

## Chapter 1

We still had a few boxes in the house, but my mother and father cleaned every room. It didn't look so old and dingy anymore, and even that nasty dust smell when we first moved in was gone. I can still remember the moment when my father told us that we were moving to Appleton. He was offered a better position as loan officer for Appleton's bank, but the only catch was he had to move to Connecticut. I didn't get why my father needed a better job. I'm the oldest out of the three, and I notice almost everything that goes on. In our old house, my mother and father could make ends meet fine. I think my father wanted to get out of Colebrook and jumped at the first chance he got. Who ever heard of moving to Connecticut from New Hampshire for a lousy bank job? We were all happy in Colebrook. Jesse and Allie's classmates in the second grade thought they were cool because they're twins, and I finally started making friends during my freshman year of high school. But the one person who should have their hands around my father's neck was my mother. She had to quit her pharmacy job in Colebrook to move to Appleton. She loved working there, but I don't think my father cared.

My father called me from the living room. I still wasn't used to the house and for a second, his voice sounded like it was coming from my parent's bedroom down at the end of the hallway. Instead of answering him I just came downstairs. He was standing a couple of feet from the back of the couch. He wasn't quite in the middle of the living room, more in the general area of where you would walk to pass the living room to either go upstairs or the kitchen. That seemed to be his spot. Unless you were upstairs, you could see him no matter what. Even if someone barged into our house they'd see my father, still wearing his black suit and tie that were almost identical to the hairs on his head.

"What's up?" I asked.

My father stared at me with his dark hazel eyes. They sunk into his face more than usual, and the bags underneath them were the size of half moons. “Let’s take a walk.”

Allie came running downstairs in search for Jesse who was still hiding, and my mother was in the kitchen doing some finishing touches so it felt like hers. Her brown cargo pants and faded yellow t-shirt told me this. Watching her open one of the wooden cupboards to put in a stack of plates helped too.

“I thought I’d hang out here today,” I said. “You know, get a little more used to the house.”

Allie was looking behind the T.V. for Jesse, and we took a second to watch her.

My father focused back to our conversation after Allie went into kitchen. “You haven’t left the house in two days,” he said

“Yeah, but we’ve only been here two days,” I said.

“Clark, just go with your father,” my mother said. She was still in the kitchen, but I kept looking at my father.

“Fine,” I said. “ Can Jesse and Allie come too?”

“No. Just go with you father,” she said. I could tell I was annoying her.

I was a little disappointed because I wanted Jesse and Allie to come. If they came they’d talk my father’s ear off, and I wouldn’t have to talk to him. I walked slower down the street so we wouldn’t be shoulder to shoulder. Our side of the street had houses wherever they could fit them. The opposite side of the street was the same, but across from our house there was a good fifty-foot gap between two houses. It looked like a house was there at one time, but now it was just a wide opening that led into the woods. Each house was practically wedged up to the next one with only picketed fences, trees or gardens separating them.

“Nice day for a walk,” my father said.

“Be better in New Hampshire.”

My father turned his head to look at me over his left shoulder. “Come on, make the best of this.”

“Why should I? We all have to start over again, and for what? A crummy bank job?”

“It’s not a crummy bank job it’s—”

“Whatever. I don’t want to hear your reasons. Our lives were in New Hampshire, and I don’t want to start over. I don’t want to do it.”

He stopped walking then grabbed my right arm. “You’re going to deal with it.” He was squeezing hard, and I looked around to see if anyone was watching us.

My father was probably angry because he wanted us to be the perfect family. I could picture him fantasizing that we were just like the family in, *Leave it to Beaver* where everything was perfect. I hated stuff like that because it’s not real. It wasn’t real in the Fifties, and it’s not real now. My father was an idiot if he thought our family could be like that.

I looked down at my arm as he kept squeezing. “It’s not that easy. You can’t just expect me to be okay with everything.” Before he could answer me, I slipped away from his grip and ran back to the house. I could feel his eyes burning into my back as I got further away from him.

I’m glad my door had a lock on it, because as soon as I got home I went upstairs and stayed there for the rest of the night. My mother knocked on my door a few times and asked me if everything was all right, but I blew her off by staying silent. The rest of the night I sat on my bed and leaned on the window frame as I stared at my plain white door, waiting for my father to kick it in.

I threw on some clothes the next morning, and went downstairs to face him. My mother was in the kitchen cooking. My father wasn't there or in his spot in the living room, or else I would have seen him. I sat down, and watched my mother from the table. She was wearing the navy blue summer dress my Memere gave her that was covered in small flowers. Her dark brown hair was in a ponytail. She looked over at me with her sky blue eyes and smiled as she moved the eggs with a spatula.

"What are your plans for today?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd explore the town, but I don't know if it's worth it."

"I'm sure you'll find something," she said.

Jesse and Allie came into the kitchen, and sat down at the table across from me. They were so much alike, but so different. I think the only thing they shared was my father's black hair. Jesse had light blue eyes like my mother, and Allie had brownish hazel ones like my father. Even their faces looked different, Jesse's ears stuck out of his head, and Allie had a larger bottom lip than Jesse. They didn't look twins, but sometimes they acted like it.

"You okay?" my mother asked.

"Fine," I said.

"Mom's worried about you," Allie said, then smiled.

"I'm not worried," she said, then took four plates out of the cupboard. "I just want to know why you locked yourself in your room all night." I watched her put the pan in the sink after she was finished with it. "Your father told me what happened." As soon as she served us, I filled my mouth with eggs so I couldn't say anything.

Today was my father's first day as a loan officer in Appleton, and he wanted to make a good first impression. At least that's what my mother told me. I had a feeling he didn't want to

see me so he went to work early. As I ate, I wondered if he was nervous. When I thought about my father's first day, my mind quickly drifted to thoughts about my first day as a sophomore in Appleton, and how awkward it was going to be. I shook my head like I felt a bad chill and remembered it was summer. I still had time to relax and not think about things that bothered me.

I went out on the porch after breakfast, and saw an ice cream truck parked in a driveway a few houses up. It was strange to see one so early in the morning. I began walking over to the truck to find out why it was driving around, and noticed a boy wearing a jean jacket with spiked hair. He sat on his porch steps hunched over a little with his arms dangling off his legs. His house was built from wood, and painted with some bright yellow cream color. The house fit in well with the neighborhood because it needed new paint and other maintenance like the rest. "He touches kids, you know."

"Who?" I asked.

"The ice cream man."

"How do you know?"

"Saw him take a kid when he was getting ice cream. Just opened his truck door and snatched him off the street."

"If you saw it, why didn't you do anything?"

"Because the kid deserved it. You don't go and buy ice cream from the ice cream man by yourself, not in this town."

"Why not? I'm sure he's a typical ice cream man."

He was so quick to answer that I wasn't sure if he was lying. "Yeah, that's how he looks. But when the white suit, and the hat come off, he's a kiddy toucher."

"What happened to the kid? Did you tell anybody?"

He looked like he was about to scream at me. “God damn it, kid.” He sat up straighter and shook his spiky head. “I thought you were going to fall for the joke, but you ask too many damn questions, like a detective or something.”

“So, he’s not a kiddy toucher? He’s just a regular ice cream man?”

“Nah, he’s not even an ice cream man. He’s my neighbor. He just got the ice cream truck ‘cause it was cheap. But he looks like he’d touch kiddies, so I told you he did.”

“Good one.”

The boy’s neighbor got in the ice cream truck, and we watched him drive by. The white truck had big splats of rust on its side and back. He tried to rip off the stickers, but you could tell it took the paint off so he left most of them on. I was surprised I didn’t see how horrible the truck looked from my house. Sometimes my eyes play tricks on me early in the morning. The man looked about middle-aged, but I didn’t think he looked like a kiddie toucher. He kind of looked like a mechanic more than anything. He drove by quickly, but I thought I saw him wearing a navy blue jumpsuit mechanics usually wear. Hopefully he was on his way to fix whatever was causing that gross smell and loud noise his truck gave when it was running.

“So, what do you—” I said, then paused. The kid in the jean jacket looked at me blankly like he didn’t care if I continued or stopped talking all together. “What’s your name?”

“Walt.”

“Walt,” I said it out loud so I’d remember it. “What do you do for fun around here?”

Walt leaned back a little and crossed his arms. “Steal things, break stuff, start trouble. Gang stuff.”

“Gang? Is there any other kids around here who aren’t in gangs?”

“Why? Too good to hang out with us?”

I could hear the anger in Walt's voice, and realized I didn't sugarcoat my words the way I wanted to. "No, I, I just thought gangs only hung out with other gang members."

"Nah, we hang out with whoever."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I dunno if the other guys want you in the gang, but you should hang with us tonight anyways."

"I don't wanna be in a gang, though."

"Just hang to see if you'll like it."

"I don't know. I'm not really into stealing stuff and causing trouble."

While we were talking, a woman came out of Walt's house and stood near him. "Walter, what did I tell you? Take off that jacket, and fix your hair. You dress like a hoodlum, and if you live in my house, you'll dress like a young man." Her voice was soft, even when she was angry with Walt.

"I'm not a hoodlum," Walt said. "Just let me dress the way I want."

The woman took off Walt's jacket as he struggled to keep it on, then pressed her hand on his head, flattening his spikes. "There, now you look like a nice young man. Doesn't he?" She looked over at me, and I smiled. "I'm Walter's Mom. My names Betty, but you can call me B."

"Nice to meet you, Betty," I said. "My name's Clark."

"Call me B," she said.

Walt laughed. "Clark?" He laughed again when he heard my name out loud. "Who names their kid, Clark?"

"It's a fine name," she said. "Are you new to the neighborhood?"

Walt kept laughing, but I ignored him. “I moved here two days ago. I live three houses down.” I said, and pointed at my house with my left arm.

“The green one?” B asked.

“Yeah, it’s more like a pukie green,” I said. “It’s probably because the paint is old and chipped.”

B laughed. “I think it’s great that you moved here, Clark. Now Walter can hang out with you instead of those hood—”

“They’re not hoodlums. They’re my friends.”

“Shush, Walter. I don’t like you hanging out with them. Now come inside, I need help moving my dresser. I have to meet a client for noon.”

Before Walt could say another word, B gave me a friendly nod and walked back inside carrying Walt’s jacket. B was young, possibly in her early or late thirties. She was wearing tight pink workout pants and a short zip-up hoodie. Her blonde hair was even brighter when the sun hit it, and Walt waited for her to walk into the house before he started talking again.

“Are you gonna hang with me and the guys tonight or what?”

“All right, but if we start getting into trouble, I’m out.”

“Sure thing.”

“Where should I meet you guys?”

“Meet me here around eight tonight. Then we’ll meet up with Syd and Sam. Until then, new kid.”

He got up and started to walk up his porch steps, but I felt I had to have the last word.

“It’s Clark, not new kid.”



Walt laughed, and I watched him go into his house before I went home. My mother was in the kitchen when I got there putting more cups and plates in the cupboards, and I wanted to ask why she was spending so much time in there lately.

“Already back?” she asked.

She walked into the living room before I could answer, but I smiled at what she said anyways then went to my room. It was hot out and I had no idea why I was inside on a day like this. In my bed I wondered if Walt had a pool. That would have been awesome right now. Cold water and the chance of seeing B in a bathing suit would be nice. My window brought in a breeze, but I still craved the pool Walt did or didn’t have.

“Hey, what are doing?”

I sat up and saw Jesse in my doorway waiting for an answer. “Nothing, what are you doing? Where’s Allie?”

“She’s in the backyard looking at the sky.”

I sat up looking confused. “What?”

“I don’t know. We were both playing outside, then I saw her looking up at the sky. I asked her, ‘Why are you doing that?’ But she didn’t say anything.”

I got up, and looked out my window. My room was on the right side of the house, but if I stuck my head out far enough, I could see the backyard pretty well. Allie was in my view, close to the corner of the house and near the narrow part of the lawn, which led to the backyard. She was looking at the sky just like Jesse said. “Why can’t you be normal?”

Without moving her head, Allie answered me. “What’s normal? Are you normal? Is anyone normal?”

I thought about her question. “You got me there, Al. What are you looking for?”

“UFO’s.”

“You’re crazy. Who told you about UFO’s?”

“Dad.”

I rolled my eyes, and looked at Jesse who shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, if they land in our backyard, tell them you don’t talk to strangers. And don’t take any space candy from them either.”

Allie gave me a thumbs up while her head stayed in the same position.

My mother was washing dishes and looking out the window when I came downstairs.

“You know what Dad’s telling Jesse and Allie?”

She looked at me over her shoulder while she washed.

“He’s telling them about UFO’s. Poor Allie’s in the backyard looking in the sky for one.”

“Don’t worry so much. Your father probably told them that so they’d settle down for a few hours.”

I pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down. “That wouldn’t settle me down for a few hours. That would make me insane for a few hours. Maybe weeks.”

“Jesse and Allie can handle things better than you could at that age.”

“What do you mean?”

She took her hands out of the water-filled sink and dried them before sitting down at the table. “I’m just saying, that your father waited a little longer to tell you stories like that.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s because he thought they’d give you nightmares. You know how he’s into all that science fiction mumbo jumbo.”

“I don’t think he should be telling them that stuff at all.”

“Why? If they enjoy it, I don’t see it doing any harm.”

“I guess you’re right. It just irritates me.”

“I don’t think that irritates you. I think moving here irritates you.”

“Of course, but its more than that. I feel like Dad made a selfish decision, because he’s the only one getting what he wants.”

My mother made a face that looked smug. “So that’s why you didn’t come out of your room. I know it seems that way, but he did it for all of us. The loan officer job will give us enough money so I don’t have to work, and once we save enough money we can fix up the house.”

“But we were fine in Colebrook.” I knew I was whining a little, but I didn’t care.

“We’re better here. Trust me. We had to make sacrifices—”

“Yeah, leaving our family, friends, and a job I *know* you loved.”

She reached her arms across the table, and held my hands. They were soft and gentle on my skin. “Just trust us. We planned this out.”

Her words made me feel at ease. My mother had a way with making me realize that I was blowing things out of proportion. She did with our whole family. She knew when we were being out of line, and knew exactly how to handle it. We finished our conversation just in time, because my father was home. He came in the house with his suit jacket over his shoulder, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He always had dark circles under his eyes the size of flapjacks. They were dented into his clean-shaven face. Dark circles and suits represented my father. Anytime I thought about him, those two images popped into my head.

We stayed in the kitchen while Jesse ran down stairs to greet him. “Dad, Allie’s looking for UFO’s in the backyard.”

My father crouched down closer to Jesse before he answered. “Did she find any?”

“I don’t think so. No, not yet.”

“Okay, let me know when she does.”

My father stood up and ruffled Jesse’s hair before he walked away. I remembered when he used to do that to me, and how much I hated it.

He came into the kitchen, and sat down with us at the table, and looked calm as he slouched in his chair. “Mom told me you went out to explore. How’d it go?”

I was in shock that he wasn’t yelling at me for running away yesterday. My mother must have told him to take it easy on me or something. Both my parents were patiently waiting for my answer. I could tell by their interest that they wanted me to like Appleton more than anything in the world.

“I met this kid, Walt. He lives three houses down from us.”

“Walt who? Disney?” my father asked.

When my father wasn’t trying to be right, he sometimes turned into a smart ass. “No, Dad. Just Walt. I’m going to meet up with him around eight tonight, and we’re hanging out with some of his friends.”

“Good, just be careful,” he said.

“Why, because they might be aliens?” I began to move my arms like tentacles, after I said aliens, and it made my mother laugh.

“Hey, you never know, the universe is—”

“Yep, Okay. You don’t need to tell me, Dad.” I left the kitchen before I got pulled in by one of my father’s stories about moon men, sun people, and life on Mars. The kind of stuff my younger siblings ate up like Cap’ n Crunch.

I went to my room and looked out the window and saw that Jesse had joined Allie in the UFO search. He was lying in the grass, and Allie probably was too, but I couldn't see her. "They will take you away from Mom and Dad if they come."

"Not true, they want to be our friends," Allie said, but I still couldn't see her.

"Dad just said that because he doesn't want you to know the truth."

"No, he told *us* the truth," Allie said. "*You're* the one who's lying."

Jesse and Allie stayed in the backyard until they had to come in for dinner, and once it got dark they begged my mother to let them camp outside for the night. I assured my mother it was fine, and helped them put up a tent, then gave them sleeping bags and a flashlight. They had everything they needed for their alien watch. When Jesse and Allie are into something, they're into it all the way. It's never half-assed like when I was younger.

When I got to Walt's, he was waiting on his porch wearing his jean jacket again. "About time, new kid."

"It's not even eight yet."

"It is by my watch."

"Whatever. So what are we doing?"

"You'll see."

I followed Walt to the center of town. While we walked, I noticed how dark our neighborhood got at night. We didn't have a single streetlight on our street and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. When they did, I looked around our neighborhood for the second time since I moved here. It still looked suburban, rural suburban if you want to be more specific. Most of the houses were older looking, and it seemed like no one had touched their doorknobs since the Fifties. If I had to describe what these houses were feeling, I'd say tired. Crooked

shutters, chipped paint, and porch decks that looked like they were about to collapse were the norm of the neighborhood.

The sidewalk never ended, but our neighborhood did. The rural part of Appleton was behind us now, and we were walking in a more modern part of town. The buildings were new, and the light poles on the sidewalks gave me a glimpse of the new paint. Buildings were back to back just like the houses in our neighborhood, and across the street from us was no different. There was a church, a bank (the one my father worked at), a funeral home, clothing store, barbershop, grocery store, hardware shop, and a candy store. It reminded me of a strip mall or an outlet plaza. Everything looked so perfect, and it felt like we were walking through a life-size toy town. I didn't understand why this place looked so new, while the rest of Appleton looked like it was falling apart. Appleton wasn't like other towns I've seen before. Sometimes it's good to see something that's a little different or odd, but when I saw Appleton's neighborhoods, buildings, and the woods that surrounded everything, I got an uneasy feeling. A feeling I usually get when I do something wrong.

We passed a large bronze sculpture that all the stores surrounded. It was of a woman whose hair was messy, and she looked like everything she loved was dying in front of her. She was also cradling something that looked like a baby. There was a large plaque underneath the statue. I read it as I followed Walt on the sidewalk:

*Maggie Pent: 1900-1953*

*Mother to many.*

*Now the mother of angels.*

The statue made me feel strange, like I wasn't supposed to be looking at it.

We passed all the buildings, and turned down a street across from the church. I became more interested in what else was in this town, since I had never seen this part of Appleton before. But once I saw that there was nothing but trees and road for miles, I knew I wasn't missing out. I still didn't know Walt that well, and I felt like he was going to play a nasty trick on me and leave me in the woods for the animals. We turned down a dirt road, and when I saw a yellow light coming from a house through the trees, I didn't feel sketched anymore. The house looked like an old cottage or a log cabin. It was hard to tell in the dark, but it had an outdoors feel to it, like someone built it with their hands. The front wooden steps made a snapping sound when we walked on them.

"Who's there?" a voice said from inside.

"It's Walt."

The door opened, and the bright yellow light made my eyes squint. A kid wearing a similar jean jacket like Walt's was in the doorway. He had a black pompadour that looked to be a foot off his head, and it jiggled when he moved aside so we could come in. We walked into a living room that had a fireplace on the back wall, a rocking chair in the right corner, and a brown couch that was covered with multiple stains.

"Who's the new kid?" he asked.

I looked at him with cold eyes. I didn't care what he thought of me. A second kid wearing a jean jacket came out from another room. He slicked his hair back with a comb for a few seconds, then sat down on the couch.

Walt looked over at Slick, then back at Pompadour. "Guys, this is Clark." Walt pointed at Slick, who was sitting on the diseased couch. "Clark, Sam."

I gave Sam a friendly nod.

Walt then brought his index finger to Pompadour. He looked like the type who hated being pointed at. “And this is Syd.”

Syd looked at me like he didn’t want me to be there. “We’re doing a little B and E tonight. Think you can keep up, new kid?”

“What’s B and E?” I asked.

“Oh my God, kid,” Syd said. “You don’t know what B and E is? It’s short for breaking and entering. You’re pathetic.”

“I don’t want to do that,” I said.

“Yeah, c’mon, Syd,” Walt said. “I told him we were gonna hang tonight. The kid doesn’t want to get in trouble.”

“We’re not gonna get in trouble,” Syd said. “You only get in trouble if you get caught, right?”

Me and Walt looked at Syd in silence. He was right, even though I didn’t want to admit it.

“And I don’t care what you told him,” Syd said. “You don’t bring a kid we barely know to my house, and expect us to change for him.”

“Not change,” Walt said. “Just don’t go around causing trouble for one night.”

“What’s with that word tonight?” Syd asked. “We only get in trouble if we get caught.”

His catch phrase silenced us again and I wanted to go home before we started doing something stupid.

“All right, we don’t have to do B and E’s tonight, but we need to do something fun.” Syd looked up at the wooden ceiling and played with his chin stubble. “I got it. Let’s do some egging. That’s not too bad, but fun as hell.”



Walt nodded, then looked at me.

“What do you think?” Walt asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “That sounds all right, I guess.”

Syd gave four eggs to me, Walt, and Sam, and five for himself since it was his idea. After the eggs were divided, we set out on foot to a place that Syd said was perfect for egging because we didn’t have to throw the eggs and run. We walked for five or ten minutes from his house until we reached a large hill hidden behind a dozen or so trees. When we got to the top of the hill, Syd said to throw an egg every time a car passed. I didn’t like what we were doing and my stomach dropped as soon as I saw the headlights of the first car.

Syd had an egg in his hand. “Everybody ready?”

“Come on, Clark,” Walt said. “Get ready.”

The car was below us when we threw our eggs. I heard three hits, and the screeching of tires.

“Oh, shit,” Walt said. “He’s getting out. Hide.”

We all ran behind the hill and into the woods. I was still running when I noticed no one was around me. Then I heard Sam’s voice for the first time. He was on the ground behind a log. “Get behind that tree and lay down.”

I saw a small light moving around from a distance in search of us. I was sketched, and hoped the guy wouldn’t come into the woods. “You fucking punks, I know you’re out there. When I get home, I’m callin’ the cops.”

He turned off his flashlight, but I didn’t move until I heard soft chuckles that turned into roaring laughter.

“All right, guys,” Syd said. “Come out. He’s gone.”

We all met at the bottom of the hill where the woods began. Everyone was laughing except for me.

“Man, that guy was pissed,” Walt said.

“I know,” Syd said. “It was great.”

I felt like I was the only one who was sketched. “Did you guys not hear him? He said he was gonna call the cops.”

“He said that to scare us into leaving, new kid,” Syd said. “He’s not gonna do shit.”

“So we’re gonna stay?” I asked.

“Yeah, we still have thirteen eggs,” Syd said. “Don’t get scared on me, new kid.”

I could tell they were about to laugh at me, so I said the first thing that came to my mind.

“I’m not scared. I just don’t know the people around here.”

“All you need to know is that they’re assholes who like to bitch about stupid shit,” Syd said.

We walked up the hill again, and that uneasy feeling in my stomach came back once I saw the next car’s headlights.

“This one’s coming up fast,” Syd said. “When I say throw it, do it.”

We all waited for his command, eggs ready. Syd yelled and we all fired. I heard the hitting sound again, but this time it was four hits instead of three.

“I hit it,” I said.

“It’s a cop,” Syd said. “Run.”

The blue lights pierced through the woods, and it seemed like the cop was following us from the road. I was thinking about burying myself in the dirt and waiting until morning to make my escape, but I knew I didn’t stand a chance if I stayed in one place. It was every man for

himself, and all I could think about was how much I missed New Hampshire. The blue lights kept up, but I was unsure if they were ahead or behind me. I could only run deeper into the woods and when the blue lights faded, only darkness remained. I had no idea where or how I was going to get out of the woods, but at least I had a better chance of escaping. I wandered in the darkness tripping over branches, stepping in mud and getting stabbed by pricker bushes. I found an opening that led me to the street, and when I looked around I realized I was only a few feet from the center of town. I couldn't believe how lucky I was.

I stayed in the woods, but used the buildings in the center of town as my guide until I made it to my neighborhood. My body was covered in mud, pricklers, and a few random tree branches were tangled around my left arm. Feeling like swamp thing, I went into my backyard to check on Jesse and Allie. The flashlight was still on in their tent. I unzipped the front, and saw that Jesse and Allie were asleep with their flashlight in an upright position pointing towards the sky, probably for the purpose of signaling aliens. I was going to shut it off, but I knew if I did I wouldn't hear the end of it in the morning. I didn't want to be blamed for the aliens not coming.

## Chapter 2

Out of all the kids in Appleton to hang out with, why did I have to pick the bad ones? At least I got away. I thought of it as a second chance, and I was going to take it. Me, Jesse, Allie, and my mother walked to center of town to the grocery store. My father was working day number two, and everyone seemed fine with him not being there. During our walk, I hoped to run into some nice kids who would take me under their wing and away from the goons I hung out with last night. But there were no kids, no cars, and no people. The perfect-looking buildings stood in silence as we walked by them. Appleton didn't seem to have any life until after ten o'clock, and that uneasy cold feeling I got the night before returned.

We walked into Appleton's grocery store, which was called Blissful Foods. A weird name, but the store was even weirder. A giant crucifix hung on the wall furthest from the entrance.

"What's that?" Allie asked.

"It's a cross," my mother said.

"Aren't those supposed to be in church?" Jesse asked.

"Yes," my mother said, but sounded confused with her answer. "But whoever owns the grocery store must really like them." She looked at me with her eyes bigger than usual and raised eyebrows like her face didn't understand what she just said.

Blissful Foods had only five checkout counters, six aisles, and a row of freezers on the back wall underneath the crucifix. As we walked through, I focused on the dull faces of the town's people, pushing their carts as if they've been doing it for centuries. No one looked the least bit interested in what they were doing, including the workers. We went to the back wall where the freezers were, and the life-size crucifix gave me the same uncomfortable feeling when I looked at Maggie Pent.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

I turned around, and I saw a middle-aged man wearing a yellow polka dotted bowtie staring up at the cross. He was balding, but not too much, just a little past his forehead. His hair was red and curly, but he tried his best to slick it back to look professional. He wore a white dress shirt that was close to the color of his skin and tan slacks, so he dressed the part, but the bowtie and red hair made him look like a clown. When he stopped gazing at the crucifix, he noticed I was looking at him.

"Are you new in town?" the clown man asked.

“Yeah, I moved here a few days ago.”

He put out his pale hand. “Owen James, son. Nice to meet you.”

“Clark Lapine, nice to meet you.” We shook hands and gave each other a quick smile.

He looked to his left at my mother, who was with Jesse and Allie on the opposite side of the freezers picking out bread. “This your family?”

I nodded my head proudly. “Yes, sir.”

“Ms. Lapine?” Owen said, and my mother stopped what she was doing and turned to him.

“Yes?” she asked.

“My names Owen James,” he said. “I’m Mayor here in Appleton and owner of Blissful Foods.”

“It’s good to meet you, Mr. James. I’m Virginia,” she said shaking his hand. “You have a very nice store.”

“You can call me, Owen,” he said then looked at me. “The same goes for you, Clark.

“Your movers put your cross in the wrong building, Mr. James,” Allie said.

“And what’s your names?” Owen asked.

“My names Allie, and this is my twin brother, Jesse,” Allie said.

“You sure you’re twins?” Owen asked, then put his hands on his hips. It reminded me of something that Mickey Mouse would do. “Cause you don’t really look alike.”

“We’re eh, what’s that word?” Allie asked.

“Fraternal,” I said.

“Fraternal, huh?” Owen said. “What’s that mean?”

“It means that we’re twins that don’t look the same,” Jesse said.

Owen smiled. “Well, I don’t want to keep you. But on behalf of Appleton, I welcome you to our town. Join us this Sunday for mass if you like.”

None of us said anything, because we didn’t go to church and Owen’s smile got weaker. “God bless,” he said, and walked away quickly.

I raised my right eyebrow as I watched him leave, and kept it raised so my mother could see it. It was another day in Appleton, and another sharp turn into weirder territory.

“Don’t forget to tell the movers they messed up and put your cross in the wrong building,” Allie said, and I let out a quick laugh so Owen wouldn’t hear.

I decided to visit my father at the bank after we finished shopping. It was a few feet from the candy store in the center of town, and my mother was fine with it. She seemed pleased that I wanted to explore Appleton. Inside the bank a woman in a red dress at the front counter brought me to my father’s office. While I followed her I couldn’t stop staring at her butt because it stuck out like a big red air conditioner.

My father was at his desk typing on a computer when I walked in. The office was gloomy because his blinds were shut.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Nothing, I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by and say hi.”

He stopped typing and turned away from his computer. “More exploring? Find any aliens?”

I sat down in the chair where his customers sat. “Nah, just went to Blissful Foods with Mom, Jesse, and Allie. The owner’s this guy, Owen James. He’s Appleton’s Mayor too.”

He went back to typing. “Must be a busy man.”

“Yeah. He’s kinda weird. He has a giant crucifix in his store and asked us to join him for church on Sunday.”

He stopped typing again, but this time he locked eyes with me. “He told you what? Don’t listen to anything that man says. We don’t go to church.”

My father looked like he was getting angry, so I quickly changed the subject. “Why do you have your blinds closed?”

My father got up, and opened the blinds. The sun beamed in, and Maggie’s statue appeared front and center.

“I don’t really like the view.”

“Do you know anything about her?”

“I do, but it’s a terrible story.”

“Just tell it.”

He sat down and moved closer to his desk. “Maggie Pent,” he said then pointed at the statue. “And her husband opened an orphanage in the thirties because they couldn’t have children. They kept trying, and eventually she got pregnant. But it was bittersweet.”

“What, did they lose the baby or something?”

“No, but a few months after she had her child, someone set the orphanage on fire. Maggie managed to get the baby out, but it ended up dying.” My father paused then looked up at Maggie. “The statue was made to capture the moment Maggie got out of the fire. To show the pain she went through.”

I asked my father why Appleton didn’t take down the statue, and he went on saying that it’s considered a piece of town history, and that uncomfortable feeling I felt before returned.

My father pulled the blind down, and the room went back to its gloomy state.

I left after a few minutes so he could go back to work. The lady with the red air conditioner butt said bye to me, and I said the same.

Outside I looked at Maggie Pent's statue. I didn't want to, but hearing what happened to her drew me closer to it. She was a beautiful lady. You could even see it during the worst moment of her life. *1900-1953*. Easy math, even for me. She was fifty-three. Only eleven years older than my mother when she died. I hated thinking about death because it's not fair, and when I thought about it too much I didn't want to do anything. I felt like my father's office when the blinds were closed during my walk home. My hands stayed in my pockets and my head was heavy so I kept it down.

"New kid," a voice said ahead of me, but I didn't look up to see who it was. "Clark."

I wanted to jump in a bush or hide behind a tree, but since the voice saw me it was too late.

"What's wrong with you?"

The black Converse made me look up. Walt was standing in the middle of the sidewalk staring at me. "Your Mom told me you were with your Dad. What's going on?"

My eyes went down to the sidewalk again. "I don't wanna hang with you and your friends."

"Why?"

I picked my head up. "What do you mean why? We almost got arrested."

"Almost."

"It was still a close call."

Walt smiled. "But fun, right?"



I wanted to smack him, but he probably had a weapon on him. “No. I’m sorry, but just stay away from me. Tell your friends too.” Walt didn’t move, so I walked around him.

“C’m on, new kid. You gotta have friends,” he said while I walked away.

“I’ll find some. Good ones.” I didn’t turn around to look at him.

“Fine. Fuck you then, new kid.”

He sounded hateful, but if Walt hated me I didn’t have to worry about him dragging me into trouble. But what if he was *really* mad? Bad people get mad and usually take revenge. I thought about turning around and talking my way out of Walt being pissed, but then decided it wasn’t worth it.

My mother was putting away a few of the groceries when I came inside. “A nice boy in a jean jacket stopped by looking for you.”

“Yeah, I saw him.”

She could tell by my voice and the way I held myself I was a little down. “Did you not want to see him?”

“No, that’s not it. Dad just told me a sad story about the statue that’s in the center of town.”

“Why’s it so sad?”

“It just is, okay?”

“Okay. Sorry,”

“It’s fine.”

We heard a knock, and my mother looked in the living room like she could see who it was through the door. I stayed in the kitchen while she went over to answer it. She opened the door slowly, being cautious like a serial murderer was on the other side.

“Hello, Virginia. My name is Winfred Rose, I’m the priest of Appleton’s Catholic community church down the street. Was your shopping experience pleasant?”

My mother didn’t say anything for a few seconds. I couldn’t see her face, but I’m sure it had, *what are you doing here?* Written all over it.

“It was good, thank you,” she said.

“I’m glad,” Rose said, “But that’s not the only reason I came here.”

Once again, my mother didn’t say anything. And I thought about walking to the front door to see if I was right about her face.

“I came here to tell you more about our church.”

“Oh, well, we—”

“It will only take a minute,” he said.

“All right,” she said, but it was probably just to humor him.

My mother moved out of the way of the door, and Rose walked in. He was wearing typical priest clothes, black blazer, shirt, pants, shoes, and that little white-collar thing around his neck. Rose’s face was withered and wrinkled, and he wore thick aviator glasses to see. Every part of his loose skin that was exposed had multiple brown spots, and the little hair he had left was white like the color of Owen’s skin. Rose stood in my father’s spot once he was inside, then pulled a pamphlet out of the side pocket of his jacket, and handed it to my mother. “This is everything you need to know about our church and how it brings together our community.”

Rose waited for a reaction, but my mother went silent for the third time. He pointed at something on the pamphlet. “You see that? That’s the times we have mass. You don’t have to go to all of them, of course,” he said. “But you can. And we’re always here for you. My personal number’s at the bottom.”

"I'll be sure to take a look at it," my mother said.

"Don't be shy about passing it around to your family as well," Rose said, and began walking towards the front door. "They're just as important."

"Thank you, Mr. Rose—"

"Father. Rose," he said. I didn't like the tone he was using on my mother.

She opened the front door to let Rose out. "Have a good day."

By my first impression of him, I could tell that Rose was going to get under my skin.

"I can't believe the Mayor had the priest come over to talk about church." My mother shook her head at the thought, then tossed the pamphlet on the kitchen table. "Unbelievable."

"Dad's not gonna like this," I said.

"Why you say that?"

"He got mad when I told him that Owen invited us to go to church. Imagine how he's gonna be when he hears this?"

I hate to sound like my father, but I was right. As soon as he saw Rose's pamphlet on the kitchen table everyone heard, 'What's this crap?' through the house.

It was the first time since we moved to Appleton my mother wasn't in the kitchen. She was upstairs helping me organize my room when we heard my father's anger. Jesse and Allie were in their room, and my mother told them not to come out then closed their door. My father was in the kitchen looking at us with Rose's pamphlet in his hand when we came down.

"What's *this* crap?" he said again, waving the pamphlet in the air.

"Winifred Rose stopped by to drop it off," my mother said.

"I don't care," he said. "It's bullshit. How hard is it to tell him you weren't interested?"

"He wouldn't leave, Dad," I said.

“So slam the door in his fuckin’ face,” he said.

“Stop swearing,” my mother said, in a voice that was louder than my father’s. “The kids are gonna hear you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just don’t understand.”

My father looked confused, standing awkwardly in the kitchen. He drooped the packet on the floor. He said he didn’t understand, but *I* didn’t understand why he was so pissed. I was just glad it wasn’t at me.

“It’s no big deal, Jack,” my mother said. “It’s not like we’re gonna go.”

“You’re damn right,” he said. “This family won’t be caught dead in a place like that.”

“Just take it easy,” my mother said. “It’s done and over with.”

But my father wouldn’t listen. He got even angrier and began saying that my mother had been brainwashed by Rose. I was going to step in and stick up for my mother, but I knew I’d probably get my face smacked, so as the arguing increased I left the house.

Before I reached the center of town, I saw that the candy store’s lights were still on. The sun was in the early stages of setting, and I could see it above the church in the distance. Appleton looked like it was becoming a ghost town like this morning. People were either leaving on foot or getting into their cars like they weren’t allowed to be outside once the sun was gone. Every second I was out of my house I noticed more creepy things about this town, and I was always surprised at what I saw or found. I was about to go inside the candy store when I saw a man passing Blissful Foods on a skateboard. His hair was shaggy and grey, and he was wearing cut-off jeans with patches on them with a tie-dyed t-shirt. It wasn’t bright out, but he had on yellow-framed sunglasses.

He leaned on the back tail on the skateboard to slow down when he was a few feet from me. “Hey, how’s it going?” He scratched his grey mustache that covered his top lip.

“I’m okay. I just needed to get out of my house for a bit. Parents are pissing me off.” I didn’t know why I blurted that out, but it made his face change from happy to blank.

“It happens.”

“Yeah, but it’s hard to deal with sometimes.” I looked down at his skateboard and noticed his neon green grip tape.

“Whatever, man you’ll get over it.” He took off his glasses and put them in his shirt collar.

“Yeah, they’re just annoying.”

“Some adults are. You new here?”

“Yeah, I moved here a couple of days ago.”

He put out his hand. “Tiggins, Dan Tiggin.”

“Clark,” I said shaking his hand. “Lapine.”

“Cool, man.” Dan got on his skateboard and started skating in the street. “I’ll see you around, and don’t worry about your parents.”

Dan skated up the street towards the church. He would stick out in the regular world, and I couldn’t imagine what Appleton thought of him.

I walked up the street feeling lousy. Dan couldn’t help me no matter what he said, and I didn’t expect him to. I roamed Appleton hoping to stumble across something interesting or fun that would snap me out of my sadness. But there was nothing outside the center of town. The high school, middle school, and police station were on the other side of the street if you were heading out of town, but after that it was all trees and road. I sat on a bench between the

barbershop and Blissful Foods, and thought about how weird it was for Owen to send Rose over to our house. Rose seemed so persistent about church, and I didn't like that, and I *really* didn't like that Owen told Rose about my family. Fucking clown mayor. All he needed was the shoes. The light poles in the center of town came on, and I went home to face my parents, who took out all their anger on me. At least they weren't arguing with each other anymore.

### Chapter 3

My parents grounded me for a week. It wasn't like I was planning to go anywhere anyway. My only friends were Jesse and Allie now, and I thought that was pretty pathetic. They woke me up the next morning with their high voices.

"You wanna go play? Mom said it was okay," Allie said, "As long as you stay in the back yard."

I was still in bed, but turned away from them. They waited a couple of seconds for me to speak, then left when I didn't answer. I never left my bed until my mother made me get up for dinner.

"It's going to be a long week if you keep acting like this," my father said at the table. I wasn't looking at him, but I could feel his eyes.

"You're missing out on your summer," my mother said.

I looked down at my plate. "So, it's not like there's anything to do around here."

"You can find plenty of stuff to do," my father said, "You're a kid."

I kept quiet.

"Why don't you have that boy come over?" my mother asked.

"Because he's trouble," I said. "Can I go to my room now?"

“You’re going to stay here with your family,” my father said. “In fact, the whole time you’re grounded you’re only allowed in your room to sleep.”

“That’s not fair,” I said. “I need time to myself.”

“You’re fifteen years old,” my father said. “You don’t *need* time by yourself.”

“Great, now I get to watch you two fight,” I said.

My mother sat up straighter in her chair. “It was only a little fight.”

“You’re fighting,” I said.

“Is that true?” Jesse asked with a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“It’s not true, honey,” my mother said. “If Clark didn’t run off, he would’ve seen that we resolved the problem.”

“Whatever,” I said.

My father pointed his fork at me. “Don’t talk to your mother that way.”

I picked up my fork and pointed it at him, so he would know what it felt like. “I’m not talking to her in a certain way, I just said, ‘Whatever’.”

“Stop,” my mother said.

I put my fork down and gave her an irritated stare. “It will come up again anyways. Rose’s determined.”

“What’s going on?” Allie asked, and her eyes began to tear up.

“I think it’s time for bed,” my mother said. She got up from her chair, and brought Jesse and Allie upstairs while me and my father sat at the table.

He continued eating. “They’re only eight. When you confuse them like that they think something’s wrong.”

“They should know what’s going on.”

“We just had a little disagreement.”

I laughed. “A *little* disagreement? You dropped a brick when you saw that pamphlet.”

“I might have overreacted, but everything’s fine.”

“You two have never fought about anything that bad.”

“We’ve never had this problem where we used to live.”

“So just ignore Rose. I’m sure he’ll leave us alone.”

“Hopefully.”

My father leaned back and looked up the stairs. He put his chair on all fours, then hunched over the table to get closer to me. “I’ve never found church to be a rewarding experience.”

I never knew my father was so against going to church. He never bashed it, but when I thought about the past, religion was never mentioned while growing up.

My mother came back into the kitchen and none of us ate anymore.

“Your father and I had a small argument,” my mother said as she pushed herself closer to the table.

“It was a fight, plain and simple,” I said. “You said it wasn’t a big deal, and Dad flipped.”

“That’s what the disagreement was about,” my mother said. “But we worked it out. You didn’t have to run away.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” I said, and I think my tone came off like I didn’t mean it. But I wanted them to get off my back.

My mother dragged us to Blissful Foods the next day because she forgot to buy milk, and Rose was there. He slithered over once we got inside. “Have you talked to your husband about church yet?”



My mother looked at Rose. Her eyes seemed like they were ready to scream. “Yes, I have, and I don’t think it’s for us, but thank you anyways.”

She gave him a smile that seemed like an apology, but Rose’s lips twisted into a frown. “How about we go over to the church just so you can see—”

“My family doesn’t want to be part of your stupid church.” It came out so fast that it didn’t seem real.

Some customers and employees of Blissful Foods must have heard me because the main floor went silent. Rose looked at me with his mouth gaping open, and I could see inside his toothless mouth. He closed his hole and coughed before going back into priest mode. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“We don’t. Clark was joking,” my mother said then looked at me for an answer.

“I wasn’t joking,” I said, and the people around us just stared at me like I was a freak.

“Virginia, I think it would be wise to leave,” Rose said.

“You can’t tell us to leave,” I said. “You’re not the owner.”

“Clark,” my mother said, and I thought she was going to smack me.

“No, I’m not the owner,” he said. “But I’m filling in for Owen today.”

My mother grabbed my arm and started pulling me towards the exit. “How come? Did he have a birthday party to entertain? With his stupid bowtie?” I was still looking at Rose who remained calm, alongside the customers, whose faces were stunned and shocked with what I said.

“I apologize,” my mother said. “We’re leaving.” My mother pulled my arm harder, and I finally started to walk towards the exit with her, Jesse, and Allie.

Everyone who heard me watched us leave. I looked back before we walked outside and saw people shaking their heads and talking amongst themselves. Rose just stood there with the same calm expression as I walked out. He reminded me of some sort of psycho killer, because he seemed so emotionless.

During the walk home my mother didn't stop crying. "How could you do this to me? The whole town thinks we hate God now."

"Because of what I said?" I asked.

"Did you see everyone's reaction?" she asked. "Appleton's a religious town."

"Well, at least they'll leave us alone now," I said.

My mother stopped walking and slapped me across the face. "Stop being so smart with me and your father," she said, and I held my hand over the cheek she slapped. Jesse and Allie stayed quiet, but their sad faces said enough.

My face stung and I didn't speak to my mother for the rest of the day. I watched T.V. while she wandered around the kitchen doing dishes, cleaning floors or whatever she thought needed to be done. This went on until my father came home. He walked through the door, and my mother told him everything that happened while I sat on the couch pretending to ignore her voice.

"I'm glad he spoke up," my father said. He was standing in his spot. "He knows I don't want to be involved in that crap."

"He didn't have to do it that way," my mother said.

"Your way wasn't doing any good," he said. "Clark knew he had to be mean for Rose to back off."

My mother then said some harsh words and my father did the same. I stayed on the couch for a few minutes and listened to the arguing, then went outside and played tag with Jesse and Allie until dinnertime. At the table my parents bickered, and Jesse and Allie looked just as sad as earlier while they ate. I stayed glued to my chair as they made a quick escape after dinner.

