave him a

slit-eyed look that spoke of several types of pain, should Maynard interfere with his plans or take any more eggs. It looked like the Maynard Cola empire had just hit peak cola.

Another boy from down the hall called out to him eagerly, asking to sit with him for lunch. Maynard strained over the thunder of shoes and slamming lockers and murmuring voices to catch the strange boy's name, and heard his friend greeting him.

“Hi, Two. How was the guest speaker?”

Chapter Thirteen

Jeremiah Cade watched the other kids walk down the hallway in groups of four, five and six. All of them laughing as if they were part of some inside joke he would never be privy to. They walked past him as if he weren't there. He was used to feeling invisible.

He followed a group of his fellow eighth graders to English class and slid into the seat in the back of the classroom. Jenny Sullivan sat in front of him, as she usually did in English, and her long blonde hair brushed against his desk as she leaned back and stretched her arms. Her striped mini dress lazily crept up her legs, exposing the soft peach fuzz of her upper thigh. He tried not to look, but it was impossible to turn away. He could feel himself getting aroused.

"Gross," said Abby Gray, the short and stocky girl with wiry black hair that sat to his left in both English and math, much to his chagrin. "You're such a pervert."

"What?" Jeremiah mumbled under his breath as he sank lower in his seat, averting his eyes to all the faces that turned to look at him.

"You were looking at her legs," Abby pursued.

"No, I wasn't," he mumbled even more and then bent over and dug through his backpack, pretending to look for something.

Jenny turned around and watched him pull out his textbook and flip through some pages. She flashed him a coy smile and then went back to chewing her gum.

Jeremiah smiled back and for the first time in a while, he felt like someone was looking at him instead of through him.

The moment was short lived, however, the second Derek Jackson walked in the room and everyone's attention automatically shifted to the tall, enigmatic thirteen year old who had won the heart of every young girl in George M. Dallas Memorial Middle School. He wore a fitted white tee and tight jeans and he went through the motions of brushing his hair but didn't actually do so.

"Hey Jenny," he said with a nod of the head as he leaned against the window and then looked out into the distance.

"Hi Blaze!" Jenny squealed while chomping on her gum.

Derek had earned the nickname Blaze in sixth grade for accidentally setting a science experiment on fire, causing the school to be promptly evacuated for almost one whole hour. No one ever questioned how or why any open flames would be involved in an Earth orbit simulation. The details seemed irrelevant. All that mattered was that Derek, or Blaze, was a legend and Jeremiah hated him for that. The fact that Jenny was enamored with him didn't help his case either.

"You going to the woods after school today?" Blaze asked her while still giving his attention to something far away outside the window.

"Oh yeah. Yeah. I wouldn't miss it!" Jenny giggled.

"Good. Cause it's going to be righteous. Me, Thumper and Woody are going to be playing our guitars and bongos and stuff, and Windy and Pegleg are bringing some food."

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. Mr. Gardner, their English teacher, entered the classroom with a cup of hot coffee and a shaky hand.

"Blaze, could you please take a seat?"

“Sure, Teach.” Blaze swaggered over to his desk and as he sat down Jenny sighed.

Jeremiah watched her watch him with envy. Although he was a full six inches shorter than Blaze and his loose curly sandy hair hung uncooperatively around his cherub face, he felt he was still worthy of wistful glances such as the ones she was giving away.

He straightened his back and leaned to peer over her shoulder to see what she was writing down in her notebook. In unrestricted curves, she had doodled the name ‘Blaze’ topped with little flames that burnt off into hearts.

Then it dawned on him: a nickname. He needed a cool, self-identifying nickname that people would hear and wonder about the story behind it. He didn’t want anything as desperate as ‘Blaze.’ Or ‘Woody.’ And God knows if he were ever called ‘Thumper’ he would just quit life.

This was serious. Now that the thought was in his head, he wouldn’t be able to do anything else until he was satisfied with his new identity.

As his teacher unenthusiastically demonstrated participle phrases to the classroom, Jeremiah raced through names that might suit him: Ace, Boss, Big J, Deuce. A little too over the top perhaps. He was going to need help on this one. And he knew just who to ask.

Jeremiah took his usual route home, passing Mr. Carpenter’s coffee shop where all the retired men in town gathered to talk about politics, nagging wives and crippling ailments. He waved at Mr. Carpenter through the window, and the old man smiled and waved back.

“Jeremiah!” he heard the men shout from their vinyl booths.

The name was now unbearable to him. How had he lived this many years with such a long, uninteresting name? ‘Jeremiah.’ It had four syllables and ended in weakness. No hard consonant. No foreign vowel sound that made him seem romantic. Just uhhhh. No one had even bothered to shorten it to Jeremy. Or Jerry for that matter.

But he was about to take care of this problem. As he rounded the corner to Autumn Avenue he saw his house in the distance, and his neighbor, Vincent — otherwise known as ‘Two’ — bent over the sidewalk smashing something with a rock.

As Jeremiah approached, he looked on in disgust at what Two was doing: He had found some bird eggs in a nest and had proceeded to crack each one open with a broken red brick. Two hadn’t noticed Jeremiah standing behind him and when he spoke his name, he jumped and let the brick drop to the ground.

“Fucking A,” Two spat. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry. I was just watching you. What were you doing?”

Two laughed and pointed to the broken egg shells splattered across the asphalt. “Oh that? I was making an omelette. You want one?”

“No thanks.”

“Whatchu doing this weekend?” Two asked as he stepped on the shells grinding them into the ground.

“Nothing really.”

Two stuck his finger in his ear and dug down deep. “Your sister having any of her friends over?”

“I don’t know.”

Two pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped them against the palm of his hand. He extended them out to Jeremiah who shook his head. Two shrugged, popped one in his mouth, took out a Zippo, lit the end, inhaled and let out a huge cloud of smoke.

“You don’t want one?”

“Nah. My Mom doesn’t want me to smoke.”

Two laughed. “Kid, you need to be your own man.”

“Funny you should say that,” Jeremiah said, looking down at his feet. “I was hoping you could help me out with something.”

“What’s that?”

“Well...you see...”

“Spit it out kid.”

Two was only a year and a half older than Jeremiah but he had always treated him like he were a much younger brother, with all the liberties that accompanied the role: unexplained beatings, constant teasing, and educating him on all the mysteries of life. Had it not been for his neighbor, Jeremiah would never had known girls had periods once a month, or that there were parts of a girl’s body you could touch that would make them love you forever.

Most people, especially parents, weren’t crazy about Two. Jeremiah’s mother accepted the fact that they would spend time outside on the street together in front of their houses, but he was never invited inside for dinner and Jeremiah wasn’t allowed to go next door, either. And Two’s older brother, Fist, was even worse. He was as badass as they came. A true Greaser in every sense of the word. And scary to look at too. If you were unlucky enough to get caught in his path, you would never make that mistake again. It

was just a look he gave. A look that told you he would hurt you in every way possible if given the chance, just because.

“I want a nickname,” Jeremiah blurted out.

“What?”

“I want a nickname.”

“Ok, I got one. Fuckface.”

“Cut it out Two. I’m serious. I need a nickname.”

Two laughed. “What do you *need* a nickname for? No one *needs* a nickname.”

“Ok, I don’t *need* one. I want one. I’m in eighth grade you know? Next year I’ll be in high school and I want to go into it with a nickname. Not Jeremiah.”

“Listen kid, you don’t just go and give yourself a nickname. They happen to you. You gotta earn it. Otherwise it’ll never catch on.”

“How do I do that?”

“I dunno. I guess you gotta go do something every day at school so people notice. Like why don’t you trip someone every day in the cafeteria and then people’ll start calling you Trip.”

“That’s retarded.”

“What the fuck did you say?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I just don’t really want to be called Trip that’s all. But I see what you’re saying.”

Two’s mother opened the window from inside her house and waved at the boys,
“Hello Jeremiah. How are you dear?”

“Good Mrs. Esposito.”

“Two, what’s wrong. You don’t come in to say hello to your mother when you get home from school?”

“Hello Mom.”

Even their mother called her own children by their nicknames. Jeremiah never fully understood that. He imagined himself having a son someday that he would eventually call Fist, or something like that. *‘I love you Fist, you want to go play some baseball?’* Nah, he just didn’t see that happening. He wondered if a mother could truly love a son she called ‘Two,’ or ‘Fist.’ And maybe that’s why there were so messed up. He didn’t know.

“You need to come inside and clean your room, Two. I’ve been telling you all week long,” Mrs. Esposito yelled from her window.

“C’mon ma. I can’t right now.”

“Why not?”

“I’m helping Jeremiah out with a problem he’s having. You don’t want me to leave a friend in need do you?”

Mrs. Esposito waved her hand at her son and then went back to whatever work she was doing in there.

“Alright kid. I’ve got an idea. If you want a nickname quick, there is a way we can do that.”

Jeremiah brightened, “Really?”

“Yeah, but you’ve got to be a man and do what I say. You can’t be worried about what your mamma’s gonna think. Agreed?”

Jeremiah thought of Jenny's short dress. Her long silky hair. He pictured her writing his imminent nickname in broad strokes all over her notebook.

"Ok. I'm in."

"Follow me."

Jeremiah followed Two back into town. They stopped in front of Jeanette's Market and sat on a bench. It wasn't a big town. But it wasn't small either. Small enough where people knew each other's business but big enough to not know everyone's names behind the stories.

"What are we doing here?" Jeremiah asked.

"Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Fist is in the woods at the clearing with his friends today. They're gonna drag. And we're gonna join em."

"Are you kidding me? We can't drive."

"What did I say to you?"

Jeremiah didn't respond. He knew at this point if he stayed he was headed down a road of trouble that was sure to get him in more trouble than he had ever been in. But if he left? If he left, he would be telling himself he would be a little boy forever and no one would ever *see* him.

At that moment, a pink 1955 Lincoln Capri convertible pulled up in front of the market, and a woman in her 60s, dressed in in appropriately clingy leopard pants and a matching tank, got out of the car and scurried into the store, leaving her keys in the car unattended.

“That’s the one,” Two said.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re takin’ it.”

“What do you mean, we’re tak—” Jeremiah stopped himself. He knew what Two meant. There was no sense in asking. No sense in complaining. This was it. Time to be his own man, right? Still, he couldn’t help himself.

“It’s pink!” he complained, thinking maybe it would somehow put a stop to the whole idea.

Two glared at Jeremiah. Jeremiah acquiesced.

They ran to the convertible stopping at the doors before jumping in. They surveyed the interior and quickly saw that the inside of the Lincoln Capri matched the old lady’s attire: Everything was leopard down to the furry mats that lined the seats and the fluffy pink-spotted steering wheel cover.

Jeremiah looked up at Two who seemed to be second-guessing his decision.

Without any more hesitation, Two ran to the passenger side and gave Jeremiah a shove toward the front of the car.

“You drive it.”

He said it without any room for disagreement. This was Jeremiah’s now-or-never moment. He recognized it as it was happening and decided to embrace it.

Jeremiah ran to the driver’s side, opened the door and jumped in behind the wheel. Two on the other hand bypassed the door altogether and leaped over it into his seat.

Jeremiah reached for the pedals down on the floor but his legs weren't quite long enough, so it took him a few seconds to figure out how to adjust the seat forward.

"Hurry up. Hurry up," Two said kind of frantically making Jeremiah realize this was the first time he had ever seen his friend show any signs of nervousness or weakness.

The seat was adjusted and Jeremiah realized he had no idea what to do.

"Turn it on first Fuckface."

Jeremiah reached for the keys and brought the monstrous car to a loud roar.

"Go. Go!" Two yelled.

Jeremiah shifted it in reverse and peeled out of the parking lot. He was rather impressed with his driving skills for never having been behind a steering wheel before. He wasn't scared. In fact, he threw his head back and laughed as he pulled onto the street and watched the market disappear quickly behind him.

"Yeah!" Two yelled. "Let's do this!"

The drive to the clearing in the woods didn't take long. Jeremiah maneuvered the car like a pro remembering to signal at every turn and follow every posted speed limit.

The clearing was filled with boisterous teenagers — mostly Greasers and the type of girls that hang around with them, some pretty and out of place, some skags. The scene was everything Jeremiah would imagine a drag setting would look like: beat up and broken down cars alongside vehicles that had seen more love than these boys' mothers.

There was a long dirt strip that had seen much wear — old and fresh tire tracks embedded in the dusty path, overgrown weeds on each side. Beer cans littered the

ground along the border of the forest. And a few burnt charcoal mounds indicated people came out at night to drink by fire. No doubt Fist was at every one of them.

Jeremiah looked into the crowd of people and was not surprised to see Fist among them staring back. That look of wanting to cause pain sent small spasms of fear through his body. And for a moment he wanted to jump back into the car and drive away until he saw Jenny a few feet away from Fist. She was also looking their way, seemingly confused.

Jeremiah waved to her, involuntarily. She waved back, awkwardly.

Fist walked briskly toward them and Two, showing no signs of weakness anymore, met his brother halfway.

“What the fuck are you doing here shitheel?” Fist asked while slapping his younger brother on the back of the head.

“We’re gonna race.”

Fist didn’t respond. He face was stoic. Then he burst out into uncontrollable laughter. He turned to his friends and waved them over.

“Hey guys, my brother and his little friend here are gonna race. In *this!*”

Fist was doubled over in laughter and Jeremiah found it difficult not to join him. Seeing Fist like this seemed so out of place and unnatural it made Jeremiah chuckle outloud. That was his first mistake.

“What the fuck are you laughing at moron?” Fist was not laughing anymore.

“N...n...n...nothing.”

“That’s right assface.”

Fist stared at him for a few seconds making it clear that he was the only one allowed to laugh in this place if he so chose. Then he turned and walked to the car.

Everyone followed.

Fist walked around the Lincoln Capri with an unreadable expression on his face, his brother Two hanging on his every movement.

“Well, it’s pretty enough. Not sure how it will drive.”

Without thinking Jeremiah interrupted, “It will drive.”

Fist looked at him and then nodded.

“Who’s gonna drive it?”

“I am,” Jeremiah said while watching Jenny out of the corner of his eyes.

“I’m surprised kid. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Yeah, well...I do.” Jeremiah straightened up and brushed some of the curls out of his eyes.

“I’m assuming this ain’t your car.” Fist said.

“Nope. It’s not.”

“So when you lose, how are you gonna pay up?”

Jeremiah wasn’t sure. He hadn’t thought this through that far.

“If he loses, I’ll give you my Playboy collection,” Two offered apprehensively.

Fist turned to his younger brother and grinned.

“Even the one with Nancy Nielsen?”

Two lowered his head and let out a painful, “Yes. Even the Nancy Nielsen one.”

“Ok everyone. You heard what the boys had to say. They wanna race. So let’s race!”

Some people in the crowd clapped, some yelled. Some did both. But the only one Jeremiah was concerned with smiled at him and winked. She then mouthed, “Good luck.”

No matter what happened in the next few minutes, no matter if he made it to the glorious end first or died in flames when he crashed into the trees, this was and always would be the best moment of his life. Every mental image he would have of Jenny from this point on would always end with a slow motion “Good luck” falling off her shiny lips and ending with a grin.

He tried to copy Two from earlier by jumping over the side of the door instead of opening it, but his legs weren’t quite long enough and instead of one swift motion, he had to awkwardly straddle the door and wiggle his way behind the wheel. Not exactly the beginning he was hoping for. But it didn’t matter because when he crossed the finish line, everything that happened before would be meaningless. He would be a winner and his friend would choose his nickname. And Jenny would love him.

They lined their cars up next to each other: the pink furry Lincoln Capri beside a slightly rusted 1949 black Hudson Commodore Eight. Jeremiah could see the crowd yelling things, even Jenny, but he could not hear anything over the deafening roar of the two engines competing against each other.

Fist looked at Jeremiah. Jeremiah looked at Fist. His foot was on the gas pedal, his hand on the shifter. He didn’t know what he was doing and he didn’t care. He looked at the half mile stretch that lay before them. It didn’t seem too complicated. Just push on the gas and go as fast as you can. If Fist could do it, he could do it.

A young teenage girl in tight black pants and a tighter red shirt stood in front of the cars with her hands up in the air, making the two wait for her signal. Both of them watched in eager anticipation.

She threw her hands down and Jeremiah slammed his foot on the gas and he instantaneously shot out in front of Fist, yards ahead. He looked in his rearview mirror at the Commodore slightly behind him and laughed jubilantly. He was doing it. He was leaving his boyhood at the starting line and would become a man at the finish.

A quarter of a mile had gone by in seconds. He was almost there. He managed to maintain his lead. The wind blew his curls around making them whip against the skin of his face. His hands felt good against the soft fur of the steering wheel cover. This stupid pink car might just be the best thing that ever happened to him. He would be forever grateful to the grandmother in leopard. And he would be sure to somehow thank her without giving anything away.

The finish line was quickly approaching. moments before he reached it, his tire rolled over something, a rock perhaps, or a thick old hardened-mud tire print. Whatever it was, it made the steering wheel turn drastically to the right and it slipped out of his hands. Panic set in.

The car spun dangerously out of control and his small adolescent body flung across the bench seat to the other side. The last thing he remembered was being flung out of the pink convertible and landing with a loud thud on the ground below. Then everything went black.

Jeremiah didn't know how long he had been out. Or if he had even made it to the end. Or what had happened that lead him to the mess he was now on the ground. But when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Jenny's worried face, backlit against the afternoon sun. Despite the pain surging through the left side of his body, pain he had never felt in all of his 13 years, he smiled and then closed his eyes again.

Minutes later the pain woke him up again. Everyone had crowded around him and Two was wrapping a shirt around his leg to stop the bleeding. Jeremiah looked down and could see his left leg had broken. Even Fist was doing his best to help him out.

"Did I win?" Jeremiah groaned through clenched teeth.

Fist smiled. "Yeah kid. You did."

Jeremiah laughed. "I knew it."

"Fist I've got to get this car back. You got him?"

Fist nodded and Two ran to the convertible and drove away. Fist and a few others helped pick Jeremiah up and carried him to the Commodore, Jenny right behind.

"You did good kid. Pretty damn good for your first time. I think you've got potential," Fist said, not in the slightest bit scary to Jeremiah at all anymore.

"Thanks."

As they tried to carefully place him into the backseat of the car, his leg brushed against the back seat and he screamed in pain.

“Dammit Joey, be careful with Lincoln,” Fist yelled at his friend.

The shut the door behind him and he lay across the seat, bleeding and in agony.

Fist got into the driver’s seat and drove back toward town. Jeremiah watched the crowd watching him pull away. Watching *him* pull away.

Minutes later, as they drove quietly toward the hospital, it dawned on him:

‘Lincoln.’ That was him. ‘Lincoln.’

Chapter Fourteen

“Fuck you!”

The shrill voice of Brad Thompson pierced through the morning air. Standing all of 5’1” and 97 pounds dripping wet, he barely left a shadow on the ground. He had been tiny his entire life, starting when he was born 9 weeks early and all the nurses referred to him as the doll on the 3rd floor.

“I’m not asking, you shitbird!”

While Brad may have been small in stature, he loomed large everywhere he else he could. He may not have had the biggest mouth in town but it was certainly the loudest. It wasn’t a weekend night unless he had picked a fight with somebody, and the folks who took him up on his offer typically wound up with either a switchblade or a boot heel staring them in the face.

“Fuck you. Give me my package or I will draw an X on each one of your faces!”

Brad flicked his switchblade at the two greasers before him who held a small box the size of a set of salt and pepper shakers. The two older teenagers each turned white and took a step back.

“Y-You’re full of shit!” The taller one stammered. “No way you could cut both of us. The other one would get to you.”

“Maybe you’re right, Fist,” Brad said with an aura of confidence. “But do you want to be the first one I get to?”

Fist threw the package on the ground. “Fine. Just have it. It’s probably not even that good anyway.” The two teenagers walked back to their car and sped off.

Brad folded his switchblade back up and picked the package up off the ground. He tore off the brown paper and found a glass bottle that felt almost empty. He barely noticed the strange lettering on the bottle, or that it was meant for someone named Tony Calhoun.

He didn't care about any of these things because he hated his job, hated everyone in town and hated everyone in his goddamn life. He popped open the bottle and a small pill fell into his hand. The pill lasted about two seconds there before falling into Brad's throat. He swallowed hard and smiled.

He dropped the bottle and walked back to his Buick Roadmaster and was surprised how normal he felt. That one pill had cost him \$84, and while half of that was from money he had taken from the cash register at work, he had worked hard for the other half. The entire ride home he became more and more angry and by the time he pulled into the driveway he was pounding on the steering wheel. "Buyer beware! Fuck me! Who do I complain to about getting illegal drugs that don't even work? Fuck me!" he screamed at himself.

Getting out of the car, he stomped to his front door. As he made his way with each step, he noticed his pants were falling down around him. Hiking them up with hands, he became even more annoyed. Great, he thought to himself. Now I am losing weight as well as money.

He didn't feel *anything* different until he sat down after he flicked the radio on. It was only then that a sense of drowsiness overtook him and he lay down. He dreamt of floating before waking up and realizing 4 hours had passed...and he still felt that floating sensation. He leaned forward and realized his feet weren't touching the floor. Leaping

from his seated position, he let out a fearful yelp. It wasn't until he was standing did he realize what had happened.

Brad Thompson had shrunk while he slept.

Looking around furiously, he focused on trying to measure himself up with various appliances in the house. At least two feet shorter than he was, walking was futile until he took off his pants which had draped over his feet like curtains hanging well past a window.

Thinking as quickly as he could, he tore into his room and threw on a pair of shorts and made a new hole in his belt to cinch them around his waist. As he ran around his house, he knew he had to see his friend Darren. If anyone could help him or if anyone *would*, it would be him.

Darren and Brad had been friends since 6th grade, when a couple of bullies threw rocks at Darren and then chased him home on their bikes. Brad stuck a stick into one of the bully's spokes and when the two other kids saw their friend flip off the handlebars and get a faceful of gravel, they never bothered Darren again. Years later, Darren asked Brad why he helped him when they had never talked in school, and Brad told him he was just bored and wanted to mix things up a bit.

Now things were really mixed up for Brad and he raced to grab his keys and made his way out the door. At this point, he figured he was the size of a typical 3rd grader and he realized those limitations suddenly when he jumped into his Roadmaster.

His feet didn't touch the pedals.

“Why?” Brad screamed. “Why? Why do I have to try to be so big all the fucking time? Why do I have to buy the biggest car I can find and do so much stupid shit!” He pounded the steering wheel and wept.

He sat like that for a good 15 minutes, and when he got out of the car he felt even smaller than he had when he got in. “You’ve got to be kidding me? Am I still shrinking or is it just my imagination?” he said to no one in particular.

No one was outside watching all this but if someone was they would have had quite a chuckle seeing what appeared to be a very uncoordinated 3rd grader run back into the house wearing odd pants and a t-shirt 3 sizes too big.

Once inside the house, Brad called for a cab, but in doing so realized his voice was much higher than it was and he wondered if the dispatcher at the taxi stand assumed he was a child. He then found an old pair of sunglasses and wished he had a wig but then laughed to himself. *Why would I need to have an fancy disguise?* he thought. *No one in town would believe I could get any shorter.* This made him laugh until he looked down at his tiny feet and understood that he was in fact getting shorter and time was of the essence.

The cab driver’s honk outside was a pleasant noise to Brad, and he instructed the cab driver to get to Java Jungle, the coffee shop where Darren owned as soon as possible. “OK, kid,” the cab driver said as he pumped his foot on the gas. *You say kid now,* Brad thought, *but by the end of the ride, I could be the size of an infant.*

This was not the case, but nevertheless Brad was slightly smaller when he got out of the Sunshine Taxi Cab than he was when he got in. When he walked into the Java Jungle, Darren looked at him and started to giggle. This lasted for roughly half a second

before a look of terror enraptured him. To see a grown man's face on the body of a small child is one thing, but that face being someone he had known for years—that shook Darren Lowe to the core.

“Darren!” Brad cried out in his new high pitched voice. “What’s happening to me?” Darren could see that Brad was trembling, which, knowing Brad’s cocky demeanor, would be a sight in itself.

“I-I don’t understand?” was all Darren could muster as he tried to process all of this. “Are you hurt?”

“I feel fine. But it’s not stopping. I can feel it. I keep getting smaller. I need help and quick!” Darren rubbed his fingers through his hair and tried to think of a solution to help his oldest friend.

“How did this happen? Is this how you woke up this morning?”

“I took a pill. I got it from these stupid kids who said they found it on that plane. I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t know what to do. I can’t go to the hospital. I’ve never even heard of something like this. I’m really scared.”

They both stared at each other for what felt like a very long time before Darren asked “Do you still have what the pill came in? Maybe that can give us some idea of what this is? Are there any more pills?”

“No.” Brad continued. “This was the only pill in the bottle. I think the bottle is still at the Dallas Middle School baseball diamond. That’s where I left it. I mean, oh shit! I hope it’s still there!” Darren could see Brad start to panic.

“Then let’s get going. I’ll close the shop up for a bit. I’ve been having terrible headaches all day anyway. Be good for me to go.” Darren locked the door and they both got into his car.

Once they got to the baseball field, Brad jumped out of the car looking for the bottle.

“It’s glass! It didn’t break when I dropped. I would have heard that. Christ! Where is it?” By now Brad couldn’t be more than two feet tall, and his little feet were tripping over the bottom of the shorts that didn’t cover his knees when he last wore them on Tuesday. They each combed the field for a good ten minutes before Brad screamed out “I found it! I found the sonofabitch!”

Darren raced over and looked at the bottle. What Brad had said was true in that it was definitely for a man named Tony Calhoun, but the rest of the bottle appeared to be written in some other language. “Do you know anyone who might know who this Tony guy is? Maybe he’s one of the people from the plane? I have lived in this town a long time and I don’t-” Darren stopped short when he saw Brad’s eyes wet with tears.

Looking lost and desperate Brad cried out “What about the lettering? You can’t make it out? You have no idea where it came from? None? Oh...what am I going to do?” Darren knelt down and hugged his friend.

“It’s OK. It’s OK.” Darren tried to console him hugging him close when an idea popped into his head. “I’ve got it! I think I know a way to find Tony Calhoun!” Darren and Brad ran to the car. Darren had thought about scooping up Brad and carrying him like football or a baby to save time but thought against it. “I met a man who also survived that plane crash. He may have some insight into where this Tony is!”

Darren headed to the boarding house where many of the survivors were staying. *They are a strange bunch*, Darren thought. They kept to themselves and spent a lot of time asking really weird questions. Hell, even the way they were dressed didn't feel...right. Darren was not surprised when he saw Brad that they would have had something to do with his condition.

By the time they got to the boarding house, Brad was the size of a baby and could not even open the car door to let himself out. To hear words like "fuck" and "goddammit" come from something that was only about 16 inches long was very strange.

This time, Darren did scoop up Brad and didn't even ask. If Brad was going to complain, Darren was going to explain that time was growing short. He immediately thought better about that choice of words in case Brad was still carrying around his trusty switchblade. That was all irrelevant because Brad didn't say a peep.

The housekeeper greeted them with a smile until she went to glance at what she thought was a baby and saw Brad's 3 day old stubble and let out a gasp.

"We need to find Gary. Is he staying here? Or, better yet, Tony?"

"I d-don't know a Gary," said the housekeeper, "but we a Tony Calhoun on the 2nd floor. Room 203. Does that help?" She didn't wait for his answer before turning her head. Darren thanked her as he ran up the stairs.

Darren knocked furiously on the door until Tony opened it and let out a gasp of his own. "You have to help us," Darren started, without introducing himself. "My friend ate a pill in a bottle made out to you and now he is...he is shrinking and we don't know what to do." Darren watched as Tony rubbed at his eyes, trying to make out if this was

still a dream he was having, when his eyes brightened. If this was a cartoon, Darren thought, a light bulb would have appeared above Tony's head.

“Wait a second? You mean that gag gift I got at Spencer's Gifts?” Tony asked in an amused tone.

“How can we get to this Spencer?” Brad piped in. Seeing what appeared to be a baby talking took Tony's breath away. Understanding the seriousness of the situation, he let both Darren and Brad inside his room.

By now, Tony was used to these types of situations where Bluff Oaks locals didn't know about things from his present. “No. There is no Spencer. It's just the name of the store where I am from. It was a joke gift. I bought it for my huge friend who was a linebacker in college. I put my name on the bottle so he knew it was coming from me because I had always called him tiny. But there were two parts to the gift. That was the pill to make you shrink. There was a pill to make you grow too...but there's no way these work. It's candy, right? I don't know...” His voice trailed off as he saw Darren and Brad's eyes fill with hope. “It's worth a try. So much of my stuff was scattered about, but a lot stuff was collected and kept in lockers at the bus station. Do you want to go and see if I have the other pill?” He had not gotten the words out before Darren was already heading towards the door to try to help his friend who was getting smaller and smaller as he held him.

Darren drove the three of them there as quickly as he could, blowing through stop signs and taking every shortcut he could think of. Tony seemed like a decent guy to Darren with his willingness to help but there seemed to be something unusual about him that he couldn't put his finger on and that he couldn't quite trust.

Pulling into the parking lot, Darren looked over at Brad and realized he had never seen anything so tiny in his life. Brad hadn't made much noise since at Darren's outside of sighing and sobbing. He certainly hadn't said a word. Darren looked at Tony with panic in his eyes and hushed "I think we have to really hurry." Tony nodded and sprinted to the front door of the bus station. Darren grabbed Brad and did the same.

Locker 37A was assigned to Tony after the plane crash and inside the locker was a two foot high cardboard box with various things in it, but mostly half torn clothes. A good amount of things were scattered after the crash, and while the people in town did their best to save as much as they could, most of it was already ruined. Tony had been here once to go through the stuff, had taken what he needed, and then left the rest.

Now he was digging through the box with furious intent, hoping to find a bottle containing a joke pill that long since lost its punch line. "I don't know... I don't see it," Tony said as he threw clothes out of the box. "Maybe I didn't see it. I don't know. No, I know I had it!" Shirts and jeans flew out and landed at Darren's feet. "Maybe I didn't have—Here it is!" Tony screamed out and held the bottle skyward.

It was the same type of bottle as Darren had seen earlier, except this bottle was yellow as opposed to green. Now that he knew this was a joke, the Made in China sticker on the bottom was more clear, but he grabbed the bottle as quick as he could and fished out the pill.

It wasn't until he held the pill up to Brad did he begin to cry.

The pill was only slightly smaller than all of Brad. Brad looked at the giant pill next to him and tried to speak but even though Darren could tell Brad was trying to scream based on his minuscule facial expressions, all he could hear was a whisper.

“Grind!” Tony screamed. “He’s saying grind!”

Darren slapped his forehead and began turning the pill into dust as fast he could. He tried using his fingers at first and then when that didn’t work the bottom of the shoe.

Brad never got to eat the pill though, because when Darren turned around to feed him the powder, his friend was too small to be found. Brad tried his best to scream out at them to let them know where he was, but the loudest man in Bluff Oaks would never be heard by anyone again.

Chapter Fifteen

On the triangular patch of grass that was the geographic center of Bluff Oaks, Florida, there stood a little girl who remembered only two things about herself before that moment. The first was that her name was Irene Jacobs, and the second was that she was five years old.

She leaned on an iron plaque that stood in the center of the triangle and tried her best to read it. She could make out the name of the town, and something that looked like it said the town had four fathers, but she wasn't sure that she'd read that right, because when she searched the plaque for some clue about how many mothers the town had, she found nothing. She was scanning the letters for the fourth time, trying in vain to put together words, when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Irene turned around and looked up into the face of beautiful girl with a shock of dirty blond hair.

"Excuse me," said the girl, "but is your name Irene?"

Irene took a step back, and then another.

"I'm sorry," said the girl. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"How do you know my name?" said Irene.

"I had a sister," said the girl. "You look just like—"

Irene backed away one step more.

"Careful," said the girl, "or you'll end up in the street."

Irene glanced backward over her shoulder. Sure enough, she now stood inches from the road. The girl crouched down so that she was eye level with Irene, smoothing out the skirt of her dress as she did. "Are your mama or daddy nearby, sweetie?"

Irene stuttered, her throat squeezing around each word as it struggled to make its way out of her mouth. "I... I can't... remember."

"How did you get here?" said the girl.

Irene managed another "I don't," but that was it; that was the end. She pressed the backs of her hands to her eyes as her body began to quake.

"Oh, sweetheart," said the girl. "Come here."

Irene blinked away her tears and looked at the girl again. She was crying now, too.

"Sweetheart," said the girl. "I won't hurt you."

"Promise?" said Irene.

"Cross my heart," said the girl, who did indeed cross her heart as she said it.

Irene ran into the girl's arms and pressed her face into the the girl's shoulder.

"There, there, Reeny," said the girl. "There, there."

Reeny, thought Irene. *I remember that. I remember that.* Irene shivered in the breeze as the girl whisked her across the street and into the hustle and bustle of a coffee shop.

"Who is that?" Irene heard another voice ask above the din. "Pheeb, is that—"

"I don't know," said the girl who held Irene. "I don't know, Sofe. Can we go out back?"

Irene peeked out from her hiding place in the girl's arms and saw the woman that the second voice belonged to. She was a waitress with hair the color of lemons, and everyone else in the place was staring at her.

"Darren," said the waitress, "I'm taking my break."

The three of them moved to the back of the room, then through a set of double doors. The room they'd stepped into was pitch black, and Irene buried her face into the girl's shoulder once more. But then there was the distinctive click of an overhead light's chain being pulled and Irene felt like it might OK to look up.

The girl set her down and said, "Irene, can my sister Sophia take look at you? She thinks you look mighty familiar, too."

Irene shook her head no.

"Please, sugar dumplin'," said the waitress named Sophia. "I just want to get a look at you."

Again, Irene shook her head no.

"What do you think, Phoebe?" said Sophia.

The girl, Phoebe, said. "It's her, Sofe. It has to be."

"But where did she come from?" said Sophia.

"I was walking over here from the house, and I saw her standing out there on the grass."

"Just standing there?" said Sophia.

"She vanished into thin air after Mom and Dad died, Sofe. Why shouldn't she reappear out of thin air now?"

Irene felt a hand on her shoulder, this one far colder than the hands that held her.

"Please, Ms. Irene," said Sophia. "Please let me look at you."

"No!" shouted Irene, stamping her feet on the floor once, then twice.

The cold hands gripped her and forced her around. With her eyes still closed, Irene swung her open hand out in front of her. There was a loud smack.

Irene opened her eyes and saw Sophia sitting on the floor in front of her, hand rubbing cheek.

“Oh, my stars and garters,” said Sophia. “Pheeb, she looks just like you at that age.”

Irene cast her gaze from side to side, looking for a way out, scared of the way the Sophia was looking at her, scared of how hard Sophia was looking.

“Reeny,” said Phoebe, “I know this is confusing, but we think you’re our sister.”

There were two ways out that Irene could see, the double doors they’d come in through, and another smaller door on the far side of the room. She knew there was no hope of escaping through the double doors—there were too many people out there who would do anything to please Sophia—but the other door, that might work.

“Three years ago-” said Phoebe, but before she could continue, Irene raced across the room and tugged on the door.

“That’s just a broom closet,” said Sophia. “Don’t be scared, sugar dumplin’.”

“I want to leave,” said Irene, tugging on the door’s handle again. “I don’t want to be here!”

Phoebe asked: “But where are you going to go, sweetheart?”

“Away,” said Irene, tugging on the door a third time. “Away!”

But on the third tug, there were butterflies in Irene’s ears, a thousand and one butterflies flapping their wings. She closed her eyes and had a dream right there, still standing up, a dream of tunnels and caverns and a door with no doorknob. There were children all around her, all of them chanting the same thing: Go above, to find the way back down.

“You’re fibbing,” said Irene. “There aren’t brooms in there.”

“I swear,” said Sophia. “It’s just a place for all the cleaning supplies, darling.”

“Let me see,” said Irene.

“I don’t have a key,” said Sophia.

Irene tugged on the door a fourth time, and this time the butterflies were worse than before. They were so loud, and fighting so hard to get out, that she couldn’t think, that she couldn’t even dream, that all she could do was turn her head off and go to sleep.

When she woke, she was wrapped up in blankets on a couch in darkened room, Phoebe sitting in an arm chair to one side, Sophia asleep in another.

“Where am I?” said Irene.

Phoebe looked up from the book she was reading. “Home,” she said.

Irene put a finger in each ear and wiggled, but there was nothing left in there. She stood and walked to the window, and looked out at the house across the street. It was two stories tall, and there was an enormous Santa Claus cut-out hanging on the side of it.

“Is it Christmas?” said Irene.

Phoebe smiled and gave a little laugh. “Not anymore. It’s January, sweetheart. They just haven’t taken that down yet.”

“Santa Claus must really like them,” said Irene. “He must’ve brought them oodles of presents.”

“Oodles and oodles,” said Phoebe. “Of course, the Brickmans do have oodles and oodles of kids.”

“There weren’t many presents at Christmastime down below,” said Irene.

“Down below?” said Phoebe. “You mean, in the tunnels?”

Irene cocked her head to one side and, exasperated, said, “Yes.”

Phoebe chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” said Irene.

“I used to do just what you just did,” said Phoebe. “Every time Sofe or Mom and Dad asked me a dumb question.”

“What makes a question dumb?” said Irene.

Phoebe went red. “I didn’t mean…” she stuttered. “There’s really no such thing as a dumb question, sweetie.”

“OK,” said Irene. “When did your mama and daddy die?”

“Three years ago,” said Phoebe.

“And is that when your sister went away?”

“Yes,” said Phoebe. “Just after that.”

“She wasn’t in the accident?”

“No,” said Phoebe. “When social services came to collect me and you—I mean, my sister—Sophia went out front to argue with them, and I followed. We’d been doing OK on our own, but Sofe wasn’t of age yet. Anyway, you—I mean, our baby sister—seemed safe enough in the yard out back, but when we came back to get you, you were gone.”

“Down below,” said Irene.

“Do you think might be remembering?” said Phoebe.

Irene shook her head no. Try as she might, all she could remember was that flash from when she’d grabbed the doorknob.

“Was Sophia fibbing?” said Irene.

“About the broom closet?” said Phoebe.

Irene shook her head. “No, was she fibbing about being able to open it? It seemed like she was really important there.”

“I suppose she might have been. I think she’s got a key that opens just about anything.”

Irene scurried back to the couch and curled up under the blankets again. She had an idea, but she needed Phoebe to go to sleep first.

“I’m going to go back to sleep,” said Irene.

“OK, sweetie,” said Phoebe. “Sweet dreams.”

Irene closed her eyes, but she didn’t go back to sleep. And when she heard Phoebe begin to snore, that’s when she made her move.

Irene crept across the room and grabbed the biggest set of keys she could find in the basket on the table by the door. Then she slowly opened the door, praying that it would not creak, and made her way outside.

She had no idea how far it was from here back to the coffee shop, and she had no idea which way to go, but she did have an idea of how to get herself an idea. She closed her eyes and focused all of her brain on her ears, listening hard for even a single butterfly.

It took a while, but she heard one finally, coming from the other side of the house with the giant Santa on it. She started that way, running as fast as she could. She remembered a song all of a sudden as she raced through the dark, and a man singing it, laughing as he walked alongside two girls in costume, with Irene in his arms. “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” he sang, and then he sang it again.

There was a man shooping the last people out of the shop when she got there, but it was perfect timing, because she was so little that he did notice her as she scooted behind him and inside.

Irene ran through the coffee shop and bolted through the double doors. She made her way to the broom closet and began to fumble with the keys. She tried one after another after another, but none of them seemed to work. It wasn't until she reached the last one that something happened.

As Irene turned the last key in the lock, a bright orange light glowed from behind the door, pouring through the cracks. Behind her, Irene heard footsteps racing her way, and then Phoebe's voice.

"Irene!" said Phoebe. "What are you doing? You scared me half to—"

Irene felt Phoebe come up beside her as she began to twist the knob.

"Reeny, we can't," said Phoebe, grasping Irene by the shoulders. "You don't know what's back there."

"I do know," said Irene, opening the door.

There were more footsteps coming. And those feet belonged to people who would stop her. So Irene jumped forward, into the light, dragging Phoebe with her. But as soon as they were swallowed by the light, it was gone, and they were falling.

They fell and fell and fell some more, Phoebe screaming the whole way, but Irene feeling strangely fine. In fact, the further they fell, the more Irene remembered. The butterflies whispered to her, telling her that she was indeed Phoebe and Sophia's sister. And then they told her of the hole she'd found beneath the tree in their backyard, of the snake she followed like Alice's rabbit down into that place. The butterflies told her of

grand waiting room where they'd welcomed her, the other children, where the older ones had taught her to play the massive grand piano, which grew less imposing and more hauntingly beautiful each year she sat before it. And then those butterflies finished the first story they'd tried to tell her, the story of the octagonal room with its knobless door. They told her of how the children had elected her, in a round of Duck, Duck, Goose, to be the one to return to the surface, to find a way back down, and to open the door from the inside.

"Phoebe," she shouted, as pinprick of light appeared below them, "I remember. I remember!"

They fell faster then, then finally plopped onto pile of fluffy orange pillows.

"My gosh," said Phoebe. "Where are we?"

A voice spread through the room like melted butter, answering Phoebe. "The Drawing Room," it said.

"The what room?" said Phoebe.

"Is this the room with the knobless door?" said Irene.

"Yes," said the voice.

"Is there a knob on this side?" said Irene, looking around.

"There was," said another voice, less melting butter, more hardening caramel.

"But we erased it," said yet another voice, this one cold, like ice cream in winter.

"So," said Phoebe, "you literally draw in here."

"Everything out there," said the first voice.

"Was first drawn," said the second voice.

"In here," said the third.

“But you can’t leave?” said Irene.

Slowly, three figures stepped out from the shadows and into the light. They looked like almost like people, but only just. They had no eyes, no noses, no ears, and no hair to speak of. But they did have mouths, and every mouth was smiling, every mouth seemed incapable of doing anything but smiling, so well-worn were the lines on either side of their mouths.

“Why,” asked the first figure.

“Would we,” continued the second figure.

“Want to leave?” finished the third.

Each of them held bright purple crayon in their right hand, and thick tome of a sketchbook under their left arm.

Irene stood up and clapped her hands together. “May I have a crayon?” she said.

Phoebe put a hand on her shoulder. “Reeny, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“But I just want to draw,” said Irene. “What’s the harm in that?”

Chapter Sixteen

George poured hot water over the Maxwell House instant coffee grounds in his small, salmon-colored mug. He swirled them together lazily with an tiny ornamental spoon bearing the crest of the state of Maryland. He had long since forgotten where he'd found the spoon. He'd never been to Maryland. He'd been to New York, or at least he'd been through there on the way back home from the Great War.

Today was his day off from his jobmaintenance custodian for the Maynard Cola Company. *Tuesday*, George thought. *Good day for bowling*. But then, just about every day was a good day for bowling. The rain never washed out a day of bowling. Impossible to get a sunburn doing it. Really, a fine sport.

After he finished the first cup of coffee, he dropped two slices of Wonder bread into his chrome toaster. He again scooped two spoonfuls of coffee into his mug, poured the still-hot water from the kettle, stirred. When the toast popped, he pulled the slices out of the slots and slowly ate both of them dry. He felt especially good as he chewed. One of those moments when the little decisions one made in a day were just right, somehow. He placed the mug in the sink and left.

His Fifty-two Chevy pickup rumbled toward The Bowl Bowl, the largest bowling alley for one-hundred miles in every direction. He drove past the Rexall Drug, the nail salon, the auto body shop. He drove past the field where last week a plane had made an emergency landing. It was long gone now. George had not seen it, but its arrival had caused a minor stir. He'd heard that everyone had lived, so he hadn't paid it another thought.

As he pulled up to the dome-shaped building, he saw that Irwin's truck was already there. *Well, of course*, George thought. Irwin rarely took a day off from bowling, always in his own lane. Lane thirteen. Irwin's lane. George had always thought it unnecessary, but never begrudged Irwin for it. He was the perennial champion, anyway. The other men in the league had long since grown accustomed to vying for second place. George himself had even placed second to Irwin once or twice before. It was, he felt, all in good fun, anyway.

He pulled his truck into the spot next to Irwin's maroon Ford and climbed out of the cab. He grabbed his bag from the passenger seat. In it were his tan shoes and a fourteen-pound green marbled ball, made to correct his tendency to curve too sharply down the lane. Except in lane seven. He was convinced that lane had learned how to coerce his otherwise-reliable ball into the gutter more often than any of the other lanes. A common lament, he knew, since he'd heard his golfer friends tell him how one hole or another knew exactly how to avoid their well-putted balls. His friend Eli was fond of neither lane nine at The Bowl Bowl nor hole five at Bluff Oaks Country Club.

Genevieve, one of the alley's attendants, stood at the counter as George entered. She was a petite brunette, her hair in a ponytail. "Hello, George," she said and smiled.

"Hello, Ginny," George said. "Anything but lane seven."

"Of course. Let's see," she said. She turned and surveyed the lanes. "How about eleven?"

"Perfect."

He nodded to Irwin when he neared the lane, who didn't seem to notice. "Mr. Moose," he said as he unzipped his bag and withdrew his shoes.

“Mr. Lincoln,” Irwin said. He did not turn to look at him.

There was no one bowling in lane twelve. Nor ten nor fourteen. Most of The Bowl Bowl was empty, aside from a couple of other attendants. George sat in the hard plastic chair and slipped off his penny loafers. He pulled the bowling shoes on and tied the cheap, flat laces tightly. He withdrew the ball and stood back from the lane, staring down length of it.

“How’s she rolling for you today?” George asked Irwin.

“Oh,” Irwin said. “Same as ever, I suppose.”

George knew Irwin was famously secretive about his bowling strategy. Everything from his shoes to the brand of the ball and its weight were secrets. George lifted the ball up to about his chin, grinned slightly and took a step toward the line.

The first roll was nearly perfect. The slight give he was expecting from his aging left knee was absent. The ball curved lightly and collided with the second pin, knocking all the rest of them flat. A strike on the first throw. A rare occurrence for George. The older he got, the more frames it took him to warm up and settle into the weight of the ball, the bend of his knees. Some days, it seemed the soles of his shoes were a little too slippery or his fingers couldn’t let go of the ball quickly enough. Even his hips, which usually gave him at least a little trouble, rotated smoothly as he released. He smiled as his ball appeared atop the return.

As he placed his fingers back into the holes on the top of the ball, he peeked over at Irwin, who released his ball evenly and with the grace of a man much younger than himself. It looked like a good roll, but broke late and only took nine pins. Irwin grimaced.

George rolled again. Strike. He was beaming now. He admired the sheen of the polished wood, which reflected the lane number above.

Every roll was met with a strike. Turkey, hambone, five bagger, six-pack. After the seventh strike, Irwin stopped and looked over at his lane. “Really knocking them down today, huh?” he asked George.

“It appears that way,” George said. He looked over and smiled at Irwin. Irwin didn’t look at him.

“Hm,” Irwin grunted.

George lifted the ball again. He took his four steps, swept the ball back and then forward, turning at the hips, and released the ball. It thudded against the decking of the lane and arced beautifully toward the backside of pin two. The pins fell, clattering loudly and scattering toward the black backdrop. George stared at the pile of pins. He couldn’t believe his luck. He counted each pin carefully. He had never bowled a perfect game before and knew it was generally poor form to believe such a thing might happen before it actually did. *Eight, nine, ten, eleven*, George counted. He stopped and counted again. *Eleven pins. How can there be eleven?* he thought.

“Irwin?” he said.

“Yah?” Irwin said without looking.

“Do you see eleven pins down there?”

Irwin squinted down the lane. He grimaced again. “How...”

“I don’t know.” They both counted again. “Do I...”

“Count it? Hm,” Irwin said. His brow furrowed. “I suppose you do.”

“Huh.” George said. “Goodness.” George noted the eleven on his score card. He picked up his ball and rolled again. Strike, strike, strike.

As he neared the end of the string, George ran his hand over the surface of the ball. This was more than he’d ever expected of the trusty sphere. He wondered if it was the February air that day. Perhaps the wood of the lanes was drier than usual? Had he actually improved this much? But no. Where had that pin come from? George thought that this was well beyond what could be accounted for by weather or skill.