“You don’t have to stay at the table,” my father said.

“I can’t go to my room,” I said. “And that’s where I want to go.”

“As long as you stay in the house or the yard,” he said. “I don’t care where you go.”

“I thought you said he was grounded from his room?” my mother asked.

“He did a good thing today. So he should get a small reward.” My father smiled at me, then continued to eat.

“Why not a big one?” my mother asked, “Like you said, he deserves it.”

My father took the fork out of his mouth and kept it in his hand. “He did the right thing. Now Rose won’t bother with us anymore.”

I knew his comment would spark a fight, so I got up and went upstairs. I took advantage of my father’s reward, and stayed in my room whenever I got the chance. I came out to eat, and use the bathroom. That’s it. I had high hopes that I was worrying my parents, but they still kept fighting with each other. It was no use, and I felt like I was only punishing myself by closing off the world with my bedroom door. Jesse and Allie sometimes came in my room to watch me sit on my bed, and their stupid sayings sometimes made me laugh. At night the sky blue wallpaper in my room turned to grey once it got dark, and sometimes it felt good to be in there, and other times it didn’t. Almost like a halfway house. The pro for me was escaping my parents, and the con was that deep down it was still a place I couldn’t leave.

After the week was finished, I became free and sometimes walked around Appleton to see if there were other kids around. But my searches were short once I saw the angry stares throughout the streets. No one wanted anything to do with me because of what I said to Rose, and people went to great lengths to avoid me. One lady even crossed the street once she saw that I was walking towards her. That was my summer. And I've never felt so alone and creeped out at the same time. Sometime in early August, I came home to another fight between my parents over Appleton and Rose.

"Oh, there he is now," my mother said. She was pointing at me from the kitchen.

"Virginia," my father said. He was trying to get in her view so she would stop staring at me. "This is between us."

"We wouldn't be fighting if he didn't open his mouth." She was yelling at me then went back to looking at my father. "And you encouraged it."

I stood in my father's spot for a few seconds. Both of them were yelling and my eyes filled with tears as I watched. When I ran upstairs to get away I heard my mother yell, "Run to your room, hermit boy."

I waited for everyone to go to bed that night, stuffed some clothes under my blankets, then jumped out my window. If I was another story higher, I probably would have broken something if I jumped out, but I didn't care. I needed to get out of that house.

I knocked on Walt's front door and B answered wearing nothing but a short nightgown and underwear. Her hair was a mess, but it still looked good.

"Who's at the door?" a man's voice said before B spoke.

"You're one of Walter's friends, right?" B asked, but I was still staring at her firm legs and skimpy white underwear.

“Um, yeah. Do you know where he is?”

The man’s deep voice kept calling for B. It sounded angry now. “No, he’s not here,” she said then closed the door.

I started walking towards the center of town but stopped after I was almost hit with an egg from behind. When I turned around Syd, Sam, and Walt were a few feet in front of me.

“Isn’t it past your bed time, new kid?” Syd asked.

“I’m not a new kid anymore,” I said. “I’ve lived here three months almost.”

“So what?” Syd said. “You’ll always be the new kid to us.”

I ignored Syd and pretended I was happy to see them all. “What are you guys doing tonight?”

“Why? You wanna hang with us?” Syd asked. “Walt said you didn’t wanna get in trouble.”

I didn’t want to get in trouble. But I needed to get my parents, Rose, Owen, and this shitty town off my mind. I knew Syd, Sam, and Walt could help me, even if it wasn’t in the best way.

“I thought about that night, and I had a pretty good time,” I said, which was a lie right through the teeth.

Syd gave me a crooked smile. “I know how to have a good time. I guess it’s cool if you hang.”

We walked to the train tracks, which is the opposite way from the center of town and passed mine and Walt’s house along the way. I could hear moaning in B’s bedroom from the street.

“Oh man,” Sam said. “B’s at it again.”

“Guys, shut up,” Walt said.

“Man, I’d like a piece of that,” Syd said.

“Shut up,” Walt said. “She’s too old for you.”

“Yeah, right. I’m eighteen,” Syd said. “She needs a young guy in her life. I’d show her a thing or two. Maybe I’ll hire her as *my* personal trainer.” We all laughed except Walt who got quiet.

The train tracks were inches away from the Appleton border. When I first saw them, I actually thought the track *was* the border. The moon made the steel shine, and I looked until the track faded into the darkness. This was a man-made path to freedom, and for a split second I was happy.

“Train passes by around midnight,” Syd said. “What time is it?”

Sam looked at his watch. “Eleven.”

“We have time,” Syd said.

“Time to do what?” I asked.

“For us to play a little game,” Syd said.

I looked at them and swallowed hard. “What game?”

“We need your parents’ car,” Syd said. “Go home and take it.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why *my* parent’s car?”

“No questions, new kid. Just do what you’re told,” Syd said. “We’ll be waiting here, and you better show up and not puss out, or else you can forget about hanging with us.”

I walked away frightened. I was dead no matter what I did. I thought Walt would stick up for me, but I think he was still pissed about what I said to him after the night we egged the cop car. When I got home, I opened the garage slow so I didn’t wake anyone up, took a ladder out

and brought it to the right side of the house where my room was. I carefully placed it on my windowsill, then climbed it like a bed of light bulbs. The car keys were on the coffee table like always, and when I went back to the garage I looked at my parent's black 2008 Explorer before I got inside.

I put the car in drive and almost smashed the front grill into the wall. When I managed to get out of the garage, I turned the wheel too much and ended up driving over the lawn then clipped the Explorer's driver mirror on our mailbox. On the road I swerved like a drunken animal until I reached the train tracks. I could see Syd, Sam, and Walt jumping up and down with excitement when I pulled up.

"All right." I said. "What are we doing?"

"Drive this beast on the train tracks," Syd said.

"Why?" I asked.

"No questions, new kid," Syd said, and got in the back seat of the Explorer. Sam and Walt followed and put the seats down in the back. I wanted to ask questions, but I kept my mouth shut and drove the car on the tracks.

I put the Explorer in park and listened to Syd's directions. "We're going to play a game called chicken. Last one in the car wins. Since it's your car, new kid, it's your job to keep the car on the tracks."

"What about the train?" I asked.

"Put it in drive," Syd said.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and put the car in drive. The Explorer rolled down the tracks a few feet before I put my foot on the pedal. I could feel the frame bouncing and bumping along the tracks when Syd, Sam, and Walt started wrestling. I kept watching them from

the rear view mirror. They were tumbling around and I noticed Sam looking up front sometimes. His face was sweaty and he looked nervous. When I went to focus on the track ahead, I saw a small light in the distance.

“It’s the train,” Syd said. He had a crazy look on his face. “Go faster. And stay straight.”

I looked at Sam and Walt after Syd’s order. They both shook their heads while Syd looked at the oncoming train, I could see the fear in their eyes. They stopped wrestling and watched the train coming towards the Explorer.

“Stay straight,” Syd said.

I tried to keep the wheel steady, but the Explorer was all over the track. “I can’t. We’re going too fast,” I said. I could see the front of the train from my headlights.

“Faster, you pussy,” Syd said. “You’re only going fifteen.”

“If I go any faster I won’t be able to control it,” I said. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Sam’s face. He was thinking about something. Before I started to guess what he was going to do, he pushed Syd and Walt aside and jumped out the right passenger door.

“Pussy,” Syd said.

Every second the train was getting more detailed, I could see a few of its boxcars and smoke coming from the smokestack.

“Faster,” Syd said.

I ignored him and kept the wheel steady. We heard the piercing sound of the train whistle. That was Walt’s cue, and he jumped out the left passenger door before it was blown a second time.

“Good riddance,” Syd said, and climbed in the front seat. “Come on, new kid. I know you’re scared, jump out.”



The train was about sixty or seventy feet from us. “No. I’m not gonna let my parents’ car get destroyed.”

Syd stopped looking at me and began watching the train hurdling towards us. “You better hurry or you’re gonna die. I never lose at chicken.” Syd sat quietly after he said this with his hands folded preparing for the end.

I jerked the wheel to the right out of the train’s path. We sped down a hill and my mind forgot the car had brakes until Syd screamed to use them. I slammed them down hard, but it wasn’t soon enough and crashed the Explorer into a tree. The air bags went off and Syd laughed like we just finished riding a roller coaster.

“It’s not funny.”

“That’s the price you pay, new kid.”

I pushed the airbag aside and got out to look at the wreck.

“I won. I told you no one beats me at chicken.”

The entire front end was wrapped around the tree we hit. Syd got out of the Explorer and couldn’t stop laughing.

“It’s not funny.”

“I told you to jump out, but you didn’t listen.”

“That wouldn’t have mattered. The car would have been destroyed anyways. At least I saved some of it.”

“Yeah, but I would have saved *all* of it. If you jumped out, like I said, I would have turned the wheel and drove the car to safety.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Syd came over and put his arm around my shoulder. "This is what happens when you don't trust me."

Walt and Sam found us and looked shocked when they saw the car.

"Holy shit," Walt said. "Are you guys alright?"

"Yeah, we're fine," Syd said. "The car's a different story."

"What am I gonna do?" I said.

"Leave the car here," Syd said. "Take out the keys and put them back where you found them, and tomorrow play dumb."

It didn't sound like a bad idea and I couldn't think of anything better. I was too worried to sleep when I got home. I kept thinking that one of the neighbors saw me steal the car, or maybe the cops would find something in the car to prove I stole it. I stayed awake thinking these things until early morning when I finally passed out. A few hours later I went downstairs, and cops were in our living room asking my father questions. Syd told me to play dumb and that's what I did when anybody asked me about the car, and eventually my father left with the cops once they found the Explorer.

I was in my room when I heard the front door slam. My father was home and I listened to my parents' conversation from the top of the stairs.

My father was standing in his spot again, I could see the top of his head from where I was eavesdropping. "Who the fuck would do this? They didn't hotwire it. The wires were all intact, so someone had to have taken our keys."

"But the keys are here," my mother said. "Why would they break into our house to steal the Explorer, then bring the keys back once they crashed the car?" My mother got the chills. "I can't stand the thought that someone was in our home without us knowing, snooping around."

“I told the police about the keys, and they said they were looking into it.” My father was holding a piece of yellow paper in his hand that looked like a receipt for something. “It could be five grand or more in damages, so they better find whoever did this.” My father crumpled the piece of paper and threw it at the T.V. He was so angry that I expected him to walk up to the coffee table and flip it over. I wanted to tell them everything, but I couldn’t get myself to do it. My father would beat my ass of course, but I didn’t want to add more drama to the house either.

The dinner table was quiet that night. I didn’t say a word because judging from my father’s face, anything would have made him snap. His lips were in a frowning position, but it was an angry frown. The kind that came with angry eyes and slanted brows, along with a face that looked as if it was constantly flexing.

“I still can’t believe it,” my father said. He didn’t touch his food while the rest of us ate.

My mother touched his arm. “It will be okay. This is just a minor setback.”

I pretended to focus on my plate of chicken stir-fry, while I caught a few glimpses of my father holding in all his anger as he stared at the kitchen wall furthest from the door.

“It’s not minor,” he said, and snatched away his arm from my mother. “It’s major. I had everything planned out with our bills, our food, house repairs, I had it all.” My father went back to staring at the wall, and my eyes went back to my plate. Then I heard a smash, followed by quick footsteps. My father was gone, but his broken plate remained where his feet were, and stir-fry was stuck to the wall a few feet from the doorframe.

“It’s okay,” my mother said, as she got up to clean the mess. Jesse looked at me with tears in his eyes and I shook my head like it was the wrong thing to do right now. He pouted for a few more seconds as the three of us watched my mother clean up my father’s mess, then finally stopped.

I snuck out of my window again later on to escape his anger. I felt like jumping head first, but I wimped out. Walt answered his door after I knocked, and I was a little upset I didn't get the chance to see B in her underwear again. B was fully clothed when I came inside, and she let us have ice cream while we watched T.V.

"That was crazy last night," Walt said. "But at least you're hanging out with us again."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I didn't really talk to you last night."

"It's fine."

"No it's shitty. And I'm sorry."

"Whatever, dude." I stared off into the glow of the T.V. screen as we both ate our ice cream.

Syd and Sam barged into Walt's house a little later, and were excited to find out what happened with the Explorer. Syd laughed when I told the story, and I wanted to smash my bowl over his head.

"That sucks," Walt said.

"You didn't get caught," Syd said. "And that's all that matters."

"I don't like seeing my dad this upset," I said. "Besides, I think eventually he'll figure out it was me who took the Explorer."

"You have a lot to learn, new kid. You need to stop caring if you want to hang with us," Syd said. "The less you care, the more fun you'll have."

"It's hard," I said.

"Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it," Syd said. "As long as you don't puss out."

"I won't," I said.

Syd must have thought we had enough fun crashing my parents' car the night before, because everyone stayed at Walt's until one in the morning. Maybe Syd wanted to see more of B. She *is* great eye candy, and I noticed him grilling her all night.

My mother pulled me out of bed at nine thirty the next morning to go clothes shopping for school. My eyes could barely open during the walk and Jesse and Allie held my hands to direct me, and for the first time, I felt like they were keeping an eye on me.

"Why'd you stay up so late?" my mother asked.

"Because I didn't think I was getting up at the crack of dawn to go shopping," I said.

We walked through the center of town and people stared. But their looks of death didn't faze me anymore. The people who went out of their way to hate me for what I said to Rose needed their head checked in my eyes, and that was pretty much everybody. As the four of us walked down the sidewalk, my mother's eyes wandered between the buildings and cars that filled the center of town. I think she was trying to get a glimpse of everyone who was watching us, but that was impossible. She looked scared, and I wished she didn't care so much.

I tried to get her mind off our neighbor's creepy and twisted faces. "At least everyone knows us now."

"That's not funny," my mother said. "They know us as Satan worshippers because you couldn't keep your mouth shut."

"Maybe if you weren't so nice, I wouldn't have had to say anything," I said.

"You're lucky there's people around," my mother said. "Or else I'd smack you for talking to me like that."

Bronco's clothing store was across the street from Blissful Foods, and it was packed with kids who looked my age. I was stoked to see other kids in Appleton besides Syd, Sam, and Walt, then I realized I was with my mother. Not a good first impression.

"I'll meet up with you later," I said.

"All right. Come and get me when you're done looking," my mother said.

I walked away from my mother, Jesse, and Allie before anyone noticed I was with them, and went to the furthest part of the men's section where the jeans were. A few kids were there and they gave me quick glances before continuing to talk to each other. I felt like I wasn't good enough for anybody in the store. Over at the women's section I saw a group of girls following around a brown-haired girl who wouldn't stop talking. It was strange because when the girl stopped to look at clothes so did her followers.

"Don't waste your breath," one of the boys said. "She won't give you the time of day."

I kept looking over at the girl and her crowd. She looked in my direction sometimes as she gabbed, and my stomach went cold when she looked at me, but I liked it. I tried not to watch her as much and pretended to look for jeans. Since I can remember, I've never been confident enough to talk to girls. My whole life my family and close friends have told me I was handsome, but I never believed it myself. Some of them even said I look just like my mother except with brown eyes and shorter hair. My parents are both good-looking people, so it's natural to think that I'm good-looking too. But I've never labeled myself that way. I've only considered myself as average looking because that's what I see.

"What's her name?" I asked one of the boys who was near me.

"Ashley Simmons," the boy said.

"Is she the most popular girl in town or something?"

“Do you not see the crowd of people around her?” the boy said before rolling his eyes.

I wasn’t sure if I thought she was good-looking. I left the jean section and walked over to the button-up shirts. It was the closest section to Ashley, and I sorted through the shirts while I listened to her voice. It was quiet, the kind of voice you had to really listen to to hear. I’m sure she never had that problem though, since every girl around her looked interested in anything she said.

Ashley’s shoulder-length hair flowed like she didn’t care what it looked like, and that was cool. She had a lot of freckles on her face and probably all over her body, but she wore them well. Her eyes were crystal blue, and they reminded me of my mother’s and Jesse’s. At that moment my mind was made up. She *was* beautiful. Ashley saw that I was closer and started putting her hands through her hair. I couldn’t really hear what she was talking about, but I heard something about her summer and getting out of Appleton for three months. I listened a little longer, picked out a yellow button-up shirt and a pair of jeans, then brought them over to my mother.

“That’s all?” she asked.

“Yep, I’ll be outside,” I said, then ran out the door before Ashley saw me. Bronco’s had a bench outside, and I sat down feeling relieved that I wasn’t inside anymore. Rose was across the street walking towards the church. His cocky stride made it seem like the world was a better place because he existed. I wanted to run over and kick him in the balls. He noticed me next to Bronco’s, and gave me the same cold expression as the day I told him off. The second time seeing that look made me believe he was actually thinking about killing me.

“Bastard,” I said to myself.

“Who’s a bastard?” I could tell by the voice that it was Ashley.

“Winfred Rose. He doesn’t like me.”

She moved from the front door of Bronco’s to edge of the sidewalk next to the bench.

“You must be Clark Lapine because Father Rose loves all his children.”

I looked into Ashley’s eyes before I spoke. They were a lot darker than my mother’s and Jesse’s, and I felt hypnotized by them. “I take it you found out what I said to him.”

“As soon as I got back from my mom’s that’s all my friends were talking about. Clark Lapine this, and Clark Lapine that. I think you might be more popular than me,” she said, then laughed.

“What’s everyone saying about me?”

Before she could answer my question, Ashley’s fan club came outside and pushed her along the sidewalk away from me. “Come on, Ash. Let’s go,” some of the girls said as they pushed.

“It was nice to finally meet you,” Ashley said while getting pushed away.

“It was nice to meet you too,” I said, and few of her friends eyeballed me as they passed.

My mother came out of the clothing store shortly after with three huge shopping bags.

“Can you take the these home?” she asked.

The bags were filled to the top with clothes. “Where are you going now?”

“I’m going to the grocery store,” my mother said.

“But Mom, Owen’s gonna to eat you alive in there,” I said.

“I’ve been shopping there for weeks,” my mother said. “I’ll be fine.”

I took the bags from my mother before she walked across the street with Jesse and Allie, then carried them through the center of town. When I got to the candy store Syd, Sam, and Walt jumped out from around the corner and scared me making me drop everything.



“What’s in the bags, new kid?” Syd asked.

“I’m not the new kid anymore,” I said.

Syd helped me and his eyes lit up when he looked inside the bag he picked up. He pulled out a red bra my mother must have bought. “My, oh, my. What do we have here?” Syd said as he waved the bra around.

“Give it back,” I said.

“Not bad. Not bad at all. Your mom looks to be one hot piece by her bra size,” Syd said still waving the bra.

“Come on, that’s enough,” I said. “Give it back.”

“Yeah, give it back,” Walt said.

“Shut up, Walt. You won’t help me,” I said. “C’mon, Syd, give it back.”

Syd held the bra up to his chest. “No, I think I’ll hang on to this for a while.” Then began putting it on over his jean jacket.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I asked.

Syd started running around in the street wearing my mother’s bra.

“Stop, Syd,” I said, and started chasing after him. People around us didn’t help or say anything. They just stared at us like robots.

“I’ve gotta break this baby in,” Syd said.

Syd wouldn’t stop running in the street. He jumped in front of a car making the driver slam on his breaks. The car screeched, and the man driving started to yell. His voice sounded familiar.

“Fuck you, old man,” Syd said still wearing my mother’s bra. It made me laugh, and I walked back to the sidewalk while Syd stood his ground.

Me, Walt, and Sam couldn't stop laughing at the pissed old man beeping his horn. Finally, Syd flipped off the old fart before getting out of his the way.

When the old man drove away I remembered where I heard the voice before, and nudged Walt. "That's the guy whose car we egged."

Walt looked at me in shock. "No way. I kinda thought his voice sounded familiar."

Syd came over to the sidewalk. "What's going on?"

Ashley and her fan club were walking up the street towards us, and I was sure she had something to say. "I knew it was you who jumped in front of that car."

"There's plenty more where that came from, babe," Syd said.

"Yeah, I'm sure there is," Ashley said as she watched Syd fidget with the bra.

"What are you doing hanging out with these losers?" Ashley asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I've been hanging out with them all summer."

"Yeah, he likes to have a good time," Syd said, and took the bra off over his head.

"Being constantly watched by the police isn't my idea of a good time," Ashley said.

"Yeah, you rather have every girl in Appleton drool over you," Syd said. "Isn't that right, drones?"

Me, Sam, and Walt started laughing, and the crowd of girls gave us dirty looks.

"Stay away from this piece-of-shit," Ashley said to me. "He's a loser who'll end up getting you killed or put in jail. Just ask the moron twins who do whatever he says. They'll tell you."

"Fuck you, you snotty-nosed bitch," Walt said.

Ashley and her fan club ignored Walt and walked away.

"Yeah, keep walking, bitch," Syd said.

“How do you know her?” Sam asked.

“I met her today outside Bronco’s,” I said. “Her friends told her about me.”

“How do her friends know you?” Syd asked. “You’re the new kid.”

“I guess I’ve been talk of the town lately since I told Rose off,” I said.

“No way. I don’t believe that shit. No one tells Rose off,” Syd said. “Well, no one except me.”

“I told him my family didn’t want to go to his stupid church,” I said. “Right inside Blissful Foods, and he kicked me out.”

Syd put his arm over my shoulders with pride. “I knew you were one of us. That takes some balls. My hat’s off to you.”

“I didn’t do anything bad,” I said.

“In Appleton everyone follows Rose and Owen,” Walt said. “If you couldn’t tell, this is a religious town. So you *did* do something bad.”

“Appleton’s blind if they listen to anything they say,” I said.

“Whoa, I’m liking this rage coming out of you,” Syd said.

“It’s fine if people believe in God,” I said. “But Rose’s going above and beyond to get my family to go to church. Him and his fuckin’ clown bitch, Owen. It’s bullshit.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Walt said. “None of us like Rose or Owen either. Rose won’t even let my mom step foot into church.”

“Because she’s the town whore,” Syd said.

“Shut up,” Walt said and looked at the ground.

“Rose and Owen don’t like any of us for one reason or another,” Syd said. “Church is boring and overrated anyway, and who knows if there really is a God. And fuck Appleton. Everyone’s nuts here anyways.”

Syd, Sam, and Walt walked with me to my house, and we hung out on the porch. I felt a little better about hanging out with them since they had similar views on Rose, Owen, and Appleton. Syd told me a little bit about Ashley Simmons. Her parents were divorced and her mom lived in Florida, where she spent most of her summers. She was sixteen, and lived with her father who was a cop in Appleton. I don’t think Syd liked Ashley’s father. He called him bacon or blue boy whenever he mentioned him. When my mother came home with Jesse and Allie, I introduced Syd and Sam to them. They played the good-boy card well enough for my mother to buy, but I think Jesse and Allie saw through it.

“Why do you guys dress like that?” Jesse asked.

“What do you mean, little guy?” Syd said.

“You dress like greasers in the old movies my dad likes to watch,” Jesse said.

“Yeah, they’re really bad. They carry knives and guns,” Allie said. “To kill people with.”

“Do you guys carry guns?” Jesse asked, and Syd and Sam laughed, but didn’t answer.

“Just because they dress like that doesn’t mean they’re bad,” my mother said, and brought Jesse and Allie inside with her.

“Cute kids, but they ask too many questions like their brother,” Syd said.

“Hey, my whole family’s like that,” I said. “Get used to it.”

“People who ask too many questions remind me of cops,” Syd said. “And I hate cops.”

My father came home from work on foot a few hours later, and Syd tried to hold in his laughter. I was about to introduce Syd and Sam to him, but he walked past us with his eyes focused on the front door.

“Looks like the shit with the car is still bothering him,” Walt said.

“It bothers me,” I said.

“Shut the fuck up, the both of you. Why don’t you two get a room,” Syd said. “You’ve been sucking each other’s dicks since you met.”

“Fuck you, Syd,” Walt said.

“Fuck you. It’s funny, right?” Syd asked, then looked at Sam.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “It’s funny.”

“See? It’s funny. Let’s get out of here, so these fags can be alone,” Syd said, then walked off the porch and on to the sidewalk. I think he expected Sam to follow him, but he stayed on the porch with me and Walt. “Sam, what the fuck are you doing? Let’s go.”

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “You can hang with us.”

“Sam, you better get over here now. Don’t pull this shit,” Syd said. “Especially after everything I’ve done for you.”

“He’s right,” Sam said. “He has done a lot for me.” Sam got up and walked over to Syd.

“We’ll be at my house,” Syd said. “Come over when you guys are done getting it up the ass.”

When I asked Walt what Syd did for Sam, he told me that he let Sam move in with him because his brothers and sisters used to beat the piss out of him. It might have been the nicest thing Syd has done, but I thought Syd used it to his advantage by treating Sam like a slave.

“I think Sam’s screwed no matter who he stays with,” I said.

“Yeah, but at least he doesn’t get ignored or beaten anymore.”

“Syd could be beating Sam right now for all we know.”

“Good point.”

After we finished talking about Sam, Walt went home and I went inside to find my parents arguing about a new topic, money.

“Why did you buy clothes?” my father asked. “The kids don’t need clothes.”

“They need clothes for school,” my mother said.

“They can wear their old ones,” my father said. “No one will know.”

“We’ve always bought the kids new clothes before school started,” my mother said.

“Why should this time be any different?”

“Because we need to save for the car to get fixed,” my father said. “Don’t you remember? We don’t have a car anymore.”

“Everything’s only a few blocks away,” she said.

“Are you kidding me? What’s going to happen in the winter?” my father asked. “I’m not walking. And what if we want to leave Appleton to visit our families?”

I walked by my parents and started to go upstairs.

“Where do you think you’re going?” my father asked.

“To my room until dinner,” I said.

He glared at me. “I’m sick of you always going to your room. Go outside or something.”

“I’ve been outside all day,” I said.

My mother nodded her head at my answer. “It’s true, he has.”

“Doesn’t matter,” my father said. “You need to return those clothes, Virginia.”

I walked downstairs and back outside to the porch. The arguing continued while I sat on the front steps thinking of better times in Colebrook.

#### Chapter 4

I jumped out my window later that night and met up with Walt. We decided to go see what Syd and Sam were doing at Syd's. Sam let us in.

"Where's Syd?" I asked.

"I think he went over to his grandmother's," Sam said. "It's the only place I'm not allowed to go with him."

"His grandmother's?" I asked. "Where are his parents?"

"Dead, I think," Sam said. "But I don't really know, he doesn't talk about it."

Syd kicked open the front door and scared the shit out of us. He looked happy to see that me and Walt came over, and probably thought we forgave him for what he said earlier.

"What's going on, boys?" Syd asked. "How long you two been here?"

"Few minutes," Walt said.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Nowhere," Syd said. "I thought I'd take a stroll in the woods."

"That's not what we heard," I said, then grinned, and Sam started shaking his head at me.

"What did he tell you?" Syd said, with an ugly face.

"He said you were visiting your grandmother," I said.

"My grandmother's dead," Syd said then looked at Sam. "Why you tellin' lies?"

"That's where I thought you were," Sam said.

"Look, it's no big deal if you went to see your grandmother," I said. "If my grandmother was here, I'd go and visit her too."

“My grandmother’s dead,” Syd said. “He knows that.”

“Take it easy, Syd,” I said. “Why are you getting pissed?”

“Because this piece of shit is lying to you to make me look bad,” Syd said.

“There’s nothing bad about visiting your grandmother,” I said.

“She’s dead,” Syd said. “I can’t visit someone if they’re dead. Now stop bringing up my dead grandmother.”

Syd was breathing deep like he was about to lose his temper. I was getting sketched, and Sam looked like he was praying for his life. He was curled up on the couch like a scared dog.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” I said. “And why would Sam lie about something like that if he knew you would act this way?”

Syd pinned me against the wall with both hands. His eyes looked full of hate and his teeth were clenched. I thought he was going to foam at the mouth until he started talking. “Mind your own fucking business.”

“It’s not his fault,” I said. “He didn’t know and neither did I.”

Syd put me down, and I backed away from him slowly just in case he made any sudden moves. I stopped when I reached Sam and Walt. Syd had his back to us facing his fireplace, and we watched him wondering what he was going to do.

“Everybody out,” Syd said. He didn’t have to say it twice. The three of us scurried out like three frightened five-year-olds and Sam closed the door while I crept over to the window.

“What are you doing?” Sam asked. “Let’s go.”

“Wait a second,” I said.

Syd was in the same position we left him in, but after a few seconds of watching him he fell to his knees. I expected him to start crying and show some human emotion, but he didn’t. He



just stared at the floor. The glow of the fireplace made his face a shadow. After a few minutes of watching him we left.

We walked up the dirt road and onto the street. What just happened didn't seem to sink in, and none of us spoke.

Walt walked in front of me and Sam. "I'm sorry to be the one to break the ice, but what the hell was that?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I didn't like it."

"He almost beat the shit out of you," Walt said.

"How did you get him to stop?" Sam asked.

"All I said was, 'It wasn't our fault,' then he put me down."

"Maybe you made him realize no one was to blame," Walt said.

"I don't know," I said. "All I know is that was weird as hell."

Sam stayed at Walt's house, and I snuck out again the next night to meet up with them. They were hanging out in Walt's living room, and Syd was nowhere to be found.

"We should go over to his house," I said.

"No way. Are you crazy? He'll kill us all," Walt said. "I think he needs time to get over what he did last night."

"I think that's a good idea," Sam said.

"All right, so, he was a little crazy. But maybe he calmed down," I said. "He probably feels shitty for what he put us through last night."

"We've seen him like this before," Walt said. "I asked him about his family one time, and he punched me in the jaw."

"That was even scarier than last night," Sam said.

“What happened after?” I asked.

“I went home after he hit me,” Walt said. “We didn’t talk for a few days, then we ran into each other somewhere in the center of town and he acted like nothing happened. I wanted to say something, but Sam told me it wasn’t worth it.”

“Because it’s not,” Sam said. “He probably would have gotten pissed and hit you again.”

“You guys have to stop living in fear. Syd’s supposed to be our friend. He wants you to fear him, but don’t give him that power,” I said. “I’m going to ask him why he flipped out last night the next time I see him.”

“You’re going to die,” Sam said.

“If I do, at least I’ll die knowing I stood up to him,” I said.

“It’s not worth it,” Walt said.

“He needs to know that he can’t push us around anymore. I want to be his friend, but I don’t want to live in fear of him,” I said. “We’re his puppets, and if that doesn’t change, I’m out.”

“He’s not all bad,” Walt said. “He’s fine if you don’t mention his family.”

“He’s pretty cold-hearted at times,” I said. “He shouldn’t be like that to his friends.”

“You’re right, but that’s how Syd is,” Sam said. “You can’t change him. He’s been like this for years.”

“I only want him to treat us like his friends,” I said.

Walt and Sam weren’t behind me on this, but I didn’t blame them. They hung out with Syd long enough to be completely terrified of him. I’m sure over the years they’ve seen him do some horrible things. I had the upper hand of only knowing him for two and a half months.

“Where does Syd usually hang out when he’s not with you guys?” I asked.

“He hangs out at the cabin, or he disappears,” Sam said. “I don’t know what he does when he’s alone.”

“Do you think his grandmother is still alive?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “I always thought that’s where he went when he was alone, but I don’t know anymore.”

We were sitting around Walt’s living room talking about Syd and doing nothing with ourselves, because he wasn’t there telling us what to do.

“What do you guys want to do?” I asked.

“I don’t care what we do,” Walt said. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to find Syd, but I know you guys don’t want to do that,” I said.

“Want to go to the center of town to see what’s going on down there?” Walt asked.

Me and Sam thought that was fine and we left. I was happy we were getting out of Walt’s house and making an attempt at doing something. It was a Saturday night and the center of town looked a little festive. All the stores lights were on and they glowed through the windows, lighting up the center of town nicely. I looked up at Maggie Pent’s statue, but she still appeared dark, even with the lights surrounding her. There were other kids walking around too.

“Where were all these kids this summer?” I asked.

“Most of them leave Appleton,” Walt said. “Some go to camp and others leave to see family. Anything to get away for the summer.”

“We were the only kids who were in Appleton this summer?” I asked.

“Maybe a few others, but not many,” Sam said. “It’s not like they’d hang out with us anyways.”

“Because we hang with Syd,” I said. “He has a bad rep.”

“Yeah, and so do we,” Sam said.

“Because you tag along with him,” I said.

“Hey, you’re in the same boat as us,” Walt said. “Everyone in town thinks you’re the Anti-Christ. Syd didn’t twist your arm, and he didn’t twist ours either. We all chose this path.”

“I don’t wanna be known as a hoodlum,” I said. “I wanna have as many friends as I can.”

“It doesn’t work that way here, you have your small circle of friends and you stick by them,” Walt said. “I don’t know how it was wherever you came from, but Appleton’s different.”

“I know, and that’s why it blows here,” I said.

“You’re stuck here,” Walt said. “Get used to it and go with the flow.”

“Fuck that,” I said. “I’m gonna hang out with whoever I want.”

“Good luck with that,” Walt said.

“I don’t need luck,” I said, and walked away from Walt and Sam. I didn’t need them. There were plenty of kids around Appleton now. I walked over to Bronco’s, where a lot of kids were hanging out to take a shot at making new friends.

Two guys on the bench next to the door were watching me. “Hey, aren’t you that kid who told Father Rose that church was stupid?” one guy asked.

“Yeah, that was me,” I said.

They just stared. I didn’t like how their eyes looked. They were a couple meatheads with no necks. One was completely bald and the other had short dirty blonde hair. I went into Bronco’s quick before anything else could be said.

Ashley was inside looking at clothes again. I walked up to the crowd of people that surrounded her and pushed my way through. “Weren’t you here yesterday?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I need new clothes,” she said. “School’s only two weeks away, stupid. Where are your criminal buddies? You should be hanging out with them.” Her fan club laughed, then pushed me out of Ashley’s circle.

“A swing and a miss,” one guy said, before I walked out of the store.

The blonde meathead from the bench grabbed me by the neck as soon as my feet touched the sidewalk. I tried to get loose from his grip, but it was too strong. I started to slowly go down, and once I was on the sidewalk both of them started kicking me in the stomach. They didn’t stop until a man walking by got involved, which caused the assholes to run off.

“Are you okay?” the man asked. It was Walt’s neighbor, the guy that reminded me of a mechanic. He was wearing a blue jump suit, and I could smell gas on him when he helped me up.

I tried to catch my breath before I spoke, but it was no use “Yeah. I’m fine.”

He took out his cell phone, and began dialing. “I’m going to call the police.”

“No, it’s okay. Really, I’m fine.”

The mechanic put his cell phone to his ear. I couldn’t really see his face, only his longer military-like haircut. “Don’t you want those punks to get in trouble?”

“I don’t care right now. I just wanna go home.”

“I need to call the police. And you need to be here to identify the punks who did this to you.”

“Fine,” I said.

A cop came about fifteen minutes later, and the mechanic left in his ice cream truck once the cop began asking me questions. He was a little cop. Not much taller than me, and he had a hook nose. His dark blue uniform made him look important. Ashley came outside with her fan club close behind when she saw the blue lights. They watched me answer the cop’s questions

while I sat on the bench. Ashley was staring at me. Her dark blue eyes made me feel better. She had a smirk on her face, and she looked like she was flirting with me. I stared back at her while I answered the cop's questions the entire time. I saw Walt and Sam running over, and when they finally got in front of Bronco's they caused an even bigger scene.

"All right, that's enough, pig. Back off my friend," Walt said, and him and Sam helped me up from the bench.

"You can't talk to me like that," the cop said, then noticed Walt and Sam were taking me away from the scene of the crime. "Hey, I'm not done talking to him."

Walt looked at the cop as he was putting my arm behind his neck. "It's not like you're going to catch who did this."

It took us a long time to get to my house since I was limping so badly, and it hurt to breathe. I've never been so happy to see the pukie green color, and cracked paint you could see from the street. Once we got to the right side of the house, Walt picked up the ladder I've been using sneak back into my room, and leaned it up against my windowsill. He wanted to know exactly what I told the cop when him and Sam got me into my room.

"I told him my name and what happened," I said.

"You idiot. He's going to come to your house now," Walt said. "You're fucked, man."

"No wonder he didn't follow us," I said. "I think I need to go to the hospital. My chest kills."

"You'll be fine. Just get some sleep," Walt said, and him and Sam climbed out my window.

I kept pushing on the upper part of my stomach. My torso was a sea of black and blue, and it hurt every time I pressed on it. There was a pounding on my front door, and when I heard

it, I shut off my bedroom light and got into bed. It was a slow process, but I did it before I heard my father walk by to answer the door. I waited patiently in bed for my father and the cop that questioned me to enter my room. Their footsteps stomped up the stairs, and I turned away to face my window before my father came in and turned on the light. I pretended to be asleep and pictured the light shutting off and my door being closed like it was a big misunderstanding. My father shook me, and I fought back tears. I turned over slowly to face him and the cop. I was in a good deal of pain, and they could probably tell by the expression on my face.

“Clark, this officer said you were beaten up outside Bronco’s tonight,” my father said. “Is this true?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve been in bed.”

“Look under his shirt,” the cop said.

My father sat down on my bed, pulled off the covers and told me to lift up my shirt. I did it slowly, and when he saw the bruises he shook his head. “What were you doing outside?”

“I wanted to get out of the house for a few hours,” I said.

“I called for an ambulance,” the cop said. “But your son ran off before it arrived. It should be here shortly.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary, officer,” my father said. “His torso looks bruised, that’s all.”

“It’s part of the procedure,” the cop said.

My father sighed because he knew we were in for a long night. “Let me wake up my wife to let her know we’re going to the hospital, then.”

The cop didn’t say anything for a good minute when we were alone, and I stared at the ceiling trying not to think about the pain in my body.

“Don’t worry, kid,” the cop said. “We’ll find whoever did this.”

I thought about what Walt said earlier to the cop when him and Sam were taking me away. “No, you won’t, you’re just saying that. After tonight you’ll forget everything that happened and go back to sitting on your ass.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I looked at his nametag. It said Riley. “Ry-lee. Cop’s don’t do shit for people. Police won’t move a muscle unless something like a murder happens. Everything else is chicken shit.”

“Don’t talk to me like that, you little shit. I’ve been trying my best to help you, and all you’ve been doing is giving me a hard time. You and your punk-ass friends.”

“I didn’t want your help. The guy who chased off the kids called the police.”

“He wanted to help you.”

“He *did* help me, but he caused a scene when he called you, and now I’m in trouble because you stuck your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Riley took out his nightstick and slammed it against my door. My parents ran to my doorway to see what was going on. “Keep it up, kid,” Riley said, then pointed his nightstick at me. “Keep talking to me that way.”

My mother and father were behind Riley. My father’s teeth were showing and I could tell he was grinding them.

“Clark, listen to what he says,” my mother said. “He’s a police officer.”

I just stared at Riley, clenching my blankets for protection until he walked downstairs. I tried to be tough for once and it made me look like a big fat puss.

When my mother saw all the bruises, she looked like she was going to cry. The ambulance took me to a hospital somewhere outside of Appleton. The EMT thought I might have



a broken rib, because I had all the signs so far. Riley gave my parents, Jesse, and Allie a ride to the hospital where I got X rays, and the EMT was wrong. Those dickheads kicked me hard enough to only give me bruises.

I felt a little daring a few hours after we got home from the hospital, and asked my parents if Walt could come over. My father said no as quick as I asked, but my mother said yes.

Once he was over, we went up to my room and Walt shut my door. “What’d they look like?” he asked.

“It was kinda dark. One was bald and the other had dirty blonde hair, and they looked older than me. I don’t know, ask your neighbor. He was the one who saved me from the assholes.”

“Really?” Walt laughed. “ John saved you? Weird. Okay, so two older guys who beat up a fifteen-year-old. They sound like a couple of pussies. One with dirty blonde hair.” Walt sounded like one of those annoying detectives you see way too much on T.V. “It sounds like Will Russet and Mike Druin.”

Will Russet and Mike Druin were star football players in Appleton a few years back. They were known to give kids a hard time if they didn’t side with Rose and Owen. Will and Mike probably wouldn’t get in trouble since they were star athletes, so Walt mentioned we should take revenge ourselves. I was a little unsure about the idea, but Walt said it was the only way to get back at them.

We played a game of Battleship before Walt went home. Around eleven, I was woken up by Walt knocking on my window. He talked to Syd and John and he was sure Will and Mike were the kids that beat me up. Syd, Sam, and Walt wanted to find them and get revenge, but I wanted to talk to Syd myself before we did anything. My parents were sleeping in their bedroom,

but I stood in the doorway for a minute to make sure they were both out cold. My father's snoring made it easier to judge.

Me and Walt walked to Syd's, and by the time we were near his dirt driveway, my chest started bothering me.

"Now you sure it's Will and Mike?" I asked.

"Pretty sure," Syd said. "They jumped you because you mouthed off to Rose. Tomorrow we'll go to the candy store. Will and Mike show up there sometimes since Mike's dad works there."

"I can't be there," I said. "I'm pretty sure after last night I'm not allowed to do anything."

"Stop being a puss," Syd said.

"My parents are pissed," I said.

"Don't you want revenge on these assholes?" Syd asked. "Be at the candy store by 9:30 tomorrow. That's when it usually opens, and there won't be too many people walking around at that time."

"Fine. I'm already in deep shit," I said. "Why not get deeper?"

"Now you're thinking like us," Syd said and smiled.

I got out of bed at nine, and at nine-ten I shut my bedroom door and used the ladder to climb out my window. It felt good that we were going to get revenge on Will and Mike, and thoughts about getting in trouble for sneaking out escaped my mind. I walked with a positive stride to the center of town. Walt was already there, leaning on the side brick wall of the candy store.

"Where's Syd and Sam?" I asked.

“Don’t know. It’s not ten yet, so we have time.”

“Back me up today. I don’t want to go to the hospital again.”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll do all the hard stuff. Just jump in when you feel it’s right.”

I didn’t feel fine. My head was throbbing as fast as my heart, and I thought about all the things that could go wrong. What if the cops happened to drive by? Or what if for some crazy reason, Will and Mike *did* beat our asses? I tried to stay positive, but it was impossible. Instead of thinking of what could happen, I remembered what Walt said. *You’ll be fine*. I kept repeating it in my head. *You’ll be fine*. I saw Syd and Sam walking out of Blissful Foods. Syd was drinking something, but I couldn’t make out what it was.

“Mike and Will are in Blissful Foods,” Syd said. “I saw them kissing Owen’s ass like usual. I say we wait around the corner, and right before they go inside I hit one of them in the head with this bottle. We’ll have the upper hand, but make sure to jump out as soon as you hear the bottle smash.”

We stayed glued to the brick wall, and my head began throbbing again. I could feel beads of sweat around my hairline.

Syd peeked around the corner. “All right, they just walked out of Blissful Foods. When I jump out, wait for the bottle, then go.”

I was behind everyone else and getting nervous. By the time I leaned forward to look at Syd, he was gone. I heard the bottle smash, then saw Walt and Sam charge around the corner. I followed, but a few seconds behind. When I turned the corner, Syd was punching Will in the face. Will’s head was gushing blood from Syd’s bottle, and Walt and Sam were wrestling Mike on the ground. Syd looked like he had Will under control, but Walt and Sam were struggling. I ran next to Mike’s head, and started kicking him on the right side of his temple like a soccer ball.

His hands stopped punching Walt and Sam and moved up to his head for protection. Walt and Sam used this to their advantage, and started punching and kicking Mike in the chest and stomach.

“How’s it feel? You piece of shit,” Walt said while the three of us kicked and punched Mike’s body. I looked up while kicking Mike, and saw Syd and Will still slugging it out. Will looked wobbly as his head still gushed. He blocked a few of Syd’s punches and was throwing a couple himself. I stopped beating Mike, grabbed Will by the shoulders and kicked him in the balls from behind. It was a cheap move, but it brought him down quick.