George lifted the ball for the final time. Irwin stopped to look over at him, but looked away when George looked to meet his gaze. He stepped and let the ball go. The sound of it rolling along the planks filled his ears, shattered by the fall of the ten red-banded pins. A perfect game. Of three-hundred and one points. A feat not even Irwin Moose, bowler extraordinaire, could have accomplished. George quickly quashed the urge to gloat.

“Well,” Irwin started. “I guess you’re glad someone saw that happen, huh?”

“Gosh, yes, Irwin. Thanks!” George said. He pulled the ball from the return rails and returned it to the bag. “I believe that’s a good place to stop, if ever there was one.”

“Hm.”

“Well,” George said as he sat to untie his shoes. “Be seeing you.” He slipped on his penny loafers, tucked the shoes into his bag and zipped it closed.

“Bye, now,” Irwin said and turned to face his lane.

George walked up to the counter that Genevieve leaned on and slid his score card over to her. “Can you believe that?” he said.

“Huh,” Genevieve said and stood up. “How’d you manage that one?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” George said.

“I should think so! Well, congratulations to you, Mr. Lincoln,” she said. He slipped the card into his back pocket and nodded to her.

Outside, George placed the bag back on the passenger seat and started the truck. He sat listening to it idle for a few minutes. The thrill of the game filled his chest. He felt like he could do anything. What he thought to do was get a sausage from Angelo’s cart on the next block. Usually, he couldn’t eat anything from the lunch trucks in town because they tended to give him heartburn bad enough to keep him up all night. But today, he figured it would be all right.

Angelo smiled as George walked up to his cart. “Hello, sir! What’ll it be?” Angelo said, pushing his stained white shirt sleeves up his dark arms.

“One, peppers and onions, please,” George said.

“You got it.”

George brought the sausage back to the truck. It was hot and delicious. It had been awhile since he’d let himself have anything quite this greasy. He savored the last bite and folded the napkin before he stuffed it into his pocket.

George pulled the truck into the street and up to a stop light. While he waited, a gray Mercury Eight pulled up beside him in the wrong lane. A lead sled, the car revved its engine. *Hot rodder*, George thought. *Should just let him go*. Two young guys sat in the front seat of the car, looking over at him. He peeked over at them, then looked up at the light. The Mercury rocked as the driver nudged the gas again. *Really should*, he thought. In spite of himself, George nudged the pedal of the pickup. It lurched uncertainly.

When the light changed, George found himself planting the pedal to the floor quicker than he could've even as a much younger man. The truck tires screamed for grip and the engine roared as he caught the Merc off-guard and sped away. George's heart fluttered as he careened down the empty road, the hot rod trailing in his rearview. "Yahoo!" George yelled.

The Mercury edged closer and remained in the wrong lane. George kept his foot planted. The Chevy climbed up to nearly seventy. George managed to stay just ahead of the kids. He didn't notice the stoplight ahead of him and blew right through it. The Mercury's driver slammed on his brakes, but didn't stop in time and rolled through the intersection. A police motorcycle appeared from behind a nearby building and pursued the car. When George noticed it in the mirror, he pulled over and pushed hard on the brakes, but both the Mercury and the police officer sailed on by him.

George sat stopped on the side of the road for several minutes. The Mercury and the police officer disappeared around a bend. He felt a little sheepish, but also grateful, once it became clear that the police were not coming back for him. His heart slowed and he calmly pulled away from the curb again. *The damnest thing*, he thought. *Impossible luck.*

After a minute of driving, he pulled the score card out of his back pocket and considered it. *Probably just a pinsetting error. How else to explain it? Still...* He did feel that the day was different somehow. Almost special. It was sunny, if not exactly warm for these parts, and here he was, this old man bowling a perfect game plus one and racing teenagers in his pickup truck. What was different? As far as he was aware, nothing had

changed. He was still just George Lee Lincoln, retired Army lieutenant and janitor. Just a guy. A guy having a really strange and strangely wonderful day.

On the way home, an idea struck him. He didn't know why, exactly, but he suddenly became overwhelmed with the idea of attempting pull-ups. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to perform even one. He knew there was a gym on Main and pointed the truck in that direction.

Upon arriving at the gym, he climbed out of the truck and stood outside a minute. He wasn't entirely sure this was necessary, but he felt oddly compelled, now that he was here. He pulled the glass door open and walked in. It was fairly empty at this time of day. Most folks were still working. A gentleman in a white t-shirt and khakis approached him. "Yes, sir? How can I help you?"

"This may sound strange," George said, "but do you have a pull-up bar I could use for a couple of minutes?"

"Why, sure. I don't see what harm that would do." The man turned and led him to the bar. "Will you need a stool?" the man asked.

"Huh. Guess I should probably have one," George said.

"Of course." The man walked over to a closet and removed from it a small, white wooden stool. He placed it at George's feet. George stood on it and reached for the bar. He pulled on it, testing his biceps. To his surprise, he lifted himself easily off the stool once, twice, three times. He kept going, crossing his legs at the knee, and each time he pulled his chin clear of the bar by a couple of inches. His arms didn't waver in the slightest and he felt impossibly light. It was the easiest thing he could ever remember doing.

After several more repetitions, he removed one hand and wrapped it around the other wrist and continued one-handed. “Uh, sir,” the man said.

“It’s nothing!” George said, pulling up again. “Nothing to it.”

The man stared in amazement as George completed fifty with each hand, and then another fifty each. With each repetition, George felt stronger and it got easier. His elbows and shoulders moved easily, like that of a man forty years younger. Eventually, he let himself down and stood breathing deeply, completely satisfied with himself. “Thank you,” he said. The man stood, mouth gaping, and said nothing. George nodded and offered a little wave before leaving.

Once back in the truck, George just stared blankly. *What’s happened to me?* His arms felt as though nothing had happened, though the wrinkled skin on them proved his age. The longer he sat there, the more he tried to think of other things he could do with his new-found luck. Rock climbing? But where? Gambling? How boring. Enter a marathon? What would that prove?

Then he hit upon an idea a bit darker. *I could rob a bank.* He wasn’t entirely sure where the idea came from, but it did seem unlikely to him that this was the kind of luck that lasted forever. *It won’t hurt anybody,* he figured. *What’s the harm? The government backs all that stuff.* He started the truck.

First National sat on the corner of Main and Elm. He didn’t keep his money in the bank, but at home in a locked cash box, so he’d never had a reason to go in. When he pulled into the parking lot, he noted that there were only two other cars. He figured them to belong to a single clerk and the manager. He stood outside the door for a full minute before pulling it toward him.

There were no customers in the bank, and just the single clerk standing behind the counter. He realized that he didn't actually have any idea what he was going to do, but she had already seen him, so he continued in her direction. "Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?"

"I, uh..." George said. "This is a stick up."

"I see," she whispered.

"So, if you could just, um, fill a bag with money and give it to me."

"Of course," the clerk said. She bent beneath the counter and produced a paper shopping bag. She opened her cash drawer and calmly removed all the bills from it, stacking them neatly inside the bag. "One moment," she said and brought the bag with her into a back room. George leaned over the counter and tried to peer into the room, but could see nothing. He listened to the sound of rustling paper, followed by the top of the bag being crumpled closed. A second later, the clerk appeared with the bag held out ahead of her. "Will that be all?" she asked.

"Uh...yes. Thank you. Don't, uh, don't tell anyone about this."

"Of course, sir. Have a pleasant day."

George took the bag from her and turned on his heel. On his way to the door, the manager poked his head out of an office and said, "Good afternoon, sir. See you soon!"

"Uh, yeah, thanks," George said. The clerk and the manager both watched as he opened the door and exited.

In the truck, George opened the bag. It was filled with cash of every denomination. He was stunned. He reached in and grabbed a fistful. *There must be almost*

ten thousand dollars here. Quickly, he shoved the cash back in and shut the bag and started his truck.

At home, he locked the door behind him and hurried to his bedroom. He poured the money out onto his bed and began to put it into neat stacks. He pulled his cash box out from under the bed and fumbled with his keys to unlock it. Carefully, he placed the stacks of money in with his personal savings, as well as the score card, and locked the box again.

In the kitchen, he removed a Swanson dinner from the freezer and pre-heated his oven. He took a glass out of the cupboard and filled his glass with water. He sat at the table and stared straight ahead. *What have I done?*

His alarm clock rang promptly at five, but he couldn't bring himself to do his morning exercises. Instead, he reached under the bed and opened the cash box. The money, all of it, was still there. No one had knocked on his door. As far as he knew, this money was his now. He went to the living room and flipped on the television. The news made no mention of him.

After his shower, he sipped his coffee slowly, cash box in front of him. He knew then that he couldn't keep it. Good luck or not, this was stolen money. He was not a bad guy. He was not a thief. This was not how his parents had raised him, how he'd been trained in the Army, how he'd always lived his life. He locked the box again and left.

He waited until the bank opened at nine. He waited until the clerk and the manager were inside long enough that he figured they were ready for him. *What can I tell them?* His fingers drummed nervously on the cash box.

When he finally mustered the courage, he climbed out of the truck and went inside. The clerk smiled at him. “Good morning, again, sir. How are you today?”

“I’m, uh, fine. Look,” he said, holding the box open in front of him. “I believe this money is yours.”

She scowled at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I...” he said. “I, uh, found it outside yesterday. I wondered if someone had lost it.”

The clerk looked into the box as he set it down in front of her. “This is a lot of money. Hold on a second.” The clerk walked out from behind the counter to the manager’s office. He couldn’t hear what they were saying. They reappeared in the doorway.

“Well, yes, we are missing a fair amount of money, actually,” the manager said. “Where did you say you found this?”

“It was just, uh, in the parking lot, actually. Figured I’d bring it by first thing.”

“Well,” the manager said and stopped. He looked at George and then down at the cash box. The score card was still there, among the piles of money. “We’re certainly glad you did.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Sophia,” he quietly whispered to himself. “Sophia.”

He found himself saying her name in an ethereal tone this fine morning, while gazing intently at his mosaic of porcelain shards. A mosaic consisting of remnants from glassware he foraged from times gone by. An artistic conglomerate, mixing his “business” of search, discover and retrieve with the “business” of the past and its relevance to the human condition - both coming together under the concept of destiny. It was his destiny to find them and it was their destiny to be found. A mosaic crafted by he himself with his aging but still very agile hands, hands which told a story in every line running across them. Like jagged alpine valleys cut from the earth by a creeping glacier, the lines were formed through the ages, each one containing memories, energy and knowledge.

Arturo Winter is a hunter. He is a glacier; slowly and meticulously moving, scouring the earth for hidden gems. Venturing to corners of the Earth that had either not yet been discovered or had been forgotten. He knew that just his presence stepping into these dusty, abandoned realms brought them new life. They contained ancient artifacts, fragments from civilizations previous to his own which cried out to be found, to be lifted up into the light of day. These artifacts spoke to him. They crept into his subconscious and he knew he must liberate them from their underground prisons and exalt them to their rightful place among this world. For each article he retrieved from the depths, he felt a trail follow behind him from its site of discovery, leaving a wake like the sedimentary powder left in a glaciers path. In his minds eye he saw the trail made not only by him but of the item he liberated. Once recovered, that bit of history became a part of him and

he a part of it, inseparable, traveling together to their point of termination. It was the lucky town of Bluff Oaks where his moraines were formed and he would have it no other way, for it was here that the most valuable treasure he had ever stumbled upon resided - Sophia Jacobs.

From early on in his life he sensed that he was meant to scavenge the Earth, it was his purpose, his direction. He had scouted far off lands, trolled the seas and only once lost a piece of himself for his efforts. It was back in 1955, off the coast of the Florida panhandle, five-hundred miles south of Destin, a town only short the letter “y” at its end, he thought. He would be that “y.” While diving off his boat, “Winter’s Tail,” in an attempt to locate a ship wreck referenced in lore, he found himself disoriented as he resurfaced. For hours he amazingly and successfully fended off sharks with his diving knife. He knew his meaning in this life was not fulfilled and that greater treasures were yet to be found. He fought with voraciousness, second only to his passion for the undiscovered and emerged after eight grueling hours with the loss of his right eye and a deep stinging scar running across his left pectoral. A small sacrifice made to the gods he determined, for the magnificent bounty they had allowed him to so far retrieve in his meager forty-six years upon this planet. He knew that whatever he gave to this world he would receive ten fold. Like a broken bone heals with more strength than its original capacity, so too he healed and found himself stronger - with more determination and energy than ever before. Not long after that fateful day he found himself entering the town of Bluff Oaks, where unbeknownst to him he would finally end his drifter ways and take up residency.

It was on a bright sparkling morning, much like the one he now found himself, that

he first walked into Darren Lowe's coffee shop for a quick bite to eat. He was geared up and ready to explore the underground tunnel system that he had heard whispers of in the surrounding towns. Never did he think that his mind could be so diverted from the task at hand as it was when from the corner of his eye he saw a glint of flaxen. It was unlike any color he had ever seen before in all of his travels; a fluid and energetic gold. He turned his head only to see the most mesmerizing of all the things he had ever come across. It was the face of an angel, surrounded by a mass of what can only be described as follicular honey. Sophia's long flowing mane gently encompassed her soft and caring features, much as it did his heart in that exact moment. He felt in an instant a warmth rise from within his chest and the scar from over his heart light ablaze with the exhilaration of his latest find. She was an anomaly. The first and only treasure he had not expected, not sought out. However, like all of his other discoveries, she came at a loss to himself. This time not in the hours spent planning, energy exerted or money spent but in the relinquishing of his heart; a price he was more than willing to pay, though he would never tell her. It was almost as though she had found him, instead of the other way around.

He awoke this morning from his cocoon of blankets with a burst like a moth emerging from its spun silk home, made from strands of Sophia's glittering abundance, as the beautiful butterfly it was meant to be. He knew that today was the day he would reenter the underground tunnel system and recover such a find that was worthy of his dear Sophia. It was just the day before that he discovered the underground tunnels were a top a much older and dilapidated set of intricately woven pathways. Not knowing whether any other living soul was aware of this find, he kept it to himself, hoping his next

big discovery would be the one he would present to his muse. Never had Arturo found himself in need of any living being until he found Sophia, never before had his craft of salvage been surpassed by any other desire, than his desire for her. She became his inspiration, his connection between the realms of the old to the here and now. She brought more meaning to his explorations, even though he loved her from afar.

Somehow he felt his blessing of simply knowing she existed, his ability to even set eyes on his holy grail was more than he may deserve. Thus he did not pursue her further, he felt the gift of mingling his passions was more than he ever had hoped for or knew existed. Their relationship was perfect as it was; her mere existence was enough for him, she lit him from within.

Arturo entered the main hall of the tunnel system that afternoon. A massive hall with impressive high domed ceilings decorated in a classic rococo design. He felt today, like the hall looked - magnificent, flowing and spirited. He knew it was his chance to scavenge new and unfound territories and nothing was going to put a damper on his mood today. Nothing. Arturo made his way through the hall with its mirrored walls, fountain and grand piano; making haste knowing that he had little time for feasting on this area's ornamentation. It was for the fields of silk flowers and artificial trees that he must hurry to. It was there that just the day before he found a hidden entrance to the primordial caves behind one of this vast expanses many gilded fountains. Such exorbitant surroundings could only be explained by the affluence of the previous Gilded Age elites who built themselves a virtual play ground below with their profit from the periods lucrative 19th century railroad industry. Sadly though, with the distraction of their wealth they failed to notice the true object of value - the already present system of

pathways left by their ancestors, pathways sure to abound in mystery and treasures just waiting to be found by Arturo himself.

Following a small trickling stream of water through the fields of flowers and trees he finally came upon his fountain of interest. With a keen eye and a knack for catching those things that others do not, Arturo had realized the water led to what the elite had chalked up to as a convenient and natural drainage system, the caves. They had built this fountain with a swivel hinge, which with the push of a tucked away lever opened the wall and allowed access to the pathways below. It was here that he entered and felt the rush of exhilaration wash over him. He felt the blood in his body rise to the surface, making his face florid and bringing a pulsing sensation to the scar just above his heart. He thought of Sophia and reminisced of their first encounter. It was moments like this that most closely resembled their meeting - the thrill of what's to come, the all encompassing euphoria of knowing this is what he is meant to do. Each of his finger tips felt like they were on fire, ready to alight on the newest addition to his trove. The light he imagined would emanate from his every digit could illuminate his way and guide him down these dusty and twisted halls.

He travelled down the ominous corridor to its first craggy fork. Turning his head he noticed the dusty footprints his boots left in the stone below, ever convincing him that he was the first person in ages to venture this far. It was at this split in the trail that he noticed a luminous object clear in the middle of his path. Arturo bent down and lifted the rock to his eye level. In the dim light offered up by his perched flashlight he could see the layers of bedrock that this egg shaped boulder contained. It was fascinating, truly intricate in its natural swirls and coloration. It was unexpectedly smooth and for its size,

was inexplicably light. He could not believe his find. *How could it be this easy?* he asked himself. If he had already found such a remarkable gem, what more could these caverns offer? Normally, Arturo would have been hungry for more, insatiable in his need to travel even deeper into the unknown but now his mind was overwhelmed by his longing to present such an astonishing item to Sophia. So right then and there he turned tail and headed to the surface.

Arturo emerged from below, egg in hand, ready to present it to his beloved. He made his way to the cafe, all the while feeling a shaking sensation in his arms. He couldn't quite tell if it was his nerves or the egg itself quaking. He promptly displaced the thought. He figured it must be the excitement coursing through his veins that gave the impression the egg was somehow alive. He knew it was his own trembling and astonishment at what he found that lent to this inanimate objects sudden energetic feel. It was as if it wanted to jump out of his grasp and present itself to Sophia on its own. There was a definitive sense that this rock egg was meant for her, that she would be its rightful resting place.

Arturo reached the café to find Sophia in quite a rare form. Typically radiant and beaming, aglow with spirit; this afternoon she seemed agitated and withdrawn. Normally outgoing and seen chatting with the local patrons, she was uncharacteristically found in the rear of the café, pacing back and forth by a closet door, mumbling to herself and wringing her hands. He wondered if it had to do with the strange details of her younger sister's disappearance and rumored reappearance. Her apparent distress put a damper on his elated mood but gave him all the more reason to present her with such a gift. And so in an uncharacteristic fashion of his own he, without pause, walked into the back of the

café and greeted her. He did not linger long, his main purpose was to leave the egg and hopefully give something to distract from her obvious state of unrest. The egg was, for him, a token of his developed love for her, a symbol of the new life that she unknowingly hatched within him, a thing of beauty for her to cherish since he could not share his secret wish for her to cherish him.

He left the café with lightness in his step. He had seen her quick smile as he handed her the egg and that was all the treasure seeking he needed for the remainder of the day. The glint of surprise that came from her eyes melted his very soul. He reached home before his feet even realized they had walked the entire way and his body slumped into bed with a satisfied sense of tired that only comes from a day such as his. As he lay in bed waiting for sleep to take him, he imagined seeing Sophia the following day. He imagined that his offering had been what she may have needed to give a little light to what seemed to have been an otherwise dark day for her. Sleep came swiftly as he imagined the light scent of her hair caressing his nose. Her hair enveloped him, once again wrapping him in her warmth. His mind quickly sank into thoughts of seeing her at the cafe in the morning for his usual cup of coffee and then heading off to the underground again for more thrill seeking. He slept soundly, peacefully, awaiting the new day to come.

The following morning Arturo awoke bright and early, threw on his clothes, grabbed his gear and wasting no time, headed out the door for the cafe. As he entered the cafe doors he was met with the buzz of chatter and the concerned look on people's faces rather than the visage of Ms. Jacobs. From the words they spoke hurriedly, Arturo was only able to piece together "the center", "smashed rock" and "Soph gone". He needed no

other details. He immediately ran to the center of town and incurred a swirling of citizens surrounding the triangular patch of grass at the heart of Bluff Oaks. Panicked, he pushed his way through the crowd while his auditory nerves were barraged by the stinging sounds of the words “missing”, “kidnapped” and “disappeared.” These sounds rolled off of their tongue in all too easily a fashion. Why were they not actively looking for their town’s sweetheart, the woman that he had come to realize was adored not only by himself but by every living, breathing resident within the village and beyond. What had they seen to make them so sure? Were the towns folk reading into things, jumping to conclusions and unnecessarily worrying themselves because of prior events related to the Jacobs family? He could only pray that was the case.

Arturo parted a sea of people. He surfaced, gasping for air; his spirit drowned by their speculation and fear. What he saw did nothing to relieve his angst, the air seemed thick and his head throbbed from oxygen deprivation. There at the heart of the town which had given him his most coveted of discoveries he found evidence that the same town had taken her away. The rock egg he had given her was now in shatters at the base of the towns iron name plaque, alongside which was Sophia’s late mother’s handkerchief, her own personal sacred possession which she was known to never have leave her sight. It was at that moment that Arturo felt lost for the first time in his life. He felt helpless. His scar burned and ached at the knowledge of his loss.

The pieces were coming together in his head. He felt he had been credulous to think such a treasure would be so easily found. Suddenly each shard of the egg became a virtual dagger stabbing him in the heart. The egg must have been placed there for him to find, for him to give to Sophia, so she could be taken away like her sister before her. But

why? By whom? Was the shaking he felt possibly the egg itself? Was he becoming paranoid? Was he conspiracy theorizing? It didn't matter. Arturo felt somehow responsible and he wracked his ever deluded mind for what to do. All he knew was that he must find her. He would stop at nothing. Whatever broke the egg, whether from outside it or from within it, he would track down and bring to justice. Sophia found him and now he would find Sophia. The answer, he was certain, was to be found within the same caves that were the catalyst for his current misery.

Chapter Eighteen

Sophia woke up -- as usual these days -- to dim light, the faint smell of cigars, and the depression of agonizing hopelessness.

She had been his prisoner for almost 100 days now. After the first few days, she had started to count, but then lost track somewhere in the 50s. With little else to do, she had started counting again -- but with less concentration.

Every day, the man in the Jiminy Cricket mask would come to see her -- to talk to her -- as if they were good friends.

Sometimes he would touch her. Lightly. Her face. Her neck. Her shoulders.

And her hair. Jiminy Cricket loved Sophia's hair. One time, he even lifted his mask slightly (not enough for Sophia to see his real face) so he could hold a fistful of her long locks up to his nose and smell it.

At first, Sophia had been sure that Jiminy Cricket would rape her as the days passed. Then, weeks passed. Then, months. And still, miraculously, all Jiminy Cricket was interested in was her hair.

She had already ruled out the theory of ransom. After all, her family -- wealthy as they were -- would surely have paid to get her back by now.

Wouldn't they?

Sophia had been driven to anguish. Sometimes, when she felt her captor's clammy hand lightly caressing her cheek or stroking her hair, she found herself wishing he would hit her, grab her, or otherwise be forceful with her. At least then she could make sense of why he had kept her around.

At least then, maybe, it would end.

“Hand me that wrench, would you, Jeremiah?”

“I told you, I go by Lincoln now!”

Marek sighed -- partly out of annoyance, partly out of jealousy. His little brother had been getting more popular recently -- the popularity that Marek had craved for years. He longed to be accepted -- to feel as if he belonged.

“Fine, Lincoln; hand me the wrench.”

Of course, Marek loved his family -- and he knew that they loved him. That didn't change the feeling inside him, however -- the feeling he constantly carried with him that he didn't belong.

“Hold on. I'm using it.”

Marek's parents -- the real ones -- had died in a car crash years ago when Marek was almost six years old. The Cades promptly adopted Marek and raised him as their own. Accordingly, Marek knew little about his biological parents -- just that they had settled in the U.S. in the late 1930s, having fled German-occupied Czechoslovakia.

Marek remembered very little of his father, Karel -- only that his sizable moustache would tickle when he hugged and kissed Marek.

Marek had more vivid memories of his mother, Olga. She would spend hours cuddling little Marek, her golden tresses falling upon his face as she sang him folk lullabies and made up stories wherein he -- Marek -- played a handsome prince. Marek's mother loved to tell young Marek what a handsome little boy he was, and how all of the girls would go mad for him when he grew up into an even more handsome man.

At present, though, Marek was but an awkward 16-year-old. As far as girls went, Marek loved -- but had not yet been loved back.

“Just give me the wrench already, Jeremiah.”

“Hold on, I said.”