“Nice one,” Syd said, then jumped on Will and started bashing the back of his head into the concrete. I watched Will’s head hit the pavement with pleasure, then began kicking Will in the ribs as hard as I could.

Mike’s dad finally noticed the fight outside, and came running out with a baseball bat. “Get away from them,” he said and started swinging at us.

We dodged his swings. There wasn’t anyway he was going to hit us since every time he tried his glasses fell down to his nose.

“That’s what you get for fucking with us, motherfuckers,” Syd said, and the four of us ran towards my house.

I was surprised Will or Mike didn’t lay a finger on me. We stopped a few feet from my house to rest. Syd was a little banged up. Blood was coming from his nose and a few knuckle scrapes were across his forehead. Walt and Sam just looked dirty from being on the ground until Sam noticed a little blood was in his hair.

“I wonder if it’s mine,” Sam said slicking it back with his fingers.

“Lick it,” Syd said. “If it tastes like shit, it’s yours.”

I gave out a little snicker, and when I looked over at Walt he was smiling.

“Funny,” Sam said, and kept pushing on the area where he found the blood.

Syd walked over to a nearby oak tree that was close to the sidewalk, and leaned on it. I think we were all a little tired from the fight, Syd just showed it more. The four of us didn’t say a lot after that, and since I wasn’t talking I began to think about what these guys just did for me. I looked at each of them casually. They didn’t have to this, but they did. And since they were willing to risk themselves for me, I was willing to do the same.

I thanked the guys, then snuck back into my room. I was only gone an hour and I didn’t have a scratch on me. I went down stairs to the kitchen feeling accomplished.

“I didn’t think you’d ever get up,” my mother said.

“I was fucking tired,” I said, and realized I was still using the language I used with the guys.

“Excuse me?” my mother asked.

“He was fuckin’ tired, Mom,” Jesse said

“Go upstairs right now and wash your mouth out with soap,” my mother said. “Then go to your room.”

Jesse walked away with his head down and Allie followed with a smile on her face.

“What’s wrong with you? You know Jesse looks up to you. Why are teaching him bad words?”

“I didn’t know he was there.”

“You shouldn’t be swearing anyways. Go up to your room too.”

I went upstairs and heard Allie giggling in the bathroom. When I went to see what was going on, I saw Allie brushing Jesse's teeth with a sudsy bar of soap. Jesse was gagging, but he wasn't telling her to stop.

"He told me to get all the bad stuff out of his mouth," Allie said.

I took the bar of soap and made Jesse rinse out his mouth. The whole time I was trying not to laugh, but a few times a couple of chuckles came out.

My mother came into my room after I helped Jesse. "Remember when I let Walt come over yesterday?"

I didn't know where she was going with this. "Umm, thank you?"

She laughed. "You're welcome. I didn't think Walt should have come over yesterday, and your father *really* didn't want him over."

"Then why did you say he could?"

"Because I know *you* wanted him to."

I scratched my head. "Okay?"

"I did something for you. Now you do something for me."

"What do you want from me?"

"Apologize to Rose."

"No deal," I said.

"You have to. That's the favor I want."

"No."

"I'll ground you until you apologize."

"Dad won't let it happen."

"Maybe not, but when he's at work, you'll be grounded."

“I’ll tell him you made me apologize to Rose.”

“I was planning to tell him anyway.”

We sat on my bed not saying anything because the argument had turned down a dead end.

“You don’t care if he’s mad at you?”

My mother laughed. It was more of a quick shout, but I still considered it a laugh since she was smiling. “Me and your father are married. He’ll get over it. These people in Appleton have held on to what you said for months now, and I’m tired of it.” She began to tear up. “No one talks me.” The tears were rolling down her cheeks, and it made me listen to her more closely. “I’d kill for a single hello. I’m bored being in this house, Clark. *I need* something.”

I hugged my mother. I could feel her wet face through my shirt and on my shoulder. “We can go.”

My father was working late, so we ate dinner without him. Our plan was to see Rose after, and before we left I changed my clothes and put on a hat in case people saw me earlier. We were heading for the church, and once we crossed the street after Blissful Foods, I felt unwelcomed as I stared at the bright white doors. I was ready for them to swing open, and Rose to appear with fire in his hands, ready to burn me alive for what I said to him. The four of us walked up the brick steps, and my mother opened the right door to let us in. Long wooden benches filled the left and right sides of the church all the way to the front, and stained glass windows with reds, greens, yellows, but mostly blues surrounded us. Pictures of crosses, and characters in the bible were also part of the glass. I could feel them watching us as we stepped on the church’s blood-red carpet that ended at the Rose’s podium. We were the only ones there.

Alone with the strange pictures I was supposed to worship, but cringed at instead. My spine kept getting chills as we kept getting closing to the podium.

“I don’t think he’s here, Mom,” I said. “Maybe we can come another time.”

My mother looked around, and began walking over to a door that was a few feet from the right side of the podium.

“He’s usually here, Clark,” she said then began knocking. “I think this is his office.”

I heard a voice from the other side of the door, then my mother opened it and stuck her head inside.

“Excuse me, Father?” my mother asked, and I wondered why she called Rose, “Father”. “Could I trouble you for a minute out here?” My mother moved away from his door, and Rose came out wearing his usual black clothes and stupid white-collar thing.

“What can I do for you?” Rose asked, looking at my mother.

“Nothing, for me, Father,” she said. “But I think Clark would like to say something to you.”

Rose turned to look at me, then walked over. He took his time, and I hoped he would never reach me. “Yes, Clark?”

I stared up at him as he looked down with patience. He seemed to have gotten taller since the last time I saw him. I looked over his shoulder and saw my mother watching. She was nodding her head and smiling. Every face was watching me, even the ones in the stained glass windows.

I looked down at the blood carpet. “I’m sorry I called the church stupid.”



When I looked up at Rose, he was nodding his head and had crossed his arms once we were looking at each other. "There seems to be some promise in you after all." He patted my hat-covered head like a dog, and I took it. "Will you be attending church this Sunday?"

Rose had only said a handful of words, and he was already annoying me. Wasn't my apology enough? "I think I might have plans that day," I said.

"Mass starts at eight AM," Rose said. "I'm sure you can move those plans to a later time." His grin made me want to punch his face in.

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

The four of us began following the blood carpet to exit the church when Rose said, "I expect to see you there, Clark."

As we walked away I wanted to turn around and say, 'I said I'll see what I can do. Do you know what that means? Stop being so fucking pushy.' But I held my tongue, and walked out looking like a good boy.

"I'm not going to church," I said once we were outside.

"I know," my mother said. "You and your father don't have to go if you don't want to."

"Wait. You're gonna go?"

"Someone has to," my mother said. "It might as well be me."

"Why would you do something you don't wanna do?"

"Sometimes you need to do things to make people happy," my mother said. "You'll understand one day, I hope."

"But what you're doing is not being yourself," I said. "You're just doing it so people will treat us better."

"It's just going to church one day a week, Clark," my mother said.

I ignored my mother for the rest of the walk home. Less cars and people were around the center of town at this time, and that's usually when they turn on the light poles. It was ghost town time, and I wanted to get home before it was full blown. I had been creeped out enough for one day.

### Chapter 5

Two days after we jumped Will and Mike, Syd disappeared. None of us knew what happened, not even Sam. He woke up the first morning and realized Syd was missing, but didn't think anything of it. After five o' clock on the second day Syd still wasn't around, so he called Walt because he was worried. We looked around Appleton for Syd all day, avoiding the candy store and police department, but everywhere else was fair game.

Sometime in the late afternoon, we took a break and sat down on the bench next to Blissful Foods.

I looked across the street at Bronco's. "Do you think maybe he got arrested?"

"Nah," Sam said. "I would'a' heard them come into the house."

The three of us sat there, watching cars drive by while we wondered what happened to Syd.

Before I went home, I wanted to thank John the mechanic for saving me from Will and Mike. Walt and Sam said I could go alone because they thought it be weird if all of us went. I knocked on his front door twice, and waited for the man who drove around the beat up ice cream truck to answer.

John opened his front door. He was still sporting his navy blue jumpsuit, but I only glanced at it. His face is what I kept staring at. I had only seen John passing by or in the dark, and I never knew that he was a lot darker than anyone in town. He could have been part Native

American, but I knew he wasn't one-hundred-percent because his eyes were a dull blue, almost grey if you looked at them long enough.

John smiled at me, and I saw that he had a gap in his two front teeth. "Hey, you're the kid I helped a few nights ago, right?"

I nodded. "I just wanted to come over here and thank you."

"You're welcome. Walt came over here and asked me about it. Those kids are a couple of cowards if you ask me."

"Yeah, I don't think they'll be bothering me anymore."

"Wow, I didn't think the police would act that fast, or at all. Considering the kids are probably goons for Rose and Owen."

My eyes got wide. "What?"

"Walt told me what you said to Rose," John said and showed off his gap again. "I don't care personally, but this town doesn't deal with people who go against the grain."

I nodded again. "Do you go to church, John?"

"No, not really. Sometimes I do just to play ball. I kind of have an excuse to not go."

"An excuse?"

"Yeah, I do a lot of odd jobs around town for everyone. I fix up cars, unclog toilets, really whatever someone wants me to do I'll give it a shot. I'm usually too busy to go to church. Father Rose and Owen have never given me a hard time about it, so I think I'm in the clear."

"So since you help out the town, no one really messes with you?"

"I don't do anything for them *to* mess with me. What's your name again?"

"Clark."

“You gotta play ball, Clark. Even if the people here *are* a little pushy. I look at it like this, Appleton’s a beautiful place to live. It’s quiet, private, and if you give these people a chance, they can be the warmest humans you’ll ever meet.”

I gave John a confused look, but followed it with a smile. “Okay, I got to get home now. Thanks again for saving me.”

“It’s no problem, Clark. Sometimes people can get out of line here, and when that happens, I don’t care if they think I’m doing the wrong thing, because I know in my heart it’s right.”

The ladder was still on the ground near the right side of my house. Lucky for me my parents never went out there. I still kept quiet when I leaned the ladder against my windowsill, and climbed up slowly. Both my mother and father were in my room waiting for me.

“Why do you have to rebel against us?” my mother asked.

I didn’t answer her question as I stood on the ladder looking in.

“Who were you with?” my father asked. “Those punk-ass friends of yours?”

“They’re not punks,” I said.

“Yes they are,” he said. “Or else they’d respect that you’re grounded and can’t go out.”

“Clark, we just want you to be safe,” my mother said.

“It was me who made the decision, okay?” I said, then I climbed into my room.

“What were you doing that was so important that you had to sneak out?” my mother asked.

“I just wanted to go out,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “You’re just trying to get off the hook so you can cause trouble with those punks. Well, guess what? You’re grounded for another week.”

“C’mon, Dad that’s not fair.” I gave him a pouty look. “I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“No. We’ve caught you more than once doing this,” he said. “It has to end.”

“I can’t be in this house twenty four seven.”

“You can go to church with me tomorrow,” my mother said.

My father laughed. “That’s a good one.”

“I’m going,” she said, then looked at me. “And at least you’ll be out of the house for a few hours.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll think about.”

My mother shrugged. “Okay just giving you an opportunity to leave.”

My father waited for her to leave my room, then sat down next to me on my bed. His eyes were looking out into the hallway. “Listen, I’m still upset with you, but you don’t have to go to church. You need to be punished, but not *that* bad.” He laughed at his own joke. “If you want, maybe we can walk somewhere while she’s gone tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“Let me know what you want to do later tonight.” My father got up from my bed and ruffled my hair.

“Dad, I’m really grounded for another week?”

“You broke the rules. Now you have to pay.” He looked at me and gave me a small grin before leaving the room.

My mother woke me up the next morning and asked if I wanted to go to church with her, Jesse, and Allie. I said no quicker than I could think it, and went back to bed. Then my father woke me up by shaking me. It made my ribs sting every time he moved my body, but he didn’t get my complete attention until he turned on my light.

“What’s the game plan for today?” he asked.

I covered my eyes. “How long do we have?”

“An hour at the most, so get up.”

I got dressed and met my father downstairs. I didn’t know what we could do for an hour, and then I thought about fishing because my father loved to fish. I hated it, but I could deal with it for an hour. He seemed surprised that I wanted to go, but didn’t ask why. We grabbed two poles and a tackle box from the garage, and my father put on his tan fishing hat with all his lures on it. He was wearing shorts and a white t-shirt for the first time since we moved to Appleton. It was strange to see, but it made me happy.

“You look goofy,” I said.

“This hat brings me good luck. I don’t care how it looks.”

We were halfway down our street when my father stopped walking suddenly.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just remembered the only lake in Appleton is Dupee, and it’s right behind the church.”

“So?”

“We need to go through the center of town and back before they get home.”

“We can do it. We’ll keep an eye out.”

My father nodded. “You’re right. Lets go.”

My father put his hand on my shoulder, and we started walking again. The center of town was dead, and I saw a sign hanging from the candy store that said, “Closed for mass.” It looked like all the stores were closed, and that creepy uneasy feeling Appleton gave came over me once again. After we passed Blissful Foods, we crossed the street and followed a dirt path that started behind the funeral home and church. I knew there was a lake in Appleton, I just didn’t know

where. It was too bad I found it at the end of the summer. Dupee could have made those hot sticky days bearable. There was a sign close to the water:

*Dupee Lake.*

*Lake of Miracles.*

“Lake of miracles. I wonder who made that sign,” my father said and I laughed.

We picked a spot a few feet from the church underneath a big tree. I cast out my fishing line, and watched my bobber. Dupee was only two or three hundred feet all around, but it was well hidden from everything since it was practically in the woods. I noticed the blue stained glass windows of the church as the wind moved a couple of trees that were blocking it.

“I thought we weren’t going to see the church at all.”

“Don’t worry about it,” my father said, and cast his line out into the lake. “It doesn’t bother me.”

I stared at the flat roof of the church. The white paint before the roof started looked glossy from the sunlight. “I know you don’t like church.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Did you ever believe it was good?”

“When I was younger. But I realized that there’s no true evidence of God’s existence.” My father laughed. “There’s a better chance of a giant spider or a claw hand popping out of this lake.”

“Maybe God chooses not to show himself.”

My father laughed. “Grammy tried to prove to me time and time again that God was real, but after so many years of being dragged to church by Grampy, I just wouldn’t listen.” My father

looked up at one of the church windows. “I can’t believe in something that could be a lie.” He paused for a moment. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to scare you and get you to believe in something you’re not too sure about.”

We both got quiet when he said that. No fish were biting and the lake was still. I looked over at the church again, and saw that there were flowers and small wooden crosses leaning up against the sidewall of the entrance. It seemed like the wall was some sort of shrine, but nothing was on it besides bright white paint. After a few minutes of watching the lake, my father broke the silence.

“Whatever you decide to do in life, or what you believe in doesn’t matter. If it makes you happy, I’m happy.”

We sat there quietly for some time watching the lake. My father was an honest man. Maybe too honest, but it was one of his best qualities and I loved him for it.

“I guess this hat’s not lucky anymore. We’ve been here at least a half an hour, and I haven’t gotten a bite.”

“Me either. You wanna get outta here?”

“Let’s give it another twenty minutes, then we’ll leave,” he said, then smiled.

After a little while we could hear the busy noise of the center of town. My father looked at me like a deer in headlights, and we both started picking up everything as fast as we could. We ran down the dirt path that led to Dupee Lake, crossed the street, and went behind Blissful Foods and all the other stores on that side of the street so no one would see us. The summer heat made all the dumpers reek, and the smell made me feel sick.



We walked quickly and neither of us said anything. I think we were both thinking of what my mother was going to do to us if we got caught. I watched the lures on my father's hat dance as I followed him closely through our neighborhood. We were still walking quick. The tackle box and fishing poles were a dead giveaway. A few of our neighbors watched us as we passed them. Their faces weren't thrilled when they saw two goofy fishermen speeding through the neighborhood, but their church clothes made their reactions seem dull and expressionless. I was entertained by my father's fishing hat, and I watched it the whole walk home until it stopped moving on his head. We were a few houses from ours, and I stood next to my father and saw what had made him stop. My mother was on the porch in the rocking chair. She had a similar face like the people we passed.

"I think we're both grounded now," my father said, and began to walk slowly to our house.

When my mother saw us, she got up from the rocking chair and stood on the porch to greet us. She was wearing a dark grey button-up vest and a long skirt that matched.

We put the fishing supplies at the bottom of the porch. "I guess you were right," I said. "That hat *isn't* lucky anymore."

"I thought he was grounded?" my mother asked.

My father walked up the stairs avoiding eye contact. "I wanted to get him out of the house."

"If he wanted to get out of the house," my mother said, "he could have gone to church with us."

My father stopped at the top of the stairs while I still stood on the stoop below. "He didn't want to go to church. He hates Rose and wants nothing to do with him. I wasn't going to

make him go to church for only an hour of freedom.” My father started walking towards the front door. “If you want to call *that* freedom.”

My mother gave him a hard stare only I saw. “It’s going to help our family fit in with these people.”

Her hateful tone made her seem like a lifelong churchgoer. I had no idea why she was so defensive.

My father stopped walking. His back was still facing us, and I could see his shoulders arch like he was in pain. “That’s it. I’m tired of this town shoving religion down my throat. Jesse and Allie, come out to the porch please.”

I had no idea what was going on, and I don’t think my mother did either. It seemed like my father was rolling up his sleeves to get dirty in his defense, and I wasn’t going anywhere until it was over.

“What are you doing, Jack?” my mother asked.

“In Colebrook you could care less about religion, but since you found out Appleton is a religious town you’re all about going to church.”

My mother started looking around the neighborhood. The guy next door, and the elderly couple across the street were watching the argument my parents were having. The elderly couple sat down in their porch chairs as soon as they heard angry voices. Their house reminded me of a shit-covered barn with windows.

“Jack, can we talk about this inside?” my mother asked.

“No, we’re having it right here,” my father said. “Because I know it’s embarrassing you in front of all the neighbors you want to impress.”

Jesse and Allie came out to the porch looking confused.

“Perfect timing-all the kids are here. I don’t care that *you* choose to put on a mask and act like you give a shit about God, but I’ll be damned if my children take same the route,” my father said, then looked at Jesse and Allie. “Did you like church today?”

“It was okay,” Allie said.

“Would you like to go back there again?” my father asked.

Allie shrugged her shoulders and Jesse looked at her, then looked at my father. “Maybe.”

“That’s fine,” my father said. “Go if you want, but if you don’t want to go you don’t have to.” My father looked down at the bottom of the steps, and saw me still standing there. “Same to you, Clark.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” my mother asked.

“I’m giving my children a *choice*,” my father said. “So they don’t feel they have to do something in order to be accepted.”

“So I’m the bad guy in this?” my mother asked.

“I never said that,” my father said. “Go and do your church thing. Get accepted and be a good person in the eyes of Owen, Rose, and Appleton.”

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “You’re such a dick sometimes,” she said and stormed into house.

“Isn’t that what you want?” my father asked. “Don’t you want to be like everyone else no matter what the cost?” My father looked around the neighborhood, and noticed the man in house on the right was watching us. He looked angry, and his whole body was facing us like he wasn’t scared to show how he felt. He reminded me of a teacher with his white dress shirt, tan pants, and white hair that was in a comb-over fashion. The elderly couple was still watching us too. They gave us expressionless gazes, but I could feel their hate like a shadow. My father looked at

the elderly couple across the street, put up his hand, and gave them a smile. “Howdy, neighbor. Lovely day we’re having, isn’t it?”

The elderly couple looked at him strange, then got up and went into their house. The angry man did the same, like it was some type of drill they’ve been trained for. I couldn’t figure out if I should laugh or stay confused as they went into their broken-down homes.

The rest of the day leading into night my parents avoided each other. My mother stayed in her room, and my father sat on the couch and watched T.V. until he fell asleep. I had to put Jesse and Allie to bed because if I didn’t, they would have ran around the house all night.

“Why are Mom and Dad so mad?” Jesse asked.

“Because Dad doesn’t want to go to church, and Mom does,” I said.

“I hope it stops,” Allie said.

“Me too. Goodnight, little gremlins,” I said, and it made them giggle.

I woke up the next morning, and walked into the hallway and saw that my mother was out of her room. She was downstairs sitting at the kitchen table, while my father lay motionless on the living room couch from the night before. A small blue blanket covered everything besides his feet, which were hanging over the couch.

My mother got out of her seat to greet me. “Good morning.” Her voice was cheerful, and the yellow bathrobe she wore was tied tight around her.

“Are you okay?”

“Never better. Yesterday was a different story, but I did a lot of thinking in my room, and I can make things better,” my mother said.

Jesse, Allie, and my father came in the kitchen and joined me at the table shortly after, and I think the three of them were just as shocked at my mother’s behavior as I was.

“Now that everyone’s here I have something to say,” my mother said. “Your father was right yesterday. It’s wrong to make you go to church, and I believe that you should *choose* if you want to go or not.” My father looked at her with his right eyebrow raised. I noticed every time she said ‘choose,’ she gave my father a look worse than daggers. “So, last night in my room I got to thinking, and since you can *choose* to go to church, why not *choose* to do everything?”

Me, Jesse, and Allie glanced at each other because we knew where this was going.

“What?” my father said.

“Everything. *Choose* whatever you want to do. If you want to sleep on the lawn tonight, do it. If you don’t want to go to school, don’t go. It’s your decision,” my mother said, then smiled at my father.

My father leaned back in his chair and smiled right back, “Oh, I get it. That’s fine with me. I’m going to work, so you’ll have to deal with them.”

“I think I can manage. Have a good day,” my mother said, and my father got up to get ready for work.

“Am I still grounded?” I asked.

“Not if you don’t want to be,” she said.

“Man, this is awesome,” I said. “No rules.”

“No rules,” Jesse and Allie said, and kept repeating it while jumping up and down in their chairs.

My mother got up and went in the fridge. While she was hunched over digging around, I couldn’t imagine what she was going to pull next. The morning had been very surprising already. A chocolate-frosted cake was pulled out from the fridge, and my mother stood up straight, then shut the door with her right hip once she could hold it evenly.

She put the cake in the middle of the table. “I bought it this morning to celebrate.”

Jesse looked at my mother with half a smile. “Can we—”

“Do whatever you want,” she said.

Jesse and Allie were eating the chocolate cake with their hands at the kitchen table when my father came down stairs, and I think at that point he realized my mother wasn’t kidding around.

“Want some cake, Dad?” Allie asked with her hand filled with chocolate, offering it to my father.

“No,” he said in a blunt but firm voice.

“Have some,” my mother said. She picked up a piece and smiled, then threw it at my father but he dodged it.

“Missed me,” my father said.

“Food fight,” Jesse said in a piercing scream, and we all began throwing cake at each other. I rubbed a gob of cake right in Jesse’s hair then threw a chunk at my mother, but she ducked and the chunk splashed on the kitchen window above the sink. During the chaos of cake throwing, my mother watched where some pieces landed. She looked like she was having fun, but for some reason it felt like she cared that the cake was going on the walls instead of in our mouths. My father stood between the kitchen and the living room just watching the chaos. When I looked over at him he shook his head. Allie managed to throw a gob of chocolate frosting at him.

“Allie, why would you do that?” he asked, while wiping cake off his shoulders and face.

“That was fun,” my mother said, looking at my father.

“Now I have to go to work like this. Thanks,” my father said and stormed out the front door.

Jesse and Allie helped my mother clean up the kitchen after the food fight was over, and I took a shower to get all the cake and frosting out of my hair. The kitchen was still being cleaned when I came back downstairs, and I decided to help out when I saw how much cake was still on the walls.

“Thank you,” my mother said, as I scrubbed chocolate frosting off the refrigerator door.

“No problem,” I said. “Hey, do you care if...” I stopped myself, and remembered I didn’t have to ask. “Never mind.”

My mother smiled. “It’s gonna take some time to get used to.”

I finished scrubbing the refrigerator and went into the living room to use the phone. I was so excited, my hands were shaking as I dialed.

“Walt?”

“Who’s this?” Walt asked.

“It’s, Clark, you and Sam should come over.”

“Right now?” he said.

“Yeah, right now,” I said then looked into the kitchen. Jesse, Allie, and my mother looked like they were almost done cleaning. “Let’s just say, as soon as you step on the Lapine’s property, anything goes.”

When Walt and Sam walked into my living room, I greeted them with my arms filled with baseball gloves, bats, and balls. “Indoor baseball, anyone?”

“No way,” Walt said. “I call bluff on this shit.”

I looked behind me and saw my mother sitting at the kitchen table in her yellow bathrobe.

“Mom, baseball?”

“I told you, Clark,” she said. “Anything.”

I handed them each a glove, and they looked dazed. “C’mon, guys, play ball.”

We came up with easy rules. The entranceway between the kitchen and living room was home, the T.V. was first, the front door was second, and the stairs were third. We broke three windows and a lamp. Another rule was if you smashed something, it was a home run. My mother had a front row seat at the kitchen table, and when Walt slid to home plate, he said hi to her and she gave him an emotionless wave that matched her face. After baseball got boring, we found my father’s old toboggan in the attic and went sledding down the stairs like in *Home Alone*. Sam crashed into the wall at the bottom of the staircase, and left a crack that went all the way up the ceiling.

“I’m done,” Sam said, then got up from the toboggan and staggered to the couch to sit down. I watched him from the top of the staircase. He didn’t look too good, so we brought him upstairs so he was closer the bathroom. The upstairs hallway was wet, and we looked at each other wondering where the water came from.

I walked down the hall towards the bathroom, and saw that the door was closed. There was a towel stuffed under the bottom of the door to keep the water from coming out, but it didn’t help. I forced open the door, and watched a small wave of water spill out and soak my ankles before traveling down the hall. Jesse wore a snorkel and swim trunks. He clogged the toilet, and kept flushing it causing water to pour on the floor. Allie was standing in the bathtub fully clothed, but wearing goggles. She was knee deep in the water, with the faucet still running. The tub must have been overflowing for at least ten minutes.



I ran over to the tub, and shut off the faucet. “What are you guys doing?”

Jesse looked at me with the snorkel in his mouth and Allie, still wearing her goggles, did the same.

“Huh? Why would you guys do this?” I asked, but they didn’t answer. After a few seconds, they ran out of the bathroom.

The water was going into other rooms, and I splashed down the hallway to Walt and Sam. Sam had puked in the hall, and I watched the barf swim away before I spoke. “You guys need to leave. I have to clean this shit.”

“I thought you said no rules,” Walt said. “You don’t have to clean anything.”

“You’re right. I don’t have to, but I should,” I said. “You need to get Sam outta here anyways. He looks like shit.”

Sam was near the stairs hunched over, holding the railing to keep his balance.

“He’s gonna boot again,” Walt said.

I walked Walt and Sam outside. The water was coming downstairs and soaking into the floor wood now. My mother sat at the kitchen table, looking out the window above the sink. I could picture her pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with a match, like she was congratulating herself for creating this beautiful disaster.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Jesse and Allie flooded the bathroom. There’s water all over the house.”

“I thought I told you,” she said then turned away from the window to look at me.

“There’s no rules anymore.” Her look was serious, and it scared me a little.

“So if they wanted, they could burn down the house and you’d let them?”

My mother stopped looking at me and returned to watching the window. “If that’s what they want to do.”

“You’ve really lost it.” My eyes became watery, but Jesse and Allie came running into the house still in their water gear and distracted me.

“Wally’s outside,” Allie said.

I looked at my mother one more time. She was staring out the window like she was waiting for something to take her away, and I turned back to Jesse and Allie. “Don’t do anything bad,” I said. “We have rules again.”

“That’s a lie,” my mother said. Her voice was angry, and she turned away from the window to look me in the eye. “There’s no rules anymore.”

Jesse and Allie cheered, and ran upstairs while I met Walt on the porch. He was out of breath from running. Syd had called him from the Appleton police department a few minutes ago, and wanted us to bail him out with the help of his grandmother. I asked if Syd gave any more details, but he only told Walt directions to his grandmother’s before hanging up.

I looked inside my house at my mother staring off, and listened to Jesse and Allie ripping apart our house on the top floor. “Let’s go.”

## Chapter 6

We woke up Sam, who had been sleeping since the toboggan accident, and headed to Syd’s grandmother’s. Sam didn’t know anything about her except for the fact that she was Syd’s grandmother, so he was no help. After we passed Syd’s cabin and the hill where we egged that car, we must have walked at least a mile on the dark road until we saw another house.

“Are we even in Appleton anymore?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Walt said. “My mom either drives the other way near the school or in the opposite direction where the train tracks are.”

The cabin was hidden in the woods. It looked like someone lived there, unlike Syd’s. There was a garden near the porch and a short white fence that surrounded the development. It looked more like a cottage than a cabin since whoever lived there kept up with it. The rustic look a cabin usually had wasn’t there, but I thought it made the cabin more welcoming.

“Belbin,” I read out loud on the front door.

“Go ahead and knock,” Walt said.

So I did. I knocked hard so whoever was inside would hear it through the house.

“I hope she’s not a mean ol’ lady,” Sam said.

The door opened, and a tall elderly woman stood in front of us. She was wearing a long red skirt with a blue button-up shirt. A big woman, not only tall, but wide too. Her blonde hair looked to be turning white in parts, and it was up in a tight bun. Her overall look reminded me of Mrs. Claus in those Christmas cartoons I used to watch when I was younger. Her stare looked strange, like she wasn’t used to people knocking on her door.

“Are you Mrs. Belbin?” Walt asked.

“Yes,” she said.

Walt looked at us for some sort of approval, and I nodded my head for him to continue.

“Are you Syd Belbin’s grandmother?”

Her strange look changed into a surprised one. “Is he in trouble?”

“Kinda,” Walt said. “He said to see you for help.”

She moved out of the doorway and into the cabin. “Come inside.”

Syd's grandmother had us sit on a dusty grey couch in the living room. Her black coffee table in front of us was covered with cooking magazines, and I could only tell it was black because I looked down at the legs. She sat down across from us in a rocking chair that faced the front window, and Walt began telling her what happened to Syd.

Syd's grandmother shook her head. "That boy will never learn. How much is it *this* time?"

"I'm not sure," Walt said. "Syd didn't tell me on the phone."

Syd's grandmother began to rock in her chair as she looked outside into the darkness. "I can give you boys three-hundred. If it's more than that, he's just gonna have to stay there."

"I'm sure that'll be enough," Walt said.

She stopped rocking and turned away from the window to face us. "How come I've never seen you boys before?"

"I don't know," Walt said.

"You don't know?" she asked. "What kinda answer is that?"

"What he's trying to say is, Syd never mentioned you to us," Sam said. "I live with Syd, and I didn't know you even existed until a few hours ago."

Syd's grandmother turned her head back to the window, and began rocking again.

"Figures. The little snot."

"I don't know why he would never bring us around here," I said. "You seem like a nice lady."

"I'm sure he has his reasons." Syd's grandmother got up, and went into the kitchen. The three of us stayed sitting waiting patiently for her to return to the living room. When she did, I

saw a small stack of cash folded in her hand. “You,” she said as she pointed at Sam. “You said you live with Syd?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Sam said.

She smiled. “Where then?”

“In the cabin a little ways down the street from here,” he said.

“Okay, how old is he then?” she asked.

“Eighteen,” I said.

“All right,” she said, and handed Walt the money. “You seem like you know Syd, but if I find out you don’t. I’m gonna call the cops. Got it?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Walt said. “Would you like to know our names too?”

“I’ve seen you three around town.” She looked at Walt and Sam. “You two dress like Syd, so you’re easier to spot, but you,” she said then looked at me. “What’s your name?”

“Clark Lapine.”

She nodded her head, and continued to look at me. “Make sure you tell Syd to come here once you bail him out, and if you don’t have enough money, I want the three-hundred back here by tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Walt said, holding the money.

“You three better get going, then,” she said, and we got up, thanked her for her time, and left.

“She’s nice ol’ lady,” Walt said, as soon as he closed the front door. “A little rough around the edges if you don’t know her, but who can blame her?”

Sam shook his head, and started walking up the dirt road without us. It was dark now, and while he walked up the road I couldn’t see him anymore.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked.

I heard footsteps, then Sam came back into sight before Walt could answer my question. He stopped walking once we were face to face. “I’ve known Syd the longest. I’m closest to him. How come she asked for your name?”

Sam probably couldn’t see my face, but I was giving him a look like he was being ridiculous. “Cause I don’t stand out as much as you guys.”

Sam got closer to my face. “Yeah, and after that she told *you* what to do with Syd.”

“Who cares?” I said. “We all know you’re the closest to Syd.”

“Yeah,” Sam said and backed a few feet away from me.

“Because you’re his footstool,” I said and Walt laughed.

“Fuck you,” Sam said then walked up the road disappearing into the darkness again.

“Shit. I’ve never seen him that pissed,” Walt said.

“I didn’t mean to get him mad, but it’s the truth.”

“No, you’re right. He’s a pushover.”

I kept an eye out for Sam while we walked to the center of town, but he was lost in the darkness. I didn’t see any people walking around when we got there, then noticed the light poles were on. Ghost town time. We passed the church and funeral home, and walked up the other main road where the police station and the schools were.

“Man, I really don’t want to go in there,” I said, looking at the police department’s blue doors and brick walls.

“We owe him.”

I took in a deep breath. “All right, I’m ready.”

The police department was cold, and we followed the black-and-white checkered floor to a brown desk. A chubby red-haired cop grilled us, and waited for one of us to speak.

“We’re here to bailout Syd Belbin,” Walt said.

“Are you?” the cop said. “How much money you got?”

Walt ignored the cop’s question, and he gave Walt a dirty look before grabbing a folder on his desk and opening it. “What’s his name? Bellpin?”

“*Belbin*” Walt said.

“Right, Belbin.” He went back to looking at the folder. “Belbin, Belbin, Belbin. Here it is, Syd Belbin.” The cop looked up at us. “Seems to be in here for assault.”

Walt pulled out the money Syd’s grandmother gave him and began counting it.

“Hey, that looks to be a pretty big wad there,” the cop said. “Hand it over.”

“No,” Walt said. “I’m only giving you whatever the amount is to make bail.”

“There’s also a co-pay,” the cop said, then grinned. His teeth looked as yellow as orange juice. I looked down at his uniform, and saw he wasn’t wearing a nametag. He probably forgot it on purpose so he could pull shit like this.

Walt shook his head, and slapped all the money on the desk. The cop grabbed it and held it with a closed fist before putting it in the desk drawer. Behind the desk the cop seemed chubby, but when he got up I noticed he was full-blown fat. He waddled to the cells, and I watched his massive body sway back and fourth like a buoy down the hallway.

“What an asshole,” Walt said.

“A fasshole.”

“A what?”

“A fat asshole.”

Walt laughed. "Oh yeah, definitely. I can't believe I had to give him all the money."

"Needs his doughnuts."

Walt laughed again. "Other cops have asked me for money too."

"Really?"

"One time, I called the cops on this guy who was beating my mom. The cop came and arrested the guy, but after that he opened his hand like I was supposed to tip him or something."

"That's not right."

"He was doing his job. You don't tip someone if they're doing their job, unless they're a waiter."

Syd came walking down the hall with a smile on his face. He looked messy. His clothes were wrinkled, and his pompadour saggy. "About fuckin' time."

"Better late than never," Walt said.

The fat cop sat down at his desk, and began shuffling papers. "See you in three months for your court date," he said without looking up.

"I'll be there with bells on," Syd said.

"I'm sure you'll fuck up before then," the fat cop said. "Always do."

"Don't count on it, slob," Syd said.

The fat cop laughed. "With your record I'm sure you'll do at least a year. And you're eighteen now, no youth center for you. You're going to prison with the big boys this time."

Syd took out a quarter from his pocket and flicked it at the cop. "Go buy yourself something cheesy, so you clog your arteries and die, you fat fuckin' piece of shit."

The fat cop got up and started waddling over to us with his nightstick. I walked to the doors quickly and Walt followed.



“Don’t waste your time,” Syd said. “Your running days are done.”

The cop still made an attempt, but by the time he was close enough to swing we walked outside and onto the street. He stared at us through the glass windows, and Syd mooned him and slapped his ass before the cop disappeared into the station.

“Where’s Sam at?” Syd asked.

We gave each other quick glances, and Syd noticed our worried faces. “What happened?”

“Clark kinda said something to Sam that pissed him off,” Walt said.

Syd looked at me with a straight face and began cracking his knuckles. “What’d you say?”

“I called him your footstool,” I said.

Syd pushed me hard and started coming at me with his fists up, but Walt got in between us. “Come on, Syd. We’re all friends. Clark only told him that because Sam was being jealous and stupid.”

Syd put his hands down and backed away from Walt. “Why would he be jealous?”

“I dunno,” I said. “He thought your grandmother was giving me too much attention or something.”

“My grandmother’s a whack job sometimes,” Syd said.

“I don’t think she’s a whack job,” I said.

Syd ignored me, and stared at Walt. “Sam’s probably back with his piece of shit family, now.”

“Don’t blame Walt,” I said. “I was the one who got him pissed.”

“He could have stopped Sam,” Syd said. “He knows I’m all Sam has.” Syd’s face went back to Walt’s. “If you were a true friend, you would’ve looked after him when I was locked up.”

“I did,” Walt said. “I gave him a place to stay, I fed him. What else do you want me to do? Wipe his ass? Cut his toe nails?”

“No, I wanted you to fuckin’ stop him from running off.” Syd was breathing deeply like the night he pinned me against the wall. “Fuck you both.”

Syd walked away from the police station and we waited a few minutes for him to walk up the street, then walked home in silence.

### Chapter 7

The last week of summer was not normal in the Lapine household. We still didn’t have rules, and my father cleaned up after Jesse and Allie while my mother did nothing. Going to church last Sunday was something new for her, and when she was out I noticed how friendly she became with people. She waved to them while she walked the streets, talked with them while in line at Blissful Foods, and even went over their houses sometimes. Appleton welcomed her, and she was happy. But once she walked through our door she became this miserable person. My parents were on a no-talking basis but still slept together, and I wondered how long my mother would put on this act to punish my father. I was used to this lifestyle now, so it wasn’t the only thing on my mind. My first day of school was in two days, and I was stamped as a loser because I hung out with the misfits of Appleton.

I knew school was going to be hard, but at least I had Walt. B was looking good as ever when I came over. She was wearing a white miniskirt, and I began fantasizing about what I would do to her if I got the chance. Walt was in his room, and when I went up there I saw X-Men

and Batman posters plastered everywhere. He was playing original Nintendo, a game system created before either of us were born. His eyes were glued to his T.V. screen while he sat Indian-style on the floor.

“I’m surprised you’re playing that old thing,” I said.

Walt paused his game and turned to look at me. “Might as well kill some time before we start the worst year of our lives.”

“Why’d you say that?”

“Because everyone’s gonna beat our asses. Every day of the year.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“When the school finds out Syd doesn’t have our back, kids are gonna pound us. We’re fucked.”

My stomach dropped. “Come on, dude, news doesn’t spread that fast.”

“People don’t have anything else better to do.” Walt took the game off pause and went back to playing. “What grade you going in?”

“Tenth.”

“At least we’ll be getting our asses kicked together.”

I rolled my eyes, but played along for the hell of it. “We should enjoy these last days then. What do you wanna do?”

“I’m staying here. Summer’s over, and even if word hasn’t got out about Syd, Will and Mike are probably looking for us.”

My stomach dropped again. I had forgotten about Will and Mike. “We should go to Syd’s and apologize.”

“What makes you think he changed his mind?”

“I dunno. Maybe he found Sam and he’s okay.”

“That’s your problem, Clark. You assume too much. I know Syd better than you. He’s done with us.”

Walt stayed glued to the screen and I went downstairs to catch another glimpse of B in her miniskirt before I left, but I think she was gone. B was sexy, and I don’t mean plain sexy, she was a grade-A M.I.L.F.

“If only I was a few years older,” I said out loud as I left Walt’s.

The next two days I stayed cooped up in my house. Walt had made me paranoid, and I thought as soon as I left, Will and Mike would be waiting outside to give me another beating.

It was a little less than a mile to school, and while me and Walt walked I felt like a tool wearing my backpack, and probably looked like one too. Walt didn’t talk. Maybe he was thinking about what kids were going to do now that Syd wasn’t protecting him. That’s what I was thinking about, but I was going to get beat harder since it was a known fact I wasn’t a fan of Rose.

Appleton High was a small school. The deep single-story building had coffee colored walls with a granite base surrounding. The front cement stairs leading into the school weren’t that wide, and I imagined kids getting crammed together on them if ten or twelve were in a rush one day. There was a higher brick building next to it, and I wondered why it was bigger than the building we were about to go into.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That’s Appleton’s elementary and middle school.”

“Oh, so I’ll be right next door to Jesse and Allie.”

“Yeah,” Walt said. “And we can pound on anyone who messes with them.”

We walked through the two skinny wooden doors, which brought us to the main hallway that shared the same boring colors as outside. On the left and right sides of the hallway there were doors to the classrooms. Other kids didn't pay attention to us as they walked to their assigned homerooms. A good sign.

"I guess Sam didn't want to come," Walt said.

We were sitting next to each other in homeroom, and I looked around to see if I could spot Sam's greasy head.

"He's not here," Walt said. "Syd probably told him not to come."

"That's horrible," I said.

"Sam doesn't care," Walt said. "He already got held back."

"I take it Syd hasn't been to school either?" I asked.

"He shows up once a month maybe," Walt said.

I laughed, then shook my head. "They're both fucking idiots. What are they going to do with their lives?"

"Why you asking me?"

"Because you know them better than me."

A short lady walked into the classroom, and everyone got quiet. She had uncombed bushy black hair and was on the huskier side. Another thing that caught my attention was the size of her boobs. She had at least double D's.

"Ol' torpedo tits," Walt said.

I began to crack up, and the teacher stopped writing on the board and turned to face the class. "Quiet, people," she said with an accent I didn't recognize.

"Where's she from?" I asked.

“I think she’s from Gree—,”

“What did I just say, people?” she said while still writing on the board.

We shut up and watched her write our class schedule. It said Adomos in the middle of the board, so I assumed that was her name. She went to her desk and began reading a piece of paper, then looked up at me.

“We have a new student, people,” she said and everyone looked at me. I could feel my face getting hot.

“Clark Lah-*pine*?” she asked.

“That’s how it’s written,” I said. “But it’s pronounced Lah-*pen*.”

“Oh, getting fancy,” a kid in the front of the classroom said.

“That’s enough,” she said. “Where are you from, Clark?”

“New Hampshire,” I said.

“What’s it like in New Hampshire?” she asked.

“Amazing,” I said. “I really miss it.”

“Why don’t you go back then?” the kid in the front said, and everyone laughed.

“Enough, people. I’m sorry, Clark. Sometimes our students can be rude,” she said while looking at the boy who’d wisecracked. “Make Clark feel welcome, people. I’m Mrs. Adomos. If you have any problems or questions, you can come to me.”

The second bell rang, and everyone left for our first class. I stayed in my seat until almost everyone was out of the room.

“What’s your problem?” Walt asked.

“That kid made fun of me,” I said. “He doesn’t even know me.”

“So, he’s probably heard of you,” Walt said. “And that’s all it takes around here.”

We were a few minutes late to our math class and our teacher, Mr. Munzy made an example out of us. “Don’t be like these two,” Mr. Munzy said to the class. “If you get in the habit of being late, you’ll be late for the rest of your life.” He stared at us through his thick bifocals.

“I’m sorry we’re late, Mr. Munzy. I needed to help Clark wi—,”

“Clark’s a big boy, aren’t you, Clark?” Munzy asked.

“Yes,” I said, and the class started giggling.

“Since I’ve never seen you before, I’m assuming you’re new,” Munzy said.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Mr. Munzy,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Munzy,” I said, and the class giggled again.

We both looked at the tiled floor to escape the faces of our amused classmates.

“You can sit down now. Don’t be late again,” Munzy said.

I walked to the back of the room to the only open desk. Walt snatched one in the front, but I didn’t care. I wanted to be far away from Munzy, so he couldn’t embarrass me anymore. The kid who told me to go back to New Hampshire was sitting next to me, and he gave me dirty looks all class. He looked out of place with his long blonde hair, and reminded me of a member of Hanson. I pictured him in California surfing instead of sitting in a classroom in Connecticut. The class started talking loudly while Munzy wrote on the board. He got the classes’ attention by yelling, ‘sex’ and in less than a second, the class was focused on him. Even though I didn’t like Munzy for embarrassing me, I thought the sex line was pretty clever. Even for a sketchy-looking math teacher.

Mrs. Gerlo, a large woman with short brown hair, was our history teacher. She wore shirts that could easily be mistaken for muumuus. This time me and Walt weren't late, so we got to sit next to each other.

"We call her the Hump," Walt said.

Mrs. Gerlo was reading out of our history book when I looked at her. "Why the Hump?"

"Because she has one right below her neck," Walt said. "Check it out."

I saw a hump when she put her book down and wrote what chapters we had to read on the board. "Eww, it's huge," I said.

"She's the hunchback of Appleton," Walt said.

"Rose probably hired her to ring the church bells," I said, and it made Walt laugh.

"Father Rose would never do that," a girl said.

"What wouldn't Father Rose do?" Mrs. Gerlo asked.

"He wouldn't hire yo—,"

Walt pushed on the girl's back before she finished her sentence. "Nothing. He wouldn't do nothing."

"Clark said Father Rose hired you to ring the church bells," the surfer prick said.

I had enough of this kid. I was about to get up and tell him off or slap him in the face, but Walt acted quicker.

"He didn't say that," Walt said. "Jerry's just tryin' to get Clark in trouble because he's new."

Mrs. Gerlo looked at us then, Jerry, and finally at the girl who opened her fat mouth and started the whole thing. "Did Clark say that, Trish?"

Trish glanced over and saw both of our heads shaking no.



“No,” Trish said. “Clark just asked if Father Rose gambles, and I said he would never do that.”

I relaxed in my chair. Trish came up with a good lie on the spot. I would have never guessed she could do something like that because she looked so sweet and innocent with her braces and braids, but you never know what to expect when it comes to people.

Out in the hall, Trish came up to us and demanded five bucks for lying to Mrs. Gerlo.

“I don’t normally do that,” Trish said. “But you guys didn’t want to get caught, so I did you a favor.”

I gave her a nasty look. “You don’t pay for favors,” I said.

“With me you do,” Trish said, and I dug in my pockets.

“How much for a date?” Walt asked before cracking a wise grin.

“For you,” Trish said, then inspected Walt like a fashion judge. “Five hundred.”

“You’re cute, but not that cute,” Walt said, and I handed Trish three dollars.

“I need five,” Trish said.

“I don’t have five,” I said.

“You better get two bucks tomorrow,” Trish said. “Or I’ll tell Mrs. Gerlo what you really said.”

“Oh, yeah? We’ll tell Rose you’re lyin’ for money,” Walt said.

“I’m going to confession to tell him anyways,” Trish said then smiled. “Besides, he won’t believe a couple of scumbags.”

Trish had it all figured out, the smart little shit. I agreed to give her the two dollars and we went to our next class.

I had trouble taking my science teacher, Mr. Linus, seriously. His green button-up shirt, brown mustache, blue jeans, and excitement with science in general made him appear like Luigi from Mario Brothers. Mr. Linus as Luigi gave me some entertainment, but I got so bored in his class that my attention moved to Jerry, the wannabe surfer.

“What the fuck’s his problem?” I asked Walt.

“He’s just a goody goody,” Walt said. “He probably found out you hung out with me and the boys over the summer.”

“Or maybe he knows what I said to Rose,” I said.

“Maybe. But don’t worry about it,” Walt said. “All he does is talk shit.”

Lunch was the only time the different grades saw each other and it was in the gym. Some tables were underneath the basketball hoop and I found it silly. Appleton’s school system was strange. Kids only attended classes with other kids in their grade. I followed Walt to the end of one table, and we sat in the corner. Ashley was a few tables up from us, and when she caught me looking at her, she smiled and waved while her friends laughed. That was the moment I realized that we were the outcasts of Appleton High. I would say the whole town too, but I already knew that.

We had three more classes to go, but I wanted the day to be over. Having classes with the same kids every day and that Jerry prick was shitty. Our next class was English, taught by our homeroom teacher, Mrs. Adomos.

“Welcome back, people,” Adomos said. “How has everyone’s day been?”

No one answered, but I don’t think she cared. Adomos began teaching, and I tuned her out like every other teacher at Appleton High.

“I’m so bored,” I said to Walt. “I’m even too bored to learn if that makes sense.”

“Just wait until next class,” Walt said. “We got Mr. Hender for art, and I heard he’s a riot.”

I sat in my chair looking at Mrs. Adomos’s torpedo tits, listening to her Italian or Greek accent, and wondered if Mr. Hender being a riot was a good thing or a bad thing.

Mr. Hender being a riot was a bad thing. As soon as he walked in, I knew him. He was the angry man with white hair who watched my parents fight on the porch a couple of days ago. I put my head down and walked by his desk as soon as I knew it was him. Hender assigned us seats alphabetically. Walt was nowhere near me because his last name was Conti, and surfer prick Jerry Larr sat beside me. I had a window seat, so I looked outside to hide my face from Hender. The view outside was mostly woods, but there was a clearing, and inside it I saw a small shack.

“Clark, pay attention,” Hender said in a loud voice, and it echoed throughout the classroom, scaring me a little.

“Yeah, Clark pay attention,” Jerry said.

“You shut up,” Hender said to Jerry, and I laughed instantly.

“I’m not trying to make you laugh,” Hender said, and I shut up as quick as Jerry did. Hender looked me in the face for the first time since I came into his classroom. His left cheek moved up slightly and it made his eye squint. I could tell I looked familiar to him.

If you were talented at art, you were safe from Hender and didn’t get yelled at as much. I was *not* talented at art. I thought I was good, but not talented. We were assigned to draw a bike in the center of the room, and it wasn’t going smoothly for me.

“What are you doing?” Hender asked. “The chain isn’t that big, and why are your handle bars so curved?”

“I dunno,” I said. “That’s how it turned out.”

“Are you getting smart with me?” Hender asked. His eyes were bright green and looked like they were going to burst out of his head.

“I started drawing, and that’s how the bike turned out on the paper,” I said.

“So your hand has a mind of its own?” he asked. “You just grab a pencil and it goes to town?” His face was getting red.

Everyone in the class was looking at me for an answer, including Walt who was smiling at me. “I—,” I said, then smiled.

“You? You what?” Hender asked. “Do you think this is funny?”

“Kinda,” I said.

Hender pushed my desk aside and got in my face. “I’m here to teach you how to be an artist. What’s so funny about that?”

“It’s tenth-grade art,” I said. “Don’t take it so serious.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds then he finally got out of my face. I was now sure he remembered me and my father from that day. He didn’t give anyone that much shit, and I’m sure Jerry loved every minute of it. Walt was still looking at me when Hender walked away, and nodded his head like I did something great.

“That. Was. Awesome,” Walt said after class.

“He’s the worst teacher I’ve ever had. I thought you said he was a riot?”

“Riot in a bad way. Tomorrow should be a good class.”

“Yeah, Hender’s gonna gut and hang me on the drawing board for our next project.”

Our last class was gym in the cafeteria. When me and Walt walked in, Dan Tiggins was there minus his skateboard and aviators, but he still wore his patched up cut-offs and tie-dye shirt.

I leaned over to Walt's ear. "I saw this crazy bastard skating around at the beginning of the summer. He must have broken in or something."

Walt laughed. "He's the teacher."

Tiggins waved at us from across the gym. "Clark Lapine. How you doing?"

"I'm good," I said. I was still in shock he was a teacher. "You?"

He opened his arms like he was getting ready for a hug. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Tiggins was a goofy old hippie, but he ran laps around the gym and played kickball with us. He wasn't like the gym teachers in New Hampshire who watched kids from the sidelines, and complained if they weren't doing something right.

Walt told me there were rumors that he used to smoke weed with his students. I never smoked weed before, but if the rumors were true, I would want my first time to be with Tiggins.

The last bell rang, and our class went to the locker rooms to change. Jerry was *really* pissing me off. During gym he kept making smart remarks at the way I did everything.

I went up to Jerry while he was changing and asked him why he'd been giving me shit all day. He looked me up and down like I was a piece of trash, and for once said nothing.

"Listen, surfer prick," I said. "Stop giving me shit."

"Or what?" Jerry said trying to be tough. "Syd isn't covering your ass anymore, so you can fuck off."

I turned to walk away from him then spun around and hit Jerry in the throat with a closed fist. He slammed against his locker holding his neck, and slid down to the floor. I was aiming for

his face, but the throat worked well enough, if not better. Now he wouldn't be able to talk shit for a couple of days.

Walt came over and the both of us hovered over Jerry while he continued to hold his neck.

"We don't need Syd anymore. We can fight our own battles," Walt said. "Don't fuck with us again, surfer douche."

Walt gave me a low five, and we walked out of the locker room like we owned it.

"Not a bad first day," Walt said.

We were walking home from school and I didn't answer him. I felt proud of myself. I stood up to Jerry, and now Appleton knew I was someone they couldn't fuck with. When we got to my house, the front yard had toys scattered everywhere. It looked like Jesse and Allie threw a ripper for a bunch of eight-year-olds.

"Still no rules?" Walt asked.

"I'll see you later. I got to see what this is all about."

I tiptoed around the toys watching my step, and finally got to my front door where I could hear Jesse and Allie running around like animals.

When I opened the front door, I saw my mother sitting at the kitchen table. No surprise there, but she made me laugh when I saw her face up close because it had cosmetics slapped on every part. Her light brown hair and red summer dress were the only things that remained from her old look.

Allie ran by the kitchen, then came back to the open doorway. "We did her makeup," she said.

I was holding in my laughter while my mother sat still. "I can tell."

“How’s it look?” my mother asked.

My mother no longer looked like a depressed woman. She was now a sloppy clown who had seen better days, but she looked like she was going to be okay.

“Good,” I said. My face probably said something different since I was still trying not to laugh. “Real nice.”

I searched my house for any other unique treasures that Jesse and Allie created, but didn’t find anything until I got to my room. My bed wasn’t the same as when I left it for school. The mattress looked fine, but it was the box spring that looked strange. I lifted the mattress up while Jesse and Allie watched, and I saw that they had badly cracked the frame.

“Why did you guys jump on it so much?” I asked, still holding a corner of the mattress above my head.

“No rules, remember?” Jesse said.

I walked down the hall into their room, opened their window and threw both their mattresses out on the front lawn. “There. Now you two can be uncomfortable sleeping tonight too.”

Jesse and Allie looked out the window and down at their mattresses with their Hannah Montana and Red Sox sheets still on them. “Mom, Clar—”

“No rules, remember?” I said.

I watched Jesse and Allie cry for a few seconds. “It sucks to not have rules sometimes, doesn’t it?”

Allie sobbed while Jesse hid his face from me.

“If you go tell Mom right now that you want rules again,” I said. “I’ll bring back your beds.”

Jesse and Allie walked out of the room wiping their tears. I went over to the window to close it, and saw Ashley Simmons walking to my front door. The doorbell rang as I ran down the hallway. I think my feet might have touched three steps before I jumped over the rest.

I opened the door to Ashley's beautiful smiling face. We looked at each other, and before I could get a word out, my mother came to the door.

"Who's this?" my mother asked in a bored tone.

Ashley's face had a look of terror on it, and I realized my mother still had her clown makeup on.

I grabbed the front door and began walking outside as I closed it behind me. "This is Ashley, got to go, bye."

"Wow. Who was that?"

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see how you were since that night at Bronco's."

"I'll live. No drones today?"

"Don't you mean, no friends?"

"When I said drones, I meant drones."

She caught on that I was being a smart ass, and raised her right brow. "Wanna go for a walk?"

"I have some criminal buddies to hang out with."

"Come on, don't be like that, Clark." She kept smiling, and every time I would smile back even if I was mad at her.



We walked down to Dupee Lake. It still felt like summer and the sun shined on the center of town, making the paint on every building appear fresh and bold. Ashley told me how sorry she felt for treating me like shit the night I got jumped.

“It was wrong for me to do that. Sometimes being popular brings out the worst in me,” she said.

She wanted to tell me all of this in school, but she never saw me because she was in the junior class. I was looking down at the perfectly paved sidewalk, and noticed Ashley’s hand kept hitting mine during the walk. I wanted to hold on to it tight and never let go. John drove by in his ice cream truck and he gave us a friendly wave. *Play ball* popped into my head when I saw him. When we got to Dupee Lake, we sat under a tree that looked similar to the one me and my father went fishing under. A cold breeze blew through our bodies, like the lake didn’t want any visitors.

“I heard you got into a fight today,” Ashley said.

I looked up at the leaves and branches of the tree that were slightly arched over us.

“Wasn’t really a fight.”

“Jerry still didn’t deserve it,”

“He was making fun of me all day. He deserved it.”

“It’s because of those goons you hang with.”

I stopped looking at the arched tree, and went back to Ashley. “They’re not goons.”

“They’re goons,” Ashley said before looking down at the grass. “And you’re not. I could tell from the moment I met you. You’re better than them.” Ashley began picking the grass, piece by piece.

“I’m not better than anyone. I just want people to like me here, not just the misfits.”

“You should’a waited until you saw more kids in Appleton. Then I could have molded you into something better.”

“Molded? I’m a person, not clay,” I said, and leaned my back on the tree.

“I know.” Ashley put her hand over mine. “But hanging out with the misfits is turning you into one. Look at what you’ve done since you moved here.”

“Egging is one thing, but telling Rose off and punching Jerry are things I would have done even if I *was* popular.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Because if you were popular you would have a rep to follow.” Me and Ashley were holding hands now. “You can be popular, Clark. You’re not ugly like those scumbags you hang out with.” Ashley blushed after she spoke, and looked down at the grass to hide her face. “You’re cute.”

“I think you’re cute, too,” I said.

Ashley looked at me, and my stomach went cold. The thought of actually being her boyfriend didn’t seem real. “Just dump those losers and we can be together.”

I stared into her eyes and let the words sink in. *Play ball. Fuck that.* “I’m not walking on eggshells for this town. If you think I’m cute, then just be my girlfriend.”

“You don’t get it.” Ashley got up, and put her hands in the back pockets of her white shorts. “It’s easy. You’re popular and follow the rules and are liked by the whole town. Or you’re a misfit, and do whatever you want and be looked down on.”

I stayed sitting, and looked up at her. “Is that why your mother left?”

Her eyes began to water, but she blinked a couple of times to make the tears go away. “You don’t know shit about my mother.”

I nodded my head. “So that’s why she left. She couldn’t take it here, could she?”

Ashley made a strange grunting sound like she was disgusted. “I can’t believe I lied to my friends so I could talk to you.”

“I’m sure it’s not the first time you lied.”

Ashley began to walk up the dirt road towards the center of town. “And don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. Wouldn’t wanna ruin your rep.” I watched her walk away, and leaned all my weight on the tree. It felt like it was arching more than ever.

I told Walt what happened while walking to school the next day, and he seemed to be in shock at my story.

“She was reaching out to you,” Walt said. “Why didn’t you take the right path when you had the chance?” After his question he gave me a sarcastic grin.

“I’d like to stay on the path where I’m not a mindless drone.”

We walked through our neighborhood and passed all the dilapidated, or soon to be dilapidated, houses everyone else probably ignored. Every house on our street was a variation of the next, just a little shorter, taller or wider. I saw Ashley and her crew walking to school once we got into the center of town. They were a few feet from us in front of Blissful Foods getting ready to cross the street.

“Go say hi to your girlfriend,” Walt said.

I let out an annoyed sigh, and shook my head. “If she didn’t care about her rep so much, I’d love it if she was my girlfriend.”

“Hey, future jailbirds,” Ashley said as we walked up to her group.

I looked at Walt. “Watch this.”

I turned to face her and the drones. Ashley looked at me like she knew what I was going to say.

“I thought you said last night I was better than that?” I said.

The drone’s eyes focused on Ashley looking for an explanation. “What are you talking about, loser? I was home sick last night.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t meet me at my house, and walk down to Dupee with me?” I asked.

“Dupee?” one of the drones said. “You went to the lake with this scum?”

“No,” Ashley said, then looked back at me terrified.

“And we did some things at the lake, if you know what I mean.” I lifted up my shirt and showed them my bruised torso. “She’s a real freak.”

“Oh, my God,” one of the drones said while the rest gasped. I looked over at Walt and he was smiling ear to ear.

“I didn’t do that,” Ashley said.

“I didn’t give these bruises to myself,” I said.

Ashley ran across and down the street towards the school, and her drones followed closely behind.

“You like that?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Walt said. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Appleton High was in an uproar when we got there. Everyone already knew what happened, and kids were asking me about it in Munzy’s class. I went along with the rumor, and said Ashley beat on my chest while she rode me like a cowboy.

More people asked, but I didn’t say anything else after Munzy’s class, so I wouldn’t change the story around. At lunch Ashley still sat at her table, and I was surprised her drones were still loyal to her. Overall, the second day of school was going well. Jerry left me alone, and

I made sure to pay Trish the money I owed her for lying to Mrs. Gerlo. Hender *did* give me shit about my bike again, but I ignored him and spent most of the class staring out the window at the clearing in the woods. The shack had a dim light inside it today, so I knew someone lived there. After we played basketball in Tiggins's class, I asked Walt about the shack and he said he had never noticed it before.

## Chapter 8

I needed to know who was inside that shack. After gym, I went with Walt around the school to the clearing in the woods, but Hender noticed us through the window. He pointed his finger towards the front of the building and we walked around the corner, stayed there for five minutes then went back. We pushed a few branches to the side to get through the clearing, and the shack looked a lot smaller once we were closer. It had one window, a door, and most likely one room since the wooden shack wasn't big. I knocked on the door, and the glow I saw earlier turned off. We waited a minute for someone to answer before we peeked through the tiny window next to the door. Somebody lived in this shack. We were sure of it once we saw a bed and wood stove inside. When we put our noses closer to the glass to see more, the door swung open and an old man with a white beard, tattered jeans, and a black and red flannel shirt stepped out.

"What do you want?" the bearded man said. His voice was loud, but he wasn't screaming. He had a way of intimidating us by his delivery.

"We're leaving," I said. "Sorry to bother you, sir."

His clothes were covered in oil and grease stains. "I aint no' sir. 'Jusa man who wants some peace and quiet. So why you here? Tell it quick."

"I saw your house when I was looking out the window at school," I said.

“What winda?” the bearded man asked.

“The one down there facing your house,” I said.

He looked over in the direction of the school. I thought he was going to get a gun out and shoot the window, but all he did was look through the clearing where you could see Hender’s class. “Still don’t know why you came. Tell it.”

“I wanted to know who lived here, that’s all,” I said. “I’m new in town.”

He leaned up against his shack. “Good for you, boy. Don’t got nothin’ to do with me, though.” The bearded man didn’t want anything to do with people. I could tell by the way he talked to us, and the look he was giving me and Walt made that even clearer.

“Sorry to have bothered you,” I said, then me and Walt turned around and walked down the path back to school.

“What an asshole,” Walt said.

“Yeah, but I bet he’s got some stories about how fucked up Appleton really is. He’s probably lived here his whole life.”

“He’ll never tell us anything. Did you see the way he was looking at us? I bet he would have scalped us if we stayed any longer.”

“Nah, I bet he’s a decent guy once you get to know him.”

“Doubt it.”

“Bring some leftovers to school tomorrow. I think if we bring him some food, maybe he’ll be more welcoming.”

My thoughts were about Ashley the next day at school. A part of me felt bad for starting the rumor, but she needed to see what life is like when you don’t have to put on a show for people. I kept reassuring myself I did a good thing, but it still didn’t feel right.

We were at our usual deserted corner at lunchtime, when Ashley slammed down her tray and sat down next to me.

“Most of my friends are abandoning me,” Ashley said.

“It doesn’t help you sitting over here,” I said.

Walt looked at me and smirked. “ And what makes you think we want you here?”

Ashley’s eyes began tearing up. “We need to clear this up.”

“You don’t wanna sit with two losers do you?” Walt asked.

“I’ll do what I have to,” Ashley said.

“Okay. Well since we’re losers, and you’re sitting with us,” Walt paused then smiled.

“That must make you a loser, right?”

Ashley didn’t answer.

“Right?” Walt asked.

“All right, Walt. You had your fun,” I said. “She can sit with us.”

“Not until she admits she’s a loser,” Walt said.

“I’m a loser,” Ashley said, and a couple of kids overheard and started laughing.

“You gonna eat your pudding?” Walt asked.

Ashley crossed her arms and looked pouty. “Take it.”

Once Tiggins’s class got out, me and Walt waited ten minutes in front of the school before we went out back to the shack. We knocked on the bearded man’s door and stepped back, but he didn’t answer.

I opened my backpack and pulled out a plastic container filled with some leftover meatloaf. “Walt, you bring anything?”

Walt dug in his pocket and handed me a half-melted chocolate bar.

“What the fuck is this? I said leftovers.”

“I don’t have anything good.”

The bearded man kicked open his door and stormed outside. “Didn’t I tell you that I like peace and quiet? How’s that supposed to happen when I hear you two bickerin’ like an ol’ married couple?” He looked down at the container of food I had in my hands. “What you got, boy?”

“Food,” I said. “It’s meatloaf. Would you like some?”

The bearded man seemed confused at my offer. His eyes kept getting wider the longer he stared at me and the container. “What you want for it?”

“Just a little bit of your time,” I said.

“How come?” he asked.

“‘Cause, I’ve been interested in you since I saw your shack from school,” I said.

“It’s just’a shack, boy,” he said. “And I’m just’a old man who lives in it.”

“I’ll be the judge that,” I said, and I think I noticed a tiny smirk underneath his beard.

The bearded man let out sigh like he had given up. “All right, come on in you two.”

All that was in the shack was a bed, wood stove, and a small refrigerator. I saw small things like pots and pans, and an axe, but that was all he had. He told us to sit on his bed, and he pulled up a chair. After I handed him the meatloaf, I waited for him to enjoy it a little before I started asking a few questions. His name was Fenton Frewin, and I think Fenton had lived in the woods a long time. He said he fell in love with the outdoors, and enjoyed relying on only himself to survive.

Fenton chomped on every piece of meat like it was his last. “Damn good, boy. *Damn* good. It’s a nice change from all the deer and shit critters I kill for food.”



“Thanks, Fenton,” I said. “You mind if I ask you one more question?”

Fenton nodded his head as he kept shoveling the food into his mouth, and Walt looked shocked at the way Fenton was devouring it.

“What was Appleton like when you lived closer to town?”

There had to be a reason he moved out here other than being able to rely on himself. Fenton finished the meatloaf, then thanked me and handed back the container. He grabbed his knees and stretched his body, I could tell he was ready to tell me something I wanted to hear. Some real dirt. Fenton began telling us about Appleton, and how it used to be known for its glass factory. R.J. Glass employed almost every man in Appleton, including Fenton. The only things around in Appleton back then were the glass factory, church, and orphanage. The rest of the town was either woods or farmlands.

He spoke with pity when he mentioned the orphanage, and when I told him about the statue that was made in tribute to Maggie, he quietly said, “Poor gal deserves it.” And he went back to telling his story.

R.J. Glass closed in 1941. Fenton worked there only three months, and a few weeks after the glass factory closed someone burned down the orphanage. Appleton became poor, making the non-farmers leave. Luckily, Fenton’s family had a farm and were fine living off their crops. They lived comfortably on their farm for a good decade after Appleton’s tragedy, but it wasn’t until Winfred Rose took over the church when things got strange, he said. Father James ran the church during Fenton’s time, but he wanted to start a family, so he passed church duties over to his only seminarian, Rose.

“Wait,” I said. “James? Owen’s father was a priest here?”

“I don’t know who this Owen is, boy. But James was a damn fine priest,” Fenton said.  
“Then Rose stepped in and messed everything up.”

I asked if Rose was the main reason Fenton moved to the woods, and he nodded his head like he was frightened. Fenton said that as soon as Rose became priest of Appleton’s church, a sheet of mold appeared in the shape of Christ’s face on the side of the church closer to Dupee Lake.

“So that’s why people put flowers and crosses next to the wall,” I said.

Fenton looked angry that I kept interrupting him. “You wanna hear this or not?”

I nodded my head and Fenton continued.

When people in town began noticing Christ’s face on the wall, Rose began saying it was a sign for a better Appleton. James stood by his side, and both of them told everyone that Christ’s presence in town meant Appleton had to adapt. Rose and James explained that the town needed to have places where people could go for everyday needs, and that it *had* to be built. So people began building. The miracle in Appleton eventually spread and almost every newspaper in New England did a story on it, and more people moved here to be closer to the miracle. Fenton didn’t believe it, and thought the whole thing was a hoax planned by Rose and James to build a better town and start their legacy together. Fenton said the mold probably grew there, but it was easy for Rose and James to chip away at it to make it look like Christ’s face. He let his friends and family know about his feelings, but they ignored him. Once the town was following every order Rose and James assigned them, Fenton built the shack and has been there since.

“I live off the land, and follow God my own way.” He scratched at his beard. “And don’t you tell nobody I hunt back here, or else I’ll come and find you.”

I looked over at Walt. “We won’t.”

“In a way,” Walt said. “Rose and James did a lot for this town.”

I looked at him like he wasn’t my friend. “Yeah, but they had to lie to do it. Fenton’s story makes it seem like Appleton was fine before Rose took over the church.”

“All farmlands, that’s it,” Walt said. “Maybe it *was* a miracle.”

I shook my head in disappointment. “Not you too. God wouldn’t care about the fate of a little town. Especially if it was doing fine before.”

“Now, I’d agree with that,” Fenton said.

Walt didn’t defend himself, and I hoped I proved to him that Rose and James weren’t the right guys to root for.

“Christ’s face isn’t on the wall anymore, though,” I said. “Did it disappear when you were still living in town?”

“It was still there,” Fenton said. “People couldn’t stop praising the damn thing.”

I asked if Fenton knew anything else about Rose, James, and the miracle, but he told us everything he knew.

The next day Ashley sat down at our table again. “What the fuck? I don’t feel popular. I mean, I still have good amount of friends, but people won’t stop asking me about us.”

“Because you’re a slut,” Walt said.

“Fuck you, I’m talking to Clark,” Ashley said. “Tell everyone it was a lie.”

I was torn between saving Ashley’s reputation or letting it continue to spoil, and finally decided to let her rot. “I’m not saying shit.”

Ashley’s eyes tried piercing through me, but my smile made it clear that it had no effect. “You’ll regret this,” she said, and walked out of the cafeteria.

“Good show,” Walt said. “Hopefully if people heard that she’ll be known as a slut and a bitch.”

The next few days after Ashley’s threat I was extra careful around town, and made sure no one was following me wherever I went. I even started carrying around my father’s fishing knife for protection. A week passed without anything happening, and I noticed Ashley was a bigger outcast than ever. She was never at lunch, and didn’t really lead her drones around anymore. The four or five drones that decided to stay with her acted more like her bodyguards. Ashley stayed in the middle of them as they walked down the halls like she was some sort of untouchable celebrity. It was mid-October by this time, and I didn’t see a pumpkin, witch or ghost decoration anywhere. Appleton remained as if there wasn’t a Halloween at all, and I had the feeling Rose was behind this one hundred percent.

Our house had been a little more controlled since Jesse and Allie started school, but there were still no rules, so once in a while they would act out and break a piece of furniture or annoy me and my father.

One night after dinner, I grabbed them both by the arms to get their attention, then yelled in their faces. “You two ready for Halloween?” Their faces looked overjoyed as their open-mouthed smiles got bigger.

My mother walked by us, but didn’t stop when she began talking. “Appleton doesn’t celebrate Halloween.” Her nose pointed at the ceiling as she walked up the stairs with ease.

I was so sick of this town, and the way people revolved around Rose and Owen’s rules. Jesse and Allie were going trick or treating, and Rose and Owen were going down.

## Chapter 9

I didn't know how I was going to take Rose and Owen down, but I had to be nosey in order to do it. Walt was along for the ride, and I couldn't have been happier. We hung out around Blissful Foods, and watched Rose and Owen walk around the store together between the aisles and checkout counters. Blissful Foods wasn't the biggest grocery store, so I think they were getting suspicious.

We were in the same aisle Rose and Owen were in, and while they talked to a middle-aged couple, I grabbed a can of corn and pretended to study the nutritional facts.

"Can I help you with anything?" a voice said, and when I looked up from the can Trish was standing there. She was wearing a green apron and a nametag along with those signature braids of hers.

I laughed at the fact that she worked at Blissful Foods instead of answering her.

"Yeah, you can help me," Walt said to Trish, and she rolled her eyes because she knew one of his smart-ass comments was ready to be fired. "I was wondering if you would change your braids into pig tails, you know, for me?" Walt flapped his eyelashes and shrugged his shoulders.

Trish smiled. "Of course I can do that. Once you go to aisle four and get a life I'd be more than happy to do anything for you."

I laughed. "Denied."

"Too bad, you'd look even cuter in pig tails." Walt paused then smiled. "If that's possible."

"Gross," Trish said and walked away from us.

Rose left the store after him and Owen finished talking to the couple, and we decided to follow him from a distance. Walt leaned up against a light pole on the sidewalk, and I ducked

into the local barbershop when Rose turned around. There was an old man with slicked vanilla hair, and black-rimmed glasses cutting the hair of a younger man in a suit when I barged inside.

“Hey,” the vanilla barber said. “You got an appointment?”

I looked through the large front window to see if Walt was still leaning on the light pole. He was waving his arms at me to come out.

“Hey,” the vanilla barber said again, but this time I looked at him when he talked to me. “You either have an appointment or you don’t. And if you don’t, you better get outta here before I cut your nose off.”

The man in the suit laughed, and I left, but not before saying a quick “fuck you” to them both. It felt good to tell those assholes off, but it didn’t last because as soon as I stepped outside I bumped into Owen.

His face was bright red, and it made him look like a clown more than ever. “We need to talk, Clark.”

I looked over at Walt who was still next to the light pole.

“Now,” he said, then grabbed me by my shirt collar and walked me towards Blissful Foods.

“Hey,” Walt said, then started following us. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Owen stopped and pointed at Walt. “You mind your business or I’ll have you locked up.”

Walt stopped walking. “I’ll be right here, Clark.”

I nodded my head, and Owen jerked me by my collar. “Move.”

I looked around at the people on the streets, and no one was looking over in our direction. They chose to ignore it. I saw John’s truck turn into the center of town from Syd’s street, but he

kept his eyes on the road. So much for doing the *right* the thing. Owen could have sliced my throat on the street, and these people would just walk by.

Me and Owen walked past Blissful Foods and onto the street Syd lived on.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Shut up.”

We turned down the alleyway where all the dumpsters were behind the stores, and Owen slammed me up against one and held me there. “I know what you’re up to.” He let go of me, and I pressed my back on the dumpster before sliding down from the pain. “What are you looking for, Clark? You and your friend.”

I put my hand on my back. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit, you’re spying on me and Father Rose. I’m not an idiot.”

“What are you talking about?”

His green bowtie was slightly crooked, and he straightened it. “Ever since your little outburst in my store, I’ve been watching you.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else.”

“Don’t get smart. And you apologizing to Rose, you thought that was smart didn’t you?”

“Actually, my mother put me up to it.”

Owen came over and slapped me across the face, and I put my right hand over my pocket where my father’s knife was. “I warned you, don’t get smart. Your mother and your siblings are the only good things that come out of that house.”

“Fuck you.”

Owen smacked me again. If my father was doing this to me, I’d be bawling like a seven-year-old, but I was more pissed than scared. If I took out my father’s knife I would have never

stopped using it on him. I was so angry I think I actually would have killed Owen, and dumped his body in the dumpster.

“You lied in the house of God, you told our town priest that church was stupid, and now you’re spying on me and Father Rose. You’re an evil messenger from Satan, and I will *not* sit here and let you destroy this town. Father Rose, and my father worked too hard to build Appleton for what it is.”

“Yeah, wiping away mold so it looks like Christ’s face sounds like hard work.”

Owen’s eyes widened, then he paused and fixed his black blazer. “We’re the only church for fifty miles because of that miracle. People from all over know Appleton has been blessed, show some respect.”

“You’re a clown, and your town is built on lies.”

“I’m a clown? My father was mayor of Appleton, and the first owner of Blissful Foods. I’m following in his footsteps to keep his and Father Rose’s legacy alive.” Owen crouched down and got close to my face. “If it wasn’t for your mother, I’d run you and your church-hating father out of the this town. If I see you doing anything else that’s suspicious, you *will* be sorry. Just go to school, and be like all the other kids. Rose and I are powerful. *Don’t* cross us again.” Owen walked deeper into the alley, and left me next to the dumpster to rot. Once I knew he was gone I left the alley, and met up with Walt, who was waiting for me near the light pole.

Walt looked at my torn shirt collar. “Jesus, what happened?”

“He knew we were spying, so he slapped me around a bit.”

“What a piece of shit.”

“You know where Rose lives?”

Walt had an uncomfortable look on his face. “Syd knows.”



I slapped my forehead, and to my surprise it was full of sweat. “Jeez, of course Syd knows.”

“We could keep snooping around town.”

“Fuck that, we gotta keep this on the low. Owen said he’s gonna keep an eye on us.”

“I’m kinda scared to see Syd. He might beat the shit out of us.”

I still had my father’s fishing knife, and pulled it out. “If something goes down, I got this. I won’t use it, but if he gets nasty I’ll pull it out.”

Walt looked at me with a confused expression. “Really?”

“I’ve been carrying it with me since Ashley threatened me.”

Walt flicked his wrist like he was pushing something away. “She was talking outta her ass.”

“I’m not taking any chances.”

We turned around and ran past the barbershop and Blissful Foods, then turned the corner on to Syd’s street. Syd answered his door smelling like wine. He gave us a look like he hadn’t seen us in ten years. “What the fuck do you want?”

“We need Rose’s address,” Walt said.

I kept my hand in my pocket and didn’t say anything to Syd.

“What’s your problem?” Syd said to me.

“Nothing,” I said, and clenched the knife harder.

“More than nothin’,” Syd said. “Why you want Rose’s address?” He was slurring now.

“Huh? Why you want it?”

Sam came outside when he heard Syd raising his voice.

“Just go inside. I’ll take care of this,” Sam said and patted Syd on the back. Syd turned around and went into the cabin, probably realizing he was too drunk to talk or even handle the simplest argument. We watched him stagger slowly inside. Sam closed the front door before he turned to us. “He lives on the other side of the woods from your street.” Sam talked quick, his face looking smug and annoyed.

I looked at Sam confused, and he rolled his eyes. “You know where I’m talking about?” Sam asked, looking at Walt.

“By Bronco’s?” Walt asked.

“Further down,” Sam said. “Not where the schools and P.D. is, but where all the houses are, a little ways after the bank. He lives in the woods behind it.”

We were quiet. Sam leaned on the railing and looked out into the woods.

“I’m sorry for what I said the night we bailed out Syd,” I said.

Sam shrugged. “We were all outta line that night.”

“You should talk to Syd,” Walt said. “We could use you two for what we’re trying to pull off.”

“What are you doing?” Sam asked.

“Just tell Syd that Rose and Owen’s days are through if we work together,” Walt said.

We waited until nighttime to make our move. The only lights on the street were from our neighbor’s houses, and we followed the train tracks until we got to the street Rose lived on. While I walked on the track, I thought about how easy it would be to make a good or bad decision if you used the tracks as your guide. If you walked to the end of my street, the train tracks gave you three choices. If you go left, you can follow the tracks to a more welcoming town or you go right and follow it to Rose’s neighborhood. The third choice is to walk straight,

where the road might lead to woods or nothingness. These three choices made the track seem meaningful. It wasn't just a track to me anymore. It was an opportunity.

Rose's neighborhood had old beat-up houses that were close to each other just like ours. If I didn't know we were in a different neighborhood, I could have easily mistaken it for ours in the dark. The only difference was the dirt road Rose lived on. We crept down it to his house and something in me thought he might have advanced hearing skills for his age, so I thought it be a good idea if we were careful with our steps. Rose's house looked as weathered as his face. It was made of wood, and some of the planks were uneven. I thought it looked like a mansion version of Fenton's shack. No lights were on, and we went up to the front door. I turned the doorknob slowly. It wasn't locked.

"Stupid bastard didn't even lock his door," I said.

A low growl that sounded like a dog's came from inside the house. Walt looked at me wide-eyed like there was a wildebeest on the other side. I took the chance and opened the door a pinch. It creaked as soon as I pushed it forward, turning the low growl into a loud bark. Walt sprinted for the woods, and I followed after I pulled the door closed. We ran around Rose's house, and laid flat on the ground. It was like that time we egged the cop car all over again, but instead of Syd causing the trouble it was me. The windows became clear now that the lights were on, and we could here Rose talking.

"Did you see something, Serafin?" Rose asked. "Go see what's out there."

I heard the loud creak from the door being opened again. At that moment it sounded like a panic alarm. "Fuck," I said, and Walt knew that was my call to start running. I could hear the dog tearing through whatever got in its way as we ran, but we were quick enough to get through the woods that separated our neighborhood from Rose's and onto Walt's porch. As we were

catching our breaths, a black figure came onto the street. Since there's no streetlights, it just looked like a black blob. It stood in the street for a few seconds, then began running over to us. We went inside and looked out the front door window to see where the blob was. When Walt flipped on the outside light, we saw a black schnauzer who began barking once the light was brought to its eyes. Me and Walt ran upstairs into his room, and B barged out of hers to see what was going on. When we heard her running down the stairs to the front door, we quietly snuck out and watched from the top of the steps.

B was wearing a white robe that stopped at her upper thighs, one that looked to be made of silk, but she swung open the door like she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Rose was already there waiting, wearing a black jacket over his navy blue pajamas, the schnauzer's head right above his kneecaps.

"This your mutt who's waking all the neighbors?" B asked.

Rose was dabbing the beads of sweat on his forehead with a handkerchief. "Someone was trying to break into my house a few minutes ago, so I let Serafin loose to see who it was. And look where he led me."

"My son wouldn't break into someone's house if that's what you're getting at," B said, with her left hand still on the door.

"Serafin followed the person who was at my house," Rose said.

"I don't care. He's a dog," B said. "He could'a' smelt the dog next door and came over here."

"No. He saw your son, and I'm sure Clark Lapine was with him too. Mayor Owen told me they've been snooping around town," Rose said, his face looked bent with anger. "And Serafin wouldn't run over here for some other dog."

Rose crouched down to pat the schnauzer, and B slammed the door in his face. As soon as the door slammed, me and Walt ran into his room and held in our laughter so we didn't get caught.

The next day, my father came home with the Explorer after work. I could hear the engine running from the living room, and I nearly jumped for joy when I saw it parked in the driveway.

My father was getting out of the Explorer when I came outside. "Good as new," he said.

I cringed at the question I was thinking of asking, but asked it anyway. "Do the cops have any idea who did it?"

My father slammed the driver side door and I jumped. "No, they didn't do a thing. Just like when you got jumped this summer."

I swallowed hard. "Maybe the guys who jumped me did it."

"I dunno, Clark. It's just really strange that they stole the keys and brought them back." He starched his head like he was thinking.

"Aliens," I said, and he laughed. His good mood told that I was off the hook, but I changed the subject anyway. "Can we leave now?"

"Where we going?"

"New Hampshire."

"We've been alright these last couple months."

"Do you see Mom in there?"

"Just a phase. Once she realizes we're not going to church, I think she'll be okay."

I knew he was full of shit. "Can we get Halloween costumes?"

My father scratched at some of the little stubble he had. “I don’t think Mom would like that, but she did say there was no rules.” My father gave me a grin that was full of mischief.

“And I’d kinda like to see Appleton’s reaction to us trick-or-treating.”

“Now you’re thinking. I’m gonna see if Walt wants to come.”

When I came back to my house with Walt, everyone was already waiting in the Explorer, including my mother.

Allie was hanging out the back seat window. “Wally and Clark, let’s go.”

I wondered how my father talked my mother into going with us, but I ignored my own question and climbed in the back seat with Walt. My father drove us to Starkville. It was the closest town from Appleton, and had a similar look. Kind of country suburban, but not as closed off. People looked like they were enjoying themselves, while in our town people looked like they were doing chores.

“We should have moved here,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s only ten miles from Appleton,” my father said. “We should have.”

“Appleton’s a great town,” my mother said. “I’m glad we moved *there*.”

Jesse and Allie looked at me with concern. I think they pitied her.

“Where are we shopping first?” my mother asked. Her voice was chipper, and I hadn’t heard that voice since she declared our house of having no rules.

“I thought we’d walk around and let the kids check out some stores on their own,” my father said.

My mother gave him a kind smile, another thing I hadn’t seen in months. I wanted to cry at the sight of it.

My father parked next to a store with a banner that hung over the original name. The banner said, "Halloween Headquarters." I was waiting for my mother to say something, but she didn't. All she did was bob her head back and forth while she whistled a song I didn't recognize.

When we all got out, my father threw me the car keys. "If you buy anything just put it in the car," he said, then winked at me.

My parents then started walking down the sidewalk hand in hand. I watched them move with the swirling multicolored leaves of fall like they were in their own world. I didn't realize how happy that moment made me feel until Walt punched me in the back.

"Thanks," I said.

"That's what I'm here for," Walt said, and the four of us went into the Halloween store.

We all tried on multiple costumes in the dressings rooms. Some of them were Spiderman (Jesse and Walt), Ninja (me), nun (Allie), and Sasquatch (Walt). I really pushed Allie to go as a nun, but she didn't catch on how offensive it would have been. In the end, Allie settled as a fairy, Jesse was a mime, Walt was whoopee cushion, and I was a hot dog. We must have looked great, but totally random when we all had our costumes on.

Allie ran around the store pretending to fly with the fairy wings on her back. "Can we wear these home?"

I assumed from my father's wink that my mother had no idea we were getting Halloween costumes. "No, we can wait until Halloween," I said, still wearing the hot dog. "Then we can wear them all day."

Halloween was almost a week away, and Jesse and Allie were excited. After we bought our costumes, I walked out to the Explorer and started putting the bags in the back while Jesse, Allie, and Walt stayed in the store.

“What’s that?” my mother asked, and I jumped at the sound of her calm voice. Her and my father were still holding hands, but she let go once she saw Jesse, Allie, and Walt walking out of the Halloween store. “Halloween? No. Appleton doesn’t have Halloween.”

“C’mon, Virginia,” my father said. “Let them have Halloween.”

“You lied to me,” my mother said. “You said we were shopping.”

“We are,” my father said. “I just didn’t say what we were shopping for.”

My mother became miserable again. Her eyes, mouth, and body drooped and the glow she had when we first came to Starkville vanished, then the Appleton version of her came back. “You all lied to me. Take those costumes back and bring me home.”

I began taking the costumes out of the Explorer, but my father stopped me. “Wait, Clark you don’t have to.”

“Yes, he does,” my mother said.

My father looked at my mother with the coldest eyes I’ve ever seen. “No rules, remember?”

She gave him the same look right back. “I don’t care. We might not have rules in the house, but Appleton’s rules still apply. No Halloween.” She grabbed the bags. “Take them back or I will.”

My father said no and my mother threw the bags on the pavement and started walking to the passenger door of the Explorer.

“I hate you,” I said, and my mother froze with her back facing me.

My father gave me a blunt smack across the face. I looked around and saw Walt looking down at the ground while Jesse and Allie were looking up at my father, fearful he was going to hit them next. I noticed a few people on the sidewalk were staring at us, and I started crying.



“I do. I hate her,” I said, and my father smacked me with force again. “She’s different now. I want the sweet carefree person she used to be.”

My father stood up a little straighter and took a deep breath. “Get in the car, Clark.”