Marek wished that Jeremiah would hurry up already with the wrench. He wanted to be back at work beneath the 1953 Buick Roadmaster Skylark so he wouldn't have to keep looking at the body. Sure, the car was cool looking, especially since they had popped out the dents and detailed it, but there was something about it that he found menacing. Especially the front of it. The round headlights, spaced far apart, gave the impression of cold, soulless eyes. The grill gave the impression of teeth, bared for all who would cross the car's path to see.

The car looked like it was hungry. Not “Oh, boy, we're going out for burgers and fries!” hungry. Predatory.

Marek turned away; he was secretly afraid that if he stared at the front of the car too long, it would consume him. A haunting thought, given what presently consumed him.

“How's it coming, boys?”

“Good, pop,” said Jeremiah.

Jacob Cade closed the door behind him, popped open a Maynard Cola, and sat down. “Boys,” he said. “You're doing a great job. We'll have this ready for Mr. Maynard in no time.” “When do you kids want to break for dinner?” The boys' father paused to take a gulp of soda while he looked at the clock over the garage door. “It's almost five o'clock.”

Marek's head shot towards the clock. He was running late.

"Pop?" Marek said. "Is it okay if I head out now for a bit? I wanted to hang out with a friend."

Jacob eyed Marek shrewdly. "Is this the same 'friend' your mother and I have been wanting to meet?"

Marek blushed. "Pop..."

"You've been spending a lot of time with your 'friend,' lately," Jacob said bouncily.

"I know, Pop." Marek looked up again, anxiously, at the clock. He didn't have time for this. "Can I go?"

"Be home by seven."

"Thanks, Pop!" said Marek, immediately bolting. Five seconds later, he was out the door.

"Pop," said Jeremiah, looking up at his father. "Does Marek have a girlfriend?"

Jacob took another gulp of Maynard Cola. "Looks like it, Jeremiah."

"*Lincoln*, Pop."

"Right, sorry. Lincoln."

The window on the door slid open.

"Please sit," said Jiminy Cricket, as he always did.

Sophia sat on the far edge of the room, as she always did.

Jiminy Cricket slid the window shut, as he always did. He walked in.

She couldn't help noticing that he had gotten more comfortable with her over the weeks. His grip on the gun was more relaxed. It wasn't even directly pointed at her.

His other hand was holding something too today -- dandelions.

"I'm sorry about the dandelions," said Jiminy Cricket. "I had wanted to get you something nicer, but I didn't make it to the flower shop before they closed. Here." He handed the dandelions to her. "I picked them myself."

Sophia eyed the flowers suspiciously -- then eyed Jiminy Cricket suspiciously.

"What are these for?"

"It's our three-month anniversary," explained Jiminy Cricket.

Sophia just stared. She hated how long and spindly his legs were and how gawky and lean he looked. It made him look all the more cricket-like. *Pinocchio* was forever ruined for her.

"Take them," he chirped, thrusting the flowers towards Sophia even closer.

"No," she said.

"Take them," he said again.

"What do you want from me?!?"

Jiminy Cricket seemed to droop a bit in confusion. "I want you to take the flowers."

"No!" Sophia spat defiantly.

"Take the fucking flowers!" cried the cricket.

Sophia sobbed. She thought she would give almost anything to be back in Ed Delahanty's bathroom, wrinkling her nose at the stench of stale urine.

Her captor dropped the flowers. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry."

Sophia kept crying, ignoring him.

"I'm sorry," Jiminy Cricket said again, getting down on one knee. "I just wanted to make you happy. I love you." He reached to stroke her hair.

Suddenly, Sophia stopped crying. At first, she seemed to smile at him.

Then, her foot shot up to kick him.

Partially blinded by her tears, however, she missed. Jiminy Cricket grabbed her ankle. In one swift, strong motion, he stood up and threw her to the dusty floor.

"NO!" she hollered as she fell. "NO! I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE."

Jiminy Cricket stared down at her. "You shouldn't say that."

"GET ME OUT OF HERE!" she cried out. "SOMEBODY SAVE ME."

"No one can hear you," said Jiminy Cricket.

Sophia weeped on the floor. "Somebody save me," she said again.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew me," said the cricket. "If you could see me for who I really am. You would want to be with me."

Sophia's sobs seemed to become more violent, but they weren't sobs at all. She was laughing. "You're wrong," said Sophia. "You're a coward."

"Excuse me?" said Jiminy Cricket.

"I said, you're a coward," said Sophia, now looking up at him from the floor.

"You say you love me, but you had to kidnap me to try to win me over by force. And you keep me here locked up in secret."

Jiminy Cricket's grip on the gun tightened. He pointed it at her chest.

Sophia was unfazed. “You don’t want *anyone* to see you for who you are. That’s why you keep me here in secret. That’s why you wear a mask.”

The cricket gazed deeply into her eyes, but not in the way he usually did (i.e., in fawning infatuation). This time, he was truly considering her.

This is it, thought Sophia. He is going to kill me.

She closed her eyes, waiting for her life to pass before them.

A full minute passed.

Then, she heard the door open, and then close.

She opened her eyes. The lock clicked shut. Jiminy Cricket was gone.

Outside, Marek threw the mask off. He wiped the mixture of tears and sweat off his face with his sleeve.

3. Who was James Polk’s Vice President?

Marek had studied for the test, and he was sure that he *should* know the answer to this question, but no matter how hard he willed his brain to come up with the answer, he couldn’t. Marek couldn’t concentrate on history -- at least, not the history he was supposed to be concentrating on. All he could think about was Sophia.

The moment he had met her at Java Jungle when she came to take his order, he became enamored with her.

The most remarkable thing about Sophia -- as anyone who had ever seen her could attest -- was her hair. Marek had always had a thing for long blonde hair (he

couldn't explain why), so when he saw Sophia's lengthy, perfectly golden locks, he knew that had to have her.

The second-most remarkable thing about Sophia's appearance was her face. Her unwrinkled skin was fair but not pale. Her paradoxical eyes betrayed innocence when narrow, mischief when wide. Her eyebrows were naturally picture perfect; she eschewed plucking or shaving. Her small nose hooked up in such a way that only a woman's does.

And then, there was her perfect figure.

She was effortlessly beautiful -- and, so Marek had determined, she would soon be his.

But Sophia had never noticed him, even though he came to her coffee shop every day, even though he flirted and joked with her, even though he had given himself daily caffeine headaches as he tried to see her as much as he could at the coffee shop. Sure, she was nice enough to him, and once in a while Marek would think she was flirting back with him, but then she would see her act the same way -- nay, more intimately yet -- towards others -- especially the owner of the coffee shop and that strange Mr. Delahanty.

She doesn't think I'm special, Marek had thought. She thinks I'm just a kid. If only I could make her get to know me...and love me.

Finally, after months of pining, Marek decided he needed to do something bold. He decided that, if he wanted something, he was going to have to make it happen for himself.

Marek had waited for her across the street. It pained him to not be sitting at the coffee shop, as he normally would, to be as close as possible to his beloved Sophia, but if all went according to plan, he would be with her forever.

It was after 4:30 in the morning when Sophia came out -- still dark, but not that way for too much longer. The sun liked to shine early in Florida. Marek knew he had to act fast. He put on one of Jeremiah's old Halloween masks and quickly stalked up behind Sophia.

Chloroforming her was easy; she had been carrying something large and heavy in her arms. As she went unconsciously, the large ovoid fell out to the ground and cracked open (Marek could have sworn that something skittered out of the egg-like object and into the bushes, but he chalked it up to nerves).

Unfortunately, Marek's plan had not worked the way he had hoped it would. After three months, Sophia did not like him or love him any better. In fact, she hated him. This much was plain after yesterday.

She wanted someone braver than he was. She also wanted someone to save her.

And so that is the person Marek decided he would now be.

When the bell finally rang, nobody at school was more relieved than Marek. Not only did he no longer have to strain himself to remember Vice Presidents and what Manifest Destiny was all about, but he could also put the plan he had spent all day working up in his mind into action.

He ran to Oscar Colon's cigar shop as fast as his long legs would take him, one hand brushing his mop of hair out of his eyes, the other patting the switchblade in his pocket to make sure it was still there.

It was.

Marek arrived at the A-OK ready to cause a commotion -- quite unlike his usual *modus operandi*. Normally, with the owner of the shop getting ever drunker and the customers and employees pretty much looting to their hearts' content, Marek would easily slip by unnoticed to see his lovely Sophia in the basement. Marek had chosen the hiding spot well.

Today, though, he did not need to be clandestine. All he had to do was be bold. Brave. He was rescuing a damsel in distress.

"I recognize you," Sophia would say, he imagined, after he cut her tethered ankle free. "You're that handsome guy who I always see at the coffee shop. Thank you for rescuing me! I'll do anything to repay you. ...Anything. Because I think...I love you."

Maybe those wouldn't be her exact words, Marek admitted to himself as he dashed down the stairs. He was convinced, however, that that was the only reasonable way it could play out.

When Marek came to the door, he realized, in a crestfallen moment, that he could not possibly break it down. He would have to use the key to unlock it.

That's okay, he reasoned. He could tell Sophia that he had wrestled the key away from her captor in a daring fight.

Or, better yet., that he had wrestled the gun away from her captor, pointed it at him, and forced the captor to relinquish the key.

Yes, that would work. That would do nicely.

Taking a deep breath, Marek unlocked the door and quickly opened it. He dashed inside, brandishing his knife like a brave, mighty knight brandishing his broadsword.

He felt something heavy hit him on the back of the head, and everything went black.

Marek woke up to dim light, the faint smell of cigars, and the feeling of something warm, wet, and sticky.

He sat up and looked down at himself. He was covered in blood. So was his knife.

Marek patted himself down frantically. No pain, no gashes, no holes, nothing. He didn't have a scratch on him.

Sophia.

He looked around. Sophia was nowhere to be found.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

“Calm down,” Marek said out loud to himself. He stood up, almost falling over from shaking so much.

She can't be dead. She can't.

Marek stormed bolted out the door and stormed around the basement, trying to find some clues about what had happened.

I didn't mean to hurt her. I never wanted to hurt her. She's so beautiful.

“SHIT!” Marek shouted.

Marek was in a confounded rage. Dead people typically don't just get up and walk away.

So maybe she's not dead.

The relief that thought brought Marek almost immediately turned into dread. If he had attacked her, and yet she wasn't here, he realized, maybe she had run off.

Maybe she would tell the police.

After hurriedly rinsing off his hands, face, and clothes as best he could, Marek bolted upstairs and quickly left the cigar shop, sneaking past a distracted cashier and a snoozing Oscar Colon.

For now, Marek needed to act as if everything was normal; he would worry about an alibi later. He always went to the garage after school to help his father and his brother, so that seemed the logical place to go. The sight of the creepy Roadmaster Skylark would be welcome.

When Marek got to Cade's Garage, however, he saw no one else there. He looked up at the clock. 3:01.

Hello, Marek.

The voice was unfamiliar. Marek couldn't tell where it came from.

"Hello?" called out Marek.

Marek heard an engine start. Before Marek could wonder which of the many cars in the garage were running, he saw a pair of headlights turn on.

It was the Skylark.

"Are you in the car?" said Marek.

Mmm, in a manner of speaking.

Marek approached the Buick gingerly. When he got next to it, he saw for certain that the car was empty.

The engine revved again. Marek stumbled back, startled.

“Who are you?” Marek gasped. “*What* are you?”

I am Otto.

“Auto?”

No. Otto.

Marek scratched the back of his head intently. “That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

No. You said “Auto,” with an “A-U.” My name is Otto -- O-T-T-O.

Marek stopped scratching his head. “What? They’re pronounced the same.”

Maybe...but you meant “Auto” as in “automobile.”

Marek was getting more and more confused. He thought about scratching his head again, but decided to scratch his rear instead, on the off chance that that would help matters. “Now how could you tell what I meant just by what I said...when it sounds the same?”

Because, boy, I can see inside your head; hence, homonyms don’t confound me.

“Hommo-what?” asked Marek. He stopped scratching his rear; it hadn’t helped.

Homonyms, child. The voice -- Otto, or whatever he called himself -- seemed to sigh. *Never mind.*

“How can you be inside my head?” asked Marek, rolling his eyes as far up as they could go, willing himself to see inside his brain to try to spot Otto. “I thought you were the Buick.”

Otto gently chuckled. *Not quite.*

“Then where are you?!” said Marek rather sharply, surprising himself at how loud he sounded in the lonely garage.

Wouldn't you rather know where the girl is?

Marek felt his stomach cramp. He retched but, to his surprise, did not vomit. After catching his breath, he said, "What do you know about Sophia?"

That she's in trouble.

"How do you know that?" barked Marek a little defensively.

Because I was there. I saw it take her.

Marek rubbed his face vigorously in frustration and confusion. "Saw what?"

The thing from the underground. It plans to kill her.

Marek's eyes scanned the garage. The voice seemed to be coming from within his own mind -- but it was not his voice. It was a stranger. "She's alive?" said Marek, breathing ever more heavily.

Yes. Unlike yourself.

Marek tried to do a double-take, but realized that there was nothing in particular to look at; the voice was sourceless. Marek wound up just wagging his head around somewhat haphazardly for a few moments. "I don't understand," Marek finally said, as if the sentiment was not already plain.

You're dead, child. That thing killed you.

"What?" said Marek. "What thing?"

The thing from the underground. The thing that took the girl. It painted you red, and now you're dead.

The voice let out a blood-curdling snicker.

"I'm not dead," said Marek. "I mean, obviously. I'm alive, aren't I? I'm here. Walking and breathing and everything!" Marek stomped around the garage taking

exaggerated deep, heavy breaths to demonstrate.

Spiritual self-illusions, boy. You are quite dead. All that remains is your essence.

Your “ghost,” if you like.

“I’m-- I’m not a ghost!” Marek sputtered. “Look.” Marek leaned into the Skylark and pressed on the horn. It beeped.

Yes, you are able to influence your the physical world when you choose to do so, but you are little more than spiritual energy.

“You don’t scare me,” said Marek, breathing even more heavily, willing his lifeforce to fill the garage. “You don’t scare me at all.”

And with that, Marek ran out of the garage, scared out of his mind.

“Mom? Dad? I’m home,” said Marek.

There was no answer.

“Jeremiah?” called Marek, walking through the living room. Still nothing.

“Oh, for goodness sakes. *Lincoln???*” said Marek.

Still nothing.

Then, a wail. It reminded him of a ghost.

Then, another wail -- this one deeper, more manly.

The wails seemed to be coming from the other side of the house. Marek went into the kitchen to investigate.

It was his family. His mother was holding Jeremiah in her arms, close to her bosom, while his father sat at the kitchen table, white-knuckling a bottle of Maynard Cola.

They were all crying.

“Marek!” sobbed his adoptive mother, but she wasn’t talking to him. She seemed to be crying out the name in more of a general way, as if the name itself was lamentable.

See what I mean, boy? They weep for you.

In that moment, the cold voice shocked Marek like an ice cube plopped down the back of his shirt. “You’re wrong,” he whispered.

Marek then realized that there was no need to whisper -- quite the contrary, actually.

“Mom!” Marek said. “I’m okay! See? Dad! Jeremiah! I’m right here. I’m okay. See???”

His family did not react.

They cannot see or hear you, boy. You. Are. Dead.

“But then-- Then-- ah--” Marek stammered. Looking at his loving family crying for him, he felt his ghostly eyes welling up.

There is no time for that, boy! The voice was as sharp as Marek’s switchblade.

The girl, Sophia, is in trouble. Do you want to rescue her or not?

Marek wiped away his tears. “I can...rescue her?”

Yes. You can still save her if you hurry.

Sniffing back the mixture of mucus and tears that were running down his nasal passages, Marek immediately bolted back for the garage. He could still be Sophia’s hero.

Marek ran into his father's garage. "Now what?" he said, hoping Otto was with him.

You need to take the Skylark to the Bowl Bowl.

"But it's not yet done." said Marek.

It's finished enough for this journey. Get in the car.

The engine started up again, revving loudly.

"But I don't have my driver's license yet!" said Marek.

You kidnapped a girl and you're worried about driving without a license? Get in the car, now, boy. There is no time for excuses.

Marek started to stammer, but then remembered Sophia's words. She had no respect for cowards. She needed someone to save her. He hopped the door into the convertible's driver seat, started it up, and began to back out of the garage.

Something was off, though. After Marek had backed out of the garage, he saw that the car was still in front of him, sitting inside the garage -- but he was in the car, as plainly as day.

"The car...?" said Marek.

Ghost driver, ghost car. Get it? That's why you needed to take the Skylark. It's how Dr. Maynard is able to get into the tunnels unseen.

"The tunnels?" said Marek, more confused than he was before. Otto was not especially good at explaining things to him, he felt.

Drive. The Bowl Bowl. Now.

Shrugging, Marek complied. He knew the way well; his father (the adoptive one) took him there every couple of weeks.

“Where should I park?” he asked Otto.

Nowhere. Drive straight into the center of the building, into the automatic pinsetter machines.

“INTO the building?”

What part of “ghost” do you not understand, boy? For other, living drivers, the car is solid, even when invisible -- but for you, as a ghost, the car is as ethereal as you are capable of being.

“Dammit,” Marek muttered, partly at his own ignorance and stupidity, partly at Otto’s arrogance. Gritting his teeth, he slammed on the accelerator, driving the car straight into the Bowl Bowl, bracing himself for impact.

Impact did not come, however. Marek and his car went straight through the walls of the bowling alley. He located the pinsetter machine and drove the car straight into it.

Suddenly, he was falling, car and all.

The landing was not the thud Marek had expected, but was rather as light as a footstep.

He was in some kind of cavern “Where now?” he asked Otto.

She is not far. Drive straight down the corridor until you find her.

Marek sped down the tunnel; he did not need to be told twice when the love of his life was on the line. He did not worry too much about steering -- just speed. He could feel his heart beating throughout his entire torso and throat -- harder than he had ever felt his heart beat when he was actually alive. Had he not been focused on other matters at the time being, he would have marvelled at his lifelike nature of his ghost anatomy.

After almost two minutes of underground driving, he slammed on the brakes, flabbergasted at what he saw. The best way to describe it was something that was half-man, half-bug. Its six long, wiry, hairy legs skittered across the ground as it dragged another humanoid behind it.

It had Sophia.

Marek leapt out of the car, chasing after the bugman.

“What is that?” Marek whispered.

Better you don't know.

“Can it see me? Or hear me?”

No.

Marek contemplated the grotesque sight. “Good,” he muttered. With the patience, lightness, and concentration of a pitcher making a light toss to first base for a World Series-winning out, Marek walked around to the front of the bugman, slid the still bloody switchblade out of his pocket, flipped it open, and plunged the blade directly into the bugman's chest -- where, Marek presumed, his heart was.

The creature let out a piercing, horrific scream, somehow glottal and high-pitched at the same time. Marek hated the sound; it was the sound of pure horror. Marek stabbed the bugman again to get him to shut up. And again.

The scream got softer -- yet more vicious. Marek sliced the bugman's throat, turning the scream into an evil hiss.

Finally, the bugman collapsed, twitching. Dying.

Dead.

Marek stabbed the creature once more to be sure; it remained motionless, to his

enormous relief. He flipped the switchblade back closed and pocketed it. Then, he turned to Sophia.

He knelt beside her. She, too, was motionless. Her eyes were closed, and she had blood on her face and arms. He caressed her cheek tenderly, wiping some of the blood away. There was no reaction.

“Is she...dead?” Marek asked Otto.

Not yet. Look closely; she still breathes. If you can get her to the hospital fast enough, she might manage to avoid your fate.

Marek stopped breathing for a moment. He blinked twice. Then, he blinked a third time.

“Avoid my fate? Would she... Would she become a ghost too?” Marek swallowed hard. “...If she died?”

Everyone who dies in Bluff Oaks these days becomes a ghost. The magical energy in the town is so strong that it binds souls to the soil.

Marek’s hands trembled. “And then we could be together...” he murmured.

Yes, you would share the same plane of existence, and the same geography. But I thought you wanted to save her.

Marek ran his hands over the top of his head. “I... No, yes, I mean... No, you don’t understand. I love her.”

Marek stood up, placed his hands on the trunk of the Skylark, and rested his weight on them. “I love her.”

Sophia woke up to a bright light.

“Where am I?” she asked the person standing over her. Sophia could not see the figure very well; her eyes had not yet adjusted to the light.

“You’re safe,” said the person.

“Yes, but where am I?” asked Sophia, straining to see the figure more clearly.

“Everything is fine, so relax,” said the woman. “I’m a nurse. You’re at the Bluff County Hospital. No one will hurt you here.”

Sophia sat up, her mind hazy. “But how did I get here? What happened?”

“You tell me,” said the nurse. “We found you unconscious on the sidewalk outside the Emergency Room.”

Sophia was confused, but relieved. Her nightmare was finally over.

“I’ll tell the doctor you’re up,” said the nurse, grabbing her clipboard and heading towards the door. She smiled back at Sophia. “I guess you’ve got a guardian angel, young lady.”

“Yeah,” said Sophia. “I guess I do.”

As the nurse walked out of the room, Sophia could have sworn that she felt a hand run through her hair. She turned her head and reached her hand up to swat away whatever was there, but saw nothing.

Must have been a fly, she thought.

Chapter Nineteen

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Robert Kurring muttered. He bent down for the newspaper on his stoop, and looked up and down the street. Robert was pleased to see every mailbox smashed on the street, except well, his.

“That’s right, shitheads,” he laughed as he rattled his milk bottles at the street. “Didn’t bother Ol’ Kurring today, eh?” he snapped and triumphantly walked back inside.

No one bothered Robert, no one dared. He was entirely unapproachable, tall with wide shoulders, thick black hair which was rarely tame. His deep set eyes always gave the impression he was starring you down, figuring you out. Mainly because that’s what he did best. Robert had a way of letting you finish a sentence and then wait a painful amount of time before he’d answer. This tactic allowed people to nervously second guess themselves and worry they were about to receive an answer that wasn’t exactly wholesome. His voice was smooth and sharp, straight to the point as if he didn’t want to waste any time. Even asleep, he always looked like he was ready to attack.

Robert locked the front door behind him and made his way down the long hall and into the kitchen, where the drapes were pulled, as they were in every room everyday.

“Yes?” He answered the phone calmly, and lit a cigarette, his third one that morning.

“Long night, Buddy Boy?” The voice on the phone cracked a raspy laugh.

“Maybe for some.” Robert said knowing that everything he did went according to plan.

“That’s right, just routine, my friend, just routine.” The deep voice repeated almost rhythmically. “You know where to me meet us.” The phone clicked and was silent. Robert sat back and flicked ashes off his wrinkled navy blue pants. He threw his head back and took long, deep drags and rubbed his eyes.

“Just routine, just routine.” Robert said softly to himself and made his way up to his bedroom to prepare for the day.

As he approached the stairs, he noticed a few blood streaks on the banister. He paused and used his sleeve in attempt to wipe the dry streaks off, slowly rubbing his forearm into the wood. His elbow was exposed through a large tear in his jacket; he removed the filthy jacket, rolled it into a tight ball and threw it in a large trash can in the far corner of his closet.

It wasn’t always this way. Before, Robert lived in a small suburb outside Chicago, where he and his family avoided people like the man he had become. He had loving parents. His father who checked his homework at night, and his mother who would scrub behind his ears on Sundays before church. Robert had a younger sister, Jennifer, whom he cherished. Jenny, as he called her, was three years younger, shy and kind. Thoughtful and a true dreamer. When she was much younger, she had wanted to become a ballerina, and was always prancing around the house on her toes. She was a light, graceful girl, even when chasing after the school bus in the morning. Robert used to feel the need to protect her, allowing her to remain in her own little world.

But everything changed in one afternoon. Robert was 16 years old when his mother was caught in the cross fire of a bank robbery in the city. The ambulance

didn't make it in time. Learning the news, his father rushed to the hospital where there was total chaos as nurses buzzed around the room attending several victims. Young Robert soon had to become the head of the house as his father became a drunk, daily reliving the moment of running over to his wife's bed as a doctor declared her time of death. Watching her father grow to be more depressed, and missing her mother herself, Jenny came down from her girlie cloud, and grew up quickly. She vowed to become a nurse to help other people. Robert dropped out of school and started breaking into houses, the only way he could think of to get what he needed for his family. He even started running errands for the men in smart black pin suits, wearing gold pinkie rings, chewing thick Cuban cigars. At the time, he was naïve and didn't understand what the errands were, but old enough to know he was part of something expansive, twisted and secretive.