I could hear my mother crying softly in the front seat on the way home. Everyone else didn’t say or do anything as her crying seemed to get louder and louder. Once we were home, she got out of the car and ran into the house without saying a word to anyone. The rest of us got out slow, as if the things that happened in Starkville put a heavy weight on us.

“Mr. Lapine,” Walt said when my father closed his door. “You mind if Clark sleeps over tonight?”

My father gave out sigh that went with his tired expression. “No rules.”

I looked at Walt like he was throwing me a life preserver before I sank, and he gave me a small grin as he nodded his head at me a little.

We both slept until noon the next day, B was in the kitchen making food when we came downstairs. Her tight blue jeans sculpted her ass perfectly. Keeping my eyes off her was tricky since Walt was right next to me at the kitchen table. Seeing her cooking reminded me of the times when I first moved to Appleton.

B served us, and looked out the kitchen window after she put down our plates. “Walter, those hoodlums are on my porch.”

Walt kept eating, focusing on the plate B gave him.

“I want them outta here,” B said.

Walt spit out some toast as he talked. “I’ll take care of it in a minute.”

“Now, Walter,” B said.

Walt got up from his chair abruptly and stormed out of the kitchen. B kept looking out the window. "Hoodlums. Just get them outta here. Stop talking to them."

I got up slowly while she continued to complain through the closed window. Syd and Sam were leaning on the porch railing when I came outside while Walt talked to them.

"He's gonna to be at his house at night, retard," Syd said. "You should'a waited until he was at the church." Syd was talking to Walt like nothing happened between them, and it felt relieving to have Syd and Sam around.

"I know that now," Walt said. "But Clark woke up that bastard dog of his."

"I didn't know Rose even had a dog," I said.

"It doesn't matter," Syd said. "Night's the wrong time."

The four of us went quiet, and I stared at the floorboards and put my hands in my pockets. I felt too awkward to look at what everyone else was doing.

"I think you guys should help us," Walt said.

Syd looked at Sam. "What's in it for us?"

"No Rose, no more of his followers, possibly no more Owen, and a brand new Appleton," Walt said. "We can make history."

"It's tempting," Syd said. "But how we gonna do it?"

"I dunno," Walt said. "But if we get in his house and find something on him, or something him and Owen have been hiding, we'll have them by the balls and run them outta town."

"Rose's a priest and Owen's the mayor," Syd said. "What the fuck do they have to hide?"

B came out to the porch. She still looked sexy even with the fire in her eyes. "Get off my property," she said staring directly at Syd and Sam.

“We’re just hang—”

“I don’t want you here,” B said. “You two are bad news.”

“Mom,” Walt said like she’d spoken the unthinkable.

“It’s alright,” Syd said. “I know how it is. B doesn’t wanna be tempted.”

“Excuse me?” B asked.

“You know you wanna fuck me,” Syd said. “That’s why you don’t want me around. I see you checking me out.”

I couldn’t believe Syd had the balls to say that to B. We watched for her reaction, but instead of exploding she kept her cool and stayed stern.

“Leave or I’ll call the police,” B said.

“You fuck everyone else in town,” Syd said. “Why not me?”

B went inside without answering. She was through with Syd’s bullshit, and I didn’t blame her.

“No offense, man, but your mom’s being a hardcore bitch today,” Syd said.

“You didn’t have to say all that shit. Now she’ll never let you over,” Walt said.

“She’s always hated me,” Syd said.

“The police are on their way,” B said from inside the house.

“Shit. Meet at my house in a few,” Syd said then jumped over the porch railing, and ran down the street. Sam followed, walking casually at his own pace, since he knew the cops weren’t gunning for him.

## Chapter 10

A cop car pulled up to Walt’s house a few minutes after Syd and Sam left, and two guys got out. The cop on the passenger side was Hooknose. The driver had a bigger build than

Hooknose and was a little older. You could tell by all the lines in his clean-shaven face. The driver kept his glacier blue eyes on me as both of them walked up to the porch. His eyes seemed familiar.

“Where is he?” Hooknose asked.

“Not here anymore,” Walt said.

“Mind if we look around?” Hooknose said.

“Go ahead,” Walt said. “I’m sure my mom won’t mind two cops snooping around her house.”

The cops gave each other looks like they were talking shit about us telepathically. “I’ll stay here,” the glacier-eyed cop said.

Hooknose walked inside to a bitchy B, and we laughed as she called him an idiot for entering.

Glacier stared at me the entire time. I tried not to let it bother me, but his familiar eyes made me stare right back.

“Your name Clark?” he asked.

My stomach went cold, and I swallowed my warm spit, but it didn’t help. “Yes.”

He walked up to the porch, and lifted up my shirt revealing the yellow bruises that Will and Mike gave me a few months earlier.

“That’s enough for me,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, but he ignored me and went back to his car. He started walking back to us with a camera in his hand when Hooknose came outside.

“Hold him,” Glacier said, as he got the camera ready. “And lift up his shirt.”

Before I could react, Hooknose's right arm wrapped around my upper torso and settled underneath both my armpits.

"This is bullshit," I said as I squirmed. "You can't do this, I didn't do anything."

His arm was strong, but I kept wiggling around so he had a difficult time lifting up my shirt with his left hand.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Walt said. "Get off him." Walt jumped on Hooknose's back, but after a few seconds of struggling, he whipped Walt off using all his hip strength and launched him into a nearby chair. Walt's body looked as lifeless as the broken wooden pieces around him. I was worried about Walt, which made my strength weaken, letting Hooknose lift my shirt.

Click. Click. Click. Glacier looked at the photos through the digital window to make sure they were good enough. "That's all I need. You can let him go now."

Hooknose threw me down to the floorboards, and walked away. Glacier handed him the camera, walked to the porch then crouched down next to me. Those familiar eyes focused on me once again. "You're gonna pay now, fucker. I've got proof."

"Proof of what? I didn't do shit," I said, and tried to get up off the porch floor, but he held me down, making the sides on my lips kiss the wood.

"Ashley told me," Glacier said. "And now you got me and the justice system to deal with, asshole."

I knew I had seen those eyes before, Ashley had her father's eyes. "Mr. Simmons." My voice was muffled, but he still held me down. "Whatever Ashley told you isn't true. Please just hear me out—"

“Shut up. Just shut the fuck up,” Mr. Simmons said. “I don’t need to hear you out. You raped my daughter. And you will pay.” He stopped holding me down and began walking away from Walt’s house.

“It’s not true. Mr. Simmons, please. Don’t do this. Ask Riley, he was there when I got jumped,” I said, but he never looked back.

The cop car drove away, and B immediately came out to tend to Walt who was still on the ground. “You shoulda ran off with the other hoodlums,” B said. I could feel her passionate hatred towards me.

“It’s not his fault, Mom,” Walt said. “Clark’s not like them. Everybody just thinks he is.”

“I’m with everybody,” B said. “He got you hurt. Look at you.”

We helped Walt up and I apologized for the whole situation, but B ignored me.

After Walt took a few minutes to recuperate, we went to Syd’s like we planned on doing and told them what happened to us once the cops showed up. Syd clenched his teeth when I mentioned Ashley’s father.

“There’s never enough time in the day to give people the punishment they deserve,” Syd said.

We gathered around on Syd’s couch. Syd was standing while the rest of us sat. He talked fast about the plan he had like time wasn’t on our side. We were going to break into Rose’s house during the day, that was a definite. But what I didn’t know was only Syd and Sam were doing it. Since we fucked up the first time, me and Walt had to keep an eye on Rose in the center of town. Syd gave us an industrial walkie-talkie he probably stole from the hardware store, and told us to contact him if Rose was heading to his house. He didn’t go over what him and Sam were going to do, but Syd sounded like he had things under control.

“The plan is to be in effect by tomorrow morning,” Syd said. Then tested out the walkie talkies to make sure they were on the same channel.

I came downstairs at seven AM the next morning. My father was at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

“You’re up early,” he said, then took a sip.

“Yeah, me and Walt are hanging out today.”

My father gave me a blank stare, then took another sip. “You need to work things out with Mom. She’s devastated.”

“I will, don’t worry.” I turned around and began walking to the door.

“It was uncalled for. You should do it soon.”

I turned to face him, he was still at the table slugging down his coffee. “How soon?”

“As soon as possible, Clark. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I’ll take care of it.”

My father got up to pour himself another cup. “Whatever. Problems don’t fix themselves.”

I turned around, and finally went out the front door.

Walt was waiting on his porch. Syd had already contacted him on the walkie talkie, and said Rose left his house a few minutes ago. I was surprised at how professional Syd was, and wished I was in Rose’s house when they found something juicy about him. The center of town was dead, even the weather seemed like it wasn’t alive. The trees that surrounded Appleton didn’t flinch, and no cars were parked in front of any stores. It was still early, so we thought nothing of it until we saw the “closed for mass” sign on the candy store window.

“Shit,” Walt said, then took out the walkie-talkie.

“What is it?”

Walt held the walkie-talkie up to his mouth. “Syd.”

“What?” Syd asked, his voice was drenched in static.

It’s Sunday,” Walt said. “You guys don’t have much time before Rose gets home.” Walt was looking around the center of town to make sure no one was watching us.

“Shit. Just give us a heads up when church is over,” Syd said.

“Okay,” Walt said, then put the walkie-talkie into his pocket.

Church hadn’t started yet, so instead of looking suspicious in the center of town we hid behind the church at Dupee Lake. It was a cold day, and sitting next to the lake on a day like this wasn’t pleasant. It was the first time I had been next to the church since Fenton told me about the miracle, and I tried to picture Christ’s moldy face on the wall. I managed to fall asleep under the arching tree somehow, but was woken up by the static sound of the walkie-talkie.

Walt pulled out the walkie-talkie. “What’s up?”

“I forgot about the dog,” Syd said.

“Shit,” Walt said, and Syd didn’t answer back.

Not knowing what to do, we just waited at Dupee until church was over. Walt told Syd and Sam to get out of Rose’s after we heard the churchgoers leave, then waited for the center of town to die down before we made our move to Syd’s house.

Syd came outside when he saw us walking down his dirt driveway. “Did anyone see you?”

Walt threw Syd the walkie talkie. “We hid at Dupee the whole time.”

“Good, that’s good.” Syd let a relieved sigh and went into the house.



I looked at Walt, and he could probably sense my eagerness. I gave Sam the same face.

“Did you find anything?”

Sam let out a sigh similar as Syd’s, but his had some frustration behind it. “No. We had to wrestle that fuckin’ dog.”

“You must’a been in there for at least two hours,” I said.

“When Syd told you about the dog is when we started snooping around. We had to lock the piece of shit in the basement or else he woulda kept biting us. Look at my pant leg.” Sam’s pant leg was ripped from the bottom all the way to the knee. “Fucker went for the legs the whole time. Got Syd even worse than me.”

“You gotta go back tomorrow, or soon,” I said.

“You can go,” Syd said walking out to the porch. “I’m not dealing with that Nazi schnauzer again.”

“Just give the thing some food,” I said. “And when it’s eating we can tie it up or something.”

“You can. I’ll help as long as I don’t have to deal with that Nazi,” Syd said as he rubbed his upper thigh. “I think I need a tetanus because of that bastard.”

So we agreed if I handled the dog we would do it tomorrow. It was a school day, but I’d cut and go with Syd and Sam while Walt kept an eye on Rose during the day. After we left Syd’s, I went home, grabbed a thick rope from the garage, and a pair of winter and gardening gloves along with some peanut butter and bread.

Another seven AM morning came, but this time it was Jesse and Allie who noticed me leaving, their heads popped up from the couch while the T.V. played a *Mr. Rogers* rerun.

“Where are you going?” Jesse asked once he saw my backpack.

“School,” I said to him, then left before him or Allie could ask me any other questions.

I had become the ghost in my family, only staying there to sleep and eat. I missed them, but I couldn’t face my mother after I said those shattering words. *I hate you* repeated in my head as I walked down the street to meet Syd and Sam at the train tracks.

“Look at master thief,” Syd said when he saw me carrying a backpack.

“Gotta be prepared if shit goes down,” I said.

“Did you get the FBI’s permission for this assignment, or are you just doing this for fun?” Syd asked.

“Shut up,” I said, and we began walking to Rose’s house.

Walt contacted us through the walkie-talkie, and said that Rose was in the church and out of the way. At the front door, I unzipped my backpack and put on my winter gloves, then the gardening ones for extra thickness. Syd and Sam laughed when I took out the peanut butter and bread, but they didn’t realize how useful this would be. The Nazi schnauzer welcomed us with multiple growls and barks. I shoved the piece of bread into the Nazi’s face, and pressed hard so it would stick to the roof of his mouth. He tried licking and chewing it off, but it was going to take a good five minutes to conquer the sticky situation. We all laughed at the Nazi’s struggle for a few seconds. Then I pulled out the rope and tied him to the handle of Rose’s fridge.

Random stacks of records and books were throughout the house, and dust was on everything. The sink was full of dishes, and the food caked on them was moldy. Syd and Sam searched the kitchen and living room yesterday, but they didn’t know exactly what they were looking for. I told them photo albums, unmarked books, journals, letters, stuff like that.

They went to the back of the house where Rose’s room was while I looked through all the stacks of records and books in the living room. The Nazi finished the bread and started barking

again, but I gave him another fix to shut him up. Bibles and religious fiction were what most of the book piles were made of. *The Pilgrims Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* were some titles. The records were mostly gospels and classical. Rose was religion. He ate it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No notes or writing were in the books or record sleeves. It took me at least an hour to look through all that shit, but I was glad I did it. No spot in Rose's house could be ignored. Syd and Sam were in Rose's room the whole time I searched the piles and were still back there. When I went to see what they were doing, I saw a bigger mess of shit than in the living room. Folders, model cars, and plane boxes surrounded Rose's bed. Spider webs were in every corner, and dust painted the room just like the others.

Syd and Sam were standing on Rose's bed sorting through the piles for anything that looked interesting. Their shoes were covered in dirt, and Rose's bed was soiled from it. Syd noticed I was watching them and turned around to face me.

"Welcome to the room of broken dreams," he said with both his arms extended.

"No kidding," I said. "Find anything good?"

"Nah, we looked through all those stupid model cars and planes," Syd said, knocking a few of the boxes over. "Now we're on the photo albums."

While they searched, I looked through Rose's closet and drawers. Nothing. There was still a big stack of photo albums that Syd and Sam were picking through, so I began looking at them too. Syd had only gotten albums of church baptisms, marriages, and things of that nature, but they were only dated back a couple of years ago. The albums Sam had were just pictures of the center of town and the process of it being built, but I told Sam to put the older pictures aside just in case. I had six albums on my lap that I flipped through while I sat on Rose's dirty bed. Four of them were the same types of photo albums Syd had, but the next one was different. The

first picture looked old because it was only a grayish yellow color. There were twenty kids in the picture all lined up in front of a large brick building that took up the background. In the middle was a man and a woman holding each other close, a baby was in the woman's arms. I was sure it was Maggie and her husband.

"Guys, take a look at this," I said and they came over. Syd and Sam agreed it was Maggie. I turned the photo over, and it said, "1941" on the back. I put the photo aside and continued looking through the album. No other photos of the orphanage were taken. After the group photo, there was a picture of a twenty-something-year-old Rose shaking hands with another priest who was probably Father James. Another photo to go in the pile. The rest of the pictures were of Rose starting his life as a priest in Appleton, and newspapers clippings about Christ's face on the church. *Miracles In Appleton!* one of the headlines read. Rose was a different person to me in these pictures and articles. He looked like someone I could trust. His hair was black and full, and no lines or brown spots had developed on his face yet. I found another article that was published after all of Appleton's stores had been built. *Christ vanishes from church wall!* it seemed like a big piece of the puzzle, so I made no hesitation to add it to the pile.

The next album was filled with more newspaper clippings, but these were about the orphanage fire. The year of the fire was the same as the year on back of the photo. 1941. Rose had multiple news stories about it, but after the last story a more recent article appeared in the album:

*Local priest has statue made to memorialize town tragedy.*

"What?" I said out loud, and it got Syd and Sam's attention.

“Yeah, you didn’t know he had it built?” Syd asked.

“No. That’s weird,” I said, then added the album to the pile.

The Nazi had been barking every now and then for about an hour, but since we were in the other room we just tuned it out. I was stuffing the photos in my bag when he started barking constantly.

Syd looked at us. “Someone’s here.”

I took out the last thing I packed just in case of an emergency, three black ski masks.

Syd smiled and snatched the mask like it was gold. “I fuckin’ knew you worked for the FBI, always on your toes.”

The mask had given Syd his confidence back. He stormed down the hallway while me and Sam walked cautiously. The dogs barking echoed through the house, and each time I heard it I got more frightened. I was the last one out of the hallway, Syd and Sam were stopped only a few feet from the doorframe. Between their shoulders I saw Will and Mike. Will’s head was wrapped in bandages. Mike was holding a crowbar, and Will had a lead pipe in his hands. The dog kept barking and I imagined the gates of hell behind them.

“Rose told us to keep an eye out,” Mike said. “Said some scumbags were goin’ into his house while he was at church. Looks like he was right.”

Will and Mike stayed where they were patting their weapons as they waited for us to make the first move. I put my hands closer to my sides, and realized I still had my father’s fishing knife.

“Look,” I said.

Syd looked down at the knife I pulled out and took it. Before Will or Mike said anything else, Syd started running at them with the blade open. He was ready to cut either one if they got in his way.

Will and Mike started running once Syd started, and I began pushing stacks of records and books out of my way to make an escape. The path was so narrow from all the stacks of shit it was the only choice I had. I tackled towers of records, causing them to spill on the floor and fumbled around trying not to slip on the wax. Syd and Sam didn't enter my mind until I reached the kitchen. Syd was on top of Will punching him in the face, and Sam was struggling with Mike to get a hold of the pipe. I grabbed the thickest book I could see in the mess, and stumbled through the pile as fast as I could, and almost took out Syd who was straddling Will as I did it. Mike and Sam were still fighting over the pipe, so I decked Mike in the face with the book as hard as I could, and he dropped on a random pile of records I probably spilled. I wasn't sure if I knocked him out because right after he fell, me and Sam went over to Syd, picked him up, and ran like hell.

## Chapter 11

After Rose's house we parted ways, and I went home so I could see my family. My father still seemed upset with me. Once I was in the house he didn't greet me the way he usually does. Instead, he gave me a quick "Hi," then went back to watching T.V. on the couch.

"Where's Jesse and Allie?" I asked.

"Upstairs," he said. "Tell them dinner's almost ready."

Jesse and Allie were in their room. Jesse was looking out the window, while Allie lay in her bed face down in her pillows.

"What's up with you guys?" I asked.

Jesse stayed at the window, but stopped looking outside to face me. “Is Halloween for the devil?”

“No. Who told you that?” I asked.

“The kids at school. When me and Allie told them about our costumes, that’s what they said.”

I shook my head. “If Halloween was for the devil do you think anyone would celebrate it?”

“I guess not,” Jesse said.

Allie came up from her pillows and leaned her back on the wall. “Jesse doesn’t get it. It’s like Mom said, *Appleton* doesn’t celebrate *Halloween*.”

“Who cares?” I said. “If you still want to go treat-or-treating we’re gonna go.”

Jesse went back to looking out the window. “But the kids said—”

“Who cares, Jesse?” I said.

“Easy for you to say,” Allie said. “Everyone in town hates you already.”

I stared at Allie. I shouldn’t have been shocked that she knew, but I still was.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” I said and left their room.

We had dinner together for the first time in a while, and my mother didn’t look or talk to me at the table.

“This is nice,” my father said. “I finally feel like we’re starting to be a family again.”

“Yeah, and tomorrow night we should go trick-or-treating as a family,” Jesse said.

“No,” my mother said. “That’s not allowed here.”

“But, Mom it’ll be fun,” Jesse said.

My mother’s face twisted like she was in pain. “You’re too old for that anyway.”

I stared at my mother, who was looking at Jesse. "They're only eight."

"Don't talk to me," my mother said. "You hate me, remember?"

I clenched my teeth and my hands tightened around my silverware, but I talked with a calm voice. "How about we go to Starkville? No one will know us there."

My father looked at me and nodded at my adult way of handling things. "I think that would be a great way to solve this problem."

My mother's eyes were fixed on her plate, and at the moment I felt like the adult one while I watched her pout. "Starkville's fine. But we still have a problem. My son hates me." She put her hands over her face.

"Virginia, please," my father said.

My mother got out of her chair, and ran up to her room. She was still covering her face so no one could see if she was crying for sure.

"Dad, you saw that. I tried to level with her."

"I know, and you did a great job," he said. "But I think you need to talk to her."

"Right now? She's hysterical."

"Better to get it out of the way now."

I got up slowly from the table, and walked up the stairs with heavy feet. I knocked lightly on the door hoping she wouldn't hear it. She asked who it was, and when I heard the tone of her voice I could tell she was crying.

I went into the dark room and closed the door behind me. My mother was a shape of darkness on the bed. The only thing I could see clearly was the white curtain that covered the window. "I don't hate you," I said.

"Why'd you say it then?" my mother asked.



“Because you were being completely outta line. You know we all love Halloween, and when you threw our costumes on the ground I lost it.”

“But you weren’t listening.”

“You didn’t have to flip out, though.” I let out a deep breath.

“What?”

“I’m gonna say something that’s probably gonna piss you off, but I need to say it.” I tried to focus on her face, but my eyes were still adjusting to the darkness. “This town has turned you into a different person. You never used to be this angry and strict about anything.”

“I know.” She started crying again. “I want to feel welcomed here, and we’re not.”

“You should feel welcomed in this house. Fuck everywhere else.”

“Watch your mouth. I don’t even feel welcomed here, though.”

“Because you’re not the same person who moved here. Now, I’m only speaking for me, but I want the old you back.”

“I can’t go back,” she said, and grabbed for a tissue on her nightstand.

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not the person they want.”

“What do *you* want?”

“I *told* you what I want.”

“You *think* you want Appleton to accept us, but deep down you know they never will. Stop walking on eggshells for these people, and be the person this family loves.” I waited for her to say something else. My mother was still a dark shape, but I saw her clinging to her tissue like

it was the only thing she loved. I couldn't tell if her eyes were closed. I sat next to her on the bed for a few minutes, but we didn't say anything else to each other.

My father watched me come downstairs from the kitchen table. "I told her how I felt." I said. "Hopefully that means something to her."

My father gave me a similar nod and smile as he did earlier. "I'll talk to her later."

"You guys should leave Appleton for a few days," I said. "I noticed before the whole costume incident that Mom was a lot happier than usual. This sounds weird, but Appleton has that effect on her."

"It's not weird if other people see it too," my father said.

In the morning I woke up and checked underneath my bed for my backpack. It was still there, and I met up with Walt to walk to school like we always do. We passed three kids on the sidewalk in our neighborhood, and they gave me and Walt dirty looks as we walked by. When we were in the center of town the same thing happened. Every man, woman, and child we passed or saw head-on had a look of disgust and anger on their face. I was used to people staring at me after what I said to Rose, but this felt different. Everyone had more hate in their eyes than usual. It felt like there was a mob forming behind us, and that tingling feeling on the back of your neck when you sense a person's presence started. I looked behind me to see if my senses were right, but no crowd had formed. Some people who passed were still staring over their shoulders as they walked farther away, though.

"What the fuck is everybody's problem today?" Walt asked.

I couldn't give him an answer. Once we got to school, Ashley was reunited with her drones again at the front of the building, and when I looked at her she started to cry.

“Haven’t you done enough?” one of the drones said. “Leave her alone.” The drones crowded around Ashley so I couldn’t see her anymore, then went inside together like a clusterfuck of fakes.

“Shit,” I said, and realized why Ashley was crying and the reason for all the dirty looks. News had gotten out. Yesterday Ashley and her drones probably told the whole school while I was skipping. And if the entire town didn’t hate me for telling off Rose, I was sure they hated me for raping Appleton’s sweetheart.

It was no use defending myself. I already had a bad reputation from all the things I did. I ignored the stares and whispers in the halls between classes, but at lunch I couldn’t help but stare back at anyone who looked at me. Didn’t these kids have anything else better to do than gossip? I asked Walt, and he answered with a firm no. Surprisingly, out of all the people, Jerry didn’t say a word to me. But I was ready to maul him if he did. I didn’t have anything to lose.

I think the teachers knew, and that bothered me more than the other kids knowing. Mrs. Adomos didn’t favor me like she usually did in English class, and during attendance earlier in the day she said my name with a spiteful tone. No other teacher made it obvious that they knew except her and Mr. Hender. Hender yelled at me all class. I was used to him yelling at me once or twice, but he was definitely going out of his way.

“Clark. This is a *still life*. Why is everything so jagged and blocky? You *need* to be smoother with your lines,” Hender said loudly, as if he wanted the entire class to hear. He then grabbed my pencil out of my hand. “Like this.” He began going over my lines making it look darker and smoother in parts, then tossed my pencil on my desk after he was done. I felt like the kid in kindergarten who couldn’t color inside the lines.

Tiggins never took attendance, so me and Walt left. I just needed to get away from all the bullshit, but walking home through the center of town made me realize I hadn't escaped yet. It was a lot busier this time of day. The street was crowded with the steady flow of cars circling around for parking spots, and there must have been a few dozen people on the sidewalks. I kept my head down as I walked forward, and gripped the straps of my backpack. I saw all types of shoes as I walked, either planted or in motion, and I could feel their owner's eyes. I imagined everyone I passed hovering over me, eyes bulging, and lips curving with hate, ready to spit in my face. I kept my head down, but shifted my eyes to the other side of the street. We were passing the barber shop, which meant we were almost near our neighborhood. I could see that people from across the street were even staring. Some stopped just to look, like I was some freak-show oddity ready to be pointed and poked at. I wanted to run, but I was afraid everyone would chase after me.

We stopped walking when we got into our neighborhood. The trees and bushes in our neighbor's yards hid us well enough from the center of town once we passed the first house.

I was a little out of breath and sweating. "How fucked was that?"

"Pretty fucked," Walt said. "Smart move to keep your head down, you wouldn't of liked the way people were looking at you. There were times when people just stood there and watched you as we walked by. So fuckin' creepy."

I took off my bag and sat down on the sidewalk. "I know. But I saw it across the street. Their faces looked like they were watching a mutant or something."

"That be awesome if you were a mutant," Walt said. "Then you could use your mutant power to fuck 'em up. Like Magneto." Walt puts his hands up in the air like he was holding two imaginary balls, then pretended to throw one. "You could take people out with the light poles."

John drove by in his ice cream truck after Walt finished talking. He gave us a wave, and I flipped him off.

“Why’d you do that?”

“‘Cause he’s fake. Just like everyone else.”

When me and Walt got to my house, we saw Jesse the mime in our front yard. He pretended he was on an imaginary bike and kicking leaves everywhere.

“Where did you get your costume?” I asked.

Jesse pointed at our house, and when I looked in that direction, I was shocked to see my father coming outside wearing a black suit, tie, sunglasses, and a white dress shirt. He looked like he normally did since he always wore a suit, but his slicked back hair and black sunglasses told me he was wearing a costume. He never dressed up for Halloween, and I thought maybe he did this time because Appleton was so against it.

“Blues Brothers?” Walt asked.

My father walked over to us. He was straight-faced, and I couldn’t tell if he was staring at us or into the distance. “Reservoir Dogs.” He took out a plastic gun from his side pocket after he spoke, and pretended to shoot us. “Let’s go to work,” he said, then popped the trunk of the Explorer, and threw us our hot dog and whoopi-cushion costumes.

I put on my hot dog costume. “Where’s Allie?”

Jesse just shook his head while he frowned.

“Not coming,” my father said.

I went inside and up to Jesse and Allie’s room. Allie was on the floor coloring in a coloring book.

“Just come,” I said. “I know you want to.”

“Nice hotdog,” she said, and kept coloring. “And no, I don’t wanna go.”

“No one in Appleton will know. We’re going to Starkville,” I said.

“It’s too risky.”

A smirked appeared on my face. “Dad’s even dressed up.”

She looked up from her coloring book. “Really? Okay, I’ll come, but I’m changing in the car.”

Allie followed me outside with a black duffle bag that had her fairy costume inside, and she threw it in the back of the Explorer as fast as she could. B had come over while I was upstairs, and she was talking to my father. She had on a light brown and royal blue flannel that hugged her torso, and matching brown jeans. It was easy to picture her naked when she wore tight clothes like that, and I kept staring at her body while I walked over to Walt who was leaning on the Explorer.

“C’mon,” my father said. “You should come.”

B giggled. “No, I’m not as brave as you. If I dressed up I would just look silly.”

My father looked down at his suit and took out his plastic gun. “You don’t think I look silly?”

B giggled again, it seemed like she was flirting with my father. When I looked at Walt he rolled his eyes.

“It’s really sweet of you to dress up for the kids, but I don’t know if I can do that,” B said.

“It’s not like you’ll be alone,” my father said. “I’m dressed up too.”

B wrinkled her forehead like she was pondering it over. “Oh, what the hell. I’ll be right back, I got the perfect costume.” She ran back to her house, and I watched her until she ran up her porch steps.

Everyone started getting into the Explorer since it was getting cold, but when I heard B’s voice telling us to wait, I closed the door and stayed outside. She walked over wearing a red and white cheerleader outfit carrying pom-poms. Her hair was in pigtails, and her skirt was so short that if she bent over you’d get a free show. I kept staring at her so the image was burned in my mind for later when I was alone.

“See, I told you I had something,” B said.

“That is definitely something,” my father said. He still had his glasses on, but I knew where his eyes were.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Walt asked.

“Going trick-or-treating with you,” B said. “Mr. Lapine invited me.”

“You can call me Jack,” my father said, followed by a goofy laugh.

“Yeah, and I was fine with that,” Walt said. “But I didn’t know you’d be wearing that. Look at you.”

“What?” B looked down at her sexy cheerleader costume. “Sure, it might be a little tight, but I think I fit in it pretty good, since it’s from high school. Do you think it’s too tight, Jack?”

My father took off his glasses and looked her up and down slowly. “No. Not at all.”

“You can put your tongues back in your heads now,” Walt said, then got into the Explorer with Jesse and Allie while me and my father kept talking to B.

“You should do a cheer or something,” I said. “After like five or ten houses.”

“Yeah, maybe,” B said. She sounded annoyed, and I remembered the last time I saw her she was pretty pissed at me for what happened to Walt.

My father drove us to Starkville, and it was great. Allie put on her fairy costume, and we were trick-or-treating with ease. I kept my eyes on B almost the entire time. Nothing is better than eye candy with real candy, I thought as I watched B’s boobs bounce as she walked with us. The streets were crowded with kids wearing weird masks, stupid wizard getups or the hottest superhero costume on the market. When the sun began to set, the glow from the jack-o’-lanterns made Starkville feel warm. I think somewhere off in the distance I might have smelled pumpkin pie, but my nose might have been playing tricks on me. Jesse didn’t talk the whole time, and I was pretty impressed with his mime skills. His mime trapped in a box was good, but he even had the lassoing down. As for Allie, she kept running around smacking us with her wand. She said she was spreading her magic for people to enjoy and I don’t think anyone enjoyed it, but at least she did. Walt of course kept pushing on his stomach, making a fart noise every time. We went door to door for two blocks until people stopped answering. I asked a kid who was dressed as a lion what was going on, and he said Halloween was over. We had been in Starkville only an hour. Jesse and Allie’s faces were no longer lit with joy, and it brought everyone down.

Jesse snapped his fingers like he sparked an idea and his face lit up again. He began acting out a scenario that involved driving and trick-or-treating. After everyone stared at him for a long minute, I told him to spit it out. He looked frightened to blow his cover as a mime, so he whispered what he was trying to tell us in my ear.

“Oh, I don’t know, Jesse,” I said.

“What he say?” Allie asked.



“He thinks we should go trick-or-treating in Appleton,” I said, and I looked at my father like it was the hardest decision to make. “I’ll go. I don’t have anything to lose.”

“We’ll all go. Rose and Owen don’t scare me,” my father said, sounding like a mighty dragon slayer.

“But I don’t want people to see us,” Allie said.

“You’re disguised. People won’t know its you,” my father said.

Allie began crying. “Yes, they will. Me and Jesse told the kids at school we were going trick-or-treating and they got mad at us.”

Me and my father looked at each other.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter,” Allie said. “The kids at school are gonna find out anyway.”

All of us got in the Explorer and left Starkville. When we got home, Appleton was dead like a Sunday. We pulled into our driveway, got out, and walked up the street towards the train tracks. No one on the street opened their doors, and there wasn’t a glowing pumpkin in sight. Jesse didn’t do any more mime tricks, and Allie kept looking at the houses around us to see if anyone from school was watching out their windows.

“C’mon guys, someone’s gonna give us some candy,” I said. “We can’t give up.”

My father lead us to Rose’s street, and I had a very uneasy feeling underneath my hotdog costume.

“Dad, this is Rose’s street,” I said.

“He doesn’t own the street, Clark,” my father said. “We just won’t knock on his door. Which one’s his house?”

“It’s further down the street on the right, the one with the unpaved driveway,” I said.

There was no answer from the first three houses, but I wasn't surprised since these people lived only a few feet from Rose. Jesse's face looked mopey.

"Just one house, and I'll be happy," I said, and Jesse nodded.

Finding one house to give us candy seemed to be our goal. And for once, I had faith that Appleton had at least one home besides our own that wasn't corrupted by Rose and Owen. Just as the four of us were walking up to the next house, we heard a voice from across the street.

"We don't celebrate the devil's day, freaks. Go home," the man said.

"Who is that?" Walt asked.

I squinted my eyes to see who the man was, but his house was too far. The mailbox was closer to us, so I searched for the name. The black mailbox had white letters painted on it that said, "Simmons." The moment I figured out it was Ashley's father, he walked down his front steps to his walkway. Mr. Simmons' yard had shrubs that were almost as tall as him on both left and right sides of his walkway. As he walked between them he reminded me of someone important. Maybe someone with royalty in their blood. He probably planted the shrubs there for that purpose. I almost didn't recognize him since he wasn't wearing his uniform.

"Is that you, Lapine?" Simmons said once he was on the street.

"Are you talking to me?" my father asked.

"Who the fuck are you supposed to be?" Mr. Simmons asked looking at my father.

"Excuse me?" my father said with his glasses on.

"I don't know where you came from, freak, but the kid dressed as the hot dog is a rapist. And I don't want him in *my* neighborhood," Mr. Simmons said, pointing in my direction. B gasped when she heard the word "rapist" come out of Mr. Simmons's mouth.

"That's my son," my father said and took off his glasses. "And he's not a rapist."

I stepped off the front stoop and walked to the end of the walkway where B and my father were standing. “Dad, let’s just go.”

“Why is this man calling you a rapist?” my father asked.

“Because he *is* a rapist,” Mr. Simmons said.

Walt, Jesse, and Allie started walking down towards us when they noticed the argument was getting more intense.

The man whose property we were on came outside. It was the vanilla-haired barber. His hair looked messy from the end of his walkway, and he was wearing a dark robe. “Get off my walkway,” he said, then closed his door before any of us could answer him.

Allie started crying. I didn’t know what upset her because it could have been a number of things. B picked her up to calm her down, and I watched her stroke Allie’s hair while she whispered “shhh” into her ear.

The six of us were in the street with Mr. Simmons now, and my father was waiting for my answer. “He thinks I raped his daughter because she told him some bullshit lie about me,” I said.

“You fuckin’ punk. She didn’t lie. Check under the costume,” Mr. Simmons said. “You’ll see the bruises my daughter left him.”

“Those bruises are from when he got jumped this summer,” my father said. “I think you need to talk to your daughter.”

We began walking away, and Rose’s street got quiet.

“Don’t tell me to talk to my daughter,” Mr. Simmons said, he was shouting now, and I noticed three houses across from Simmon’s turned on their lights. “She didn’t lie. I got pictures of his bruises and I’ll use them in court.”

My father turned around and walked with a quick step over to Mr. Simmons. His walk told me he was angry, but it still was professional so he didn't come off as the weaker person. My father and Mr. Simmons were now face to face while the five of us watched. The neighbor's whose lights turned on were now outside on their porches and stoops, wearing pajamas, bathrobes, and other bedtime wear.

"Are you insane?" my father asked. "You need to at least get a rape kit to prove my son did it, and I'm sure your daughter has showered since she told you that story. You have nothing." My father began walking away.

"I have plenty," Mr. Simmons said. "I got photos, and the fact that I'm an Appleton police officer helps all the better."

My father kept walking up the street towards the train tracks, and all of us followed him back to our house. He sat down on our porch steps with his head in his hands. B put Allie down, and her and Walt silently said bye to us while my father stared at our well-kept lawn that you could see bits and pieces of between the leaves.

"Is Halloween over?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah, it's over," I said. "Go inside."

As Jesse and Allie passed my father going up the steps, he picked up his head and looked at me. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you could get into if he's right?"

"I know, but I try not to think about it."

"You need to. This is serious stuff, Clark. You could go away for a long time."

"I don't think there's anything I can do. Mr. Simmons is set that I raped his daughter."

"Why would she say that?"

After he asked his question, I told my father about Ashley Simmons and the kind of person she was. He wasn't too thrilled when I got to the part where I ruined her reputation, because that's how I could have avoided this. But I did it, and now I was in some shit I had no idea how to get out of. My father didn't give me advice on what I should do because he didn't have any. If I was Mr. Blonde and he was a hot dog, I don't think I would have advice for him either.

He went inside, but I didn't follow him. I was angry with Mr. Simmons for ruining our Halloween, and my father reminded me how pissed I was at Ashley. But the thing that pissed me off the most was this shitty town. I took off my hot dog costume, threw it in the yard then walked to Walt's house and knocked on his door. When he answered I told him to come with me. My voice was demanding, and for the first time I felt the power Syd felt when we were following him. The center of town was lit up slightly by the light poles on both sides of the street. Someone forgot to turn on the lights that faced Maggie's statue, and it seemed dark and alone. Me and Walt had sweatshirts on, but I was still cold. I rubbed my arms with my hands while the scent of the night made my nose numb.

When we turned the corner at Blissful Foods, the moon was the only light we had. That soon disappeared once we were on the dirt path to Syd's cabin. The shadows of the night were around us as we walked, and I began wondering if it was true that Halloween was the night of the dead. One of Syd's lights were on in the cabin, but when we got closer I saw that him and Sam were drinking beers outside on the porch. Sam guzzled down a bottle while we were walking over and threw it off the porch, causing it to smash. Sam let out a screech right after the glass broke, and it was weird seeing him this way. He was always the levelheaded follower in our

group, but after I noticed his glassy eyes from the light in the cabin, I could tell he was letting loose tonight.

Syd stood up when he saw us. “Happy Halloween,” he said, loud enough for Appleton to hear. “Let’s fuck shit up.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, then joined Syd and Sam on the porch.

“Good. Let’s do it,” Syd said. “I got eggs, I got bats, I got.” He paused and thought about what else he had, then looked down at his beer and smiled. “Beer,” he said with a giggle sound I didn’t think he could make.

“What else?” I asked. “I wanna really fuck up Appleton tonight.”

“Look at this li’l badass,” Sam said. “A couple of months ago, he wouldn’t be caught dead with us.”

I looked at Sam ready to fight. I was angry at the world, and ready to take it out on something, or in this case, someone. “Things change, and a lot of shit has gone down since I moved here.”

“Yeah, a lot of *crazy* shit,” Syd said. “We were fine until you showed up. Now we’re hated more than ever because of all the crazy shit you did, and are doin’. Rose is fire, man.” Syd staggered inside to get another beer, and Walt finally came on the porch. I thought about having to babysit Syd’s drunken ass, but I wasn’t in the caring mood tonight. If shit went down I was only saving myself. Syd came back outside with another beer, and started running his mouth again. “Nah, I don’t give a shit. People can hate me, us. I don’t care.”

“So what else do you have?” I asked.

“Uh, spray paint,” Syd said, followed by a monster burp. “Yeah, that’s about it.”

“Alright,” I said, and clapped my hands together. “What do you wanna hit first?”

“Let’s spray-paint a big cock on Rose’s door,” Syd said.

“How ‘bout a swastika?” I said.

Syd laughed. “Yeah, yeah. That be insane, just a big swastika. For him and his dog. Happy Halloween, mothafucka.”

“What else?” I said. “We gotta do more than that.”

“I dunno man, I can’t think right now,” Syd said. “My mind is set on that swastika. Nothin’ else matters right now.” Syd was laughing at his own words, a clear sign he was hammered. Walt and Sam watched us with big eyes. They were probably thinking our next idea was blowing up the town, and at this point, I would have tried to pull it off if it was mentioned.

Syd grabbed a backpack and put some eggs and spray paint inside. He gave me and Walt the two bats, and Sam a pair of brass knuckles. He shut off the living room light of the cabin, then took out my father’s fishing knife from his pocket, and asked me if he could use it tonight. Before I could answer him he opened it and held it above his head. The blade was shining from the moonlight as we watched. I could hear millions of branches slapping together from the wind. “This is what saved our asses yesterday.” He went back inside, and came out with another beer. “I’m not drunk enough,” he said, then chugged about half the bottle. “Time to fuck shit up.” He smashed the bottle on the ground, and we headed to the center of town.

The last beer Syd chugged started hitting him pretty hard, making him act loud and more obnoxious. Syd staggered once or twice during the walk, but I don’t think anyone noticed but me. I got in front of him a few feet before the corner of Blissful Foods, where his street ended and became the center of town.

“Wha you doin’?” Syd asked. “Let’s egg.”

My hands were pushing on his chest since he was still trying to move forward as he talked. “Not yet. We gotta be smart about this so we don’t get caught.”

Syd stopped trying to get by me. “Alright, alright.”

We walked to the corner of Blissful Foods, but stayed close to the wall. I looked around the corner and saw that no cops were around. “Okay, I think we might be—”

Syd ran past me with a carton of eggs before I could finish my sentence, and started throwing them as soon as he stepped foot in the center of town. Bronco’s: egged. Blissful Foods: egged. The church and funeral home: egged. The loud hits against the windows made me jump every time.

Syd stopped and noticed no one else was throwing. “C’mon. I the only one with balls?”

Syd didn’t wait for an answer, and continued to bomb the center of town.

Sam nudged me. “C’mon, badass, fuck shit up.”

I turned to face him so he could see by the look on my face that I wasn’t going to deal with his shit. “What’s your problem? I thought we were cool.”

“We *are* cool,” Sam said. “But you said that you wanted to fuck shit up, so do it.”

“Not this way,” I said, shaking my head. “I wanted to do it without drawing attention.”

“Fuckin’ pussy,” Sam said, and walked up to Syd with his own carton to join him in the bombing.

“C’mon, pussies,” Syd said. “Let’s egg this shit.”

Syd was trashed, hurling eggs in every direction. I began to think how I could stop him so we could leave the center of town before the cops came. One word came to mind. He was drunk enough that it might work.

“Syd,” I said loud enough to get his attention.



He turned around with an egg in his hand. “What?”

“Swastika,” I said.

“Oh, yeah. Fuck this,” Syd said, and threw the egg carton at one of the Blissful Foods windows. “You’re right. Let’s get over there.”

I started to run hoping everyone followed me. I was sure stuff had been vandalized before on Halloween, which meant police were patrolling. I didn’t stop until I reached Rose’s slightly curved and unpaved driveway that disappeared into the woods. It was dark on this street, just as dark as mine since there were no streetlights on this side either. We were safe from being seen, but the moon gave us enough light. Syd, Sam, and Walt were still a good distance behind me. My quick decision to run must have caught them off guard, and they were pumping their legs as hard as they could to catch up. Their legs slowed down when they were close, and it reminded me of horses at a racetrack when they tried to stop running.

Syd took off his backpack and unzipped it while he caught his breath. “Here,” he said handing me a can of spray paint. “Jeez, you run fast.” He took out another can, shook it up, and sprayed a white dot the size of a half dollar on the street. I guess he wanted to make sure there was still enough paint inside.

“I thought it was a good a idea to get outta there,” I said, looking down at the white dot.

“Gotta keepa movin’ don’t cha?” Syd asked. He had finally caught his breath and was putting on his backpack.

“We all going?” Walt asked. He rested the bat on his left shoulder, and I put mine under my left arm. Sam looked naked standing there, since his brass knuckles were in his pocket.

“Me, Sam, and Clark are going, and you’ll stay and look out,” Syd said.

Walt looked at Sam, then down at his hands. He took the bat off his shoulder and held it like a walking stick. "Sam doesn't even have spray paint to use."

Syd gripped the straps of his backpack with both hands. "After that bullshit with my grandmother, he's not leavin' my side."

Walt leaned closer to Syd with a squinted face. "What bullshit? Clark let Sam know what he is to you."

"He's not a footstool," Syd said screaming. "He's my best friend, my brother, my fam—"

"Shhh," Walt said putting his index finger on his lips. "Shut the fuck up."

Syd held his hand to his neck and cleared his throat. "We got each other's backs. Don't tell me to shut—"

Syd looked away from Walt like he was pondering something, then hunched over and booted all over our shoes. The three of us jumped back in disgust.

"Uh, what the fuck, man?" Walt said wiggling his right foot.

I kicked some of the dirt from Rose's driveway on my shoes with hope it would dry out the vomit. When I looked up from what I was doing, I saw that Syd was still hunched over booting while Sam was next to him. The sounds he was making were terrible, a loud deep yelp that echoed through the neighborhood, followed by the sound of splashing.

Walt was still in the street watching Syd boot up all the beer he drank, holding his bat with one hand like he wanted to club Sam over the head with it. I could smell the vomit. The steam from the pile was wafted over. It made me gag a little, causing my eyes to water.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Walt asked. "Just let him boot in peace."

Sam was hunched over with Syd, but stood up straight to answer Walt. "I'm seeing if he's alright."

“Pull down his pants and suck his dick while you’re at it,” Walt said.

I laughed, not expecting Sam to hear me over Syd, but he turned around and started digging in his pocket for the brass knuckles. Sam slipped them on like a workout glove and started running at me. I didn’t want to hit Sam, but he was coming at me with a deadly weapon. I gave him a hard dab in the stomach with the front of the bat causing him to hunch over, holding his stomach in pain.

“You done?” I asked, holding my bat above his head. I could hear Walt jogging over, but didn’t dare to look just in case Sam tried to cheap-shot me in the balls. I could still hear and smell the boot coming from Syd in the street.

“You done?” I asked again. “Cause if you’re not, I’ll crack this bat right over your head.”

“And I’ll break your back with mine,” Walt said.

I never took my eyes off Sam. “There’s no need. I got this.” I felt confident and reasonable.

“Like I have a choice,” Sam said, then took off his brass knuckles and put them in his pocket. Sam stood up straight, held his stomach, then walked over to Syd. Leaving us at the tip of Rose’s driveway.

I put my bat under my arm again. This time holding it there a little more proudly, as if it were my battle-axe or sword. “You had a choice. You just chose the smarter one.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Sam said with his back to me.

Sam hunched over again next to Syd, but after a few seconds they both straightened their backs, Sam more than Syd, and walked towards the direction of Syd’s house. As we watched

them from the top of Rose's driveway, I saw Sam put Syd's arm over his shoulders for support as they walked down the street.

"And now they hate us again," Walt said, swinging his bat at the night.

"I felt like they never really forgave us."

Walt was still practicing his swing, but now his body was posed like he was waiting for a fastball. "You wanna hit Rose's door still?"

I picked up the can of spray paint that I dropped when Sam charged at me, and shook it a little so I could hear the ball inside. "I'm all set."

## Chapter 12

When I visited Fenton's shack in mid-October, the trees were only in the beginning stages of change. It was now the first of November, and Fenton's shack was covered with leaves that shared the same colors as a bag of Reese's pieces. Walt had to help B with something after school, so I snuck around the back by myself, and made sure to crawl under Mr. Hender's window. I saw the glow of fire coming from Fenton's wood stove in the tiny window next to the front door, then looked up at his roof and saw the smoke. I never realized it in the past, but Fenton's shack was kind of cozy.

Fenton opened his door and came out on schedule, wearing the red-and-black flannel covered in oil and grease. His clothes were baggy, like his frame shrunk dramatically since he moved out here. I could see him being a broad-shouldered man that could swing an axe anytime of the day, but those days were long gone. He was still sporting a somewhat trimmed beard. It looked whiter than the last time I saw it.

"What you want this time, boy?"

I was still scared of him, but I knew once we started talking he would become more pleasant.

“I got some pictures I want you to see,” I said.

“Did you bring any more food?”

“No.”

Fenton grunted like an angry caveman. “Bring em’ here, boy.”

I opened my backpack, and got out the photo album. He just stood there waiting with his hands in his tattered black jeans. When I walked over to him, I don’t think he even blinked while he watched me. Fenton took one hand out of his pocket, and I handed him one of the photo albums. He glanced at a couple of photos, then gave it back. “Come inside. I know you got more questions,” he said, then walked with a slight limp back to the shack.

I asked if he was okay when I went inside to join him, but he said he was fine. Maybe his limp was just a limp and nothing else.

Fenton sat down on his bed that was directly across from the wood stove. He had it blazing so bad I had to take off my jacket before I sat.

“Shut the door,” Fenton said.

I wanted to remove my sweater, but I didn’t because I knew it would make Fenton complain. I could picture him saying, ‘too hot for ya, boy’ or something along those lines. I took out the album again. This time I asked him if he recognized anyone in the pictures.

Fenton held the album close to his face, squinting every time he looked at a new picture. “I see Rose and Father James in one picture. And Rose in the article about the Maggie statue.” He handed me the photo album.

“Do you remember anything else about Rose? Like how he got so close with Father James?”

Fenton’s face puckered like he just chewed a lemon, and his body looked stiff. “I’m eighty-six. How you suppose I remember anything that long ago?”

I began stuffing the photos into my backpack, and my mind forgot to hold my tongue from my usual answers. “I dunno. Try.”

Fenton got up. He towered over me because I was still sitting. I focused on his beard that was still burly, even though I could tell he trimmed it. He looked deep into my eyes. “I told you everything I know.” His voice was low and fierce. “Don’t come by anymore if you gonna be actin’ like the cops.”

I pushed the chair away from Fenton, and got up. Then I grabbed my jacket and backpack as quick as I could and left. When I walked down the leafed trail I turned around and saw Fenton from his open door. He was still standing in the same position, watching all my movements.

I went home and threw the backpack full of photos underneath my bed as hard as I could, causing a loud thump against my wall. I could feel somebody behind me. When I turned around, I saw Walt standing in my doorway. “Oh, it’s just you.”

“Just me? Who were you expecting? Ashley?”

I ignored him and sat down on my bed.

“C’mon. She liked it the first time, she just didn’t wanna admit it.”

“Actually, I was expecting your Mom.”

Walt asked me about Fenton, and when I told him what happened all he said was, “We need to dig deeper. Rose’s basement must have something.”

“I’m waiting on that,” I said. “Things need to cool down before we start snooping again.”

“Clark, is Walt staying for dinner?” my mother asked, from the bottom of the stairs.

Walt shot his head back in shock at what my mother said.

“I think she’s trying to be herself again.”

“Oh, in that case, I guess I’ll stay.”

We were having roast pork for dinner, and an extra seat was placed at the table for Walt next to mine. I hated roast pork, but this was the first time my mother cooked in months, so I didn’t dare complain.

Allie sat next to Walt, and I watched her poke him in the leg with her fork. “Ow,” Walt said. “Quit stabbing me.”

Allie looked at both my parents right away with an innocent face. “I didn’t do anything to Wally,” she said, but her forced smile said something different.

Throughout dinner I noticed my mother smiling. It was a hidden smile. The kind where your lips appear to look straight, but once in a while they can’t help but curve.

“You seem overly happy tonight,” I said.

My mother played with her food and watched it. “I’m just thinking.”

“Of what?” I asked.

“I’m thinking about having rules again,” she said.

My father dropped his fork, and it made a scratching clicking noise. He raised his arms with clenched fists. “Finally.”

Jesse and Allie laughed at my father, but then realized what my mother said.

Jesse let out a sigh like his life was over, then leaned back in his chair.

“We need rules,” my father said. “You can’t always do what you want.”

My father was back to being a hard-ass. I could tell by his tone of voice.

“Clark?” my mother asked.

I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say. “Yes?”

“Do you want rules?” she asked.

“I’m okay with it,” I said, glancing into both of my parent’s eyes. “And I know things will be better if we have rules.”

Jesse flared his arms and made an annoyed face with an open mouth. “C’m on.”

“Yeah, c’m on,” Walt said.

“*I’m* gonna poke you with a fork if you keep it up, buster,” my mother said, then smiled.

“So it’s settled,” my father said, holding up his drinking glass and looking across the table at my mother.

“Yes,” she said, and she and my father clinked their glasses.

“Now, the bad news,” my father said putting down his glass. “Since there’s rules again, I’m sorry to be doing a total one-eighty on you, Clark, but you’re grounded.”

“What?” I said, blurting it out like an uncontrolled sneeze.

“I’m sorry,” my father said again, but I didn’t believe him. “I made myself a promise as soon as there were rules again, I would go back to my old ways.” My father looked into my eyes from across the table as he talked. “And you know that if you do something wrong, you will pay the consequences.”

“What did he do?” my mother asked.

“He’s in a lot of trouble, Virginia,” my father said, then our eyes locked once again. I stared for a few seconds until I realized my mother was looking at me too.



Walt had his teeth clenched like he was feeling the pain of what I had to tell my mother. I put my head down. "I told the school I had sex with one of the popular girls." I heard my mother gasp. "And then to get me back, she told the school and her father that I raped her."

I finally got the courage to look up at my mother. She was looking at my father across the table. He was nodding his head, agreeing with everything I said. "Her father's a cop in Appleton too," my father said, then put a piece of pork in his mouth. "And I found out about this last night when we were trick-or-treating."

"In Appleton?" my mother asked.

My father began chewing his pork slowly. "Yes."

My mother raised her head and looked at the ceiling. Her lips were tight with anger at my father and she began shaking her head. "I thought I told you not to go trick-or-treating in Appleton."

"Starkville's trick-or-treating ended early," my father said. "So we came back—"

"I don't care," my mother said. "No trick-or-treating in Appleton."

My father stood up. "We shouldn't be arguing over this. Clark's in a lot of trouble—"

"You lied to me again," my mother said, still in her chair. "No wonder Father Rose forbids Halloween. It brings out the worst in everybody." She crossed her arms and looked away from the table.

"Here we go, back to Rose," my father said. He started to yell now. "The girl's father is trying to get Clark put in jail for raping her. I think we need—"

"Yeah, and I'm sure all of this coulda—"

"Will you stop cutting me off?" my father leaned in closer to my mother. "Listen to what I have to say, dammit."

I motioned for Walt to come closer with my hand, and whispered in his ear, “I think you should go.” He nodded, and when he got up, I followed him out of the kitchen taking Jesse and Allie with me. Walt gave us a wave once he got to the door so my parents wouldn’t hear us, and we waved back then went upstairs.

“See what Halloween does?” Allie said once we were in the upstairs hallway.

“Mom’s more mad about what I did,” I said, “Halloween has nothing to do with it.” I changed the subject quick. “Do you guys wanna camp outside tonight?”

“Okay,” Allie said. “But can we wait until they’re done down there?”

“Yeah, we’ll wait,” I said. “Go play in your room, and I’ll come and get you guys later.” I noticed Jesse was quiet. Before he walked into their room, I told him to come back over to me. “You alright, buddy?”

“Everything was fine with no rules,” he said with a pouty tone.

“When there were no rules, Mom and Dad kept all their feelings bottled up. And that’s not good to do.”

“But they didn’t fight.”

“Sometimes grownups need to fight to make things better.”

Jesse stared at me blankly. No state of emotion was on his face. “I don’t wanna grow up,” he said then hugged me.

“You’re a Toys ‘R’ Us kid,” I said still hugging him.

“Huh?”

“You know, the song. I don’t wanna grow up, I’m a Toys ‘R’ Us kid.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said and gave a little chuckle.

“Alright, buddy. Go to your room and play.”

I waited for Jesse to go in the room before I went down stairs. My parents were still shouting at each other, while my mother cleared the table. They didn't notice me watching them, but I got their attention when I yelled, "Shut the fuck up." Both of them got quiet, but looked at me like I popped their argument bubble before they finished. I think they were both in complete shock at what I said.

"Who do you think *you* are?" my father said. "Coming in here and saying that to us. We're the parents. We tell *you* what to do."

"I'm just so sick of the fighting." I said, and grabbed my hair like I wanted to rip it out. "You two are always on each other's case."

"We're your parents." My father tapped his chest with his ring and middle finger. "Don't give us advice. We've been doing this a long time. We have our ways of figuring things out. You think you can help us? You don't have a clue, Clark. So shut your mouth and go to your room."

I stood in the kitchen staring at my father, trying to hold on to the hatred I had for him at the moment. Since I can remember, the anger in his voice alone caused me to cry. The lump in my throat felt like it was getting bigger. "I might not have a clue but—"

"Shut your mouth," my father said.

I just stared at him, more focused on my hate than keeping the tears inside my head. I didn't see the foggy wetness around the frames of my eyes, and I felt positive I looked like he couldn't break me. "Asshole," I said, and my father lunged towards me, too quickly for my mother to grab his arm. I would usually run, but I stood my ground. My father squeezed my left shoulder with his right hand, and from his grip I could tell he wanted it to be around my neck. He slapped me across the face. The blow made my head whip to the right. I watched my father's hand still gripping my shoulder. It felt like he was trying to crush it. His knuckles were white

from the pressure, and his black hairs made it look like a dark forest in the winter. He grabbed my chin and set my face up for another smack. The second time my head sprung back and my eyes met with his, but only for a few seconds. I knew if I stared long enough into his dark eyes I would see his hate for me, and start bawling. I concentrated on his hair, which looked darker than the hairs on his hands.

He grabbed my chin with his left hand. “You don’t call your father an asshole.”

I kept looking at his hair, avoiding his eyes. I was breathing heavy now, almost hyperventilating. My father let go of my chin and wound up for a third hit, but my mother grabbed his arm. “That’s enough,” she said in a quivery voice. I stopped watching my father’s hair and looked at her. “That’s enough,” she said again, softly. This time looking at me.

My father unclenched his hand from my shoulder, and I ran to my room to finally let out the cry I was holding in almost the entire time. It felt good to do it. Like I said to Jesse, it’s not good to keep things bottled up.

### Chapter 13

I couldn’t sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, my father’s face was there. It looked just as angry as when he was hitting me, but instead of smacking me around I imagined him strangling me. Once there wasn’t rules, me and my father bonded so well because we both agreed how ridiculous Appleton was, and how crazy my mother had been acting. But the more I thought about it instead of sleeping, the more I realized that we only got close because there were no rules. He loosened his tie and stopped caring, and became more of friend who once in a while stepped back into father mode. But now he was back to his old strict self, and if you were out of line or did something wrong, you’d get smacked.

When I remembered the pictures underneath my bed, I thought about those and my father faded away. I tried to connect all the pictures in my mind, and then it clicked. I don't know how I came up with it, but it sounded so right in my head I had to tell Walt right away.

I grabbed my backpack, jumped out my window and headed over to Walt's. I imagined what I was going to see from B tonight as I walked down the street. Maybe she would be fully nude when she answered the door this time, I could only hope. But I knew I wouldn't see B tonight when I saw Walt sitting on the steps of his porch. His porch light shined above him, but he was hunched over and looked like a shadow.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

Walt picked his head up so he could see who was talking to him. "What are *you* doing out here?"

"I figured out Rose's secret." I was so excited when I finally said it out loud I think I might have been jumping up and down a little.

"That's great." Walt was still hunched over. His hands looked like the only thing that was keeping his head from falling down completely.

"What's wrong with you?"

Walt let out a groan like he didn't want to tell me his problems. "It's my Mom. I'm so sick and tired of her shit."

"What shit?"

"She's a whore. At least twice a week she's doing another guy. It's not right, and she doesn't care what anyone thinks."

"Jeez, man. I'm sorry. I never knew it was *that* bad."

“Yeah, it’s *that* bad. My mom’s such a whore she doesn’t even know who my real father is. She’s got it pinned down to about four guys, but they won’t take a paternity test. And I don’t blame them. Who wants to pay child support to a whore they fucked once because she’s known to be easy?”

“That’s terrible, man.” I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t want keep saying I’m sorry because I thought it would just sound stupid.

Walt stood up and opened the front pocket of his jean jacket, and pulled out a cigarette. “I’m just gonna leave one day.” He dug in the same pocket and pulled out a lighter, and lit the cigarette taking a deep drag as he did it. “She’s not even a good mother.” Walt spit on the ground then looked at the cigarette. “Ugh. Menthol. Figures the one kind of cigarette she has is the one I hate.” Walt spit again, but took another drag after. “All she really does is cook for me, but as soon as it’s nighttime she’s either gone or upstairs with another douche bag.”

“It sounds to me like she’s always been like this. Why are you getting pissed now?”

“Because tonight’s the last straw.” He pointed up at B’s window with the cigarette still in his hand. “She’s up there fucking that cop who threw me into a wooden chair.”

“You gotta be kidding me. Hooknose? Why would she do that?”

He took another deep drag then started yelling. “Because she has no boundaries, and thinks with her pussy. She thinks I’m totally oblivious. That’s probably why she thinks it’s okay to fuck the guy who hurt her son.” Walt took one last drag of his cigarette and flicked it across his yard. “Hope the bitch heard every word.”

“I’m sorry, man.” I felt like an idiot, but I had to say something.

“Whatever. I’m just gonna leave her and this piece of shit town one day. Then she’ll be sorry. Probably not, but I like to think she will be.”

Walt hit me on the arm then went into his house. I was going to tell him about Rose's secret, but it just wasn't the right time.

The next morning I promised Jesse and Allie we would go camping tonight. At school everyone treated me like I didn't exist except for Walt, and today didn't seem different judging from the same dirty looks on the streets towards me.

"You don't have to hang out with me," I said.

"I want to hang out with you."

"People probably hate you for hanging with me."

"I don't give a shit. Even if Appleton didn't hate you I'd still hang. I don't let a rep run my life. You should know that."

We got to Adomos' class a little early. Only Jerry and a few other kids were there, and when we walked by his seat he coughed, but said the word, "Rapist." as he did it.

I turned around and walked over to where he was sitting. "What was that?"

Jerry had his hands folded on the desk and looked straight ahead at the chalkboard. "I coughed."

"I think you said something when you coughed," I said, staring at the top of his head like a target.

"No, I just coughed," he said, and I went to the back of the classroom with Walt.

I waited patiently for him to say it again. If he did he was going to get a chair to the face, but he kept his mouth shut.

The day went on with us walking through the halls, going class to class, while Appleton High treated us as wandering ghosts without purpose. At lunch no one sat at our table. Before Ashley's lie we had only half the table to ourselves. Now we were completely abandoned. I don't

know if it bothered Walt, but it bothered me. Ashley was five tables up from us, but she never looked over like she used to.

“I need to talk to her. Get this shit taken care of.”

“Why? She’ll never tell the school she lied about being raped. Face it. It’s just us. The quicker you come to terms with it, the easier it’ll get.”

“I just want to talk to her, see where she’s at.”

My plan was to give Ashley a note telling her to meet me at Dupee after school. But I couldn’t give it to her in person because she’d probably whip up some fake tears. And Walt wasn’t a choice since he hung out with me. After lunch, I wrote the note in English class and tried to think of who could give it to Ashley. I noticed Trish in the second row. She would do anything for quick cash.

The bell rang and everybody began to get up besides me. “Trish, Trish,” I said, calling her over desperately.

“What are you doing?” Walt asked.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch up with you in Hender’s class.”

Walt shrugged, then got up from his desk and walked by Trish. She always wore braids to appear innocent, and showed off her metal mouth just in case people didn’t fall for her image.

She walked over to me with a few of her books against her chest. “What is it, Lapine?”

“I need you to give a note to Ashley Simmons for me,” I said, and held out the letter that I folded four or five times.

“Gonna cost ya.”

I played dumb like she always did favors for free. “C’mon, it’s just a small delivery.”



“There’s a charge for Trish Express,” she said followed by a cocky giggle. “And maybe she’ll write back. That’s more work for me.”

“She won’t. It’s a reasonable letter, telling her where to meet and when.”

“Ten bucks.”

“Five.”

“Ten.”

“Seven.”

She slammed her books on my desk and got in my face. “Ten, you cheap prick, or I walk.”

I wanted to shove her books off my desk to teach her that she couldn’t fuck with me, but I needed her and she knew it. “God dammit,” I said, and hit her books with the bottom of my fists.

“You gotta deal. Can I pay you tomorrow?”

“Eh, I guess. But only ‘cause I know you’re good for it.”

“Thanks,” I said then gave her the note.

She took her books off my desk and held them up to her chest again. “And if you don’t pay I’ll just tell everyone you raped *me*,” she said, then showed me her mouth of metal.

“Whoa, that was below the belt.”

“I know, but I need to play rough to get my way.”

“You two are gonna be late,” Adomos said. Her voice scared us because we forgot she was still in the room.

The deal was set with Trish, and we both left Adomos’ class for Mr. Hender’s. Walking in together caused the class to make catcalls and kissy sounds. I even heard one kid say,

“Another one, Lapine?” But since it didn’t come from Jerry’s lips I didn’t care.

I stared at the clock in Hender's class so much I began drawing it instead of the wine bottles he put in the middle of the classroom. Hender took his usual stroll to see what everyone was doing and once he came behind me he stopped. I stayed hunched over my desk adding more detail and shading to the circular frame of the clock, wiping the sweat from my forehead every couple seconds. Hender stood there watching over my shoulder, and the feeling of his eyes on me caused my forehead to sweat faster.

He came around to the front of my desk and kneeled so he was closer to my artwork, but I still kept my eyes on the paper. "This isn't bad," he said calmly, and I looked up because I wasn't expecting a voice like that to come out of him. "But you should work on the general image of the clock before you add the detail." He took my drawing off the desk and held it in front of me. "You see? If you have the overall outline of the clock, you'll be able to work on the detail better. Think of the outline as your blueprint."

"Thanks," I said.

Hender ripped my drawing in half and threw it on the floor. "But we're not drawing clocks today, are we?"

"No," I said, and looked out the window at the clearing in the woods where the path to Fenton's shack was. I was in shock at what he did, but didn't want to show it.

"Look at me," he said in an irritated voice. When I turned away from the window, the first thing I noticed was that Hender's fists were clenched and shaking. I could have just been imagining it, but it looked like he was holding back with all his power not to hit me. The class watched us like they always did. Me and Hender always got into some argument about something I did or didn't do, and it was pretty much normal for this to happen. In fact, I think the

class looked forward to it. “You do the work I assign, or I’ll fail you,” he said. “Next time you do this, you fail. Got it?”

“Yep,” I said, and took out another piece of paper treating his threat like a slap on the wrist.

“You better. ‘Cause I will fail you,”

I ignored him and focused on drawing, and he finally walked away when he realized I wasn’t going to look up again.

After the bell rang, I noticed while I was walking over to Walt that Trish was the first one out the door, and I assumed she was on her way to track Ashley down before gym class started.

“I wrote Ashley a note and gave it to Trish.”

Walt got up from his desk. “She’s not gonna talk to you.”

“Get out. Class is over,” Hender said, and we went to the gym.

Trish was late, and I thanked her for delivering the letter when I saw her. I couldn’t wait to talk to Ashley, but I had no idea what I was going to say. We were playing basketball today and the dribbling that echoed through the gym made it hard for me to think. I gave up thinking after a few minutes and concentrated on Jerry. I was waiting for him to make the wrong move again so I could pelt him with a basketball, but he stayed away from me and even avoided eye contact ever since I talked to him in Adomos’ class.

I heard the final bell of the day in the locker room while I threw on my shirt, hoodie and pants. Sliding on my shoes as I ran out, I heard Walt asking where I was going. If Ashley got my note she would probably be at Dupee, so I didn’t have time to explain. Trish was outside standing close to the stairs on the sidewalk facing the school. Kids were everywhere, but when I

came out I spotted her right after I noticed everyone scattering to their homes. She was holding a note in her hand when I walked down the front steps.

“Told you she’d write back,” she said handing me the note.

I opened it and it said to meet her at her house around six o’ clock. I put the note in my pocket and sat down on the last step.

“What it say?”

I looked at her like she was an idiot. “You know what it says.”

“Last time I’ll do you a favor,” Trish said and started walking away.

“Bullshit, you’ll do anything if the cash is right.”

“Fuck you,” she said and kept walking.

Walt came outside and sat down next to me. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“Cause I thought I was meeting Ashley at Dupee, but now I’m—”

“Who cares? Remember what your Dad said? They don’t have shit on you.”

“Maybe, but I still don’t wanna be known as a rapist.”

“Once shit goes down and your name is cleared, people won’t.”

“You don’t know for sure. Even if I’m innocent people will never believe I didn’t do it.”

“Just stay away from Ashley and wait for this shit to blow over.” Walt got up and stretched, but stayed standing. “I don’t know why you’re all about clearing your name.”

“Because I don’t wanna be known as a rapist.”

“Who? Cares? People already hate you in this town because of Rose. The rape thing is a little extra icing. Live your life. I thought you didn’t care what people thought anyway.”

I stood up and leaned on the railing. “You’re half right. I don’t give a shit what people think of me with Rose, but I don’t want the town to think I rape women.”

“And they won’t once this blows over ‘cause all her dad has is the pictures.”

“We’re talking in circles,” I said, and began walking home without him. I expected Walt to shout something, but all I heard was the wind blowing in my ears along with the cars of parents picking up their kids. I put my hood over my head and tightened the hoodie strings to muffle the sounds.

Jesse and Allie came out to the porch with their tent when I was walking up to the front door. “Still going camping?” Jesse asked all excited.

“Of course we are,” I said, and I hoped they couldn’t tell that I wasn’t even a quarter as excited as they were.

I helped them set up the tent in the back yard before dinner. My mother opened the screen door when I was hammering the last stake into the ground. “What are you doing?”

I looked at the tent, then back at her like she didn’t see it. “Putting up the tent.”

“No you’re not. It’s way too cold for camping now.”

Looking at Jesse, Allie, and myself, I noticed we were all wearing thick sweaters to protect ourselves from the cold. “Guys, Mom’s right. It is too cold, I’m sorry.”

“But you promised,” Jesse said. “Last night, you promised.” He wiped away the first batch of tears with his sweater sleeve.

“I’m sorry, guys. I’ll make it up to you, I prom—”

“Don’t even say that word,” Allie said, and went inside with Jesse pulling the top of his sweater sleeve while she stomped away.

I looked up at my mother who was still staring at me as Jesse and Allie passed her in the doorway. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

I began taking out the stakes around the tent. After the last one I heard the screen door shut, followed by the back door. I worked at taking apart the tent until the sun went down, and used the light from the kitchen window to gather up the pile of tent poles, stakes, and the tent itself. I rolled up everything, put it on the front porch and then went inside. My house was much warmer than outside, and it made me realize how cold it got on a fall night.

“You hungry, Clark?” my mother asked while I took off my shoes. She was in the kitchen, and I knew everyone else was done eating because I could hear her doing dishes.

I could see my father sitting at the table. “Not right now. What time is it?”

“Five-fifty-four,” she said.

I put my shoes back on and almost ran out of the house without saying a word, but remembered that the house had rules again. “I’m going over Walt’s for a few.”

“No you’re not,” my father said like he was taunting me. “You’re grounded.”

I didn’t answer him. My back was to the door and I put my arm behind me and placed my sweaty hand on the cold doorknob.

“Didn’t you hear me?” my father asked, then leaned a little forward to see what I was doing. “Get away from the door.”

My hand made a fist around the doorknob and I gave it a twist. Barely opening the door, but letting some cold air inside.

“What are you doing?” my father asked and started to get up.

“Uh, be right back,” I said, and opened the door enough for me to curve around it and step on the porch backwards. I faced my father the whole time. He was running after me but I closed the door when he was a few feet away, then ran across the street into the woods.

My father was on the porch searching for me. “Clark, don’t make me come in those woods. You’re not gonna like it if I do.”

When he began walking down the stairs, I started heading for Rose’s neighborhood. I couldn’t see anything, but I kept running using my arms and hands as a shield. A small branch snapped me in the eye, and for the rest of the run I looked at the ground until I was on asphalt again. I could still hear my father calling my name in the woods, not giving a damn who heard.

Ashley’s was two houses down from where I entered her neighborhood. I ran between the giant shrubs towards her porch before my father made it out of the woods, and gave her door a steady knock until she opened it.

“Can I come in?”

She moved out of the way and I came inside before she answered. “What are you running from?” she asked, then closed the door.

“My dad. I’m supposed to be grounded.” I looked down at the rug we were standing on near the front door. It was golden brown and navy blue with a lot of vines and flowers on it. I jumped when I heard the grandfather clock. I had no idea it was only a few feet from the door. The hour hand was pointing at the six.

“Jumpy,” Ashley said, then crossed her arms.

I could hear my father yelling outside, and I went to the long rectangular window beside Ashley’s door. My father was a dark figure that moved up the street calling my name like I was a lost dog. “Can we talk somewhere else?”

“Sure,” Ashley said, and brought me to her living room, which was on the right side of the entrance hallway. Ashley’s living room had wooden floors, and more of those weird rugs

were underneath her black leather furniture. Two lamps were at both ends of the room, and there wasn't a T.V. The lighting was dim, and it gave the room a warm feel.

We sat on the love seat farthest away from anything. There was a window once you walked in on the left and I wondered if I could see my father. He kept calling my name. "You know why I'm here?"

Ashley ran her fingers through her brown hair, and I wondered if this was stage one in her flirting technique. "Honestly I don't. I thought you'd be smart and keep your distance."

"Don't need to. You don't have anything on me."

Ashley put her hands in her lap. "Doesn't matter. My dad's a cop."

"Bullshit. The judge won't waste his time if there isn't proof."

"My dad's known the judge for years. I told you it doesn't matter."

My father stopped screaming my name, and I walked to the window to see if he was still outside, but it was too dark to see anything now. "Why'd you have to lie?"

"Why'd *you* lie?"

"Because *you* deserved it. You treated me like shit, so I got you back."

"And now I got you back." Ashley got up from the love seat and walked over to me. She had a sexy sway, and knew how to use every curve of her body to hypnotize. "And now we're even."

"Me having the word, 'rapist' stamped on my head sounds more than even to me."

"It's the price you pay. You should've just shut your mouth." Ashley laughed. "The funny thing is you thought everyone would believe you. I'm queen bitch here and you're just trash."

"Psst," I said, then looked out the window. "More like queen cunt."



Ashley pushed me out of the living room and into the hallway. “You’re so fuckin’ stupid.” She pushed me again into the wall. “You have no idea how fucked you are, and for some reason you’re still an asshole.”

“What do you want from me? You tell the town I raped you, then you expect me to take it with a smile?”

“Yes,” she said with a shriek in her voice. “After I read your note I thought you wanted to make deal with me and clear your name or something. But instead you come here and talk shit, just like your scumbag friends.”

“Fine.” I threw up my hands and got in Ashley’s face. “You started the lie and you can end it. What do I have to do?”

“Throw away everything. Your scumbag friends, your hatred for Rose, all that. Then come to church on Sunday and confess your sins.”

“I’m not confessing that I raped you.”

“I’ll confess I lied.”

“Just to Rose?”

“No, an open confession. I’ll let Rose know that we’ve held in our sins and want the town to hear them.”

“And you’ll drop everything?”

“Yeah.”

“What about your Dad?”

“He’ll be pissed, but I’ll tell him the truth.”

I nodded my head as I thought about the deal. “Alright.”

“And no more hanging with those scum either, and if you do I’ll find out about it, and spread an even nastier lie about you.”

“Like what?”

“You’re gonna have to fuck up to find out.”

I looked at Ashley with a crooked smile and twisty eyebrows. “No deal. I’m gonna take my chances, I don’t think you have shit.” I began to walk to the front door.

“I’m giving you an easy way out. You really are a moron.”

I turned back around to face her. “An easy way out? Of what? Your lies? Trust me, those lies might be helping you now, but they’ll turn sour and everyone will see past the mask.” I opened the door and walked home the long way. As I went along the train tracks I hoped for the midnight train to come early to take me away.

#### Chapter 14

I didn’t use the ladder to sneak back into my room because I knew my father would be waiting for me when I came home. And just like I said, he was. When I walked through the door he was standing in his spot.

“Come here,” he said with his hands in his pockets.

I walked over to him with my shoulders raised like a turtle trying to hide in its shell.

His right hand came out his pocket, and smacked me hard across the face. Harder than the other night. But it was just once, and the force almost took me off my feet. He had never hit me when I was younger, but when I thought about it he never had a reason to.

“Get upstairs,” he said, and I walked by him to go to my room.

I heard Jesse and Allie laughing once I got to the hallway, and walked over to their room to see what they were doing. As I stood in their doorway, I saw they had used their

blankets and sheets to make a fort. Jesse and Allie's Red Sox and Hannah Montana blankets were tucked under their mattresses for the roof, and they were crawling around on the floor giggling. My flesh still tingled from my father's smack, and I hoped it wasn't red enough for Jesse and Allie to notice.

"I see you guys made your own tent," I said.

Allie's face popped out from the blankets. "No thanks to you."

I turned my body slightly to the right, so she couldn't see that side of my face. "Hey, it's not my fault Mom said it was too cold out."

"But you still made us go trick-or-treating," Allie said.

"You wanted to go," I said.

"I did in Starkville," Allie said. "But Jenny Whelm saw us in Appleton and told the whole school. Now no one likes us."

I made a farting sound with my mouth. "Who cares? They'll get over it."

"No, they won't. They've teased me and Jesse every day since Halloween," Allie said.

"Two days. Big whoop," I said. "By the end of the week they'll forget about it."

"Devil twins, devil twins," Jesse said from underneath the covers.

"That's what they call us," Allie said.

"I'm going through the same thing, you guys. It's gonna be okay," I said. "You guys are little, and in a couple of days they'll be making fun of someone else."

"I hope so," Jesse said, still hidden.

For the next few weeks, me and Walt walked behind the stores on our way to school to avoid the eerie stare-down, and one day I realized Walt never really made an effort to talk anymore. We still sat next to each other at lunch and during classes, but the spark we used to

have every time we talked was gone. His voice had a careless tone now, and I was ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure he was hanging out with Syd and Sam again.

“Syd’s court date is soon,” Walt said.

I was surprised that what came out of his mouth wasn’t school-related or small talk.

“When is it?”

“November 23rd.”

“Shit, might be locked up before Thanksgiving.”

“Yep. All thanks to you.”

“Hey, I didn’t ask him to jump Will and Mike, and I didn’t ask him to take all the blame either.”

“Yeah, but he did it anyway. Because he’s a good friend.”

“That’s the only good thing he’s done for me and you since I moved here.”

“No, he helped you break into Rose’s—”

“Shut up,” I said, then looked around the cafeteria to make sure no one was listening.

“What’s your point?”

“My point is to stop thinking you’re better and go apologize for what you did to Sam on Halloween. I did.”

“You were the one talking shit, I just laughed. I *might* apologize, but right now I don’t feel like it.”

Walt squinted at me like I didn’t make sense. “What’s your deal? You’re the biggest outcast in town. Ashley’s Dad is after you, people hate you for causing trouble with Rose, and your home life is going down the shitter. We’re all you got. We might not be perfect, but we’re here for you.”

“Maybe you, but Syd and Sam, I dunno. It’s always iffy with them.”

“They feel the same about you. The three of you need to talk, because if Syd does time for you and you guys aren’t cool, I guarantee he’ll put you in a wheelchair.”

“Nah, he won’t—”

“He will.” Walt looked at me with a face like granite. He didn’t care about a lot of things, but this was something. “Don’t fuck this up. Build respect, then you guys will have a strong bond.”

“We’ve never had that.”

“I know, I feel like you don’t treat them like serious friends. Let me ask you this. If Will and Mike jumped Syd would you be down to fight?”

“Eh, I don’t really like to—”

“That’s a no.”

“Alright, fine. You’re right. I don’t know why, but I just wouldn’t.”

“‘Cause you’re not as close with them as you are with me. But if you wanna be, you gotta be loyal no matter what.”

“I dunno. It seems like we’ll never be that close.”

Walt slapped his forehead with his hand and shook his head. “Open your eyes. They helped you break into Rose’s house and jumped two kids they didn’t have beef with.”

“Shhh,” I said and looked around again. “You gotta stop talking so loud.”

After school I went with Walt to Syd’s house. All the windows of the cabin were dark inside and I thought that I’d be able to wait another day before apologizing. Inside Syd and Sam sat in darkness on their food-strained couch that looked even more rotten in the dark. When the afternoon light came in they squinted and covered their eyes until Walt shut the door. When it

was dark again, Sam looked at me, then pointed his eyes to the floor and dug his body deeper into the dirty couch cushions. Syd was leaning forward on the couch and began to crack his knuckles. The sound made things less awkward as we stood silently in his living room.

“How are you, guys?” I asked.

“Fine,” Syd said, and kept cracking his knuckles.

“Look, if it means anything, I’m sorry for what I did on Halloween,” I said, then looked down at the floor like Sam. “I made it a shitty time, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Sam said, and Syd leaned back and looked at him.

“No. It’s not all right. I’m gonna tell you the same thing I told Walt when he apologized. Me and Sam are brothers, we’re family. When shit happens we know we can trust and rely on each other no matter what. You and Walt don’t understand us.”

I looked up from the floor at Syd when he was done talking. “I know, and I wanna be part of that. You guys helped me out, especially you, Syd. And now that you might do time for me I just wanted to come here and say that I’m with you.” I looked at Sam still sinking into the couch cushions. “You too, Sam.”

“That’s cool,” Syd said. “But I’m not gonna fully believe you until something comes up, so until then we’re okay, but just okay.”

“Sam?” I said, and looked over for his approval.

“Yeah, as long as you understand that we all look out for each other,” he said, and leaned forward like he wanted to be involved in the conversation. “Me and Syd want this to be a family. And we thought it was for a little while, but something happened with you and shit didn’t feel right. And then Walt talking all that shit on Halloween.” Sam paused for a second to cross his arms, then shook his head. “I just didn’t know what happened to us.”

“That’s over,” Walt said.

“It better be,” Syd said. “Cause we’re through giving you chances.”

“I hope you don’t go to jail,” I said, and at first I said it to be nice, but I really meant it.

“Yeah, I hope you don’t go either,” Syd said, then he smiled at me. He never did that.

Syd smiled with his whole face. His cheeks turned into balls of dough like his grandmother’s did, and his eyes got squinty like the sun was in them.

There was silence between us again, and I remembered I had the photos we stole from Rose’s house still in my backpack.

“What’s that?” Syd asked when he saw me shuffling around in my backpack.

“I think I might have figured out Rose’s secret,” I said.

I threw the photos and newspaper clippings on the floor in the order I wanted them, then began telling them my theory.

“The first photo is a picture of the orphanage with all the people who lived there. On the back it says 1941, the year the orphanage set on fire. Why does Rose have this photo? And here’s newspaper clippings of the fire, and why did he have the memorial made for Maggie?”

“Maybe the photo and newspaper clippings were for research before he had the statue made,” Walt said.

I was pacing and looking down at the pictures. “I don’t think so. The pictures are old. If he was doing research they wouldn’t be this discolored or ripped. They’d be more like this photo.” I pointed at the last photo in the line up, Rose shaking hands with Father James.

“So what is it? Spit it out,” Syd said.

“I think Rose made the statue because he was guilty. Because when he was young he burned down the orphanage.”

“What? That’s crazy,” Syd said.

“Think about it. You know how the story goes. Maggie had a child of her own. I’m sure some of the orphans were jealous. Rose might have been one of them, and out of anger decided to burn down the orphanage. He never got caught, but always felt guilty. That’s probably why he gave himself to God. Maybe it was the only way he could feel better about himself.” I pointed at the articles about the miracle, then the one about how the Christ’s face disappeared. “This is just another theory, but Rose and James probably came up with this so-called miracle, then began resculpting the town. Once that was done, they just washed the mold off the church, and played it like Christ was no longer needed there since Appleton did the right thing by building a better town. By that time everyone was already eating Rose and James’ bullshit anyways, so why not pay tribute to Maggie too?”

Syd crouched down and picked up the photo of the orphanage. “I don’t know. It all sounds like a little much.”

“I know it does, but I’m like eighty percent sure this is how it happened. We need to find out if Rose was an orphan, then it’s definitely true,” I said.

“Syd’s right,” Walt said. “All these stories need to be proven for people to believe it.”

I picked up some of the photos and waved them around. “I have proof.”

“But it’s not enough,” Syd said. “You need to find someone who actually knows. Someone’s who’s willing to rat.”

“Doubt that will happen,” Sam said.

“I know,” I said. “Nobody’s gonna talk, but we might have a chance if we look around Rose’s basement. Maybe there’s something down there we can pin on him. It doesn’t have to be



any of this stuff, either. As long as it's something bad enough to wake up these brain dead fucks, so realize that Rose and Owen are crooked and power hungry."

The three of them looked at me like I was out of mind, and I didn't blame them. My theories were a little loopy, but it still could have happened. This was our only shot to find some dirt on Rose or Owen, and we needed to take it.

"If we do it quick and keep our faces covered, what do we have to lose?" I asked.

Walt shrugged. "What the fuck? I'm down."

"Me too," Sam said.

"Good luck," Syd said. "I'll be rootin' for you in the slammer."

"Don't talk like that," Sam said. "There might be a chance you'll get community service or something."

Syd's court date landed on a Monday. We thought of skipping school to go, but the cops would catch on quick if we showed our faces in the courtroom. I kept looking at the clock in Adomos' class and at the chalkboard in front of the classroom. My brain felt like someone chopped it up in tiny pieces, and every piece was trying to find another piece to become what my brain used to be.

"Clark," Walt said, "Clark."

He punched me in the arm and I turned to him. "What?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, just wondering how the trial is going."

"I don't think Syd wanted us to worry."

"You're telling me you're not worried?"

“Of course I am, but he wouldn’t want us to count the clock like you’re doing. Imagine if he *did* tell us a time?” Walt said, then let out a quiet laugh.

“I hope he only gets a fine or community service,” I said, and laid my head down on my desk.

“Clark, get up,” Adomos said, and I shot up with a straight back like she tazed me.

I kept thinking that Syd could be getting hauled away to jail, while I’m sitting in class not doing anything about it. Everything I did in this town always resulted in something bad. After I told Rose that his church was stupid, it’s all been downhill. If I only kept my mouth shut and let him slither around, and do his normal thing he does to newcomers. I tried to picture how perfect everything would have been if I was a good kid that day, but that life was a million miles away. I could never reach it no matter how hard I tried. The path I chose was now crumbling underneath me, and all I could do was watch what I created.

When school was over, we walked down the street to the police station where the courtroom was. As soon as we walked in, the red-haired fasshole cop laughed in our faces. I didn’t know what his laugh meant, but me and Walt left before we found out. We wanted to hear the news from someone who cared about Syd, so we went to his cabin to see if Sam was there. The whole walk my legs felt flimsy, like they were shaking even though I was moving them. The fasshole’s laugh made me feel really uneasy. Syd’s cabin looked dark and empty, but we checked it anyway. No Sam. We walked further down the street to Syd’s grandmother’s house, and I was getting more nervous because I knew his grandmother would be home. Walt knocked on her door and we stood close to the edge of the porch. Syd’s grandmother opened the door with tears running down her cheeks.

She invited us in, and once we were inside we saw Sam sitting in a rocking chair in her living room. He had been crying too, but didn't look embarrassed about it. "Six months." He began to choke up again as me and Walt sat down on the couch. "Assault with a deadly weapon."

"Jeez," Walt said, and scratched his head. "In jail?"