“Good to see you, Robby. Now we're all here. Let's get crackin',” A fat man announced as Robert entered the darkened room. Robert nodded in greeting the rest of the men, crossed his arms and leaned up against the doorway.

“Now some of you may know about this dumb bastard,” said the fat man chewing fistfuls of bread. “He's been lifting our shit and it gets better-”

“Now this dummy is claimin' to be communicatin' with dopes from the future!” A skinny squeaky man interrupted, elbowing the man next to him.

“Would you like to tell the back story, Lenny, you fuck?” The fat man yelled spitting out clumps of bread.

“The future, Don, what it this shit?” A dark figure barked.

“Young kid, lost his family, everything, now as this genius pointed out,

runnin' around thinking he's pretty funny." Don paused to look around and shove more bread down his fat throat. "Pretty fuckin' funny, future funny bullshit."

"Yeah! Tellin' the whole town he's got some new informant, some ghosts or someone from outer space or somethin'." Lenny exclaimed looking around excitedly.

"SHUT UP, LENNY." Don pounded a chubby fist on the table and leaned close into Lenny's boney face.

"Alright, fellas. So...who's going for him?" Robert inserted, while starring straight through Don.

"Well, of course, we was thinkin' you, Bobby Boy. Easy hit for you." Don relaxed and turned to Robert, finally putting the loaf down. "Easy target, easy disposal and no one will miss that crazy fuck."

"I'll take Lenard and Vincent. Give me the address, let's go." Robert said turned on his heels, grabbed his hat and a folded piece of paper from Don and headed for the door.

Lenny and the man next to him, Vinny headed for the door. Lenny patted his pockets, formed a gun sign with his pointer finger and thumb and shoot a goodbye to Don. Vinny shook his head and shoved Lenny through the doorframe.

"Have fun, boys." Don said to their backs not smiling.

Robert opened the passenger door and slid to the driver's seat. Clutching the steering wheel and starring into the empty road ahead of him, he thought about Jenny. Images of her flashed through his mind, 6 year old Jenny with blond bouncy curls, spinning in circles in the back yard; 13 year old Jenny hugging their mother before work

on her last day alive; 15 year old Jenny round, sweaty, screaming and crying and bloody. Robert opened the driver's door quickly, spun in his seat bent over clutching his lap and spewed vomit all over his shoes.

"You alright, Robby?" Lenny ran to his side, helping him back into the car.

"Get in, Lenard." He said, not looking at Lenny and he and Vinny stumbled into the back seat of the car.

"Say boss, you need to sit this one out? Afraid of the guy and his team of ghosts?" Lenny half-laughed, poking Vinny for approval.

Robert started the car and took off, speeding. The car roared obnoxiously through the empty Bluff Oaks streets and came to a halt in front of Trixie's Diner.

"Get out. Meet you here in three hours." Robert said as he watched the men through the rear view mirror as they climbed out and shuffled quickly to the diner.

Robert headed back to his house to prepare everything for that night. He tried to focus on his task, but found himself distracted again by images of Jenny. He walked around the house, gathering flashlights, rope, blankets, and all of the chemicals necessary; and packed an old army duffle bag with robotic precision.

Jenny, sweet Jenny, innocent Jenny. He thought to himself. It was the anniversary of her death and it seemed he had lost count of how many years it had been.

Which bothered him, but not as much and picturing her in so much pain.

Back in Chicago, when Jenny was 15, he started to notice her getting bigger, and ill. She was always tired, and the girls teased her at school. She was five months along before she revealed to him that she was pregnant. Robert was enraged to learn his good friend Bill

had taken advantage of her before he went off to war. Being young and in love she didn't think of the consequences, and it would later cost her her life.

"I fucking said I would be there in three hours," Robert snapped to Lenny who kept calling the house looking for instructions. He slammed down the phone, gathered the army duffel bag and concealed his gun in his jacket. Robert picked up a delicate gold chain off his kitchen table and wove it around his fingers. He took one last dazed look at the tiny gold cross and left the house this time without locking it.

Getting back in the car, Robert hung the chain on the rear view mirror but it slipped and bounced somewhere in an air vent. He frantically clawed around looking for it, and gave up, rushing to the diner.

It was getting dark now and Robert switched the lights on, accidentally turning on the high beams. He poked at a few knobs and started to hear a girl's voice over the radio.

"Stop Robby. Stop Robby. Stop Robby." The voice echoed. Robert slowed the car and looked around suspiciously. There was no one in sight except for a couple hand in hand on the sidewalk, neither were talking.

"Robby. I can't let you do this Robby." The eerie voice continued. "It's me Robby..."

"Jenny?" He came to a complete stop. His hands were shaking and he slapped the radio. "Jenny? Jenny?!"

"I miss you, Robby."

Robert heard the voice loud and clear now, he looked around outside and jumped in his seat when he saw blond hair reflected in the mirror.

“Jenny!”

“Please don’t go through with this, not tonight.” Jenny was sitting in the middle of the back seat, her soft features were the same as they were decades ago, but she appeared tired and worried. She was in a green and blue checkered dress, matching her once piercing green eyes that now had a cloudy film over them. Robert wanted to touch her hands that were gently clasped on her lap.

“Jenny. How did you-? Where-? Are you alright?” Robert stammered.

“Jenny, you know this is what I do...it’s what I- are you alright, oh Jenny, why-”

“The man you are about to go after is my baby. My baby, his name is Randy now.”

Robert felt ill again. “I didn’t know, I didn’t know, Jenny.”

“Get him out of here, he’s in trouble, I know. You need to help him. Get him out of here!”

“I will! Are you ok-” the image of Jenny started to fade, the gold chain left behind on the seat. Robert grabbed it hastily and groped at his keys, he knew he’d have to hurry to find his nephew before the others got to him.

He knew he had kept Jenny’s secret too long. He knew he had to tell Randy the truth, and had waited far too long. For now what had happened to his family was now Randy’s fate. Years ago in the middle of the night, Jenny went into labor. Being a young girl back in Illinois, Robert used the excuse that she had an extreme fever and they both ran off to Bluff Oaks, Florida for the fresh start they both needed. He felt responsible for getting them into trouble with the mob, and Jenny being with-child. It was his time to make it right. And now he had to help her again.

Racing quickly to the address scribbled on a crumpled envelope in his pocket, Robert's eyes darted from the road to the mirror, hoping Jenny would reappear and tell him what to do. He was still shaken from seeing her, she didn't look happy and peaceful as she truly was so many years ago. Was she in heaven? Was she somewhere in between? Robert had never believed in such things and slapped his face wondering if this was all real.

The palm trees along the street seemed to whiz by and he screeched block after block hoping frantically hoping each house to be his destination.

"Fuck...fuck...fuck...where are you Randy?" Robert wondered if he'd be a junkie, a loser, he knew vaguely from what he learned earlier that day, that if he and his men went out for Randy, then things weren't looking good.

He knew Randy wouldn't be a baby of course; actually, he hadn't spied on him since he was a boy. And he regretted not being more in his life. Though, Robert's own path wouldn't have been a healthy future for the boy anyway.

Finally he came upon 423 Washington Ave., and parked across the street. He surveyed the neighborhood and the house from afar. The house looked empty, the lights were out, and there seemed to be broken glass and splintered wooden planks across the back yard.

Robert had to find him. He had to tell him everything and he had to start from the beginning. After Robert and Jenny moved to Florida, they pretended to be married and had planned on Jenny going back to school to focus on biology after the baby was born. Since the real father was off to war, he wouldn't have much information to find them, not that he would ever care to come looking.

One summer night, Jenny had overwhelming pain, the delivery happened so fast that Robert was forced to do everything himself. After several hours, Jenny lay dead on the kitchen floor, and Robert held a bloody crying baby. Caught in grief and panic, he cleaned the newborn boy and wrapped him up in a dish rag and tucked him into a picnic basket. Hoping to give him a better life, Robert left the basket on the steps of the church in the center of town, and watched, hidden in the car, as someone finally discovered him and brought the screaming baby inside.

“Listen fucker, don’t you touch our cars no more,” Robert was brought back to reality as he heard a familiar meek voice from inside Randy’s house.

“Honest! I swears I didn’t take nothin’!” Another voice begged. Robert snuck in through the back porch window to find two men harassing a man on the floor. The room was dark with only the few streaks of light bouncing around the walls from two flash lights.

“You know, freak, when the boss gets here, we’re gonna shut you up for good.” Lenny leaned in a grinned.

Robert slid sideways into the room, not making a sound. He coughed, “Good work, I can take it from here.”

Lenny and Vinny straightened up and pointed their guns at Robert. He motioned his hands for them to relax, and they let out a sigh of relief.

“Gee, pal, you shouldn’t sneak up on a man like that. We’ve got him ready for you.” Vinny said, not noticing Randy slowly getting off the ground and onto his knees.

“I thought I made it clear you were to wait for me to pick you up,”

Robert said through gritted teeth. “Why don’t you give me a chance to-”

As Robert finished, a loud bang sounded as Randy swung a stray board to the back of Vinny’s head. Startled, Lenny turned his right arm outstretched waving his gun at Randy and his left clenched to block whatever was coming for him. Randy wielded the other side of the board and chopped it down on Lenny’s right arm knocking the gun across the room. They both dove for the gun as Robert retreated to the back of the room where he had entered. Randy reached the gun first, firing two shots at Vinny and turning to Lenny and Robert. Lenny clamored over to Robert with his hands up, both appeared to be unarmed as Robert still hadn’t revealed his weapon.

“Randy, listen son, there is something you should know. Randy, put the gun down and we’ll talk.” Robert delivered calmly looking appathetically into Randy’s green eyes. He couldn’t believe how much he looked like Jenny. It almost made him smile, if not for the urgent situation.

“Now it’s your turn to shut up...” Randy said forcefully to Lenny.

“What happens now Future-Boy-” with one shot to the mouth Lenny gurgled and fell to the floor face first.

“Randy. I know about you. I know about your family, your real family. I know about your real mother, please Randy.” Robert lowered his hands to prove everything was ok. Randy looked at him sideways, he also lowered his hands, but kept the gun firmly to his side. He stepped closer and smiled.

“You don’t know nothin’ about me friend.” Randy got even closer and Robert could see how lifeless his eyes were and how while well groomed, he stunk off liquor. They were almost nose to nose when a shot fired. Robert felt his right hip bone

split and he grabbed it as he dropped to the floor.

“Randy please, I’m your uncle, honest!” Robert pledged watching his own blood cover his hands and pool around his leg.

“Nothing. You don’t know nothin’ about me, friend.” Randy backed away towards the other door by the front of the house.

“Nothing.” One last shot was fired and soon all Robert saw was black.

Chapter Twenty

Don't flutter. Just let her fly. Irwin Moose whispered to himself as he stood in Lane 13, holding his Brunswick ball in his hands like a bird with a broken wing. He closed his eyes and the sweet cacophony of The Bowl Bowl soothed his racing heart. The automatic pinsetter rattled. The ball return mechanism whirred. A ball was returning, its 15-pound roll a satisfying rumble. Then, an explosive pin drop.

“YEEAAAooow!”

Hollers and laughs followed. Irwin looked to his left and saw a throng at Lane 6. He had a flashback to the day that old George Lee Lincoln rolled with the skill and luck of a Billy Welu. It was another sign that something had disturbed his universe, The Bowl Bowl in particular and Bluff Oaks in general. People were acting crazy. Weird things were happening. Bowl a 301? How is that possible? And by that bastard George “Stinkin” Lincoln, of all people? *Must be the End of Times*, he thought.

He lowered his Brunswick. His shoulders with it. One step. Two steps. Then the waltz, as he called the footwork leading up to the lane, and a twist, and a hurl, and a ... His ball kissed the polished wooden lane and appeared to pick up speed with every millisecond. *Sssmaack-pockle!* The pins toppled. All but two, sentinels standing on either side of the lane.

“Balls!” he yelled.

Standing there in Lane 13, his lucky lane, the lane no one else dared use since the accident of '59, Irwin Moose suddenly knew that nothing was the same. Nothing would ever be the same. Again. That thought both terrified him and excited him.

Whoever was rolling over in Lane 6 was having a time of it, weren't they? At least it wasn't old George Lee Lincoln, his bum hip and all showing up a league champion like Irwin Moose, who at that very second was craving another Jack and Maynard Cola. And a good cigar. Would Oscar and his *A-OK Cigar & News* be open? Would that drunk even know what day it is, or would his internal beer clock be stuck on Greenwich Mean Time?

Lane 6 erupted again in applause. Peering out of his peripheral vision, he saw the crowd, then saw it disperse. The Bowl Bowl was deserted. His attention darted to a flurry of shadows down the length of the alley, behind the Henry J. Murrey pinsetter machines. He caught the smell of leather shoes steeped in deodorizer, then the heinous waft of *ugh, Judas Priest, is that garbage?* Smelled like a dead carcass, rotten eggs, burning insulation. His eyes watered. Blinking, he saw more shadows and heard a clanking noise, followed by something slithering, and then someone or something dragging a steel bar across concrete.

“Moose?”

Irwin bolted upright. It was Debbie, the gum-smacking counter girl and waitress.

“Didn't mean to spook ya, Moose. Can I get you anything from the bar, hon?”

“Jack and Maynard,” he blurted, avoiding her eyes and looking at a point above her head.

“Maynard Cola. Yes, you may!”

“Jesus, Debbie, just go easy on the cola, will ya.”

Debbie smacked her gum and spun on her heels to sashay off to the bar. Irwin stared after her, appraising her ass as she swung her hips back and forth, back and forth.

Onion. His father would have called that ass an *onion* -- so perfect it could make a man weep. Irwin smiled and shook his head. He glanced down the alley. Lane 6 was empty. He looked toward the bar. It, too, was empty. Debbie had vanished. Something was definitely wrong. The noise was gone. But those shadows still flittered behind the pinsetters.

Ain't nothing back there but gears, pulleys, old pins, and dust. It was Irwin's favorite part of The Bowl Bowl. It was the one utilitarian part of the joint, a ridiculous piece of architecture if there ever was one - churches excluded. A dome-shaped bowling alley? Please. More wasted space along those outer, concave walls than Wall Street. The only good thing about it, besides the cheap whiskey and the short-skirted attendants, was the name, The Bowl Bowl, and even that was a stretch.

Irwin cocked his head and looked up at the ceiling. He was listening for whatever had made the noise down the alley. It was useless, he realized, when Hank Williams started crooning out of the jukebox:

"Your Cheatin' Heart ... will make you weep ... you'll cry and cry, and cry to sleep. But sleep won't come ... the whole night through ... Your cheatin' heart ... will tell on you ..."

Irwin Moose shook. He shivered. He stood, took a deep breath, and ran for the side exit.

Nightfall had arrived and made the Florida heat sufferable. With his long stride, Irwin was covering ground when he noticed the bulb on Oscar's cigar shop sign flash off and on, off and on. As he passed, the bulb went out again. Beneath it, he snapped open and flicked his Zippo. The old blunt he saved for his evening walk lit up and hissed.

Sucking the end of it, the flame shot higher. A deep inhale. His throat warmed and he dragon-exhaled through his nostrils. The bulb on Oscar's sign, the *A-OK Cigar & News*, flashed back on, and that's when he saw it. Right there in the street.

A body.

Heart thumping in his chest, Irwin stared at it for several long seconds before he could breathe. *It's just a drunk. Poor bastard.* Looked like he'd been dropped to the earth. The man's body was a crumpled mass, a crumpled mess. His long legs juttled out in either direction, points on a twisted compass. Irwin glanced left and right. Nobody was around. He stepped forward, crouched, and slipped his hand into the man's pocket. *Careful, careful ...*he removed a worn billfold. It was warm. The bulb overhead blinked off and on as Irwin inspected his spoils. Some wrinkled One Dollar Bills. A Merchant Mariner card. A faded photograph of a familiar woman. *Wow, she really does look familiar.* An identification card that read ... Irwin Manfred Moose.

Irwin recoiled. The wallet landed onto the body at his feet. His cigar dropped onto the body. The cigar smoldered and *ARRRGH-son-of-a-bitch*, his own leg was burning. He hopped around and patted his leg, but the pain continued. Then he understood. His cigar was burning that poor bastard on the ground. *And him.* He kicked the cigar off the body. His foot smarted, and his left knee hurt from where he kicked the body in the left knee.

“What the hell? Is this ... me?”

It kind of looked like him. Same worn corduroy pants, still two inches longer than his long legs. Same bright green blazer. Same coarse white hair coming out the ears. Same tuft of graying hair. Every pore on the guy's body seemed to emanate a whiskey

cologne. The only difference that Irwin could gather: A golden ring on the body's right hand.

If it hadn't twinkled in the shop light overhead, Irwin would have missed it. He picked up the hand, and the ring slid easily off. Bigger than it looked. Someone had inscribed something on the inside of the band. Irwin held it up to the light, still couldn't make out the words. Something ... *requiescat*? He shrugged. *Why the hell not?* He slipped the ring on his finger. He tried to slip it off, but it wouldn't budge past his knuckle, swollen as it was from so many years of hurling and hooking a bowling ball. He kept trying until his eyes started watering. That rotten carcass-garbage stench overwhelmed him again.

"Fits, doesn't it?"

Whirling around, Irwin Moose stood before three gargoyle-like creatures. Puss bubbled from their nostrils. He wanted to scream, but couldn't. He wanted to run, but wouldn't. Something held him in place. Every molecule in his body was tingling yet frozen. Pitiful, pitiful creatures. They huddled together, as if interlocked. Their bodies were a mass of litter, broken bottles, and metal scraps, like each was resuscitated road kill that had rolled in pine tar and fallen into the town dump. Something like blood and saliva oozed from each. As he inspected the horrific scene, the other-worldly trio just wavered there, perhaps an unspoken acknowledgement that their presence was disgusting, shocking, and beastly, and that Irwin Moose would need a moment to grasp the moment.

The middle creature spoke. "You see for yourself. Bluff Oaks is being destroyed. Don't let them do it. It's not too late."

One of the creatures hissed like a gas lantern. The other one appeared to be inspecting the body on the ground. And ... *grinning?* Irwin couldn't be sure. He wasn't sure of anything at that precise moment. As he followed the creature's gaze, casting his own furtive glance at his body double on the ground, he was surprised to see the body shimmer and fade away. His twin, his other body, had disappeared.

"Balls." He tried to compose himself. His mind raced. He thought of the Warwick Club, that small men's society that worships spirits from other dimensions. Maybe they weren't so bat-shit crazy after all. He turned to face the three creatures. And, unlike any human being he'd encountered since the war, he looked them directly in the eyes.

"Am I ... dead?"

The middle creature was about to speak again. The stinking, rotting biomass to its right interjected. "Do you feel dead?" It was grinning again. Definitely grinning.

"Irwin," a mouth-drooling pause, "you've never been more alive. For now."

"What do you want from me?"

"Bluff Oaks," the middle creature spit out, falling silent to catch its breath.

"Err, what about it?"

"Bluff Oaks. The egg extraction. ... You must save the city from destruction."

His eyes watered again. Irwin felt it coming, welling up from deep within. He broke into uncontrollable sobbing. He tried to speak, but his sobs suffocated his words. He wanted more information. He wanted to know. As he tried to catch his breath, the three creatures slithered back and forth, and then back, and then, one after the other, they faded into the night.

His sobs subsided. His finger burned. The golden ring pulsed. And Irwin knew what had to be done, knew it with the dream-like clarity of bowling a perfect game.

The East Church clock groaned. As its giant hand creaked past midnight, Irwin Moose stepped out of the side alley and made his long legs do what God had intended: cover territory. Seven strides and he was to the rectory door. Someone had spray painted on it: *Bee is for Broke*. The night, quiet as a morgue on Sunday, was his accomplice. If he couldn't save himself, the least he could do was save the town he loved. He turned the knob and the heavy door opened inward, as he knew it would.

“We’ve been waiting.” The Voice from the darkness instructed him to follow and to hurry. “The tunnels are this way.”

Down uneven steps. Past an air vent that smelled like pastries. Through a long hallway. Around and around. Through an archway. More steps. Around and around. A tunnel. The stone walls were cold, clammy. The Voice paused in a chamber, and Irwin bumped into it. He felt rough terry cloth fabric before being pushed backward. Still he couldn't see a thing, but somehow he knew where they were: the root cellar of The Bowl Bowl. This was the Rev. Jeremy Grafton's long lost chart room. It wasn't supposed to exist. The odor of old maps, missives, and archives proved otherwise. It smelled like musty bacon grease. Smelled like home. Irwin's stomach growled.

The Voice fluttered away to his right. It was whispering something to someone, or something. Irwin opened his bowling bag, took out two long sticks of dynamite and cradled them in his left arm. With his right, he reached for the shelving nearby. He fumbled a bit, then clutched a rolled-up manuscript and quickly transferred it to his

bowling bag. Then again, and again, until his bag was full. It weighed a lot more than his Brunswick, he realized, pleased with the comparison.

Next he reached into the back pocket of his corduroys and fished out his Zippo. *Click*. A blinding, white light paralyzed his every sense. Someone had flicked an electric switch. When his eyes adjusted, his lighter was in his hand, unopened. Dynamite sticks were in his left hand, unlit. The *click* belonged to the hammer on the back of what looked like a tricked out .38 revolver. The revolver belonged to a toothy smirk. The toothy smirk belonged to Dr. Brian Maynard.

“*Maynard?*”

“Yes, Moose. Yes, you may.”

Chapter Twenty-One

George Lee Lincoln's body bent slightly toward the concrete, coming within inches of a pea-sized object of indeterminate origin. He realized instantaneously that he could no longer reach the ground. Years of custodial work in the Maynard Cola Factory had allowed for nimble tasks to quickly become impossibilities almost overnight. Age had settled in his joints, spending most of its time in an ornery revolt, one which George subverted each morning he rose promptly for five AM calisthenics. The object remained non-plussed and out of reach.

Most would have moved onto other distractions-*after all, no one was really watching*. The damp of an empty brick cavern might draw anyone toward an endless chasm of meaningless tasks, things to clean, or various explorations. The payroll was steady, so long as someone was willing to stand guard. However, George was determined in each minute task, his make and model a generation that reputed inconsequential chit chat in favor of good old-fashioned work ethic and task completion.

He was the last of his kind. Where other bottlers, supervisors, and factory workers had left in the wake of the cola scandal, its owner still held the lease on the decidedly defunct property. The property and company were still under control of one Dr. Brian Maynard, former chemist and cola magnate. Despite the cease of operations, the man had surprisingly incurred little to no debt. George was one of the last to leave, simply because no one had told him to go. Maynard seized the opportunity. Promoting George to "maintenance supervisor" allowed Maynard a sense of security, knowing he could keep the property and its contents under lock and key beneath the guise of a man whose sole interest was in "upkeep."

Cleanliness is in the details. The object stared up at him--rose gold and spherical. It's minutia was seemingly attached to the battered mess of concrete, which broke open into an extensive crack of crumbled stone and corroded metal buttresses. It dared him to continue. He stooped to reach it again and was stalled by his own physical limitations. The sphere remained. *C'mon, you little bugger.*

Speaking with him for more than three minutes would quickly reveal George Lee Lincoln a former lieutenant and veteran of Word War I, which he insisted on referring to as "The Great War," or on particularly nostalgic days, *La Guerre du Droit*. Trenches had taught him something about leverage and, spying the push broom nearby, he attempted to lower his body toward the object. With wrinkled palm on splintered handle, he steadied himself, his lower back straining to balance precariously on essentially a one inch-thick twig. George's knees buckled at the notion of reaching the cold floor, mocking him from below.

What was at first a tingle soon became a pinprick, announcing its arrival with a deep, cutting pain that sprinted through his left leg in precision-timed nanoseconds. George's knee hit ground, the broom handle whacking the floor with a crack that echoed staggeringly off of brick and mortar slabs. George Lee Lincoln had finally broken his hip.