"Yep," Sam said, followed by a few snuffles.

"He's going to be at the Clintbury correctional facility," Syd's grandmother said.

Sam began rocking the chair while he looked out the window. "Fuckin' Will and Mike lied the whole time—"

"Watch it," Syd's grandmother said. "I know you're upset, but there's no need for that."

Sam stopped rocking and put his head down like an ashamed puppy. "Yes, ma'am."

"What'd they lie about?" Walt asked.

"They told the judge it was only Syd who was there," Sam said.

"Sounds like they're up to something," Walt said.

"My brother is gone," Sam said with tears streaming down his face.

Syd's grandmother stood behind the rocking chair. "I know, but Syd's a tough kid. He'll be alright." Syd's grandmother spoke with confidence, but she was crying more than Sam was.

"I know it might not be the best time to ask this," I said. "But where are Syd's parents?"

Syd's grandmother smiled at me and started rocking Sam. "Syd would tear me in half if I told you about his parents." She smiled again, this time smiling with her whole face. "But I know now that you're good boys, and Syd needs good boys in his life, so I'll tell you."

Me and Walt leaned in closer, excited to hear about Syd's past. Syd was abandoned by his parents when he was five or six years old, and ever since then his grandmother has taken care of him. I thought there was more to tell, but Syd's grandmother suddenly stopped talking.

“That’s it?” I said, and she probably noticed the disappointment on my face.

“That’s it,” she said.

“But what happened to them?” I asked. “Why did they leave Syd behind?”

“Don’t know. That’s why I stopped talking.”

“Do you have an idea what the reason was?” I asked.

“I do,” she said. “But what’s the point of wondering? My son and his girlfriend dropped Syd off because they wanted time alone, and I never saw them again.” More tears were streaming down her face. “It was like they vanished.”

Syd’s grandmother had a difficult time raising Syd, and after Syd’s grandfather died they fought a lot, resulting in Syd moving to the cabin down the street. The cabin was built by her husband and Syd’s father more than thirty years ago, so she believes it has some sort emotional value to him.

Syd’s grandmother’s lips puckered, and her face had a concentrated look to it. “He was always trouble, and I think my son and his girlfriend knew that. But I don’t know the truth, and I’ll never know. I used to sit up at night rocking in this chair with Syd in my arms wondering when they’d be back, and I thought about every possible reason for them to leave Appleton. After ten years of wondering and waiting I lost hope. It’s been too long.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” she said. “Just stay in touch with Syd. He needs you guys more than he’d like to admit.”

Her and Sam were looking out the window, like they were waiting for Syd to walk down the dirt path to the cabin. Syd’s grandmother was still rocking the chair, while Sam wiped away

his tears every few minutes. I couldn't help but blame myself. I almost wished Syd wasn't a good friend. If he wasn't so loyal he'd be free.

"So, where you gonna stay?" Walt asked.

"I dunno," Sam said then sighed. "Guess I'm gonna hafta go home."

"Fuck that," Walt said. "My mom isn't too crazy about you, but I'll find a way to have you live with me."

Syd's grandmother turned her head to face Walt. "Stop swearing."

"Sorry," Walt said quietly.

"Thanks for caring," Sam said. "But I'm just gonna go home."

Syd's grandmother kept rocking Sam. "You could stay here, Sam. I have plenty of room."

"You don't mind?" Sam asked, and I saw the hope in his face when he looked up at her.

"No, I'd love the company," she said. "Syd used to come by only once or twice a week. It would be nice to talk to someone every day."

"Thank you so much," Sam said, then got up and hugged her. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"You're going back to school, though," she said as she hugged him back.

Sam stopped hugging Syd's grandmother and stepped away from her. "But I haven't been to school in so long, Mrs. Belbin."

"Call me Gloria." She looked at me and Walt, who were still sitting on the couch. "The same goes for you too. I'm sorry, what are your names again?"

"I'm Walt," Walt said then pointed at me. "And this is Clark."

“That’s right,” Gloria said, then looked back at Sam. “And as for you, I don’t care how long it’s been. If you’re going to live here, you’re going to school.”

“But I don’t know what I grade I’m in,” Sam said. “I can’t just show up.”

“Stop making excuses,” Gloria said. “Tomorrow we’ll go to the school and get everything straightened out. Got it?”

“Yes,” Sam said.

“And let’s do something about that hair,” she said, and Sam turned to us with a face full of fear. “It’s way too long and greasy. I know someone in town who can cut it so you don’t have to slick it back all the time.”

I didn’t see Gloria as a strict person, but after what she said about Sam’s hair I wondered if he was going to put up with her. Walt said he would because his parents would either treat him like shit or not take him back at all.

### Chapter 15

Walt called it. Sam did end up putting up with Gloria, but I only saw him in school because I was still grounded for starting the rumor about Ashley. He smiled a lot more, and with his new haircut it was like looking at a different person. He still put jell in it, but only a little so he could spike his hair in the front. Walt laughed when he first saw it and called him duck ass. Sam was in our class, but he was supposed to be a senior. Kids called him super sophomore, but it never fazed him. Unlike me and Walt, Sam seemed like he was at school to learn. Maybe Gloria turned him that way.

A couple days had passed since Syd’s court date, and Appleton got littered with snow.

“We got hit with an early winter this year,” an old man said to his wife as I passed them on my way home from school. They weren’t staring since I was bundled up with a hat and scarf over my face.

The roofs of buildings and houses were covered with so much white they looked unknown to me, but I liked it that way. Appleton felt new again, and I pretended this little town let people do things without consequence. I thought about Syd a lot since he was gone, and in my head I pictured all of us having a snowball fight during Thanksgiving break. But after the daydream ended Syd was placed back in jail, and I thought about all the other things in my life that brought me down.

On the last day of school before we were off for Thanksgiving, I mentioned that we should visit Syd sometime.

“Would Gloria be able to drive us to wherever he is?” I asked.

“She doesn’t have a car,” Sam said. “And if she needs to go anywhere far, she’ll take the bus.”

“We could all do that,” I said, and Sam and Walt agreed. We decided that the Friday after Thanksgiving we would take the bus to see Syd. I just didn’t know how I was going to make it since I was grounded for what felt like the hundredth time. I didn’t tell my parents anything about what happened to Syd, so I couldn’t tell them the truth, and if I did they wouldn’t want me to see him anyways because he’s in jail. I didn’t really care about what they said. Grounded or not, I was seeing Syd.

Around dinnertime, my mother came up to my room and asked me in a worried voice if I was hungry. I could only see her body shape from the hallway light. I told her I wasn’t, and with

the same voice she told me that whenever I got hungry to come down. I think she was really concerned about me because a few minutes later my father came up.

“You need to come downstairs,” he said.

I was sitting on my bed with my knees up to my face. “Why? Or else you’ll hit me again? I just told Mom I’m not hungry.”

“I only did that so you’d learn. You’re not supposed to disrespect me.”

My father’s body looked darker than a black hole, but unlike my mother I didn’t care if I saw his face or his body clearly. “I’m not hungry.”

My father put his right hand on my doorframe and leaned. “It would mean a lot to Mom if you came down.”

“What would it mean to you?”

“I would enjoy your company.”

“You’re just up here ‘cause Mom made you.”

“Fine. Worry your poor mother,” he said, then slammed the door.

As I sat in the darkness, I thought about how my father was in New Hampshire, and how he changed during the summer when we had no rules, and how he was now. My father was strict in New Hampshire, to the point where if you were out a minute after curfew you were grounded for a week. My father was an actual person this summer, not a man who was stern about rules who once in a while showed some warmth towards his kids. Now he was a more advanced version of when we lived in New Hampshire. The warmth was gone, and everything he said or did was a lesson. I thought about him hitting Jesse and Allie in the future when he got angry, and it was so clear it made my stomach hurt. My father was a different man, and I never thought I would want the old him back, but at least some of his personality came out then.



My mother woke me up around eight the next morning. She wanted me to go to Blissful Foods with her to get a turkey. My father was working, but was nice enough to leave us the Explorer. I was surprised he didn't make us walk in the snowstorm, and made sure my mother knew that while we got our coats and hats on. When we got inside Blissful Foods, Jesse and Allie didn't remove one part of clothing as we walked in, and their scarf-covered faces made them look like amateur criminals.

"Say, gimmie all your money," I said.

"Why?" Allie asked, blinking wildly so the snowflakes fell off her lashes.

"Cause you look like—" I put my hat and scarf in my pocket and turned to face the cash registers. "Never mind."

My mother began taking off her hat and gloves, while the four of us still stood in front of the entrance. I saw Owen at one of registers talking to one of the girls. She looked about my age, maybe a little older, so I assumed she was one of Ashley's drones. She had so many I couldn't tell them apart. Owen's face lit up when he saw us, and he began to walk over.

"We've been spotted," I said, and when my mother's head rose from putting her gloves in her purse, Owen was there with a kind smile I could see through.

"How are you, Virginia?" he asked.

"I'm good, Owen," she said politely. "How are you?"

"I'm doing all right," he said, then gripped his hands together. "Just wish it wasn't so awful out there. Bad for business. Usually the day before Thanksgiving is booming."

"I'm sure. That's why we're here," my mother said, followed by a fake laugh I wanted to call her out on.

"And you brought the children," Owen said, looking at Jesse and Allie.

“I needed Clark to help me, and I couldn’t leave them alone,” my mother said, and put her purse strap over her shoulder.

Owen gave me a glance. No facial expression was needed. I knew how he felt, then his eyes returned to my mothers. “Nonsense. You didn’t need Clark. I could have had one of my bag boys bring everything to your car.”

“He’s all the help I need,” my mother said, then looked over at me and smiled. “So Clark is *very* much needed.”

“I see.” Owen nodded his head and became very quiet. “If you need anything else, don’t be a stranger.”

“You know I won’t,” my mother said with popping eyes and an overdone smile.

I realized when Owen walked away that if anyone knew about Rose’s past it would be him. But if I asked Owen anything about Rose, he’d know I was up to something, and soon after that, I would probably be badly beaten by Will and Mike, or even killed. The James and Rose legacy wasn’t something I could easily fuck with. I had to go behind both their backs for answers.

My mother grabbed a shopping cart, and we went to the back of the store where the freezers were. That giant crucifix was still placed on the back wall, and I cringed at how creepy it looked, just like I did when I first saw it. My mother was bent over, headfirst in one the freezers piling turkeys on top of each other.

“Hurry up, I hate this place,” I said, but I don’t think she heard me over the freezer buzz.

I came up from behind her, leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder. She popped up quick like she expected Owen to be there with a surprised and interested face. “What is it?”

“Hurry up,” I said.

“I’m trying, but there’s so many turkeys,” she said, then pointed at the pile she formed.

I looked up at the crucifix again. The dark brown cross and golden Jesus were too big, and I pictured Jesus getting off the cross, climbing down to floor and walking around Blissful Foods like a resurrected zombie. “Its creepy here, Mom.”

She crossed her arms like I was wasting her time. “You were fine a minute ago.”

“Because I forgot about the giant crucifix in the store,” I said. “It’s weird. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Don’t look at it,” she said.

“It’s kinda hard,” I said. “Look at it. It’s so big, no matter what it’s gonna be in the corner of your eye.”

She gave me the shopping list. “If you wanna get out sooner, get everything else.”

I took the list and looked at Jesse and Allie, who were still fully clothed. They didn’t move and were quiet, like badly dressed dolls. “*You* even look creepy. You guys wanna get this stuff?”

They nodded their heads and we went into one of the aisles nearby.

Jesse and Allie were in front of me. They were waddling slightly from all the extra weight on their bodies. “Guys, take off your hats at least. It’s warm in here.” I took off both their hats and they jumped to try and snatch them back.

“We’re cold,” Jesse said, still jumping.

I held their hats in my hands as I watched them continue to jump. “It’s warm in here. Look, you’re sweating. Take off the scarves too.”

“No,” Allie said.

“Okay. I guess I’ll have to take those off too,” I said, and grabbed for their scarves, but they ran away.

“I’m gonna get ‘em.” I put their hats in my pocket and started running down the aisle after them. They went into the next aisle giggling, and I turned and ran down the aisle I was in. I peeked around the corner of the next aisle, and saw Jesse and Allie looking over their shoulders as they ran, and scooped them both up in my arms.

“I got you now,” I said and let out an evil laugh while they squirmed.

We were only a few aisles down from the freezers, and I saw my mother watching us as she dug through the turkeys.

“Put them down,” a voice said behind me.

I turned around with Jesse and Allie in my arms to face Owen. His ghost-white face was calm and unreadable. Owen’s face at the moment was the perfect example of what it would look like if your face muscles had died. I looked up and down at his black pants, blazer, white dress-shirt, and his navy blue bow tie with stupid white dots on it.

“There’s no horsing around in the store,” he said. “Now put them down.”

I didn’t want to put them down, but I did. “*Sorry.*”

Owen looked at Jesse and Allie and smiled. “Just don’t do it again,” he said, “I’m watching you.”

“Gimme back my hat,” Allie said.

I watched Owen walk away towards my mother to help her put a turkey into the shopping cart. His Clown days were through if I got some dirt on him and Rose.

“Clark,” Allie said. “Gimmie my hat.”

“No, it’s too warm in here,” I said, and she tried to steal it from my pocket, but I backed away quick.

My mother was pushing the cart over to us now. “Did you get anything?”

Allie was still fighting with me for her hat. “No, as you can see, we got preoccupied.”

“Alright, Allie, stop. You can put it on before we leave,” she said, and Allie went over to my mother and grabbed the handle of the shopping cart.

The store was still empty while we filled the cart with things on the Thanksgiving list. My mother sent me to another aisle to grab cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie filling, and when I returned she was talking to a couple who appeared out of nowhere. I walked over with the cans as they talked. Jesse and Allie were leaning against one of the shelves as they hid their faces in their scarves.

I threw the cans in the cart, and gave the man and woman a friendly wave so I didn’t interrupt their conversation. The man looked about in his mid-forties. His olive dress shirt stretched at the belly, and it looked like he was carrying a beach ball underneath. Every time he talked it jiggled. The top button of his shirt was buttoned, but you could still see a mound of black hairs sprouting out. I knew the rest of his body looked like that, and thought the top of his head could use some of that hair to cover his lousy comb-over. His wife or lady friend was heavy, but not as much as him. You could see her stomach and love handles through her red turtleneck. She wore glasses that were round and small in the frames. She had a chin that was so pointy you could probably break rocks with it. Her brown hair was a little past her ears. The weather outside made it look greasy and tangled.

“We’re having the fundraiser over my house a week from tomorrow,” the woman said.

“Well, I’ve never been to one,” my mother said, her voice sounding nervous. “Do you think it will be alright?”

“Oh, yeah,” the fat man said, chiming in before the women could. “Shouldn’t be a problem at all since you come to church.”

My mother looked at me and didn’t realize I was back and listening to their conversation. “Clark, this is Nolan and Sage Hoard. I met them at church.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, and shook both their hands.

Nolan gave me a look while he crooked his fat head. “Haven’t seen you around on Sundays, and you’re never here with your mother and the little ones. What do you do, my boy?”

His tone and question threw me off, and I didn’t know what he was trying to get out of me, but I’m sure either him or Sage knew about my problems with Rose or Ashley. “I play with my brother and sister, go to school, and hang out with a couple of kids.”

Nolan’s head bobbed like he was interested. “That’s good. Who do you hang out with?”

“Just a couple of kids,” I said. “You probably don’t know them.”

Nolan looked at Sage then looked back at me. “Try me. This isn’t the biggest town, you know.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and clenched my jaw, and tried to think of an excuse to not answer his question.

“Clark, I don’t see any stuffing mix in here,” my mother said. “Could you go get some for me?”

“Sure,” I said then looked at the Hoards. “Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure,” Sage said, and Nolan watched me like a guard watches a suspicious prisoner.

I walked away fast, so he couldn't ask me any more questions, but I heard little feet following me. Jesse and Allie were behind me, but I waited until I turned the corner to look at them. "You didn't wanna stay with Mom?"

"No," Jesse said. "Those people are weird."

"What fundraiser were they talking about?" I asked.

"Something for church, I think," Jesse said. "They want Mom to go."

"So they can suck out her brain and make her weird like she used to be," Allie said.

"Not on my watch," I said, then tickled Allie.

The three of us went into the next aisle, and I saw Trish on her knees rearranging soup cans and boxes of crackers.

"Workin' hard?"

Trish looked up from the shelf she was organizing. "Lapine? What are you doing here?"

"Pickin' some stuff up for tomorrow," I said. "What do you think?"

She went back to placing cans on one of bottom shelves. "Those overly dressed dwarves your brother and sister?"

"Hey," Allie said in a muffled voice, her scarf was covering her mouth.

"I need some information," I said.

Trish stood up, and I could tell I had her full attention. "About?"

"Rose's past," I said.

Trish looked around to see if anyone was coming down the aisle, then put out her right hand and smiled.

"Question first, then the answer, then the money," I said.

Trish whipped her hand to her side like she was frustrated. "Fine."

“Do you know anything about Rose’s past?” I asked.

“Nope,” Trish said then put out her hand again. “Okay, gimmie some cash.”

I opened my hands in front of Jesse and Allie, and they both grabbed on. “Sorry. No info, no cash.”

“Fuck you, that’s information,” Trish said and we started to walk away. “You better give me something, or else I’ll tell Owen about this conversation.

I stopped walking with Jesse and Allie. Trish had me trapped in a corner. “Guys, go and find Mom, I’ll meet up with you in a minute.”

Jesse and Allie ran out of the aisle, and I turned around and walked over to Trish.

Her mouth of metal welcomed me back. “So, how much we talkin’?”

I dug in my pocket and pulled out a five and handed it to her.

Trish pocketed it as soon as it touched her skin. “That’s a start, but what else you got?”

“Nothing,” I said. “That’s all I have on me.”

Trish put her hands in her green Blissful Foods smock. “Gimmie that nice pea coat you’re wearing and we’ll call it even.”

“Right now?” I asked. “Are you crazy?”

Trish smiled, and I began to think that metal mouth of hers enjoyed feeding on the weak a little too much. “But that’s what I want, and a deal’s a deal.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll give it to you, but not now. It’s a blizzard outside.”

Trish closed her lips together. “When?”

“First day back from vacation,” I said.

“Alright, I’ll let you enjoy for a few more days.” Trish’s metal smile returned, and I stood there waiting for an evil villain laugh to follow. “Let’s have a handshake to settle the deal.”



I shook her hand quickly to make sure she kept her mouth shut, then left her aisle to find my mother, Jesse, and Allie. They were already at one of the front registers, and some kid from school was scanning our food. It filled six bags. I looked outside, and the wind looked like it was still blowing just as hard as when we left the house. I would have been an idiot if I gave Trish my coat. Maybe she was testing to see how stupid I was. Trish was pretty sneaky like that. At the end of the register I checked to see which bags were the lightest and gave them to Jesse and Allie.

“I don’t wanna,” Allie said as I handed her a bag.

“You don’t have a choice,” my mother said.

In the distance I could see the Hoards coming to our register. They were the only people in the store, and once I saw them, the crucifix that had been in the corner of my eye grabbed my attention. I put Jesse and Allie’s hats on, then bundled myself up before grabbing two bags at the end of the register. The weight of the turkey and some of the other groceries made the bags feel like they were fifty pounds. The Hoards shouted goodbye to us as we walked out, just in case we didn’t hear them over the wind.

Jesse and Allie put their bags on the kitchen table right away when we got home, then went into the living room to watch T.V. I took everything out of the bags and left them on the table for my mother to put away. She didn’t say thank you or anything to me. I thought it was weird, but ignored it and joined Jesse and Allie on the couch. They were watching *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*

“I’d like to be a millionaire,” I said when I sat down next to them. “How’s school?”

Allie turned away from the T.V. and looked at me with a grumpy frown. “Bad. They still call us the devil twins.”

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought they'd stop by now."

"You thought wrong," Allie said. "Nobody likes us."

"They think we're weird," Jesse said, then smiled at me. "But I don't care."

"That's the spirit," I said, and we went back to watching T.V.

"You're lucky I covered for you in Blissful Foods," my mother said from the kitchen.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because you know no one approves of the kids you hang out with," she said.

I looked at Jesse and Allie, but they were paying attention to the woman who was on her 25,000-dollar question. "I don't care what this town thinks."

"Apparently not," she said.

"You like Walt," I said. "And the couple times Sam and Syd have came over, you seemed to like them too."

My mother came out to the living room to talk to me. "Deep down I think Walt and Sam *are* good kids. I just think when you guys hang out with Syd you get in trouble"

"That's not true," I said.

My mother looked at me blankly to see if I was lying. "I've heard things, I'm not stupid."

"You've heard lies," I said.

"It sounded pretty accurate to me," she said. "Because I heard the same stories from different people."

I turned away from her and faced the T.V. "Whatever, believe their lies and not your son."

"Syd's the ringleader," she said. "You, Sam, and Walt just follow him around and cause trouble."

“We *choose* to do it,” I said still looking at the T.V. “Syd never made us do anything.”

“Now you’re just lying to yourself,” she said. “You never would have done this back in Colebrook.”

“I never had friends like this in Colebrook,” I said.

“They’re not your friends,” she said. “Friends don’t put you in bad situations.”

I turned back to her, and by the tone of my voice she could probably tell I was getting sick of the conversation. “Friends look out for each other. And that’s what they do. No matter what they have my back, and I have theirs.”

“Sounds like a gang,” she said.

“It’s not, we’re just friends,” I said.

“We’ll see,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll hear about Syd and his little gang running around town.”

“Yeah, probably at the that hate fest you were invited to.” I looked away from her again. “And you won’t hear anything about Syd, ‘cause he’s gone.”

“They finally sent him away?” she asked.

I looked down at our dark wood floor and nodded my head.

“See? Why would you wanna be involved with someone like that?” she asked. “He’s a criminal.”

“He has my back, though,” I said. “Always has.”

“He’s gone, Clark,” she said. “Forget about him and make new friends, and tell Walt and Sam to do the same.”

“No one likes us,” I said. “And we can’t do that to Syd. We can’t abandon him.”

“If you guys redeem yourselves,” she said. “Appleton *will* forgive you.”

“They might say they forgive,” I said. “But they’ll always judge and keep their eyes on us. You don’t know. You think you know everything about this town because you go to church. If you’re a misfit here like me, there’s an evil this town dishes out.”

“There’s no evil here,” she said.

“Even Dad sees it,” I said.

“No. You’re father just doesn’t want to go to church, that’s all,” she said. “He doesn’t think this town is evil. That’s your excuse for not accepting anything.”

I didn’t have anything else to say at that point because I had no physical proof that Appleton *was* evil. The way people treated you if you didn’t attend church or pretend that the town was normal was proof in my eyes. Regular towns wouldn’t give a shit what you did, as long as it didn’t affect anyone. The people of Appleton seemed to only accept their ideal townspeople. Which to me was someone who went to church, church functions, licked Owen’s clown shoes, and kissed Rose’s wrinkly ass.

## Chapter 16

Everything I looked forward to on Thanksgiving was in New Hampshire. That was where we ate my father’s deer meat stuffing, and Memere’s homemade gravy with the most moist and tender turkey I’d ever eaten. I was the last one to get up, and I came downstairs to my parents in the kitchen juggling canned and boxed food while they tried to not to run into each other. I could see the stove from the last step, and noticed a large turkey in the oven.

“We’re having Thanksgiving here?” I asked.

My mother stopped walking. She was holding two cans of corn in one hand and a glass bowl in the other. “Why would you ask that? You went with me yesterday to buy a turkey.”

I thought about what she said for a minute and realized I was still groggy. “Oh, yeah,” I said, but I was still upset that this year wouldn’t be the same as all the others. “I just thought we’d still be going up to New Hampshire today.”

My mother was looking at me. “We got everything here.” She smiled then put the bowl and cans on the kitchen table.

Jesse and Allie were still in their pajamas like I was. They were sitting on the couch watching T.V. and pointing at the floats they liked from the parade. I wanted to crawl back into bed until tomorrow came.

I went back to the entranceway of the kitchen, and watched my parents speed around like they were in a competition for the fastest Thanksgiving dinner. I looked up at the clock above the stove, and it said 1:30. “When’s everything gonna be ready?”

“Around three or three-thirty,” my mother said.

“I’m going back to bed,” I said.

My father was doing something near the stove, and turned around to face me. He was wearing his usual suit he wore to work, but instead his tie was a light brown instead of black. “No, everyone’s going to get dressed. Make sure to put something nice on, too.”

“Why?” I said then looked down at my t-shirt and boxers. “So we can sit around and make a mess on our good clothes at dinner?”

My mother was wearing a peach-colored evening dress. It annoyed me that both my parents were dressed so nice for such a watered down version of Thanksgiving. “It will be nice,” my mother said. “We never dress up.”

“I’m the only one who never dresses up.” I said. “Dad dresses up every day for work and you, Jesse, and Allie dress up for church.”

“It’s only dinner, Clark,” my father said. Both my parents weren’t working on anything. Their complete attention was on me now.

“It’s so stupid. It’s not like dressing up is gonna fill the void of Thanksgivings in New Hampshire,” I said. “Every holiday here will suck because Appleton sucks.”

“Stop acting like a punk,” my father said. “We’re here and that’s that. Deal with it and be open to the change.”

I looked at my parents, who were watching me with hopeful stares. But they didn’t know. Everything was all cushiony since my mother went to church. My father could live the way he wanted without religion in his way, while my mother pretended to be thrilled about Rose and Owen’s Catholic community. While the misfit (me), gets force-fed the shit Appleton offered. I didn’t say anything else to them, then went upstairs.

“You better be going up to room to change,” my father said.

*Fuck you.* I wanted to say it so bad I mouthed it as I went up to my room. I didn’t dare take the chance and say it, even if it was Thanksgiving.

Dinner was served around three forty-five. I stayed in my room until it was time to eat. My father stomped up the stairs and stormed into my room to get me. He looked surprised when he saw me wearing tan dress pants and a white button-up shirt.

“I was expecting to see you in bed,” he said.

“Nope,” I said buttoning my last button. “I put on my clothes like a good boy.”

“Good. Now come down stairs and join us like one too.”

“Yes, *Father*,” I said then walked by him and out to the hallway.

“Don’t be a smart ass.”

My mother, Jesse, and Allie were already sitting at the kitchen table. Allie was wearing her pink and white dress that she usually wore to church, and Jesse put on a light blue dress shirt with a little black tie. The turkey was in the middle of the table surrounded by all the fixings. I sat at the end of the table, farthest away from my mother and father. My father began cutting the turkey as soon as we were all in the room, and by the way he was struggling to slice it, I could tell there was something wrong. The knife was barely going in, and it looked like he was trying to stab a solid block of ice.

My father stood up and began slamming the knife into the turkey. "It just doesn't want to go in." He wiped the sweat from his forehead while I looked at the knife sticking out of the turkey.

"What's wrong with it?" my mother asked.

"I dunno. It's been in the oven since five," he said.

"Maybe we cooked it too long?" my mother asked, as my father continued to pry open the bird.

"It does look a little dark," I said.

"It's fine," my father said. Burnt turkey flakes scattered while he worked the knife back and fourth. He managed to cut a few pieces he put on a nearby plate. "Who wants a piece?"

"I'm all set with everything else," I said.

"C'mon," my father said. "Your mother went through a lot of trouble cooking this."

"It's fine," my mother said and watched me from across the table. "I didn't expect you to try it anyways."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"You fight until the bitter end if you don't want to do something. I'm just tired of it."

Deep down I didn't want to try anything she made, and debated asking my father what he cooked just to piss her off. "You shouldn't talk."

"And why is that, Clark?" my mother asked.

My father began serving himself squash, and nodded his head at Jesse and Allie to start if they wanted.

"You were so set on having this perfect little church family to satisfy the town," I said. "And when you didn't get your way you practically tore this family apart by complaining and setting the no-rules law on the house."

"But it was necessary," she said. My mother was moving her hands a lot while she talked. "I didn't understand how things worked around here yet, but I found a loophole, and now we're happy."

"I'm not happy." I said. "And I dunno why you should be."

"You're not happy because you're a brat, and for once you realize you can't get your way," she said this in a harsh voice that made Jesse and Allie look up from their plates.

"No." I said. "I'm not happy because of what this town has done to our family."

My mother looked at me for a few seconds and then began serving herself. I continued to watch her, and didn't care if she wanted to end the conversation. "You know why you're unhappy?"

"Clark, just drop it," my father said.

"You don't even like church," I said. "You just go so the town doesn't hate us."

"I go for my family," my mother said while she looked down at her plate. "So we're not hated and treated unfairly."

"That isn't right, though," I said. "Appleton shouldn't be able to do that."



“Well, they do,” my mother said, and continued staring at her plate. Everyone else was eating except for me.

I still watched my mother. She looked nervous. “Mom?”

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t have to pretend anymore,” I said.

She picked her head up and finally looked back at me. “What are talking about?”

“No matter what, this town will hate me,” I said. “Our family will always be known as the one whose son is the fuck-up. Save yourself the headache, take off the mask every time you step out the front door, and be yourself.”

My mother’s eyebrows moved closer to her eyes, and she squinted. “Unlike you, I care about others in this family. I’m not just doing this for you, Clark. Like I said before, I’m doing it for all of you, so we can have a normal life.”

“And where do I fit in?” I asked.

My mother looked at me and smiled for the first time since the conversation started. “You’ll always fit in here. But in order to fit into Appleton, you need to be good. After a few months people will come around.”

I sighed. “No, they won’t. I’m branded as trash.”

“You don’t think I stick up for you when I overhear people or have someone approach me about you?” my mother asked.

“No,” I said.

“I do,” she said. “And I will always stick up for you. And when you straighten out your act, I will go to great lengths to let people know.” For the first time since dinner started, I didn’t

have anything to say. I just looked at my mother who stared back, ready for my next comment.

“Why don’t you grab something before these three eat it all?”

I took a piece of the burnt turkey and covered it in gravy to kill the taste. As soon as it hit my tongue, I craved my Memere’s.

After dinner I jumped out my window, and the cold air felt nice during my walk to Walt’s house. Walt had just finished eating too when I stopped by, and B was in the kitchen cleaning up when I came inside.

Walt stayed near the door after he closed it. “I don’t wanna stay here. I’ve been stuck with her all day.”

I turned around right after he spoke, and began walking to the front door. No quick glimpse of B today.

It was quiet outside, and the houses we walked by actually looked comforting from the glow each window gave. The color of the light reminded me of candle flames. Walt rolled up his jacket sleeves, and stretched his collar with his fingers so the cold could get underneath his t-shirt. We didn’t talk much during our walk to the train tracks, and I tried to think of something to talk about, but every idea that popped into my head was negative. At the train tracks I sat down on the steel, and jumped from the coldness.

“Bet you five bucks your ass will stick,” Walt said.

“It’s not that bad anymore. My ass warmed it up.”

We were both laughing, and when I looked up I noticed Walt stopped. He was staring at something behind me. Each second his face looked more frightened.

“What’s wrong?”

Walt pointed with his mouth open in shock at what he was seeing. I stood up, and turned around to see Sam running from two boys riding bikes. Riding up next to him on both sides, the boys smacked him with yardsticks. Sam protected his head with his arms, but the boys hit him on his sides until he covered his body, leaving his head open for a whapping.

“Who the fuck are these assholes?” I said as I watched Sam getting pummeled.

“His brothers.”

“Should we help him?”

Sam’s brothers gave him a hard smack to the back of the head, causing him to fall forward, then turned their bikes around and started pedaling away once they knew he wasn’t going to get up.

“And don’t come back, fuck face,” one of the brothers said, as they rode away.

We ran over to Sam. His face had thick red rectangles all over it. His eyes were closed, and we shook him until he opened them.

“Hey, guys,” Sam said, like the beating never happened.

“What the fuck was that?” Walt asked.

“Just a stupid game they like to play,” Sam said.

“What’s it called?” I asked. “Beat your brother till he’s dead?”

We helped Sam get to his feet. “Pretty much.”

Walt brushed some of the dirt and snow off Sam’s jean jacket. “Why didn’t you stay with Gloria?”

“She told me to go home,” Sam said. “She said it’s best to be with family on the holidays.”

“Not your family,” Walt said.

“No shit,” Sam said. “But when I go back to her place she’ll feel sorry when she sees me, and I’ll never have to go to that hell hole again.”

The smells of Thanksgiving were gone by the morning, and I couldn’t hear any activity in the house besides Jesse and Allie running around once in a while. I was supposed to meet the guys at Gloria’s at eleven to catch the twelve o’ clock bus, but I had no idea how I was going to sneak out while my mother, Jesse, and Allie were home.

I came downstairs, and watched my mother pick apart the remains of the burnt turkey. She was up to her wrists in the bird, and it looked like a hard task for her to get down and dirty like that. “I’m going to see Syd today.”

She looked up from the pile of ripped meat. “Fine, go right ahead.” She took out her hands and wiped them with a baby blue towel on the kitchen table. “Your father might be angry if he finds out I let you leave, but I think it’s good for you to see Syd like that.”

I walked to Gloria’s by myself, but made sure to wear a hat and a scarf over my face. Ever since winter started in Appleton, I looked at everything I normally would just pass by. Snow made this town beautiful. The buildings and sidewalks were covered in white, and all the light poles were coated with a thick sheet of ice. Winter was the only thing I actually liked about Appleton. Walt and Sam were outside waiting for Gloria to finish getting ready when I got there. She came out wearing a tight forest green dress, and it didn’t look good. It hugged her body, and showed her large hips. But none of us said anything during the walk to the center of town.

The bus was empty when we got on, and the three of us ran to the back while Gloria took her time. The seats smelled moldy and like plastic, but other than that the bus seemed pretty clean. Syd’s and Gloria’s cabin was the last thing I saw in town as Appleton rolled away from us through my left side window. Sam and Walt sat in the middle, and I looked over at Gloria’s

white hair glowing from the afternoon sunlight. She was watching the trees pass by, and I wondered how she could be so calm about visiting someone she loved in jail. Jails and prisons were fucked up places. I had never been to one, but I'd seen two or three documentaries about them with my father. During the bus ride I pictured us walking into the jail, asking for Syd and the guard telling us he was murdered that morning. Everyone was quiet during the drive, and I wanted to ask Sam and Walt if they had the same feeling I did about visiting Syd. But I never asked because I thought it would make me sound like a pussy.

From the bus stop it was about a half-mile walk to the jail, Gloria said. Clintbury was a small town like Appleton and Starkville, but it had a lot more businesses and stores. It reminded me of a tiny city with fewer traffic lights and concrete. Behind all the buildings were either a few trees or acres of woods. Clintbury had a little bit of everything. Appleton tried to do that, but failed.

Sam slipped on a patch of ice as we walked up a steep sidewalk. "Are we almost there?" he said while Walt helped him up.

"It's right after this hill. Don't get snappy," Gloria said calmly, but she was ready to bite if she had to.

At the end of the steep sidewalk there was a parking lot to our right, which led to an industrial building that looked like it was stolen off the set of a futuristic movie. It was a mixture of brick, and what seemed like stainless steel walls with at least fifty glass windows. The roof of the building was round and dome shaped, and reminded me of a flying saucer. Jesse, Allie, and my father would have loved seeing it. They had a similar eye for strange things. Especially if it involved UFO's or anything resembling science fiction.

"We're here," Gloria said, and started walking across the parking lot.

We followed her and I felt better every time I saw the weird building. It was nothing like the shithole jails I've seen on T.V.

"Man, this place is legit," Walt said.

"It's a lot nicer than the other jails he could have gone to," Gloria said. "Syd's very lucky."

When we were close to the front doors I tilted my head up to look at the building one more time, hoping that Gloria's opinion was about the whole jail and not just the outside. We walked inside to the front desk and a guard stamped "visitor" on our hands after Gloria told him that we were there to see Syd. I rubbed the red letters below my knuckles while we followed the guard through two doors that he had to unlock. The room he brought us to was huge. It had a lot of tables and chairs, and reminded me of the cafeteria at school. There were six or seven inmates in the chairs, either waiting for their visitors or talking with their loved ones from the outside. Their jumpsuits were all the same color, light brown that reminded me of coffee once you put milk in it. Syd was at the end of the room. It took me a few seconds of searching to find him since all the inmates looked the same. He was sitting at the table with his hands folded as he watched us walk over to him.

"Hey, guys," Syd said. He was very quiet when he spoke, like he would get in trouble if he raised his voice. The three of us stood around him for a few seconds before we sat down at the table.

"How you holdin' up?" Sam asked as he pulled out a chair.

"I'm doing okay," Syd said. "I mean, it sucks but...."

"Is anyone giving you trouble?" Gloria asked.

“No.” Syd unfolded his hands. “My cell mate is nice. He’s been in here for a few months, so I’m staying under his wing.”

“Just do that and six months will fly by,” I said.

“It’s not that easy.” Syd’s voice got a little harsher, and he sounded more like himself.

“It’s only been what? A week?”

“Not even,” Walt said.

“Yeah, and it feels like a month,” Syd said.

Gloria reached over and touched Syd’s hand. I focused on the red letters stamped on her hand. They were more defined than mine. “Just make the best of it.”

Syd took his hands away and hid them underneath the table. “Don’t tell me that. You don’t even know what it’s like in here. *I* don’t even know what it’s like here.

Gloria kept her hands on the table. “I’m only trying to help.”

Syd shook his head. “Well, don’t.” His eyes shifted from Gloria’s to Sam’s. “Nice hair.”

“You like it?” Sam asked, then began playing with the front of his spiked hair.

“No,” Syd said. “What, are you trying to be a model or something?” Me and Walt laughed, and Sam and Gloria sat there. “You look ridiculous.”

“Don’t insult him, Syd,” Gloria said. “We all came here to see how you were doing.”

Syd stared at Gloria, teeth clenched behind his closed lips. He slammed his hands on the table and it made Gloria jump. “I can say whatever the hell I want to to these three. They owe me.”

“I don’t care,” Gloria said and folded her arms. “You don’t treat people like that. Sam didn’t have to come and visit you, but he wanted to.”

Syd looked at me, Sam, and Walt. Taking his time with each of us. “You don’t have to visit me. Just get those fucks who put me away.”

“I think they’ll find us before we find them,” I said.

“Whatever,” Syd said. “Just make sure they pay.”

“Haven’t you learned anything?” Gloria asked.

“Shut up,” Syd said. “I’m talking to them.”

Gloria got up. “Let’s go. I didn’t want to believe it, but I had a feeling this was a waste of time.”

We got up from our seats to follow Gloria.

Syd stood up. “I need this to be done.”

The three of us nodded then started to walk away from the table Syd was standing in front of. “At least say you’re gonna do something.”

Sam turned around. “We will.”

“You guys better. We’re a family,” Syd said, then we started walking away again. “Don’t forget. I’m in here for you guys.” Syd was yelling across the room, and the other inmates were looking over in his direction.

On the bus back to Appleton the four of us didn’t say anything. I watched Gloria stare out her window, and I wondered what she was thinking. She probably thought Syd was an ungrateful little shit who will never change. That’s what I thought, but I wasn’t related to him, so I could see Gloria having some sort sympathy.

“So, we gonna actually go after Will and Mike?” I asked.

“Yeah, but we got plenty of time,” Walt said.

Gloria turned away from the window. “You be won’t be going after anyone.”



Sam leaned forward in his seat so he could look at Gloria. “But, Gloria we—”

“No,” Gloria said. “I don’t care if you owe him, and I don’t care if you’re a *family*. It’s not going to happen, and if it does you’ll be finding another place to stay.”

Sam leaned back in his seat then looked at Walt and shrugged.

“Don’t think I won’t do it,” Gloria said. Her voice snapped like a viper.

### Chapter 17

After the bus dropped us off in the center of town, me and Walt parted ways with Gloria and Sam. The afternoon sun was bright, and I hoped it didn’t melt too much of the snow. It was too warm out to hide my face in a scarf, so we walked behind the buildings to our neighborhood. I wanted to tell Walt that I didn’t want to hunt down Will and Mike, but he would probably go on a rant about how much we owed Syd, and how we were his family and that family has each other’s back. But I didn’t make Syd take the blame, and I didn’t tell him he had to get revenge on Will and Mike for me either. In my eyes it was his own damn fault. And the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t stand the idea of getting revenge for him.

“You think Syd is gonna be alright?” Walt asked.

“I dunno,” I said and dug my hands in my jacket pocket. “If he keeps up with the attitude, he probably won’t be.”

Walt shrugged his shoulders and looked inside the candy store as we passed by. “Eh, he’s only like that with us ‘cause we’re close.”

“I think it’s something he can’t control.”

There was a patch of ice that me and Walt noticed on our street. It was a few feet long, and looked like the shape of Illinois. Walt got a running start and slid across the whole patch. He looked like a professional, wiggling his weight as his body zoomed across it. Now it was my

turn. I knew my slide wasn't going to be as good as Walt's, but I was still going to try. I got a running start like Walt did, then jumped once the snow ended. I slid for a few seconds, but my feet weren't steady on the ice, which caused me to fall hard on my back. My body slid a few more inches, but I wasn't even close to the end of the patch where Walt was. He was laughing while half my back and ass felt the cold wetness of the ice.

"I would've paid to see that," Walt said.

I stayed lying on the ice. "Give me fifty then." Walt laughed again, then slid over and helped me up. "Show-off."

When we got to my house I saw a man in a brown suit walking down my front porch steps. He was scrawny and nerdy-looking. If there was one person he looked like, it would be Harry Truman. He had similar glasses and hairstyle, except that his hair was dark brown. I didn't know why this man was at my house, but he walked with a strut while slightly swinging his briefcase in his right hand. It was strange to see because this man was practically swimming in his corduroy blazer. He looked weak and fragile, but that walk he had meant business. The Truman doppelganger didn't even look at us. He got into his black Mercedes and pulled out of my driveway, almost clipping Walt with his right brake light because he was going so fast.

"Watch it, shithead," Walt said.

He drove up the street towards the train tracks. It wasn't too common that people drove that way, so I knew he wasn't from Appleton.

My father was on the couch reading a newspaper when I walked inside. He didn't pay attention to the sound of the front door opening or me talking off my shoes. It seemed like all that mattered to him was his newspaper. "Who was that guy?"

My father put the newspaper pages together and carefully flipped to the next page with his thumb. "It's actually gonna happen."

"What?"

"That was the Simmons' lawyer." He was still reading his newspaper as he said it. "He stopped by to drop off a court summons for you." My father paused again, and it pissed me off that he kept doing it. "February 16<sup>th</sup>, you're goin' to court."

My stomach dropped and my body lost all its warmth. "But they don't have proof."

"I know that. But obviously Simmons' lawyer thinks they have a case."

I stared at the back of my father's head as he continued to read. "I'm scared. What if the judge sides with them?"

"I don't know, Clark. But after your mother gets back from the Hoards I think we're gonna go up to New Hampshire for a few days."

Usually I would jump for joy knowing that I was getting out of Appleton. But after I heard the news that I might go to jail I just felt dead inside. "Why?"

"Because it will be good to get away for a few days. We'll visit Memere and Pepere and the rest of the family too."

I thought about what he said, and it sounded like a good idea. "You think Mom will wanna go?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine. She can miss one Sunday here."

I heard Jesse and Allie's footsteps upstairs. It had been quiet since I got home, so I thought they were with my mother.

My father put his newspaper down on the coffee table and turned on the T.V. “She’ll be thrilled when I tell her about the summons.” He flipped through the channels so fast I couldn’t tell what was on them.

I could still hear Jesse and Allie stomping around upstairs, so I went up to their room to see what they were doing. Jesse and Allie couldn’t have looked guiltier once they saw me. They were both sitting on their beds facing each other with their hands folded.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Um, a staring contest?” Jesse said.

“I’ll give you credit,” I said. “That was a pretty quick excuse. Now tell me what you were really doing.” I looked at Allie, but she didn’t make eye contact with me. “Allie?”

“We were playin’ lava jump,” she said.

“Lava jump? What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s when you pretend the ground is hot lava and you gotta jump over it,” she said.

“Like this,” Jesse said, then stood up on his bed, jumped up and down a few times and leaped over to Allie’s bed. Jesse laughed and began wrestling Allie while I watched. Jesse pinned her down, but Allie dug her nails into Jesse’s arms and pushed him off her bed. Jesse began squirming around as soon as he hit the floor. “Oh, no. The lava.”

“I win,” Allie said while she watched Jesse. She looked up at me and smiled like it was the right thing to say.

“You two are a couple of weirdos,” I said, and watched Jesse stick out his hand so Allie could pull him out of the lava. “But I wouldn’t want it any other way. School going okay?”

Allie ignored Jesse’s hand. “No. But me and Jesse decided to be like you.”

“Like me?” I asked.

Allie grabbed Jesse's hand and pulled him up on to the bed. "We don't care about what they say anymore."

I walked over to Allie's bed, but pretended I was stepping on lava while I walked. The "oo" and "ow" noises made them both laugh.

"I'm proud of you guys," I said once I sat down. "You didn't let this town get to you."

I went to my bedroom after, and the window brought in some white light you usually see when there's a lot of snow outside. Since my light was off, the light from the snow seemed extra bright and almost blinding. My bed was the brightest thing in the room and there was a dark mound underneath it. Before I crawled under my bed, I remembered it was my schoolbag filled with Rose's photos. While standing there looking into the brightness, I realized if my parents were gone for the weekend, it be easier to break into Rose's basement without them getting suspicious.

I slept for the rest of the afternoon. When I woke up the light was gone, and my bedroom never looked so dark. Instead of turning on the light, I decided to leave my room and went downstairs. No one was in the kitchen or the living room. I smirked at the thought that they left me behind.

"Is anyone home?"

"We're up here," my mother said from what sounded like her room.

I stopped smirking, and went back upstairs to my parent's room to find them packing a couple of suitcases. I guess my mother was fine with leaving Appleton for a couple of days.

"You better start packing, Clark," my mother said as she folded one of her sweaters.

"Don't wanna waste the whole time driving up there."

I stood in the doorway and watched both of my parents pack their suitcases on their bed. I looked to my right and noticed that Jesse and Allie were doing the same thing in their room. “I don’t think I’m going.”

My father stuffed some of his clothes violently in his suitcase. “It’ll be good for everyone to leave here. We might even stay until Monday morning.”

“So?” I said.

“So? So you won’t have to go to school on Monday.” My father zipped up his suitcase. “Why don’t you want to go? I’m surprised you’re not already waiting in the car.”

My father was looking at me now since he was finished packing, and he was right. I was the one in this family who wanted to get out of Appleton more than anyone. But those photos in my bag spoke to me. There might be something else in Rose’s basement, and I wasn’t going to miss the opportunity to find it.

I came up with the most bullshit lie of my life. “Walt’s snake died.”

“So?” my father said, and I wanted to laugh because he sounded just like me when he said it. But I kept a straight face. “What does that have to do with you?”

“He’s taking it pretty rough.” I rubbed the back of my head. “And as his friend, I feel like I should be there for him.”

My mother stopped packing, stood up straight and put her hands on her hips. “Oh, yeah? How’d he die then?”

“Walt bought him this summer, but he didn’t know that the snake was a desert snake.” I paused for a second to look at both of them in the eyes individually. I thought maybe making eye contact would make the lie more believable. “And it got colder since we live in New England and he died.”

My mother and father gave each other a quick glance. It was that kind of look like they knew I was full of shit.

“Just start packing, Clark,” my mother said.

“Please, don’t make me go,” I said. I was ready to get on my knees and start begging.

My father walked around the bed and stopped once he was a few feet in front of me.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just want to stay,” I said.

“You’re up to something,” he said. “Otherwise you’d want to come.”

“No, it’s just—” I said, then paused to think of a better lie.

“What?” my father asked. His word had more of an angrier tone behind it now, and I could feel the lump in my throat like usual.

“I feel like if I leave, it’s gonna be harder for me to come back,” I said.

“Oh, that’s a bunch of bull—”

“Fine,” my mother said. “You don’t have to go. But you better go to school on Monday. You’re in enough trouble.”

“I will,” I said.

My father looked at my mother who was still packing. “Virginia, he’s up to something. I know it.”

My mother kept folding her clothes before she put them in her suitcase. “Well, he’ll feel pretty guilty for lying to us once we leave, then.”

My mother kept on folding her clothes, and my father kept his eyes on me like he was waiting for me to crack.

“It’s not a lie. That’s how I feel,” I said, and when I thought about it, it could have been the truth. But I’d have to leave Appleton to find out, and I couldn’t do that.

I helped my parents, Jesse, and Allie with their bags into the Explorer. Jesse and Allie each gave me a hug and told me how much they were going to miss me. I told them that I already missed them, and Allie said you couldn’t miss someone until they’re gone, and that made me laugh.

Before they pulled out of the driveway my father rolled down his window and told me to come over. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I won’t,” I said.

“You better not,” he said while pointing his index finger at me. “Stay out of trouble, don’t answer the door if you’re home, and keep an eye out for the Simmons’ lawyer. He seems like the sneaky type.”

“Okay,” I said, and watched them drive off towards the train tracks. I walked out on to the street and watched the Explorer disappear out of town. My mother was right, as soon as they were out of site I began to feel terrible about lying to them.

It was weird having the house to myself. The first thing I did once my parents left was call up Walt and Sam. I didn’t know why, but being there alone felt eerie. Like my house all of a sudden become haunted now that my family was gone. I sat on my couch to wait for them, and it seemed like I was waiting hours. I watched T.V. to kill time, but I kept hearing creaks and bangs. As soon as I put the T.V. on mute, the sounds would disappear back into the shadows.

Walt swung my front door open. He yelled “party” as he did it, and it made me almost jump off the couch. “Jeez, you’re jumpy,” he said.



I stayed sitting on the couch, but turned my head to look at him. “Yeah, I don’t know why either. I’ve never been alone in this house, and I guess it’s giving me the creeps.”

“Clark, there’s something I’ve been keeping from you.”

I stood up and looked at him like he was a ghost.

“This house is haunted.” Walt’s eyes got wide. “It was built over an Indian burial ground.” As soon as he finished his sentence he burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, man I just couldn’t help myself. Your face is priceless.”

I could feel my body getting warm again now that I knew it was a joke. “You asshole.” I ran over to him and punched him in the arm.

“It was worth it.” Walt was still laughing and holding his arm.

Sam didn’t show for another hour, and when he walked in me and Walt were in the kitchen eating leftovers from Thanksgiving.

“Sorry I’m late,” Sam said as he walked into the kitchen. “Gloria made me promise that I wasn’t going to look for Will and Mike.” He squeezed his chin with his index finger and thumb. “Actually, where’s your phone?”

“In the living room,” I said. “Next to the couch. Who you calling?”

Sam left the kitchen to search for the phone. “Gloria. I told her I’d call once I’m here.”

“Wow,” Walt said as he dug his teeth into a burnt piece of turkey meat. “Sam’s got a new ass to kiss.”

“Hey, shut the fuck up,” Sam said as he held the phone to the side of his face. “No, Gloria. I was talking to Walt.”

I laughed when I heard Sam explaining himself to Gloria over the phone. Walt would have probably too if his mouth wasn’t full.

Sam came back into the kitchen once he was off the phone. "I don't kiss her ass. I just follow her rules so I don't have to live with my piece-of-shit family."

"Chill out." Walt threw a turkey bone at Sam, but he jumped out of the way before it hit him. "I was only kidding."

"So why did you tell us to come over?" Sam asked.

"Cause he's scared to be all alone," Walt said.

"Fuck you," I said, then flipped him off. "I want to sneak into Rose's basement. It's been long enough since we last did it, and with my parents gone we can just chill here. Gloria and B won't know shit."

Walt folded his arms and looked at me. "First of all. Fuck *you*. And second of all, you seemed to have thought this through." He slammed his hand on the table causing our plates to rattle. "Let's fuckin' do it."

Sam pulled out one of the table chairs and joined us. "Not now, right?"

"Nah, I was thinking Sunday morning. Rose will be tied up in service like he always is," I said. "But the thing is, we gotta be quick and look through everything within an hour or two."

"Just go ape-shit," Walt said. "Rip everything open."

"Yeah, this is a one-time shot, so we gotta make it count," I said.

"And what if Will and Mike show?" Sam asked.

"Then we can get two things done at once," Walt said.

Sam was looking out the window above the sink. It was the first time I saw him deep in thought, and I guess when he did it he liked to space out. "Alright. But Gloria cant find out or else I'm fucked."

"I doubt she will," I said. "Unless she talks to other people in town besides you."

“No, not really,” Sam said. “She just stays to herself. Except if she’s at the store and can’t find something. You know, common conversation.”

“Alright,” I said. “So Sunday morning. We hit Rose’s for the last time.”

“Let’s fuckin’ do it,” Walt said. “I hope he’s got some good shit down there.”

“It’s gonna be weird without Syd,” Sam said.

“We can do it,” I said, and when I looked at Sam I could tell he still really missed Syd. “He was a plus, though.”

The three of us stayed up late talking. I told Walt and Sam about my court summons, and Sam talked about Gloria and her strict rules. But he knew it was a better living environment for him then with his family, and he mentioned it a few times that night. Walt of course talked about B. She was still occasionally fucking Hooknose, sometimes while Walt was in the house. He was pissed about it, and I never heard him talk so badly about her.

“You got any booze?” Walt asked.

“Nah, my parents don’t drink,” I said.

“My house is got plenty of booze,” Sam said.

“I could use some right now,” Walt said. “Any kind too. I just wanna get fucked up.”

I never drank before, and I was afraid to tell them that. The way Walt talked, it seemed like every time he had a problem he pounded whatever alcohol he could get his hands on. Walt was a little annoyed that we had no way of getting booze, but we kept talking about our problems anyway and that seemed to get his mind off the alcohol. We went to bed around four AM and I couldn’t remember the last time I stayed up that late. Walt and Sam slept in Jesse and Allie’s room, and before I fell asleep I thought about how much the three of us bonded. It was like all

three of our hearts were one during those several hours in the kitchen, and it really made me happy that I knew Walt and Sam.

Saturday was the prep day. I emptied out the photos from my backpack and filled it with a rope, a crowbar I found in the garage, and three ski masks. Sam had my father's fishing knife that Syd gave him, and he gave Walt his brass knuckles. Our identities were safe, and if Will and Mike showed up we all had weapons. It was two in the afternoon, and I thought it would be a good idea to just lay low until Sunday morning. Walt and Sam were fine with my idea, and we killed time by playing a few board games that I found in my basement.

After a two-hour game of Monopoly, Walt flicked the iron play piece across the room. "I'm sick of this shit. Let's play some *real* games."

"This *is* a real game," I said.

"This ain't no real game," Walt said. "You got any cards?"

I went into the kitchen and grabbed a deck of cards from a drawer near the fridge. When I returned to the living room I threw the deck on the coffee table.

"Good," Walt said and picked up the cards. "Let's play some poker. How much money you got?"

I took ten bucks out of my wallet and Sam sat quietly on the couch next to Walt.

"No money?" Walt asked.

"Nope," Sam said.

"He's out," Walt said. "Wanna play, Clark?"

"Don't know how," I said.

Walt threw the cards at the T.V. "Too bad. I was gonna make that ten bucks mine."

The earliest service was at five AM. I woke the guys up at 4:30, and Walt didn't like that he had to get up that early.

"C'mon, man, just let me sleep until five," he said, then put his head back into Allie's Hanna Montana pillow.

"No way." I ripped the blankets off the bed and Walt curled up into a ball. "We gotta get ready and be at his house at five."

Sam was slowly getting out of Jesse's bed while I argued for Walt to get out of Allie's. "You can sleep after. Let's go."

Walt finally got up, and the three of us went downstairs and I made some coffee. Walt plopped on the couch and shut his eyes as soon as his body hit the cushions. It was around 4:45 at this time, and while I made coffee in the kitchen I looked out the window into the backyard every few minutes. It was still dark out, and it didn't feel like it was Sunday yet.

"Clark, come out here," Sam said from the living room.

Sam was looking out the window that was closest to the T.V. The blinds were still shut, but he used his fingers to open them a crack. "Check it out," he said then moved away from the window.

I put two fingers on the blinds and pushed one down to see outside. It was hard to see what was going on, but I could see movement. "Sam, can you turn off the light for a second?" I kept my eyes on the street, and when Sam shut off the light my eyes adjusted. The movement was people. All the families on our street were walking towards the center of town to go to church. It wasn't snowing or anything, but it looked cold outside judging from the way people were dressed. I took my fingers off the blinds. "Why wouldn't they just take their cars?"

Sam shrugged. "Too many cars? I dunno, but it makes sense. I think your family and Walt's family are the only ones who don't go."

"Actually, my mom goes, and so don't my brother and sister sometimes," I said.

"Oh, yeah," Sam said. "I forgot, but still that's a lot of cars."

I looked out the window again and watched all these people who looked like shadows in the morning darkness. "They're like zombies," I said.

I stepped away from the window and turned on the living room light. Walt was still sleeping, so I picked up a pillow from the couch and hit him with it as hard as I could in the face. "Wake up and drink some coffee."

"Alright, alright," he said with his arms guarding his head. "I'm up. Shit, that scared me."

"Good," I said. "'Cause it's almost time. People are heading to the church now."

Walt got up from the couch. "I'm ready."

"Drink some coffee first," I said. "People are still on our street."

"What?" Walt said then went over to the window. He lifted one of the blinds up with his thumb, then shook his head. "Freaks."

The three of us drank coffee and waited. Every few minutes one of us would peek to see if there were people still walking, and there always was. Walt was getting antsy because he drank three cups of coffee like water, but I didn't mind him this way. He would work faster being this wired, and I almost drank as much as him but remembered being that wired sometimes makes it hard to think straight. I had to be sharp when I entered Rose's. If I wasn't, the opportunity would slip away and this town would be his and Owen's forever.

After a half hour, the snowy street was deserted. The cold struck me like my father's hand when I stepped outside, and I covered most of my face with a scarf so I couldn't feel it. We

thought about going through the woods, but we probably would have been up to our knees in snow, so we took the long way up the street and down the train tracks. We made sure no one was on Rose's street before we walked down it, and every few feet I walked I scanned the neighborhood for Will and Mike. When we got to Rose's house we just stood there for a few minutes. The roof had a few feet of snow on it, and it looked like it could cave in at any moment.

I looked down at the snow. "He's gonna know people were here 'cause of our footprints. But as long as we don't get caught he doesn't have proof."

"Let's go," Walt said, and ran up to the front door. "Crowbar me."

I took my backpack off while I walked closer to Rose's house, and when I was close enough I threw the crowbar to Walt.

He put the crowbar where the door and frame met, but Walt didn't have enough strength to pry it open so he began kicking the crowbar while it stayed wedged in the crack. The Nazi began barking as soon as he heard the first kick.

"C'mon, you piece of shit," Walt said as he kicked.

After ten or eleven tries, I pushed him aside and pulled the crowbar out of the wedge.

"What are you doing?" Walt asked.

I held the crowbar while I looked at him. "There's windows on the door." As soon as I finished talking, I smashed one of the tiny windows with the crowbar and unlocked the door from inside. Walt gave me a dirty look, and I grinned like a smart ass. The Nazi was still barking, and I motioned for Walt to open the door. He turned the knob slowly and closed his eyes while he pushed the door open. Me and Sam had our backs to the front of the house just in case the Nazi was waiting inside for us.

After the door was opened for a few seconds, Walt looked over at us. “He’s just standing there barking.”

I moved over towards the doorframe and peeked into Rose’s house. Walt was right. The Nazi was standing right where the kitchen and the living room floor met. The lights were off, and the black blur growled, barked, then barked again. He kept repeating it in that order. I wanted the piles of records and books to fall on him, but the stacks that surrounded the Nazi looked pretty sturdy. I could see the door to the basement. It was across the kitchen, almost lined up perfectly with the front door.

“There it is,” I said, over the barking and stepped into Rose’s house carefully. Walt and Sam followed, but the Nazi never moved. Maybe he remembered what we did to him last time, and now he was scared of us.

When I got closer to the basement door, the Nazi took a few steps forward as he barked.

We all stayed still. “What the fuck should we do?” Sam asked quietly.

“I got an idea,” Walt said. “We get as close as we can to it, then run like hell.”

“So tease it into chasing us is what you’re saying,” I said.

Walt nodded. “Yep.”

We started walking slowly towards the Nazi, and when we were less than a foot away from him, he started barking constantly.

“Okay,” Walt said. “Now, let’s back up slow.”

Every few steps we took to back away, the Nazi would follow.

“Run,” Walt said.

The three of us ran out the front door as the Nazi followed, barking along the way. I didn’t look back to see if the Nazi was chasing me until I heard Sam yelling in pain and the



sound of footsteps trudging in the snow. The Nazi got Sam. The two of them were wrestling in the snow. Walt was still on the porch and signaled for me to come over.

“Now that’s how you take care of business,” Walt said as we watched Sam struggle from the right side of the porch.

“We gotta help him,” I said.

“No time,” Walt said.

“Sam, you alright?” I asked.

“What do you think?” Sam said. He managed to kick the dog off him, and now he was running towards the back of the house.

“C’mon, man, he’s fine,” Walt said.

“Hold on.” I walked over to the left side of the porch.

“Clark, we don’t have time for this,” Walt said.

I could sometimes see Sam running around in woods behind Rose’s house. “Sam, run to the front of the house.”

“Let’s go,” Walt said.

“Chill the fuck out,” I said. “He’s coming over here.”

Walt walked into the house, and went down to the basement. I didn’t care if he was pissed at me, I wasn’t going to let Sam get mauled by the Nazi.

Sam came running over to the front yard, and I stood near the door. “You gotta make a run for the front door.”

Sam was on the ground again with the Nazi, and he looked to have a good grip on Sam’s upper arm. Sam looked up at me, then rolled on top of the dog. This caused the Nazi to let Sam loose, and he made a run for the front door.

“Get ready to shut the fuckin’ door,” Sam said. The Nazi was close behind him, but I waited until Sam’s feet touched the doorframe before I slammed it.

Sam was hunched over trying to catch his breath. He was soaked from the snow, and one of his sleeves on his jacket was completely torn off. Sam’s hands were the only things on him that were bleeding, which surprised me.

“Holy shit,” Sam said.

“Holy shit is right. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine for now. Let’s get down there.”

I thought Rose’s living room was cluttered. That was nothing compared to his basement. As me and Sam walked down the wooden staircase, stacks upon stacks of papers, records, books, and cardboard boxes filled with random shit appeared. You couldn’t see the floor. Some of the stacks were a few inches from the ceiling and over time, a good amount of shit probably fell to the floor, making even more clutter. Walt was in the middle of the mess looking for clues, and throwing shit left and right.

“Should’ve brought our rain boots,” Walt said.

“No shit,” I said. “Who knows what’s down there.”

At the bottom of the stairs the smell finally kicked in.

“Smells like pure asshole,” Sam said.

Walt laughed when he saw Sam. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“That Nazi bit the hell out of me thanks to your plan,” Sam said.

“Hey, it worked didn’t it?” Walt asked.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think I’d be wrestling with a dog,” Sam said. “You didn’t even run from it, you just stayed on the porch.”

“Cause I’m not an idiot,” Walt said.

We heard the Nazi barking outside. There was a small basement window that was between two piles of records. I tried to get a glimpse of the outside so I could see if anyone was out there, but it was still dark out.

“Let’s just get to work, guys,” I said.

The three of us got started tipping over piles, and watching where we put our feet in the process.

Walt began gagging after he opened a box that was sealed. “We forgot one thing.” He threw the box across the room and a pile of moldy cookies flowed out. “Bio-hazard suits.”

I went through the basement avoiding most of the stacks, only looking for strange things like sealed boxes, weird packages or anything that seemed hidden. I don’t know how much time passed, but I looked out the basement window and noticed it was light out.

We heard the door open and slam shut. The Nazi was still barking, but it sounded like it was still outside. I put my mask down over my face. I didn’t know who was in the house, but the three of us made sure our identities were unknown. I had my crowbar ready, Sam had my father’s knife behind his back, and Walt put on Sam’s brass knuckles. The basement door was wide open, so whoever was in the house knew we were there too. The three of us were standing in the middle of the basement with our weapons ready when Mike came down. He had a crowbar in his hand just like last time.

Mike ran his fingers through his dirty blonde hair, which was a little longer than the last time I saw it. “Look’s like we’re going crowbar for crowbar.” He was looking at me when he talked, but I didn’t say anything back.

We thought we had lucked out since it was just Mike who showed up, but after a few minutes of staring, Will came down. No more bandages were on his head, just skin since he shaved his head bald. He brought his lead pipe, and held it like an infant as he walked over to Mike.

“You fuckers got away last time, but that piece of shit Syd is locked up,” Will said, then pointed his lead pipe at us. “No one’s gonna save you now.”

Walt ran at them, brass knuckles in his clenched fist. He didn’t get too far before Will hit him on the side of the neck causing him to drop hard. Walt held his neck in pain and Mike hit him in the chest with the crowbar to make sure he’d stay down.

“Who’s next?” Mike asked followed by a smile.

Sam looked at me and nodded. I wasn’t sure if the nod was for me to go or for the both of us to go, but when he took out the knife from behind his back I started to run with him. All I heard after that was, “Oh, he’s got a knife.” In a sarcastic tone from Mike as I ran, then Will hit me over the head.

## Chapter 18

It wasn’t Walt smacking me or shaking me that woke me up. It was the smell of the basement. A mixture of rotten meat and shit. That’s what the floor smelled like when you were close to it. Walt was staring at me. He wasn’t wearing his ski mask anymore, and his face looked concerned. When he saw that my eyes were open he called for Sam, who was upstairs.

I sat up and felt my head. No blood, which surprised me, but I did feel a bump the size of an egg on the left side of my head. I thought I was going to pass out from the pain when I pressed on it.

“You’re lucky he didn’t crack your head open,” Walt said. “He hit you hard. I saw the whole thing.”

“Yeah,” I said, then breathed in some of the rotten meat smell and puked.

“Is he alright?” Sam asked when he came downstairs.

“I’m fine,” I said, “Where’s my mask?”

“I took it off after they went upstairs,” Walt looked around for the mask on the floor. “It’s right here.”

“Did they see us without the masks?” I asked.

“Nope, the morons just beat on us, then went upstairs,” Walt said.

“They’re not that stupid,” Sam said. “I can’t get the door unlocked.”

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“I dunno, couple of minutes,” Walt said.

“Shit,” I said, and held my head. I was still sitting down, but the whole room felt like it was spinning. “We gotta get outta here,”

“Yeah, we do,” Walt said, and helped me up. “But we can’t pry the door open ‘cause they took our weapons.”

Once I was able to stand on my own, Walt let go of me. I stood for a few seconds to make sure I had my balance. I felt like puking again, but I didn’t think about it because I was looking for the basement window.

“We gotta break the window then.” I pointed at the window and they both looked. Their hopeful faces made me feel a little better.

Walt grabbed a fat book from one of the piles, then walked over to the window.

“Just break it,” I said. “We don’t have much time.”

“Shut up,” Walt said, then stood on his toes and began hitting the glass softly with the book. “Shit, it’s too loud. Sam, go to the door, and play with it to make some noise.”

Sam pulled down his mask. “Okay.”

As soon as Sam went upstairs and began hitting the door, Walt started hitting the glass harder. It took him about four tries until the window smashed, but it wasn’t loud. I could still hear Sam slamming on the door, and Will and Mike’s laughter.

I ran over to the stairs. “He did it.”

Sam nodded his head, and came downstairs. I heard either Will or Mike say, “That’s all you got? Rest for a little while, baby, then try again.” I could hear their laughter as I walked back over to the window.

“Just keep on laughing, you sons of bitches,” I said.

“Alright, Clark. Since you’re not all there, you go first,” Walt said.

I looked down at the pile that was the floor, found my black ski mask, and put it on.

Walt looked at me, then took out his ski mask from his jacket pocket and put it on. “Even though you probably have a concussion, you’re still on your toes.”

Sam and Walt helped me through the basement window, then Sam came out followed by Walt. I pulled both of them out when they were halfway through the window to save time, because I thought Rose would be at his house any minute with the police. As soon as Walt got up, I followed him and Sam through the snow and woods. We were soaked from the knees up, but we were moving so fast it didn’t matter. My house was in sight when we got out of the woods, but we were almost hit by John’s ice cream truck. He slammed on his breaks once he saw that we weren’t going to stop, and the three of us watched the truck slide from the snow and ice.

“What the fuck are kids doing?” John said once the truck was at a complete stop.

We were still standing in the middle of the road, a few feet from the truck.

“Get outta the way,” he said. His head was hanging out the window, and he was screaming.

The three of us moved out of the truck’s way, and casually walked over to the sidewalk. John stayed where he was and watched us. I wanted him to drive away so we could go inside, but he just stayed in the middle of the road.

“What’s with the masks, guys?” he asked.

“It’s cold out,” Walt said.

I looked over at my house, then back to John, who must have seen where I was looking. He nodded his head, put the truck back in drive and drove away.

Walt stripped down to his underwear when he got inside my house. Me and Sam watched, wondering what he was doing. His neck and chest were already starting to bruise. “This is fuckin’ bullshit.”

“What?” I asked, slowly taking off my jacket and ski mask.

“We just got our asses beat and almost got caught for B and E,” Walt said, “Red-handed.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t,” I said.

“So what?” Walt put his left index finger on his right like he was counting. “We got nothing on Rose now, Will and Mike are going to be after us for sure, and we’ll probably be arrested for the break-in. Will and Mike saw us, and so didn’t John.”

“They don’t have any proof. We were wearing our masks,” I said. “And we can take Will and Mike.”

“Okay.” Walt shook his head. “Now the concussion is setting in. They don’t *need* proof. I realized it once you got your summons. If Appleton doesn’t like you, they find a way to get rid of you.” Walt put his pants and shirt on and grabbed his jacket. “They’re not getting rid of me, though. I’m getting rid of them.”

Walt opened the door, but I grabbed him by the shoulder to stop him. “C’mon, man, this is crazy. Let’s just talk about this.”

Walt turned around and shut the door. “Fine,” he said and looked at Sam. “Look at his face.”

I didn’t notice until now that Sam had a broken nose. It had dried up blood around it, and was so crooked it looked mangled.

“Holy shit,” I said. “What happened?”

“After Will knocked you out, he joined in with Mike to get the knife away from me.” Sam was tearing up as he told the story. “They fuckin’ held me down. Mike wanted to stab me, but Will talked him out of it. But he told Mike to break my nose so it would never be the same again.”

By the look of his nose it seemed like Mike did his job. I put my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. We’ll get those fucks.”

“What’s the point? They’ll always come back, unless we kill them. Are you willing to do that?” Walt asked, but I didn’t answer him. “Exactly. It doesn’t matter if we fuck them up a million times. They will *always* come back. Just like Rose, just like Owen, and just like this town. At the end of the day Appleton *always* wins and *always* gets its way.” Walt put on his jacket and zipped it shut, then walked over to the front door and opened it.

“So where you going?” I asked.



“I’m going home, packing my shit, and getting wasted,” Walt said. “Then at midnight I’m jumping the train and getting outta this fuckin’ hell hole.”

“That’s crazy, Walt,” I said. “Where will you go? You’ll be homeless.”

“It’s better living on the streets than living in fear in your own backyard.” Walt looked at me and Sam, then walked out to the porch, but left the front door open. “You guys are welcome to join me. I’d really like the company, and I can guarantee it’s better for us out there.”

We both looked at Walt, who had stopped to look back at us in the doorway.

Sam looked at me. I could see it in the corner of my eye while I kept focusing on Walt. “I’m going too,” Sam said, then went outside to join Walt on the porch.

I looked at them both, and realized that this could be our last time together. I hated that feeling. I haven’t even lived here half a year yet, and I knew these two were my best friends. I had friends since I was five in New Hampshire, but they meant nothing to me when I compared them with Walt and Sam. All the shit we went through together made us friends for eternity.

“Midnight?” I asked.

Walt’s face looked dead. I had never seen him look so serious. “Be there for 11:45, just in case.”

I didn’t say I’d be there. I just said I had some things to do first, then closed the door slowly while the winter winds fought with me to keep it open. I shut off all the lights in the house, and I laid down on the couch for awhile after that, but didn’t realize I fell asleep until the phone woke me up.

I watched the phone ring twice on the coffee table before I picked it up.

“Clark, it’s Mom. Everything alright at home?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.”

“Sorry I didn’t call yesterday or Friday. It was kind of late when we got here, so I didn’t bother.”

“It’s fine, Mom. How’s New Hampshire?”

“It’s good.” She paused for a minute. “I really wish you came with us, though. I just have a bad feeling, leaving you at home all by yourself.”

“No bad feelings, everything’s fine.”

“Okay. It’s probably better that you didn’t come. You’d probably want to stay, like you said.” She laughed, and my body shivered at the sound. “Dad got in touch with a friend of his who’s a lawyer, and he thinks you’ll be alright.”

“Just wait until he gets here.”

I heard a loud noise that sounded like John’s truck when it was running. I ignored it, but took the phone with me to the side of the couch where no one could see me from the windows. I could still hear the awful sound of the truck. It sounded like the engine was ready to blow.

“Positive, Clark. You got to be positive.”

There was a knock on the door.

“I can see you’re a lot more positive than when you’re here.” I listened to my voice as I whispered, and it sounded like death.

My mother sighed. “We’ll be back tomorrow in the afternoon, maybe around dinner time. Go to school. Why are you whispering?”

“There’s someone at the door,”

The phone started making shuffling noises. “Hello?”

Another knock. This time it was louder.

“Don’t answer it.”

“I know.”

I heard a knock for a third time, and pictured John motioning for twenty cops to come on my porch. They were waiting for me to answer with their clubs and guns ready. Rose and Owen were there too, standing on my lawn, grinning as they waited to see my bruised face.

“Hold on, Allie wants to talk to you.”

I heard more shuffling noises. “You miss us yet?”

I held in the laugh I wanted to let out. “I told you before you left I missed you guys.”

“That doesn’t count, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. How’s everybody?”

“Um, Jesse picked his nose until there was blood.”

I let out a quiet laugh without opening my mouth.

“And Mom’s really happy, and that makes Dad happy too.”

“Good, how’s Memere and Pepere?”

“Fat.”

“Fat? That’s not nice to say.”

“That’s what Pepere said. He says Memere’s food is too good, so they eat a lot and get fat. Memere’s even getting fat from it.”

I pulled the phone away to put my hand over my mouth. “Oh, man that’s funny. Thanks, Al. I really needed that.”

“I’m just telling you the truth.”

“And it’s funny. I’ll see you tomorrow. Tell Jesse I miss him and to stop picking his nose so much.”

“Okay. Hey, Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry I was mad at you for taking us trick-or-treating.”

“It’s okay, you didn’t want the kids at school to be mean to you.”

“Yeah, but I should’a’ knew they were being stupid.”

“It’s okay, Allie. Now you know.”

“Know what?”

“That they’re stupid.”

Allie laughed. “Oh, yeah. Why are you whispering?”

“Can you put Mom back on the phone?”

“Okay, you can tell me later. I’ll put Mom back on. See ya soon.”

The knocking stopped. I thought I heard footsteps leaving my porch, and the sound of the truck engine was faint like it was leaving. The phone made a shuffling noise again, and I stopped paying attention when my mother’s voice returned. “Hey, I’m gonna have to let you go. It’s almost dinner time, and you know how Memere gets when you’re on the phone while dinner’s being served.”

“I know. Wait, it’s already around five?”

“It’s 6:30.”

“Wow, okay. I’ll let you go. See ya tomorrow sometime.”

“Alright, if anything happens between then, call Memere’s. The number is in the address book if you forgot it.”

“Okay.” I hung up the phone before she could say I love you. I had a weird feeling if I heard those words I would start bawling and confess everything that’s happened since they’d been gone.

It was dark out again, and it felt like the day never really came, since I was either inside or sleeping. It made me feel like a hermit or a monster. Something strange and not human. I ate the rest of the leftover turkey and thought about my family while I sat at our kitchen table. This could be the last thing I eat from my mother, and that conversation could have been the last one I had with them if I decided to jump on that train tonight. After I ate I laid back down on the couch. Before I dozed off, I thought about not being human again. If only I could sink into this couch or the walls, so I was part of the house, becoming an object that doesn't have to do anything but be there. It would make all of this easier.

A scraping sound from outside woke me up, and I looked out the window to see what it was. One of my neighbors next door was shoveling their driveway. Their light was on, but it was my neighbor's shadow that gave him away. I went into the kitchen to see what time it was. 10:25. I went upstairs without looking at anything, and packed some clothes into my backpack. I made sure not to pack too much, so my bag wasn't heavy. I didn't know what type of shit we were going to get into, so I thought it was a good idea to stay light. I didn't know why, but I saved room for the pictures I stole from Rose's house. I put my backpack on over my jacket, and stood in my living room for a few seconds. There was a family picture hanging up on the wall near the stairs. I wanted to take it with me, so at least when I was gone they would know I still cared enough to remember them. But I finally decided to leave it on the wall because I knew if I took it, I would always be looking at it.

I zipped up my jacket when I got outside, and I looked at the watch on my wrist I remembered to take with me. 10:56. A little less than an hour before I made my decision. It seemed like I already made it, though. I walked to the center of town to kill some time. It was snowing now, but it wasn't as cold as earlier that day. I unbuttoned my jacket and let the

snowflakes fall on my hoodie. Appleton was starting to get covered in snow again, but you couldn't appreciate it if you couldn't see it. That's why the center of town was perfect. The buildings there were becoming hidden in white, and the light poles showed you how much snow was falling. Someone turned on Maggie's lights, and the sight of it drew me in for the first time since I moved to Appleton. Maggie's face and shoulders were a white blob that looked like her body parts. All I could actually see was the baby she cradled. I brushed away the snow from the plaque underneath Maggie's statue with my hand:

*Mother to the angels now*

If there was a God, I believe Maggie *was* mother to the angels, but my positive thought turned negative when I thought about the man behind the statue and the quote.

"I was so close, Maggie." I was looking up at her face that I couldn't see. "I'm sorry." I walked over to the left side of the center of town where the hardware store and Bronco's was. Nothing was open this late, but the light poles welcomed anyone to walk through this little perfect town. Bullshit. But no one knew that if they didn't live here. I just kept walking until I was in front of Appleton High. When I realized where I was, I picked up my head and ran through the snow to the back of the school. Fenton's trail was hidden now, and the only way I could find it was to look through each school window until I found Hender's room. Once I saw the art room, I put my back to the window and looked at the woods. I made a path with me eyes and went from there. It took me longer than usual, but I found Fenton's shack. I could only see the light coming from his window since it was so dark. It looked like it was just floating next to the trees. When I knocked on his door, he answered right away like he was waiting for me.

His face was hidden from the dark, but I knew it was him from his raspy voice. "I told you, boy. I don't know nothin' else."

“I know. I was just stopping by.”

He looked over my shoulder at my backpack. “You don’t got any more pictures or other crap to show me?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the bag for?”

“I might be leaving.”

Fenton stepped aside from the door, and I assumed it was an invitation to come inside. He closed the door once I sat down on his only chair. “Leavin’?” He grabbed a few more pieces of wood and threw them into the stove that was near the door. “Where you gonna go?”

“Don’t know. Just think it’s time to get out of here.”

“Rose?”

I leaned forward and took off my backpack. “It’s not only him. It’s everybody. This place isn’t right for me.”

Fenton thought about what I said for a few seconds while he sat comfortably on his bed.

“Your family know you’re leaving?”

“Hell, no. They’d never let me go out on my own.”

“Hmm, that’s true. Never thought ‘bout that.”

“They’re better off without me. All I’ve done is cause trouble for them since I moved here.”

“So what? They’re still your family. It’s not like they left you for doing that bad stuff.”

“Yeah, but life would be easier for them without me.”

Fenton laughed. “Life’s never easy, boy.”

“I know, I’m just saying. It would make living here a little bit easier if I wasn’t around.”

Fenton stroked his beard carefully like he was inspecting it for bugs. All he needed was a smoking pipe and he would look like an old philosopher. “It’ll be worse. If you go, your family will never be the same. Like a bad itch you can’t scratch.”

“Why are you telling me this? Look at you. You left your family because of this town and you turned out fine.”

Fenton looked around his one room shack. It didn’t take him long. “Fine? I get by, but I wouldn’t say I’m fine. You don’t think I regret what I did?”

“No, or else you would’ve went back.”

“After a few years, once I stopped hatin’ everyone for calling me crazy, I did. But it was too late. My father was dead, and the rest of my family didn’t want anything to do with me. Said things like, ‘You were gone for so long, so why don’t you stay gone?’ So I turned around and came back here, but I’m getting old, and it’s only a matter of time.”

“Before what?”

“Before I can’t hunt anymore, stupid. Every day before I go to sleep I wonder if I’ll be able to get outta bed tomorrow.” Fenton looked at the fire in the woodstove. His eyes were slightly glowing from the flames. “Do what you gotta do, boy. But sometimes the right thing at the time could be the worse thing for the rest of your life.”

I thought about what he said for a few seconds. “If your family took you back, do you think you’d be happier with that life?”

“Maybe, maybe not. At least I’d have a family, though.”

I looked at my watch. 11:37. I got up and put on my backpack.

“Time to go?”

“Yep. Gotta make the midnight train.”



“Better get going then.”

I shook my head. “It was nice knowing you, Fenton.” I reached out to shake his hand. He looked at it for a few seconds like he had never seen one before, then gently grabbed it for a shake.

“Take care of yourself, boy.”

“If I decide to come back, I’ll stop by again.”

“Don’t bother if it’ll be in the next five years.” He looked at the fire again, then got up to open to the door. “Off you go.”

“Thanks,” I said and walked out of Fenton’s shack. I was going to look back once I heard the door shut to get one last look at Fenton’s home, but the sound didn’t come until I was out of the woods and out of sight.

## Chapter 19

My watch said 11:42 by the time I got to the front of the school. It was still snowing and no matter how fast I ran I wasn’t getting to the train tracks by 11:45, but I was still going to try. I hoped Walt and Sam didn’t think I was bailing out on them. 11:44. I looked at the church just before I ran by Bronco’s, and imagined Rose and Owen standing in front of the doors mouthing the words, “Get out.” I didn’t stop to answer them or make sure they were really there. I needed to run the whole time so I’d make the train. Before I left the center of town I gave Maggie one last glimpse. She was completely covered now, like she was forgotten. I wanted to tell her *I* would never forget her. The sidewalk of my street was slick from the ice, so I had to run on the unplowed street. I was slowing down, I could tell, and I didn’t even look at my watch for the time.

11:50. My porch light was on and that made me stop right in the middle of the street. Where they home already? Still 11:50. I could spare a minute to see. I took out my house key as I walked up the porch steps, then unlocked the door and opened it as fast as I could. I poked my head in to see if anyone was home like a burglar would. 11:51.

“Is anyone home?” No answer.

I searched the kitchen, Jesse and Allie’s room, my parent’s room, and the bathroom upstairs. They still weren’t home. I must have left the porch light on. 11:52.

I made sure to shut off the porch light this time, then locked the front door. The entire street was dark tonight. Usually, one or two neighbors would leave their porch lights on so some of the street was visible. But tonight it was like they didn’t care if I found my way or not. I had caught my breath while I was inside my house, so the rest of the run to the train tracks was easy. 11:54. Walt and Sam’s backs were facing me, their heads were looking to the right to see when the train was coming. I could see smoke coming from their mouths. Walt’s smoke was much thicker.

Walt turned around with a cigarette in the mouth. A duffle bag was next to his feet. “I didn’t think you’d show.”

“I told you I’d be here,” I said. “I just had a few things to do.”

Walt took a drag and the cigarette lit up his whole face. He looked old and tired. “All good.” He bent over and took out a bottle of booze. I couldn’t tell what it was since it was dark. “Want some?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I looked over at Sam, who was still looking down at the train tracks. 11:56. “When I was at my house earlier someone knocked on my door three times.”

“Maybe it was the cops. They probably wouldn’t leave, though,” Walt said.

“I don’t think so, I think it might have been John. I thought I heard his truck outside, Why? Did cops go to your house?” I asked.

“Nope. Maybe they didn’t ‘cause my mom’s fucking one of them,” Walt said.

Sam walked over and Walt gave him the bottle. His nose had a white bandage on it, but the bandage wasn’t put on good, so it looked like crumpled-up napkins were on his face. He took a hard swig of the bottle, tipping his head back as he did it, then gave it back to Walt. “What’s up, Clark? I knew you’d come around. I could tell by the way you were lookin’ at us that you were sick of this shithole too.”

I looked down at my watch. 11:57.

“Yep. It’s almost time,” Sam said and grabbed a cigarette from the front pocket of Walt’s jean jacket. “I just saw the smoke coming from the train.”

The blinking red lights that always flashed when the train was near weren’t going off yet, and the black and white gate was still up. “I’m still not sure I want go.”

Walt sighed, then flicked his cigarette and put his duffle bag over his shoulder. “You better make up your mind, ‘cause the train *is* coming.”

“I know. I’m just gonna—”

“What?” Walt had anger in his voice when he cut me off.

11:58. “I dunno. I’m gonna miss my family.”

The lights began flashing and the gate slowly came down. Walt and Sam ducked underneath it and began walking down the train tracks, and I followed.

“We’re your family now. We’ve been your family since you moved here. We’re gonna be fine as long as we stick together.” Walt was looking at me as he walked. “If that’s what you’re worried about, don’t be.”

The head of the train passed us at an easygoing speed. 12:00. And we started running.

“We’ll jump into the next open boxcar,” Walt said.

As we kept running, none of us saw an open boxcar. Walt pointed at a white ladder that was attached to the back of one of the boxcars, and ran towards it. The snow was getting deeper the further we ran, first up to our ankles and now it was up to our lower calves. Walt got as close as he could to the ladder and grabbed it, clenching on like a monkey. He climbed up a couple of the ladder legs, then jumped on the lip of the boxcar.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Walt said. I couldn’t see him but he was yelling loud enough for us to hear.

Me and Sam were running together, but since Sam was closer to the train he was the next to jump onto the ladder. He climbed up a couple of the legs, then let out a joyful scream before disappearing in between the boxcars like Walt. I could hear them screaming my name, but I couldn’t see them. I didn’t like that, so I ran faster. They were both hunched over like they were out breath, motioning for me to jump onto the white ladder. It was only a couple of feet from me. I grabbed one of the legs with my right hand while I kept running with the train, and as I did I thought about Jesse and Allie and the last conversation I had with Allie. The cold leg of the ladder shocked my hand, and the feeling traveled through my whole body. It wasn’t too painful or too cold, but just enough of both to make me think about letting go. Jesse and Allie had grown up so much since we moved here. I got the same cold shock when I put my left hand on the leg. I thought, if I let go, I’d only be letting go for Jesse and Allie. I forgot about the pain by using all my leg strength to keep up with the train.

“C’mon, Clark,” Walt said. He was still hidden, but I could hear everything he said.

“You’re almost there.”

I put my right foot on the last leg of the ladder. The running part was over, and the train was running for me now. I looked to my right and saw Walt and Sam sitting on the lips of the boxcars, their legs stretched out on the metal. It was nighttime so I wasn't sure, but I think they were smiling at me. They were my best friends. I spun my body around on the ladder so my back and heels rested on the poles. I needed to take one last look at Appleton, to remember all the bad that those trees surrounded. I could still see the light poles from the center of town. It was the only glow I could see for miles. It felt welcoming, and I almost jumped off because of it, but I would have been going backwards if I did. I need to go forward. Just like this train every time it passes Appleton. It probably sees the lights and wants to stop, but it knows what lurks between its houses, buildings, fences, and gardens. Shadows. And no one can be truly happy living around shadows. So it keeps chugging along, as if it remembered where it was.