Most of the clerical employees at Maynard Cola had quit or been carefully "let go" following Dr. Maynard's somewhat troubling and universally scandalous revelation to Mrs. Gilman's eighth grade classroom. The aftermath of the event was profound. Secretaries quickly made new arrangements, some finding time to suddenly "start a family" while others found hospitality at a telephone switchboard. The typists, who pecked out press releases and correspondence were the first to depart, leaving in their

wake a nest of paperwork one could neither begin to sort out, nor answer. One local dentist had taken the best of them and by the end, all of Maynard's magnificent blue jays had quickly found gainful employment. All but one.

Hattie Rafferty had heard the noise from a quiet room in the back offices. Despite her elderly nature, she was insistent upon working and, like her colleague Mr. Lincoln, was also cleaning. To her it was more or less scavenging. At first glance, she gave the appearance of a condor feeding, her bulbous head leering slightly past slim, bony shoulders. Angular elbows consistently at a crook, her hands picked through document after document, searching for morsels of truth in the chaotic aftermath. Her eyelids squinted, head moving mechanically from left to right, emerald eyes sweeping, ever sweeping. She still couldn't understand it. The documentation simply wasn't there. Her deep green eyes gleamed as they swept mercilessly through the files for some semblance of understanding.

Where were the records of the 'supposed' egg extractions? she wondered. Hattie couldn't wrap her head around the idea that something of this nature had even occurred, let alone ended the universal consumption of Maynard Cola. She had been drinking it for years, her first icy bottle the day Dr. Brian Maynard hired her his personal assistant and secretary. Her hair was redder then, an effortless sweep of vibrant apricot pinned and tucked, the highlight of her aging frame. Dripping from her shoulders and waist, expensive linen suits hung in a not quite fit, causing some of her coworkers to wonder "Had she lost weight recently?" Divorce was a cruel fate for a woman of that time and Maynard Cola had finally married her to a purpose. While her hair had faded into hues of

dull copper soot, her fiery spirit remained. She may have been old, but Hattie Rafferty had no intention of leaving.

Following the exodus, it was she who remained on the business end of things. The day the townspeople revolted, picketing the entrance with signs outlining their outrage, it was she who bravely stood by Dr. Maynard's side. If it were not for their extreme age difference, one might begin to suspect she was in on Maynard's cola secrets from the very beginning. However, it was her pure faith in a business model that she had come to think of as her own that bound her so resolutely to Maynard. People turned their backs. She had no business being so headstrong, especially a woman at her age.

"Until my pension is paid in full, I'm not going anywhere," she had told Dr. Maynard, so very matter-of-factly, as boxes were packed up and vacated, their corrugated cardboard contents filled with years of indisputable loyalty. Thinking he had no other choice but to gainfully employ her, with benefits, Dr. Maynard continued the payroll. A woman of Hattie's caliber would not be drowned by someone else's sinking ship.

George's yelp echoed past empty hallways, up hollow staircases, racing toward the back offices. Meanwhile, the wooden broom handle danced its gymnastic routine, eventually settling to the floor, its clamoring a staccato that further amplified George's pain. Hattie's slim neck strained to hear the commotion, her leathery wrinkles smoothing as her head craned toward the factory floor. She rose immediately. *George.*

When she found him, he was immobile from the waist down. The ambulance was surprised to find the desolate place occupied, let alone by two people who could easily be retired by now. "Mr. Lincoln," they'd say, "it's a testament to your spirit that you didn't kill yourself back there. You had quiet a fall."

They'd always say things like that to the elderly. Of course they weren't terribly concerned. They had seen those whose demises would terrify any person living alone over the age of 70--old men discovered weeks later, half eaten by their prized Dobermans, things like that. "You could've killed yourself there." Hattie and George knew better. If anything was going to take a man like George Lee Lincoln down, it certainly was not going to be a broken hip.

The small golden sphere was still connected firmly to the ground. As they carried George out, he gazed tacitly at Hattie, pointing to its location in the concrete, light from the dusty factory windows reflecting off of its brushed metallic surface.

Was it an earring? Hattie knelt down, straining to pull it from the floor, its weight much loftier than its size. Nevertheless, she bore down, and with a final purposeful tug, it was loosened from the surface, stone crumbling through holes in the factory floor. *It wasn't.* A small rod extended from the rose gold handle, attaching to a conical juncture at one end. *It's some sort of key.*

When she looked up, he was gone. Former Army Lieutenant George Lee Lincoln was ferried away, all his stark loyalties tied to a dark, brick monument to nothing, looming surreptitiously over an empty parking lot. Moss crept onto the loading dock and disappeared into wet stone corners. It was the last George saw of the place--the Maynard Cola sign as vibrant as the day it opened, his '52 Chevy pickup parked in the first space of the lot, the sky an eerie cornflower. The sun as bright as rain.

Hattie Rafferty was utterly alone--the lone post-apocalyptic survivor of failed business in action. She returned to her nest, setting the key in her lap, cradled in the patterned tweed of her lap. Of course, it had to open something. Securing stray wisps of

her hair with a pin, Hattie smoothed her skirt and handled the key. It possessed a faint metallic smell of iron ore and licorice, reminiscent of Hattie's favorite theater candy, Allsorts. It was surprisingly cool to the touch.

But what could it possibly open? Hattie had spent years in the space, working diligently at her desk, the keys to the entire building at her fingertips. She possessed an extensive knowledge of all the building's entrances and exits, impressing town fire marshal after town fire marshal--some considerably younger than her--with both her highly-detailed emergency routes and striking looks. For an aging woman of 83, she took considerable care of herself, going so far as to dress for colleagues who simply were not there. Each day, she made 14 imaginary heads turn in a room full of 14 empty desks. She had been the facilitator of information, the control in a chaos no one could completely understand. If Hattie was privy to knowledge others had not, how was she still surprised as the rest regarding Maynard's secret ingredient? She resigned herself to the fact that maybe she hadn't known it all. There was only one other option.

Fingering the cold metal of the key, Hattie returned to the darkened factory floor, George's mop bucket and a broom handle haphazardly lying next to the cracked concrete. *The underground tunnels. The tunnels must somehow connect to the factory.* Grabbing the broom's oak handle, she began chipping away at the already crumbling concrete, at one point positioning a chair over the area so that she could chisel while seated. Rock seemingly fell into nothing, making no sound to indicate any sort of landing. *Was it bottomless?* Upon hearing silence, followed by faint crackles and echoes, Hattie's strength grew, her actions growing more and more unbridled. Hairpins fell and yet, she

continued. The sky darkened to cold steel. There was something beneath the factory floor. She knew it.

Hattie's papyrus-like hands warmed the cold metal of the key in her lap. *Earl Rafferty would just spit if he could see this.* With her makeshift tool in hand, a little bit of effort went a long way, working for what seemed like hours. With one last whack, the broom handle pushed through, taking a full square foot of concrete with it to a world below. 83-year old Hattie Rafferty had broken through the Maynard Cola Factory floor.

"Well, my word..." she exclaimed, speaking to no one in particular, captivating once again a room of imaginary faces. The shadows of former workers did double takes, examining her handiwork, peering into the newly-revealed chasm below. "See what I did there?" she yelled out, her voice jubilant in its never-ending reverberation. It broke into the rafters. The chasm fell into nothing as her voice travelled hypothetical miles. "See what I did?!?"

Her hair neatly fell into a bowl cut vaguely reminiscent of an inverted coconut and had matted to her face as the beads of vigorous sweat enlarged. She had originally thought the hard part was over, conceiving the excavation as a probable dead end hours earlier. However, as ground had crumbled away to nothing, she knew the roughest part of the adventure lay ahead. *Eggs. Will I find eggs?* she thought, hoping in a small sense for a bizarre fountain of youth somewhere beneath her beige BeeBee work pumps.

Lying against the concrete, her body rested into a plank, her face positioned to peer into the dark hole. No light. A trip to the back offices remedied this, as she soon returned with a small kerosene lantern, conveniently kept in the storage closet for emergencies and

power outages. Hattie lit the match on the first try, illuminating the entire space. She lowered the lantern.

The floor must have been at least 50 feet down, and she hung her head downwards to look more carefully at the space. Close to half of Hattie's strong, but aged body was thrust through the hole, her left hand swinging the lantern as low as possible to give off the most light. *Take that Earl Rafferty.* As blood rushed to her head, she recalled various breathing techniques she had learned while training for the national synchronized swimming team. She had qualified, but never continued. Still, the deep breathing was memorable and alleviated some of the pain. The adrenaline took care of the rest.

The lantern cast high-key shadows throughout what looked like a stark ballroom. Directly beneath her lay the vague presence of a white--*or was it beige?*--sportscar. She couldn't quite tell in the gloaming. She was after all, hanging precariously from the cavernous ceiling of an undiscovered space. Hattie pulled herself up from the dusty hovel and took a breath. Whatever it was down there, there was something larger in the distance. She couldn't quite tell if it was object or shadow. With another deep breath, Hattie thrust her head and torso downward into the wet must of the hole. The car was in sight now. She adjusted the position of the lantern to get a more accurate inspection. Friendly headlights peered out from the sides of a grill that looked suspiciously like the face of a monkfish. White-rimmed tires and a familiar downward-facing silver arc accessorized the sides. Hattie's eyes may not have been what they used to be, but she knew almost instantly that it was a 1953 Buick Skylark.

Most women of her age were not intrigued by cars--in fact, many feared their power. However, Hattie was a driver at heart. Her prized possession, a candy apple red

Chevy Impala Convertible carted her to work each day, even though she only lived right the street. She took great care to wear driving gloves, cloistering her hair from the warm Florida wind, even for the short trip. On Mondays, she'd go for short jaunts around town. If Hattie knew anything for certain, she knew the make and model of this car. It was as white as her blouse, as white as her leather driving gloves. She was positive this time. Re-adjusting, her right hand grasped one of many rusted buttressed giving the floor its structural integrity, using it to peer more closely at the larger object.

At first, it was shadow, casting a dark amorphous shape on what appeared to be stone wall, dug out of the earth. Something large was in the room, something beast-like. Hattie shuddered, but refused to be afraid. She had lived through a depression, divorce, and several world wars. She was now once again hanging from the ceiling. *The rest is minutia. The rest is nothing.*

Scraping her body against graveled floor, she turned her body to face the opposite direction. And there it was, like nothing she had seen in 83 years. Directly beneath her legs, which had grown cold and raw pressed to bare factory floor, was what at first seemed a pure impossibility. And yet, it was there. 50 feet below Hattie Rafferty's half-dangling frame rested a large commercial airplane.

She knew exactly who to telephone next. Her paper hands trembled with something that was part anticipation and part compulsion, dialing the numbers nervously, one by one. She knew it was late, she knew she was a mess of damp mold and dirt--but put-together, headstrong Hattie Rafferty no longer cared. Her blouse was marked with cement, her hair was caked in rust. "Hello? I urgently need to speak with Arturo Winter."

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Yes, it’s most peculiar,” the old man said to the other on the street corner.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if Satan’s afoot again,” the second babbled. The old men communicated in inside references and catch phrases that could only be deciphered by one another.

From his bicycle, Jeremiah watched them fervently arguing the finer details of the latest affront to their sensibilities. It wasn’t so much that he was interested in their conversation as he was the corner they were conversing at. It looked like a good place to stop..

“They say right here was where one of them was taken. Kidnapped I suppose. One can never be too careful these days,” the first man said.

“How do they know that, Walter? If they disappeared, how can they leave a trace behind?”

“Ah,” said the first man. “They found the broad’s purse on the lawn.”

Jeremiah looked over to the lawn beside him, letting the old men narrate. Just beyond the road was a small, compact park that consisted of a short green lawn and a pair of old palm trees beneath a flower bed of hibiscus and oleander. The hibiscus were in bloom for the spring, and they filled the lot with a massive, garish splattering of color.

It very suddenly dawned on him that he had no idea where he’d been planning to go. Bike rides were just that -- free from a practical purpose, a journey for its own sake. He dismounted his bicycle. The old men were more interesting than anything he’d find around the Maynard plant. Besides, the garden looked nice, and he could lie on the grass

and watch clouds, or just listen.

The old men took notice of him and waved. “Why if it isn’t young Jeremiah Cade,” Walter said. “You’re the spitting image of your father, you know that? So sorry about your brother.”

Jeremiah momentarily cringed. He didn’t want to think about it. But the old man probably thought he was showing sympathy. That’s what old men like him did. He didn’t have a good response other than to smile politely and accept the words with a short, clipped, “thanks.” Oh well. He could find another place to while the day away.

That was all Jerermiah had wanted to do -- get away and waste away. Maybe he’d go back to the Maynard Plant after all. He was just about to mount his bicycle again when the gleam of metal caught his eye.

It could have been gold, or silver, or something even more valuable, like a watch or jewelry. It wasn’t unheard of around here. There were rumors that pirates used to use this town as a smuggling base way back when -- so raved Mr. Mackrory, his history teacher. Whatever it was, it was sticking out of the dirt at the base of the hibiscus bush.

Moving slowly, awkwardly across the lawn in full view of the intent gaze of Walter and his friend, Jeremiah walked to the hibiscus bush and knelt down.

The object was shaped like about three-fourths of an egg, round and oblong, delicate: the color of tarnished silver. Speckles and delicate little structures that looked like jewels were applied in seemingly random places. Jeremiah had never seen anything like it before.

“What have you got there, boy?” Walter asked.

Jeremiah looked up. “I don’t know, sir.” Cupping his find in his hand, he brought it

over for the old men to see.

“What the devil is that?” said Walter’s friend.

“It looks like a fabregé egg, or a poor imitation of one, anyway.”

“It’s broken,” Jeremiah added, stating the obvious. “I’ve never seen nothing like it before.”

Walter pointed out with his index finger, preparing a lecture as old men were want to do. “You ought to take that in to McClatchy’s Jewelers,” he said, “He could tell you what it’s supposed to be. And if you take it to the police and no one claims it, it’s yours and you can sell it. That might fetch a pretty penny for scrap. You could buy a new bicycle.”

Enough money to buy a new bicycle. Of course, Jeremiah would never be so childish. That kind of money bought more than just bikes. That kind of money bought reputations. His mind began to swirl with the possibilities.

“Thanks, Mister,” he said to Walter. “I think I’ll hang onto it for now.” Jeremiah realized his evil grin probably gave him away, but he didn’t care.

“Yes, it’s very strange indeed,” said Walter’s friend. “They found one of those over by the Johnson place when the guy walked out on Audrey and the kids.”

Jeremiah pocketed the egg, hopped back on his bike, and rode off.

* * *

McClatchy’s Jewelers sat on Main Street between the bakery and one of the many banks. It would surely be open here on a Saturday morning. The egg was hot property, Jeremiah was sure of it, and he could just see the dollar signs flashing in front of him.

There was only one problem with the plan, which he discovered as he pulled onto Main Street: namely that Main Street was in utter pandemonium.

Jeremiah had never seen anything like it before. By a small park, a preacher man screamed and hopped and raved that the end of the world was nigh. The rapture, as foretold in the Bible was upon us. Nearby, the mayor and sheriff anxiously tried to calm the crowd, which was pulsing and throbbing with gasps and hushed whispering conversations. Jeremiah stopped and listened. There were rumors. I hadn't heard it from Mary Greene herself, but I heard she saw someone take Mr. Johnson from his driveway. Someone or something? And Mrs. Prescott in the garden. That poor thing, left only her purse behind. I heard from a friend of a friend of Mr. Prescott that the police said there was a sign of a struggle.

If a meteor were to fly overhead right now, the entire crowd would melt down and explode in a giant mushroom cloud, a human atom bomb. Jeremiah watched, entranced. It was exactly like that episode of *The Twilight Zone* he'd seen not two weeks before.

For a few minutes, he stood there on his bike, flabbergasted, watching the crowd. The preacher preached. The mayor tried once or twice to start up a competing speech calling for calm, but the crowd would have none of it. Walter Frink was always a little off-balance, Jeremiah thought to himself, especially to miss something like this. Or maybe he knew and didn't care. That was the thing about old people -- you could never tell.

Jeremiah never noticed the figure slowly coming up from behind.

"Where'd you get the egg?" asked a voice, young but confident.

Jeremiah turned and beheld a sprite-like young girl with an angry, determined look on her face.

“What?” he asked.

“The egg. Hand it over, and tell me where you found it.”

Jeremiah looked down at his pocket. “What? No. This is my egg.”

“Let me see it,” the girl demanded again.

“No!” Jeremiah repeated. “Finders keepers. Get your own egg.”

“I have my own egg,” she says. “The eggs aren’t that important. Where you found it is what matters.”

“I found it over in the hibiscus garden on Elm Street. There, now leave me alone.”

He could see the gears turning in the girl’s head. “Elm Street...” she paused, still deep in thought. “Okay, come with me.”

“Wait, what?” But it was already too late. The girl had already started walking back the way she came down the street.

Well, he certainly wasn’t going to get to the jeweler’s now. The preacher man was getting into the heart of his sermon: fire and brimstone and all the gory details of hell.

“Hey, wait up!” he shouted to the girl, who stopped and turned in place, as if she had been expecting him to follow all along. “Who are you? What do you know about the eggs?”

“I’m Maggie Miller,” the girl said. “Follow me. We could use your help.”

Maggie broke into a light jog now, and Jeremiah followed on his bike. He followed for about three or four blocks (though the street intersections were irregular here, so it was a matter of interpretation), as Maggie led him into an old low squat brick building between two houses. “This way,” she beckoned, swinging open a door barely on its hinges. Jeremiah ditched his bike and followed her inside.

“Ever since I came here, I’ve been using this place to try to figure everything out,” Maggie said as she carefully shut the door behind her and flicked on a nearby flashlight.

“People in the 60s are so paranoid. There’s a bomb shelter under the building. Watch.”

She slid away a panel in the wall and revealed a door, which in turn led to a small, steep staircase, and then to a small finished cavity in the building’s basement.

“I’ve got another one,” Maggie announced.

A murmur filled the basement. Jeremiah could pick out three or four distinct voices, which he attached to faces as soon as he finished descending the stairs. A single bare bulb illuminated the room, which was about twenty feet by twenty feet. It had all the trappings of post-apocalyptic luxury: canned fruit and vegetables, a propane hot-plate, bunk beds, reading material, candles, flashlights, and scattered among them a small litany of artifacts, including but not limited to: several gold doubloons; an old bottle of whiskey; a sword; several bayonets; a revolver; maps; a collage of red string, drawings, and pictures; and a small clutch of eggs just like the one Jeremiah had found.

In addition, he could make out three faces, all around his age. Two he recognized immediately. One was that nerd Dexter Fowler, a legend at George M. Dallas Middle school, both for his math skills and also for an exploding science fair project that had literally set Mr. Mackrory’s hair on fire; his plaid shirt and thick glasses only completing the look. The other was Molly Sands, the equally genius girl from English class with equally thick, huge bug-eyed eyeglasses, hair as thick and fuzzy as her sweater, and a mouth full of orthodonture work. Both were hard at work scribbling maps with pens and making calculations with slide rules and rudimentary pocket calculators of the kind Jeremiah had seen advertisements for in his father’s old issues of Popular Mechanics. A

third device, small and flat and seemingly alien was displaying various pictures in full, sharp color, of a kind that he had never seen before, not even in the movies. Finally, Jeremiah saw an older boy he recognized as Jimmy Keegan, his thick arms, greasy hair, and leather jacket only making him look more dangerous. Jimmy stood watch over the entrance to the shelter as the two nerds worked feverishly away.

Molly, upon seeing Jeremiah enter, looked up and smiled.

“What is this place?” Jeremiah asked.

“This is Bluff Oaks’ only hope,” announced Maggie.

It was a truly surreal sight. Dexter was working furiously on some sort of equation, while Molly watched and corrected as necessary.

“What are you all doing?” Jeremiah heard himself ask again.

“It’s simple, really,” Maggie said, walking to the center of the shelter. “But you may not believe me.”

Jeremiah sneered. “Try me.”

“I’m from the future,” she began, but Jeremiah soon cut her off.

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. Look at her computer,” said Dexter, holding up the flat device.

“You remember the plane crash, of course,” Maggie said. “And all the strange things that have happened since.”

“All right, that’s nice,” Jeremiah replied. “But I really ought to be going.”

“It doesn’t matter if you believe me or not,” Maggie continued, “But I think your egg may have something to do with it, and with all the strange things that have been happening around here ever since first got here. We need someone strong and tough to

help us. I heard you won a drag race with that kid they called Two.”

“Well, not exactly, but-”

“Come on, you’ll get a cool story out of it at the very least.”

“Well, I suppose, I guess.”

“Welcome aboard.” She offered her hand. Jeremiah shook it.

“Thanks, I guess, but what exactly are we doing?” Jeremiah asked.

“I’ll explain,” said Maggie. “We’re mystery solvers. Like Scooby Doo, only not as lame, and with less crazy Rube Goldberg contraptions.”

“Scooby what?”

“Drat. I keep forgetting nobody here gets my pop culture references. It’s been the hardest thing of all to get used to.”

“Whatever,” Jeremiah said. “So we solve mysteries. Okay.”

“At first I recruited Dexter and Molly to help me figure out how I got here, but eventually with all the disappearances and the eggs, we had to work on other things,” Maggie explained. “Jimmy here’s our protection. He believes in sticking up for the little guy.”

Arms crossed, Jimmy nodded in agreement.

“Now, you said you found the egg in the hibiscus garden on Elm Street?” Maggie asked Jeremiah.

“Y-Yes,” he said, too overwhelmed by the absurdity of the situation to say anything else.

“Only two blocks from the Bowl Bowl,” said Molly. “This does it. It’s definitely coming from the Bowl Bowl.”

“The Bowl Bowl,” Jeremiah said out loud. “You mean the place with all the tunnels.” All eyes suddenly turned to him. “I mean, that’s what this guy at my school said.”

Maggie held out a finger as if she was about to say something, but paused for a moment, mouth open, before she spoke. “We can’t go to the police.”

Molly, Dexter, and Jimmy all nodded in agreement. “No, of course not,” said Dexter.

“Why not?” asked Jeremiah.

“Who’d believe us? Besides, the cops have their hands full up top. No, we’re going to have to go ourselves,” said Maggie.

Jeremiah’s eyes grew wide. “What, are you crazy? People are disappearing. With a struggle. There could be...*things* down there.”

“What, are you a coward?” asked Jimmy. Maggie nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, we may be Bluff Oaks’ last hope,” said Molly.

Even Dexter looked over in derision now.

“What? No. Of course I’ll go down into the tunnels with you. Don’t be ridiculous.”

He laughed nervously. “Whatever’s down there, we could deal with it and be... heroes.”

Maggie made a fist and unclenched it, bobbing her head as she thought things over.

“So it’s decided, then. We’ll go down. It’s not good. My iPad doesn’t work without GPS satellites.”

“What?”

“Forget it. Doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t be any good underground anyway, so we’ll have to map things as we go. I heard a rumor that there are at least two levels to it, but nobody can seem to figure it out.”

“How do we get down?” asked Jeremiah.

“We’ll have to use the cover of darkness, even with the police distracted like they are,” she said, pacing back and forth. “Jimmy, we’ll need your car to hide our...” she looked around the room, “Equipment.”

Well, whatever was going to happen, Jeremiah would have some stories to tell about it. That would be better for his popularity and girls than any amount of money could buy.

“Well, it won’t be dark for like eight hours,” Jeremiah said.

“All the more time to plan,” Maggie wryly answered.

* * *

“Are you absolutely sure about this?” Jeremiah asked, for what had to be the twentieth time.

“Sure as anything in life,” said Maggie as the group skulked to the bulkhead behind the Bowl Bowl. “This is it. Flashlights, everyone.”

Jimmy tried the hatch, and to Jeremiah’s surprise, it burst right open with seemingly minimal effort. A long, low staircase led down into an interminable darkness.

It had either been a supreme act of bravery or stupidity that Jeremiah had volunteered to take the lead, and he wasn’t quite sure which it was just yet. Jimmy, his thick arms crossed as always stood to the side as Jeremiah flicked on his flashlight and took his first few tentative steps inside.

The light beam showed an old concrete staircase: sturdy, but impossibly dark, with seemingly no end in sight. “All right, everybody. Watch your step. I’m gonna go slowly, so nobody rush or panic or get any ideas like that.”

“I think you’re very brave,” said Molly, who perhaps sensed she hadn’t meant to say

that out loud and made an embarrassed giggle.

Well, with that kind of send-off, there was only one thing left to do. Jeremiah started walking.

About thirty or so steps down, the staircase came to a landing, and then to another door. The door swung easily open, and Jeremiah shone his flashlight down to try and get his bearings. Maggie followed shortly behind, with Dexter and Molly mapping and charting all the way by the light of a Coleman lantern held by Jimmy, who brought up the rear. The combined light of Jeremiah and Maggie's flashlights was enough to give a general sense of what lay in front of them, and from what Jeremiah could tell, what lay in front of them didn't look so inviting.

A hot, fetid breeze blew out of the new doorway, which opened into a small platform that in turn led to a narrow spiral staircase. Jeremiah clutched the bayonet that he had stuck into his belt loop. They had decided that the sword was much too large to use underground, and Jimmy came armed with both a tire iron and a baseball bat. It was decided that Jeremiah and Dexter would carry the two bayonets, though Jeremiah didn't fully trust Dexter with the weapon, or really anything except a slide rule. Still, one could never be too careful. It would be Maggie's job to provide light if anything happened, and Molly would be there to map, and help them find their way back if they got lost.

The staircase terminated about a story and a half below the landing that appeared to be bricked over. "Well shit," Jeremiah cursed.

"Check the bricks. There's always a trick lever," said Maggie.

"According to the historical records I researched at the library last weekend, before it became the Bowl Bowl, this site was occupied by a rather large house that served as a

restaurant and function hall,” Molly recited. “Perhaps this was a speakeasy of some sort, or a wine cellar.”

Jeremiah was only half-listening. He was busy feeling the bricks for any sign of a crack or something loose. Maggie shone her flashlight to let him work. “Come on,” he grunted, tapping each brick to see if he heard an echo. Finally, about three bricks from the bottom, he felt his hand plunge through and into a small cavity, where the tell-tale feeling of a latch and a level betrayed its presence.

“Got it!” he shouted, proud of himself, and tugged on the lever as hard as he could.

A sudden burst of hot air flooded the space, and Jeremiah was nearly knocked over as the wall suddenly gave way to an open tunnel.

“My God, this is it,” said Maggie. “Incredible.”

They walked through the tunnel, which terminated about thirty feet later in a rusted iron door swung partly open. Jeremiah didn’t think he could move it, but there was enough room for them to squeeze by one at a time. Swallowing a big gulp of the stale air, he took a tentative step forward as the rest of the team waited with bated breath.

What he saw on the other side was beyond his wildest dreams. Molly had been right. There was a speakeasy here, and it was in a spectacular state of ruin. Maggie and the rest of the gang rushing in behind him, he stood still, mouth agape, taking it all in.

Overhead, a great crystal chandelier hung askew on its halo, as if it might collapse at any time. Shelves upon shelves of old liquor bottles, most still full, lined the walls. At the bar, there was ancient crystal stemware, including a cocktail shaker and a beer keg that looked hastily abandoned, as if the bartender had fled in the midst of making a drink.

There were plates with food half-eaten, now rotted and fossilized, cracked, chipped, and

covered in mold and dust. The smell was overwhelming. And then there were the eggshells on the floor. Countless eggshells, all just like the egg he'd found, everywhere, littering the place. He could hardly step without crushing one with his feet.

“What the hell is this place?” Jimmy asked, his voice sounding tense and nervous.

“It would appear the place was abandoned in a hurry,” Molly said. “Exits lead back the way we came, and also up a main staircase on the opposite end of the lounge.

Fascinating.”

“Fuckin’ creepy is what it is,” said Jeremiah, taking a few small steps forward.

“I am beginning to suspect that these eggs have a biological, rather than geological origin,” Dexter said, picking one up. “Observe how they cluster around where people would have been dining or drinking. It is almost as if...”

Jeremiah wasn't listening anymore. From the other end of the room had come a horrible sound, like a furious clicking or scratching, along with an almost sing-song of garbled gibberish. There was a crash from behind them, and he heard Jimmy yelp in pain, as something huge and hideously fast lunged from the darkness. He heard a scream: Molly's voice, and then a deathly silence, as Jimmy dropped the lantern and the light was reduced to just the two beams from his and Maggie's flashlights.

“Shit!” he heard Jimmy shout, and he whirled around to see him clutching his arm. “It feels like something bit me.”

“Help me!” came a cry, Molly's voice, no doubt, but far, far away. The sound of someone being dragged, her shrieks, and the cry for help seemed to come from every direction at once. The flashlights danced as panic began to set in, and Jeremiah felt his knees start to give out.

It was only after the screams had begun to subside that any sense of his bearings returned. The heavy sound of breathing, his heart pounding in his chest, that faint dizziness of adrenalin. Maggie was standing up, and Dexter had taken the lantern from where it fell.

“Shit, man, it got Molly,” cried Jimmy.

In the light of the lantern, Maggie did her best to look calm. “Is everybody okay?” Jeremiah didn’t know how convincing it really was.

“We should go,” said Jimmy. “We should get out of here.”

Terror. Jeremiah had never known it before, not like this. Stumbling over himself, he walked back the way they had come, feet cracking eggs left and right, the sickening crunch of their shells only adding to the queasiness in his stomach. The surface. Please let him get to the surface. The police could come down here, or the FBI or the army and kill whatever it was that had just emerged from the shadows, kill it dead and good and burn it and send it to hell and all the things Jeremiah was trying not think of about himself right now. But the iron door had been knocked shut right on its hinges, so only a sliver remained back out to the tunnel, the staircase, and freedom beyond.

The sound of heavy breathing filled the room, the high ceiling and the gilded molding only making its echoes seem louder.

“Okay,” said Maggie, out of breath. “The door’s probably out of commission.”

“We could get it if we all pushed at once,” Jeremiah said.

“It’s no good,” replied Jimmy. “I think my arm is broken. I can’t push anything.”

Maggie walked over. A little bit of blood seeped from a scrape near his elbow. “That looks bad. I’m sorry, this was a stupid idea.”

“I’m fine,” Jimmy gritted through his teeth. “Let’s just figure out what to do. I want to get out of here. This is freakin’ me out, man.”

“What about you, Dexter?” he asked.

“It’s unlikely,” he said, walking over. “The door opens to the inside. The angle and leverage we would have to exert would be nearly impossible, even for a team of adults.”

Maggie nodded in agreement. “The guy who told me about the tunnels, he said there were more of them than just this speakeasy. There’s probably another way out -- we just have to find it.”

“And find Molly,” added Dexter.

“Molly knew everything,” Jeremiah said, thinking out loud, surprised at how calm he was becoming now that the adrenalin had had a chance to flush out of his system. “So finding her makes sense. Does anybody remember where the thing that took her came from, and which way it went?”

“Hmm,” said Dexter. “Jimmy, when the thing hit you, which way did you fall?”

“Um, like sideways, kind of twisting. It brushed up against me and clipped my arm,” Jimmy replied.

“Then we can assume it was a lateral strike,” Dexter said, pacing across the room.

“The lantern, please?”

Maggie shone her flashlight down to the side. Sure enough, there was an arched door that led to another tunnel about fifty feet down.

“It must be an old bootlegger tunnel,” Dexter said.

“That means it has to lead to the surface somewhere,” said Jeremiah, walking over to where Jimmy had dropped his baseball bat.

But Maggie flashed her light down the opposite way, revealing another tunnel.

“Hmm,” Jeremiah thought out loud. “Which way do we go?”

Maggie turned back around and looked the other way. “Well, it came the other way, and it went this way.”

“Then we’ll go the way it went,” Jeremiah decided, shocked at how authoritative he sounded. “It could have come from deeper down, and gone towards the surface.”

“Works for me,” said Maggie, and Dexter and Jimmy let out a chorus of agreement.

They walked down the tunnel, Jeremiah leading the way. He gripped his baseball bat with white knuckles, and the flashlight in the other hand just the same, as the tunnel grew rougher. Eventually it merged with another, narrower tunnel about two hundred feet down. Here, the carpeting and tile ended, and the walls became bare stone and rock.

“Who do you suppose made these?” Jeremiah asked, as much to keep himself from getting nervous as to make conversation.

“Pirates, maybe. Or bootleggers during Prohibition,” answered Maggie. “I saw a special on it on the History Channel.”

“The what channel?” he asked, confused.

“Assuming we live through this, you’ll see someday. In the future, where I come from we have over five hundred channels of premium color high definition TV. Of course none of that seems to compare to the things I’ve seen here in Oak Bluffs, but that should go without saying.”

Five hundred channels of color television. He’d never have an excuse to go outside ever again, let alone a crazy hare-brained mission like this. An eternity melting onto the couch, something always on. It sounded like paradise. No, he had to be brave.

He had to be a man. If he freaked here, he'd let everybody down. "We should keep walking," he finally answered, clearing the thought from his head.

A few dozen feet later, they came to another junction. Another tunnel merged into this one, but the tunnel itself began to curve sharply to the left. The sound of rushing water could be heard nearby.

"Which way?" Jeremiah asked again.

"It is plausible to surmise that the speakeasy was a termination point, or at least a station in these tunnels," Dexter said. "If you notice, when the other two tunnels merged with this one, they merged in the direction that we're headed, not the way we came. That implies the tunnel was dug going the opposite direction, and thus that the exit is ahead, not behind us."

Jeremiah agreed. They kept walking, the sound of rushing water grew louder.

They walked for another ten minutes in cold, tense silence. Jeremiah's fingertips were tingling, and he was beginning to sway the bat back and forth in a rapid-fire nervous rhythm. The sound of water only grew louder, until finally it sounded like nothing less than Niagra Falls was just ahead: the roar of a jet engine on the runway. Too loud to think. Too loud to do anything but walk. Finally, the tunnel began to open, and Jeremiah's brain blew a fuse.

"What the..."

As far as he could tell, he was standing in the middle of a beautiful wooded park.

Trees, a stunning waterfall, and a nearby fountain, plaza, and gazebo were all arranged by a pool of rushing water, over which there stood an outlook and a railing. Overhead, a dim light illuminated the scene in a faint reminiscence of twilight: just enough to discern

color from shadow.

“Who built this place?” Jeremiah asked no one in particular, his voice echoing with all the fear and wonder over the sound of the rushing water.

“It’s beautiful,” said Maggie, staring up at the ceiling.

“What the fuck, man,” gaped Jimmy, his speech reduced to a babbling Tourette’s sort of language.

“Dexter, where- where are we?” Jeremiah asked. “I mean, what are we under?”

“I didn’t really study the map,” he said, “Molly had it. But if I were to guess, we’re under Finklestein’s Grocery.”

“Is there a way up?” Maggie asked.

They could make out the general shape and landscape of things in the faint light. The gazebo and fountain, in the center of the room, met at a t-shaped intersection of three tunnels: one the way they had come, another straight ahead, and an ominous-looking gate set deep in the rock marked “AMUSEMENT” that branched off at a ninety-degree angle to left.

“What was this place? Some old amusement park?” Jeremiah heard himself ask.

“Looks like,” said Maggie. “Man, Disney World’s got nothing on this place.”

“Which way?” Jeremiah said, trying to take control. Hey, he was doing pretty well at this. But then he looked down and saw the eggs again, the interminable eggs. They were coming from the gate marked “AMUSEMENT.”

“I think it would be prudent for us to go straight,” suggested Dexter. He looked like he was about to say something more, but a strange, haunting scream suddenly bubbled up from below.

“Help me! Help me! Jeremiah, Maggie, help me!”

Molly.

All four of them looked at each other, each trying to discern the direction they’d heard the cry. It unmistakably came from below, as if from the water itself. If there was a direction, it came from the vaulted gate to hell to their left, if anywhere.

“Help me,” he heard Molly cry one more time. Then, nothing, just the sound of the water. The horrible clicking sound and a hiss, from the same direction and place.

This whole thing was colossally stupid. It was crazy, it was beyond weird, beyond television, it was simply stranger than anything that had ever existed before.

There were a lot of things he could do. Discretion may have been the better part of valor as his father always said, but to the daring went the spoils of victory. Anyhow, what did it matter? He was ready to piss himself and couldn’t think straight. Oh, they’d call him all sorts of things if he rescued Molly and solved the mystery of the eggs. He’d be a movie star. Audrey Hepburn would play Molly in the movie version, and he’d be played by some other famous young actor. Or he could play himself. Oh yes, oh yes. But then he blinked and saw that he was still here, in this strange wonderland four stories underground. Oh no, oh no. Time to make a decision, Jeremiah. Time to find out just what kind of man you are.

Jeremiah took a step back. “Well, I’ve decided I’m going to go find Molly. But I want the rest of you to keep following the tunnel and try and make it to the surface. They can’t go on forever. Just keep staying straight, like Dexter said.”

“And leave you to hog all the glory?” asked Maggie suspiciously. “No way. I’ve survived a plane crash, I’ve traveled through time, and as long as we’re trapped down

here, the least I can do is try and save Molly.”

“Jimmy’s hurt,” Jeremiah said to Dexter. “Can you use what you remember to get him to the surface?”

“I certainly hope so,” he said.

Jeremiah looked back once more to that foreboding gate. “Then you two had better go. You hear that clicking sound, or that gibberish again, run and don’t look back.”

Jimmy and Dexter nodded in affirmation.

Jeremiah looked back to Maggie. “Let’s do it.”

“Right on,” said Maggie.

Jeremiah took one last look behind him, as if to wish himself luck. They were off.

* * *

The sound of their breaths and the quickening of their pulse were their only communications. Jeremiah and Maggie had worked out how to use their flashlights in tandem to quickly show the way ahead, and they did it like they’d been working together for years. She was kind of cute, he was starting to notice, and unbelievably smart. It was Maggie who’d pulled this whole crazy mission together, and she hadn’t abandoned him when he decided to go on a crazy stupid suicidal rescue mission. If he lived through this, he may just ask this strange girl who claimed she was from the future out on a date. But that was all to come. Right now they both still had to survive and make it to the surface.

The tunnel narrowed past the gate, but it was finished, and clearly designed in its heyday to maximize the sense of mystery. Old signs advertising such entertainments as the body of One-Eyed William, the mad pirate and his hoard of treasure, the bones of the

last Indian chief to fall to DeSoto and the white man in the state of Florida, Esmerelda the gypsy mystic, and the Amazing Abdullah, the Turkish ninth wonder of the world with his incredible flying swords. Indeed, there had used to be display cases here of all sorts of things: flags, relics, pirate treasure. The sword or the gold doubloons he saw in the bomb shelter could easily have come from here. The question was how.

“Hey, where did you get that neat stuff in the basement?” he asked, as they proceeded efficiently apace down the dizzying labyrinth of corridors and displays of horrors and treasures the world over.

“I found a couple of them near where people said they found eggs,” Maggie replied. “Only a few times, though. The sword I found washed up in the swamp just outside of town. That’s where they found Old Man Duffy.

“Whoever took them, and whoever made the eggs, must have been aware of these tunnels for a very long time,” Jeremiah noted. “I mean, like decades. Centuries even.”

“It has to be true,” Maggie said. “Come on, look up ahead. It looks like there’s finally a way out of all these exhibition halls.”

Indeed, just out of the way, several paths converged in a covered stage. A sign for “THE AMAZING RANDINI” hung by a single screw.

“We have to get behind the public parts somehow, into the inner workings of whatever this place is,” Maggie said.

“The stage has to lead somewhere,” replied Jeremiah, hoisting himself up. Then they both paused, as they heard the terrible clicking sound once more.

“No! This can’t be happening! It can’t!” sounded a faint muffled shriek from below. It was Molly’s voice -- there could be no doubt about it. But her screams soon ended in

a strange muffled garble. It was, to Jeremiah, almost as if she sounded like she had been swallowed by something. But what?

Then he looked down. The stage was just a hollow shell out front: beneath it was room for an orchestra pit and a switching room that by the looks of the dials and consoles, ran the electrical systems of the amusement hall. A short steel grated staircase led down, followed by another spiral staircase beside it below.

“Well, we know where we have to go,” Maggie said.

“We’re in it to the end, right?” said Jeremiah. “Whatever happens happens.”

Maggie offered her fist. Jeremiah got what she was trying to do and bumped it with his own. The eggs were everywhere now, carpeting the walkway and the orchestra pit, the switching room, even the stairs. Both had long-since given up trying to avoid crunching them beneath their feet: it was a mere fact of life now. And still they descended, deeper down, first a story, then two, deep into the bowels of the the very Earth itself.

Finally, the staircase ended in a crude stone cavern. It hardly looked shaped at all, just a mere cavity deep in the Earth. Curiously, though, there were no eggs here. In fact, the place was completely devoid of any debris. A long, low passageway not much more than six feet high looked like it had been very briefly fashioned by workmen, but the chisel marks petered out about twenty feet in. And then they smelled it.

It was a musky smell, acidic and oily, sickeningly organic and at the same time metallic and chemical. The walls here had started to become coated in some sort of sticky slime: silvery white, with patches of tarry black. Jeremiah hesitated, and Maggie stopped in tandem. There was a moment of absolute silence, and then the clicking

started. It began low and distant, and began to crescendo: not just up ahead, but behind, too, from the walls and the ceiling and the ground beneath.

My God, Jeremiah thought. This is it. I'm going to die, and I've never even kissed a girl or smoked a cigarette.

"Pick a direction!" he shouted, but Maggie was already off, running straight ahead.

Then, surreally, the sound of a cry could be heard, strangely calm: a sickening quiet voice above the din. "Jeremiah, is that you? Maggie? Can it be? Oh please, I'm so close. So very close. Please come find me."

In the light of the bouncing flashlight, Jeremiah looked at Maggie, and they both nodded to each other. He knew exactly what Maggie was thinking; he was thinking the same thing.

Trap.

Faster now, his heart aching and his arms and legs feeling like his blood had been replaced with acid. It wasn't long before they finally saw what it was that had taken Molly.

The passageway opened up into a large cavern, which revealed a veritable city in the strange otherworldly blue light of phosphorescent fungus. Well, maybe city wasn't the right word. It was more like a hive. There was a central raised platform, constructed of various cobbled together things: chairs, tables, treasure chests and trunks, even parts of animal bone, and worse yet, a human femur, all held together by the sticky black tar into a kind of packrat's concrete. From it branched any number of smaller platforms and bubble-like chambers: some thick as steel, others thin as eggshells, all strangely luminescent and glowing in unearthly blues, whites, and silvers. Surrounding them were

people like Mr. Johnson, Mrs. Wallace, the poor woman whose purse they'd found in the park next to Jeremiah's egg; old man Duffy, still in overalls. Only, they weren't completely people, either. Where their legs should have been there was now a terminus of six insectoid limbs, all leading to a central bulge at their guts, from which secreted various strains of the sticky substance coating the walls. Mrs. Prescott was still wearing her hat and gloves from her night out. And at the center of it all, two hideously misshapen figures, twelve-limbed and gleaming with glistening glands, wings, spines, antennae, every horrible appendage of inhuman and alien design imaginable.

One lay slumped over on its side, the other standing up, if it could be called that. It perched on its ledge, surveying the hideous bustle of the colony overhead, as all of its minions -- little more than drones from the dead look in their still-human eyes: intelligence but not consciousness, nothing more than puppets. The Queen -- yes, it had to be a queen, like of an insect hive, raised its neck, where the shoulders and arms of a young girl could still be seen, and more horrible of all, a pair of bug-eyed glasses still perched askew on the bridge of its nose.

The flashlight dropped from Jeremiah's hands.

For an aching eternity, no one moved -- not the barely human creatures, nor Jeremiah, nor Maggie. Absolute, horrible silence crushed all, with only the pitter-patter of dripping ooze echoing with a deafening roar if it was the volume of a pin dropping.

Slowly, Jeremiah's gaze turned to Maggie's, then back to the creature at the center of it all, who had once been Molly Sands.

"Yes, I was frightened too, at first," the thing said to them, her voice tinted with a hiss and the strange clicks of the dozens -- no, hundreds -- of minions that now lay at her feet.

“But that was before we merged. Now I’m so much more.”

“I think I’ve got it,” Maggie said. “The disappearances.” Turning to the creature, she said “This is how you reproduce, isn’t it?”

“Who are you?” Jeremiah blurted out.

“I am ancient, but I have no name of my own,” the thing snapped.

“Why are you here?”

It snorted in amusement. “This land is a fetid swamp, and no human in their right mind should want to live here. The days of the natives offering sacrifices ended long ago. I was done for. But then your foolish civilization decided it liked the warm climate, and you brought with you all your human amusements and accouterments. The men who built that...thing above our heads, that hive of human amusement. Oh, it was easy. I feasted upon their supple minds and bodies. They sustained my thirst and built my army.

“My drones had to be fed. First I drained the underground amusement park, built on the old tunnels of a band of smugglers and pirates who once roamed this coast. It sustained us for a while, true. But then the hunger set in again. To make matters worse, that damnable soda merchant had stolen my precious clutch. But all was not lost. We found our way to the surface anyway. But I had grown weak and tired myself, until finally the perfect human female arrived to carry on my life. Yes, Molly and I are one now, one in the same, and I shall live on for centuries longer with the humans that have sustained me.”

“What are you going to do with us?” Jeremiah asked, his mind cranking on overdrive trying to some way, any way out of here.

“You are young, and you will make good workers,” the Molly-thing hissed. “I have many stories to tell you. I like telling my stories. Having someone listen for a change.”

“Keep her talking, we need to figure out a plan,” Maggie whispered.

“And what will we do? Listen to your stories forever?” Jeremiah shouted again.

Turning ever so subtly to Maggie, he whispered “That passageway’s pretty narrow. We can move no problem, but they could probably only come one at a time. If the way is clear, we might be able to make it back up and at least escape with our lives.”

“It’s a gamble. We’d need something to fight it once we’re out in the open.”

The Molly-Queen prattled on. “It is such a pleasure, though, when you humans come to me.” Jeremiah had read a story once penned by Molly in English class. She was always lost in the details. If he could just keep her focused on the details, he might buy them some time.

“This is fantastic,” he said, doing his best to sound convincing. He was sure the fear at the very least would bleed out any hint of deception, at least because it simply overrode every other tone of voice he seemed to try.

“I am timeless, and I am newborn. Yes, I can hardly remember it...”

As she continued, Maggie twitched towards him. “Think for a second. Where are we?”

It was finally too much. They were going to run, and it would give them a few minutes, but in the end it wouldn’t make much of a difference. He had no idea where he was. He had no idea what he was doing. How stupid of him to have tried to outwit an entire army.

“Maybe we ought to just give up,” he whispered, but the look that Maggie gave him back quickly dashed any thoughts of the sort.

Don’t think, then. Just relax and clear your head. Easier said than done, but not impossible. Just try. Try to visualize the way he came, how he could get out. The bends, the twists, they had all seemed to be leading somewhere, but where exactly he wasn’t entirely sure. Think. This used to be an amusement park. The amusement park had been carved out of the old pirate and later bootlegging tunnels that ran underneath the town. How many left turns did they make? They hadn’t gone that far. So that meant...

He had it! Of course. It all made sense now. It would take some luck, but it was better than a lifetime as an insectoid troglodyte drone.

“Oh my mark, we run,” he said. Where was the baseball bat? He looked down. To his utter astonishment, he was still gripping it, his hand mottled red and white. He wasn’t sure he could let go even if he wanted to. But he had a plan. Did he ever have a plan. They just had to make to make it a little ways.

“What?” Maggie said with a sharp turn of her head. This idea was clearly crazy. But so was everything else about this place. Sometimes all you needed to do was stop trying to make sense of things and just look around, and something would come to you.

“I think I know a way out,” Jeremiah said.

The drones were approaching them now. Molly looked on. There would be time for grief and tears and all the emotions that were scratching just below the veneer of mere survival. Now they had one thing to do, and one thing only.

“NOW!” shouted Jeremiah.

All he could think, all he could feel or say or do was run and pray that there weren’t

more of them on the other end of the passageway.

The chase was on.

Jeremiah said nothing and thought nothing. He looked at Maggie and he looked ahead, and that was all they could do. They ran. They ran and ran and ran, faster than he had ever imagined he could have ever run in a hundred thousand million billion years. The staircase was a choke point. There may only be two of them versus hundreds of drones, but that was to their advantage: only a few could pass through at once.

They wasted no time getting back to the orchestra pit. “Follow me!” Jeremiah shouted. There had to be a way. There had to be another way back to the Bowl Bowl.

Three corridors led out in addition to the stage: cardinal directions. Jeremiah did the math in his head. One of them must have been a service tunnel that led back to the speakeasy.

“You read my mind!” shouted Maggie.

“If we make it through this...”

“I know,” she said. “You’re pretty brave.”

“Tell it to me after we get out. This is all adrenalin,” he said as they ran.

After what felt like an eternity, the clicking close behind all the while, they emerged in a vast kitchen. Ventilation shafts and chimneys, now walled up and paved over, led out at even intervals. There had to be another stairwell here somewhere, a service entrance that would lead somewhere else. Quickly now. There wasn’t much time.

“Look for a door, a hatch, anything.”

The flashlight flickered around, darting back and forth. His eyes followed Maggie as she scrambled amidst broken pots and pans, half-finished fossilized souffles and steaks.

The line shone on a column, then another, then a shaft, and finally a wide row of bricks. Running, crashing into things, they spun around until they saw at long last what they had been looking for.

“Is it clear?”

“It’d better be,” Maggie said.

“If we make it out, there’s no guarantee they won’t just follow us up to the surface.”

“If we even make it up.”

“Quickly, follow me back to the dining room,” he said. This place had been decrepit for a long time. Surely some gas had built up. Besides which, there was all the alcohol in the restaurant.

It was only one way to prevent the things from following them.

They stumbled back into the dining room. It wouldn’t be long now. It would be soon, veyr soon. Very, very soon. The knowledge of what had taken all those patrons by surprise all those years ago only served to make the nightmare surreality all the more palpable.

“Tell me you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” he said.

But Maggie nodded in the almost nonexistent light. “We’re only going to have one chance at this,” she breathed out.

“The bar,” he shouted. “Find me a match.”

Maggie was already on it. He’d come this far and still hadn’t used his baseball bat. His hand was completely numb. It was a blind shot in the dark, but the good news was he didn’t have to see in order to hit something. What was that his father had always told him? *Good liquor never goes bad.*

Jeremiah felt his way to the wall and swung like he had never swung a bat before. The sound of a spray of breaking glass pierced the horrible quiet, overriding the deep clicking coming from within.

“We’re only going to have a few more seconds!” he shouted. “Match, now!”

“GOT IT!” Maggie screamed. She laughed, maniacally, like a little girl on Christmas morning or a mad scientist.

“Here goes everything!” Jeremiah shouted. They were almost upon them now. He could make out their faint shadow scrabbling in the distance.

Maggie handed him the matchbook.

“On three,” he said. “One...two...”

Three.

Jeremiah lit the match, jumped out of the way, and threw it behind him. The darkness burst forth in a storm of blue-white light as the match ignited the old whiskey and rum. The creatures screamed in a horrible hissing, clicking cacophony at the sight, as Jeremiah and Maggie ran through the kitchen, praying they hadn’t been cut off. The last thing he saw was the wood of the dining room beginning to light aflame.

Up the stairs, Up, up, up, up. They came to an old basement, where a wooden door stood rotting on its hinges. They didn’t even slow down. Maggie aimed with the flashlight and they charged, crashing through it and into the parking lot, where the ground began to shake under their feet, and the howl of sirens had begun to sound in the distance.

There must be bedlam up there, he thought.

Stumbling, holding each other, they ran across the parking lot. Smoke was beginning to billow out from behind them, and now from even the bulkhead they had

entered. The fire alarm sounded at the Bowl Bowl, and the universe suddenly erupted in light and sound. They ran across the street, where they were nearly hit by a Cadillac, which honked its horn, swerved, and came to a dead stop.

“Damn punks!” shouted an old man at the wheel. The pair, now locked in each others’ arms, stared at him, at his jowls, his airy blue eyes, his snap-brim fedora.

Jeremiah thought the explosion underneath the Bowl Bowl would have spoken for itself, but he supposed it didn’t really matter.

“My goodness, what happened to you?” he asked, his anger turning to concern. “Here, get in, get in. Get warm.”

A steady stream of unsuspecting late night bowlers and patrons began to parade out of the Bowl Bowl, dazed and confused. The sound of sirens began to come closer, and in the distance, Jeremiah could make out the lights of a fire truck.

“The whole damn town’s gone mad,” the old man said. “You shouldn’t be out here. It isn’t safe.”

The flames were beginning to lick the foundation of the Bowl Bowl now. The fire trucks had arrived.

Slowly, Jeremiah began to cry.

“We’d better find your folks,” the old man said. He helped the two of them -- just children, really, Jeremiah realized, into the back seat of the Cadillac.

“Fourth and Vine,” Maggie exhaled. “There’s where you can take us.”

They had made it about a block when they saw the Bowl Bowl collapse. The supports of the basement that held the speakeasy must have given way, and they watched as the entire parking lot caved in too as one massive sinkhole.

“Holy cow,” said the old man, who parked his Cadillac about a block away and opened the door to get out and gawk. It was only a couple of blocks back to the basement.

“She’s gone,” Jeremiah said. “Molly’s gone. They’re all gone.”

“Not exactly,” Maggie said. “She’s not gone, she’s just...” she stopped. The sentence required no further elaboration.

“We’ll have to warn them somehow,” Jeremiah said. “Somehow.”

“Who’d believe us?” Maggie said.

“Do you think Dexter and Jimmy made it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do we do?”

“We’ll have to think about it,” Maggie said.

They walked back towards the bomb shelter. Police sirens were wailing. The preacher was speaking in tongues to a megaphone.

“Yes,” Jeremiah thought to himself. “We’ll have to think about it for a long time.”

Slowly, her hand extended to his. Maybe people would figure out the truth. Maybe they never would. Maybe this would be their horrible secret. Maybe it was up to them. Who knew?

“So tell me about the future.” Jeremiah said to Maggie. “Tell me something, anything that isn’t about this town in the year 1961.”

“Well, for one thing, we have a black president,” Maggie said. They walked down the garbage-strewn streets as the flashing lights of a riot in progress unfolded around them, two islands in a sea of utter chaos.

* * *

They walked all night, watching the world break down around them. Maggie told him fantastic things about the world to come, of computers, televisions, and people living in space. When it looked as if the dawn had finally come, they parted ways and vowed to meet the next day in the bomb shelter. And after a brief, fitful nap to the rising sun, he did indeed go to find her. But when he arrived, he found it locked, amidst the wreckage of the night before. Maggie was nowhere to be found. He waited every day for a year, but still she never came. Finally he broke down the door and careened through the staircase into the basement, only to find it abandoned. Maggie was gone.

In time, Oak Bluffs was rebuilt, the missile crisis, the president's assassination, and the chaos of the decade burying the terrible, bizarre events of that night. In time, the memory of the panic faded, replaced by memories of other panics, joy, elation and tribulation. In the end, maybe it was just a dream, a hallucination, a terrible waking nightmare. Jeremiah never found out. And Maggie never, ever returned.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Otto wanted to paint it red. Timothy knew that the decree would probably stand. With Otto, there was rarely democracy in the Secret Clubhouse Org. When he didn't get his way, he got grumpy, got mean. Timothy, Panda Bill and Pirate Sally liked Otto much better when he was happy and making jokes about crippled people and road kill sandwiches. They didn't think the jokes were funny but it was nice to see Otto smiling and laughing. If he got quiet, he got mean and bullish, and who knew when he'd go back to being pleasant again.

So that's why it might have been a mistake to call a meeting of the SCO to decide what paint to use on the toy airplane. Panda Bill and Pirate Sally politely gave their opinions, just like kids did in school after the teacher played a history movie. Otto though, he just sat in the corner of the clubhouse, looking away from them, not saying anything. It was terribly strange to see Otto, because it wasn't like *seeing* at all. Timothy just knew he was there, knew he did these things, but he couldn't actually use his eyes when looking at Otto; he had to use his mind. And as far as Timothy could tell, he was the only one who even knew Otto existed. Pirate Sally and Panda Bill were stuffed animals and once Timothy thought he might give Otto a body as well. But Otto didn't like any of the animals or action figures that Timothy picked out.

Otto was particular about what he wanted.

Just like this clubhouse. Otto wanted it a certain way: high up in the big gumbo limbo tree in the back yard, with fifty-seven ropes for climbing, and a six foot deep moat around it. Timothy had to tell him right off that none of that would be happening. He'd already talked to Dr. Colon that morning about the clubhouse. Timothy's father also

happened to be set in his ways and Timothy knew that the clubhouse's location would not be up to him.

His father had been making himself a wheat grass shake that morning. Timothy liked watching him drink it and get the greenish milk on his big mustache. His father was careful about many things but his mustache seemed to play by different rules.

“Doctor Colon, I was wondering if the clubhouse could be built up in the tree.”

His father dropped chunks of banana into the blender. “No Timothy. You remember what happened to your uncle. It isn't worth you getting hurt. Run along now, I'm late.”

And that had been that. As a teenager Timothy's Uncle Oscar got drunk on rum punch and climbed the same gumbo limbo tree outside. He fell asleep on one of the limbs, fell off, and broke his collar bone, his right arm, cracked some ribs and punctured a lung. He spent some time in the hospital. Timothy's father said he might have busted more than bones in the fall— one day Oscar had started stealing bed pans, tissue boxes and rolls of toilet paper from the supply closet and creating statues out of them. He didn't remember any of it when Timothy asked him about it one Thanksgiving.

“Can I have my cutlass back?” asked Pirate Sally.

Timothy, breaking from his dark thoughts about Otto's silence, glanced down at the pocket knife his uncle had given him that same Thanksgiving. It was the only birthday present he ever got from his uncle, and he wasn't supposed to let his mother or the doctor know he'd been given such a dangerous toy, but despite the controversial nature of the knife, it was his favorite item in the world. And Pirate Sally used it to fend off hordes of privateers.

He picked up the knife and brushed off the sawdust on the end. It'd taken him a long time to whittle the airplane's body and wings, and even longer to cut the narrow opening through the body for the wings to fit through. Carefully, Timothy set the knife across the lap of the stuffed animal parrot with the eye patch.

"The more I think of it, for balance, you really should paint the airplane white and its wings black," suggested Panda Bill. He let out a quiet fart and muttered under his breath, "that was weak."

Pirate Sally and Timothy laughed. He checked the corner for Otto. Sometimes if something funny happened, he would break out of his funk. But Timothy found the corner empty—oh it would be empty for most people even with Otto there—but this was absolute emptiness. The feeling of Otto had vanished.

"Maybe we should just paint it red," Timothy said with a sigh. It didn't matter what color it was anyhow. The idea was to give it as a present to one of the doctor's very sick patients. Timothy imagined that would make the doctor a little proud of him, for a change.

"Planes aren't red," Pirate Sally objected.

"Incorrect. There have been and can be red planes," Panda Bill sagely replied. He grunted a little. Bill always had issues with gas, just like Timothy's Uncle Oscar.

"However, they are quite hideous."

Timothy reached out for the tiny jars of paint. The yellow jar shot up suddenly, clipped his knuckles, and broke on the floor. "Otto?" he cried.

The clubhouse's frame shifted. Timothy scrambled to his feet. The black and white paint smashed together against the far wall, making a drooping gray ghost on the

wood panels.

“For her,” Otto whispered in his ear. Timothy turned around and nobody stood behind him. He looked back and the jar of red paint twisted in the air. In a flash he ducked as it spun towards him and broke on the clubhouse door. Somebody screamed and gulped outside, as though strangled.

Timothy waited on the ground, tucked in a ball. Pirate Sally whispered, “We need to go out and see what this is.”

“No,” said Panda Bill, “the child needs to go to his parents. He needs to tell them about Otto, about the sounds he’s heard coming from under the tree. Timothy, you have to tell them everything that’s gone on since you met Otto. They’ll help. Tell the Doctor first. If he doesn’t help—tell your mother. If she doesn’t, go to the police.”

“And why not ask for a diaper change while you’re at it,” Sally spat. “They won’t believe him, so why even go through the trouble? Tim, just take my cutlass and go out there. We’ll be right behind you. Otto’s not going to bully us anymore. Understand me? We won’t let him.”

“I’m scared.”

“Do you think your father would be scared right now? What would the doctor think of you if he saw you tucked in a ball on the floor like some crybaby?”

Timothy thought about that. It was simple for him to picture his father’s judging eyes. When he was disappointed they seemed to droop in his face, just like his mustache. His normally straight body sunk with the heaviness of it, a strong tree that had suddenly grown too much fruit.

The tree—

Timothy realized now that he could hear it creaking all over from outside. Pushing up on his hands, he crawled over to the single window in the clubhouse and lifted the cloth drape up an inch to see.

Timothy counted up to thirty before stopping. There must have been twice that number of dead people hanging from the tree. Nobody was dressed the same. Some were in old suits and dresses like from those history reels his teachers would show him, but there were a few people that wore jeans and t-shirts and dresses in the style that the high school girls wore sometimes.

They did all wear one thing in common.

Bloody grins with star-struck eyes. The dead looked in awe of something, or someone. Rich dark red blood poured through their teeth, over their chins and dappled their clothing.

Somebody walked through the swaying bodies. It was an older man dressed in dirty old-timey clothes with holes through the elbows and knees. A faded top hat rested askew on his head. It too had holes throughout its material, but these weren't from wear; they appeared burnt around the edges like bullets had ripped through. He held out a piece of moldy bread and moved it back and forth for some reason.

“Go out there, ask him why he brought these people. Tell him to take them away!” Pirate Sally demanded.

The man turned to look at his bread and began weeping. He fought an outright sob before shambling off to sit down at the fence. Once he sat there, he studied the bread. His lower lip quivered uncontrollably like a dying fish. A startling, agonized sound escaped him and he lowered his head. A moment later he was bawling.

Timothy didn't want to move a muscle. He didn't want to watch this. All he had to do was look away long enough. Ghosts were supposed to go away when you did that.

Then the bad man came and he couldn't look away.

“Otto?” Timothy watched the man. He could sense Otto again. It just took some getting used to, seeing him, how he really looked. There was a difference in the feeling though. With Otto, there could be joy, there could be laughter—this version wasn't like that. There was a lot of bad emotion in this Otto, darker than the darkest night Timothy had ever been scared and alone in his bed.

Otto wore a dark red suit with tails and matching red top hat that appeared heavy enough to murder someone with.

A woman from olden times walked out into the yard. Under an elegant white umbrella, she seemed to be walking somewhere else, not minding her path that would end up taking her right into the back fence. Timothy watched as she hurried along, her dress gliding out from that thing under it that gave her a bubble-butt. Otto crept up behind her, almost cartoonish, and raised a noose.

“Stop! Look out!” Timothy yelled.

Otto, nor the woman turned to hear him.

The noose slipped over her head. Instinctively she dropped the umbrella and put her hands to her neck. Otto moaned with joy as he pushed the noose tight. Her wild eyes turned to him and she tried to make words. Nothing came. Otto kicked out her feet. She fell to the grass, stunned. With expertise never witnessed before, he tossed the rope perfectly over a branch. It came down only a couple of feet from him. Otto made a greedy lunge for the hanging rope. The woman scrambled in her awkward dress, trying to

get away, but Otto began laughing, pulling the rope, hand over hand, powerfully, with hissing breaths, until the woman's dainty feet clicked frantically together overhead.

Timothy dropped the drapes and fell to the floor again. He cried and cried and caught his breath to cry some more. His ribs began to hurt as he pulled into a tighter ball.

He felt as though he could fall asleep, maybe put this behind him, but the door to the clubhouse squeaked open.

Eyes through his fingers, chattering teeth, Timothy looked through the open door outside. The woman convulsed on the rope, which had been tied off around an exposed root arcing up from the ground. The homeless man with the worn suit approached the woman. Terror fled from her face and was replaced with joy. Her mouth parted in a wide grin as bright red blood cascaded down. The homeless man held his bread out under the falling blood, soaking up as much as he could.

Timothy searched around for Otto. He could still feel him, but he couldn't see him anymore.

A shriek came from the homeless man. He stared at the bread in disbelief and shook his head, returning to the fence.

"You should cut those people down with my cutlass," said Pirate Sally.

"This isn't some pirate movie. It's a quick run to the house boy." Panda Bill leaned against the wall with a dead look in his button eyes. Timothy expected him to let one go, break the uneasy silence like Bill always did. The panda remained stoic however. It bothered Timothy that he couldn't lighten the moment.

"What do I tell my parents?" he asked.

The panda doll slumped over.

Timothy looked askance to Sally. “What happened to Bill? Where’d he go?”

Pirate Sally said nothing. They were gone. Probably for good.

A cold ray of sunlight glanced off the long pocket knife resting on the pirate parrot’s lap. The knife’s sheath had come with a sharpening stone and Timothy had used it throughout the airplane project. He’d used the stone today in fact, even though the knife was brutally sharp still.

He took the knife then, for protection. Bill was right. The run to the porch wasn’t far and Timothy was quick.

With a look left and right, he went outside his clubhouse. The man still cried against the fence, the people still swung from their ropes, and blood painted the ground. He meant to run to the house. First he would get a big glass of water—he was thirsty, so dreadfully thirsty—and then he would tell the doctor what was happening outside. His father didn’t like to be bothered in his study, but this was an emergency.

Timothy took a step in that direction. He imagined then his father limping out to an empty yard. He could picture his father’s hunting eyes. Maybe he was still hunting for Korean soldiers with those eyes. Timothy could never tell. The man must have hidden a world of red secrets under that incredible mustache. He was a hollow man but he could be filled completely with any emotion that poured into him in a moment’s time. Perhaps he would come out here and seeing the haunting, or at least be understanding, or perhaps he would see how his son was failing him, just like his brother had.

So thirsty.

Timothy didn’t want to see those grinning faces anymore, but he didn’t want to see the doctor’s mustache-frown even less. He began walking to the tree. The crying

homeless man didn't address him, just kept with the tears.

Mouth, so dry.

At the base of the tree, Timothy stared up above to the struggling branches. He put the knife in his pocket and with the other hand brought something up to his lips to take a long drink. It was a bottle... he tipped it back, drinking almost half of the contents. It was sweet and sharp. Alcohol.

Horrified, Timothy caught himself and drew away the bottle of rum punch. Things started to sway around him. He looked down again and saw blood coating the half empty bottle.

The homeless man put an icy arm around his throat and whispered to him, freezing lips glancing his ear. "Are you going to help me paint it red or not, Timothy?"

"Otto? You're Otto?"

The man started crying again and managed a pathetic "Yes."

"Who was the man in the red?"

"He's no man. He isn't even a person, or a being, he's just a mechanism. He brings and we reap." Otto held a piece of bread in front of Timothy's face. There were a few blood drops soaked in and one bloody swipe of a finger, but otherwise the bread was clean.

Timothy swallowed. Everything around him was blurry. He must have been drunk. This was what being drunk felt like. "What's the bread for?"

"To feed the thing in the ground. To keep it happy. But this isn't enough. This is never enough. It soaks through."

Timothy broke away and flung himself up the tree. He grabbed for anything for a handhold, his knees scraped the bark, the tree shuttered at his weight, one moment later one of his fingernails split. The world folded on itself, unfolded, folded twice again. Dizziness claimed him. Otto scrambled below and caught his ankle. Timothy kicked out and his knee buckled at the impact of his foot connecting with Otto's face.

But he isn't real. He's never been real.

"It's not me who is real," Otto called from below. "Underground, underground, in the underground!" he sang.

Timothy's arm slipped off the branch he clung to. He corrected with the other arm and for a split second dislocated his shoulder. The pain and the dizziness made his stomach twist, ready to rid itself of that blood punch. He fought through it, found a rope, took his knife from his pocket, held it tight, so tight, and brought the blade against the tautness. It took only a couple saws and one body fell. The displacement of weight caused the branch to bounce and Timothy nearly lost his grip. He looked up, praying not to puke. The branches above him flooded into one another and the sky pressed its cruel blue palm down.

He groped for another rope and found one immediately. Lowered the knife—Otto crashed into him fully, knocking his backwards on the wide branch. Timothy dropped the knife and caught the branch in both hands at the last minute.

Otto looked at him, hanging there. His dirty face was surprised and concerned. He'd lost his top hat and all he had on top of his head were a few silvery threads of hair amongst a galaxy of liver spots. He extended a withered hand brown with blood. "You could have helped me paint everything red!"

A rope flew past Timothy. He glanced down through pain and vertigo. The man in the red suit was back, hanging the body he'd just cut free.

Otto recoiled at the sight below. "It's come up to the surface! It's come up."

Otto burst into a wild cloud of sunlit dust motes that scattered on the wind. Fingers slipping, Timothy made an attempt to do a pull-up. He could do five at school, but this was different. He was tired. He was drunk. It wasn't going to happen.

Timothy slowly glanced down again, expecting to see the man in the red suit. Instead, a young girl stood there.

"Hello Timothy. Don't be scared. My name is Maggie Miller," she said, unsmiling. She had Otto's piece of bread in her hand. She looked at it disapprovingly and tossed it aside.

"He was talking about you, wasn't he?" Timothy said with a grunt, making a useless move to pull up again. "You're from underground?"

The girl shook her head. "It isn't me he's talking about, you know. It isn't the queen either. I've seen her for myself."

Queen? thought Timothy.

"Though he won't stop trying, that one can't understand," explained Maggie. "None of them do. They never will."

Thunder rumbled somewhere close. Lightning flashed in the distant gray clouds and struck something in the air. A halo of dark gray smoke lifted up to the blue above the clouds.

"Let's begin now Timothy," said Maggie. "Fall into my arms. If I catch you, it will start over in many different ways. One of them might be good."

Timothy hung by three fingers and they were sliding away. “No!” he screamed. “No!” he said again, this time angrily envisioning his father pushing him in a wheel chair, telling him pain was for cowards.

The branch fell away from his fingertips in the next moment, Timothy’s body rolled sideways and air rushed through his hair, sounding like a god drawing a breath from every possible universe. Light went dark blue around him, the world smelled of stagnant cave water, and pleasure-pain marched over his heart like army ants in steel boots.

The sound of Timothy’s fall echoed miles across the tunnel, tremulous, roaring, destroying, creating, for everyone to listen to and wonder about, for a moment or forever, and when his piercing scream finally reached the end of the underground, when it found the very limit of its journey. Timothy was waiting to receive it, to embrace it, standing there, good and ready, unafraid.

THE END

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Christopher Klemmer - Christopher Klemmer is a sketch comedy writer for [Portsketch](#) and lives in Portsmouth, NH. Whether it be alarming fellow middle school peers with disturbing stories in creative writing classes or writing press releases as a sports information director in college, writing has been a constant thread in his life. His favorite book is THE STAND by Stephen King but he feels his life is more like "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson.

Margaret McAleese - Margaret's full-length play, *There's a Girl in Boston*, was commissioned by Yellow Taxi Productions in Nashua, NH (considered for the American Theatre Critics Association's New Play Award). Her ten-minute play, *Captured*, was selected for New Hampshire Theatre Project's New Works Festival, and her short play, *Seven Sisters*, appeared in *An Evening of Steampunk and Robot Theatre* at The Players'

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Joe Stanganelli - [Joe](#) is a Boston-based writer, communications consultant, and attorney.

In addition to writing scripts, songs, and stories, Joe writes about business and technology topics for United Business Media and other outlets. Follow him on Twitter: [@JoeStanganelli](#).

Laura Thomas - Laura lives in beautiful Portsmouth, NH with her boyfriend and their two spoiled dogs. This is her first time working on a novel; usually when she tries to sit down to write she is distracted by the sudden need to do laundry, drinking more coffee, and wondering if she could survive alone in Jurassic Park. Laura is passionate about improv and sketch comedy; find out more about her group [Portsketch](#).

Jillian Thiele - English teacher, writer, and artist, Jillian proudly hails from NH, where she enjoys performing with improv comedy troupe [Stranger Than Fiction](#) and directing student theater productions. A traveller, indie rock lover, and cine-phile, she enjoys exploring various forms and genres of storytelling. Follow her on Twitter: [@jillianthiele](#)
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During the 7th Inning Stretch, he stretches. And sings. His Info-IV is Twitter [@tuohy](#) and his theme song is [Sweet Caroline](#).

Erika J. Wilson - Erika studied at the University of New Hampshire, graduating magna cum laude with a B.A. in honors English. She is heavily involved with the production and writing departments of DARWiN'S WAIting ROOM comedy troupe and Shoe Slung Films. She enjoys script and creative writing, poetry and editing with hopes of someday becoming a published author.

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