

**The promise of the wrecking ball**

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

On the day my father died, I sat, for the first time, in his big leather chair behind the oversized desk in his study. I'd spent countless hours in this room with my dad, doing homework, reading books, but I had never sat behind this desk. The chair climbed up past my head as I collapsed into the soft, light brown leather. I spread my arms wide, searching for the armrests before finding them, the chair seemingly spacious enough for at least two people to comfortably sit in it. When I leaned against its back, my feet just barely touched the ground. The desk, likewise, seemed enormous from my new perspective. Made of oak, it seemed as permanent as the house itself, a shelter under which to hide from a spring thunderstorm. Matching bookshelves, the same color as the desk, lined an entire side of the room. They overflowed with a mix of three ring binders for his work as an insurance salesman and tattered, dog-eared paperbacks of the classics – Dickens, Twain, some anthologies of the Romantic poets. The shelves were so full that I thought pulling out even one of the books or binders might cause the rest to come spilling out like a dam cracking under the weight of its water.

On the far wall by the door were more shelves holding a small stereo that was always tuned to NPR or the local opera station, depending on his mood that night. Pictures of my family stared back at me from distant locales – a mountain in Colorado, a golf course in Arizona, a beach in Hawai'i. The deep red color on the walls made the room feel closed-off from the world, a sanctuary for a father and his son.

I looked to the far left corner of the desk, the spot I occupied as a kid when my dad and I worked together in the office. We didn't speak much during those evenings. He would clack away at his typewriter, occasionally grumbling to himself or reading aloud

what he had just written, provided the evening's soundtrack. I sat silently at my corner, reading or coloring, nearly every night for most of my childhood. I can't remember anything he read out loud to me, and now that he was gone, I wish I had paid better attention, had kept any of his discarded pages on whose backs I drew the dinosaurs and trucks that flicker through a young boy's imagination.

From his chair, I could picture myself there at the corner of his desk, in his sightline: the pictures on his desk were still parted and the desk lamp still stood awkwardly in the middle of the desk toward the edge so that we could see each other, so that he could give me the occasional wink, so that I could make faces back at him, trying to get him to laugh.

No mementos from my childhood, no coloring books or paper airplanes sat on that corner the day he died. Dark spots, from where a permanent marker bled through the paper and a few scratches from an X-acto knife used to cut the forms for a balsawood glider served as the only testament to my position at his desk. The area in front of his spot behind the desk was likewise empty. My dad's typewriter, an Olivetti 32 portable he bought at a garage sale, was shrouded in a navy blue vinyl cover and had rested on the large credenza behind his chair for the last few years of his life. I couldn't help but notice the layer of dust on it.

My mom called to me from another room, her voice bringing me back to the reality of that day. We needed to meet with the mortician to confirm the funeral plans, and she was ready to leave. I wasn't ready, but I knew arguing with my mom on this day, of all days, would be disastrous for the both of us. But before I could go, I needed something, an object, a memento of some sort, that would connect my dad and me.

Something tangible that I could hold on to. Some object from the study that, in the years to come, I could look at and touch, and find him in.

The problem was that this was his office, not mine, and no matter how much time we spent together in here, these were his things. Aside from my small corner of the desk, I wasn't allowed to touch anything. Not his typewriter. Not the pictures. Not even the radio dials on the shelf system stereo. As a kid, I always thought these rules were a little harsh, and when my parents were out of the house, I would sometimes sneak in and turn the radio to the local Top 10 station, always careful to turn the volume down and the station back when I was done. One time, I didn't hear my parents come in, and had to run out of the study, able only to turn the stereo off. It wasn't more that twenty minutes later that my dad called me in to his office. He sat behind his desk like a boss firing and employee—but he didn't yell at me. He just explained that I was being let in to his special place where we could spend time together, and, to keep that privilege, I couldn't touch certain things in his office ever again. To my eight-year-old mind, it made sense, and up to the day he died, I never touched the stereo again.

My mom called for me again, and I heard her walking toward the study. She appeared in the doorway, but stopped short of coming in. “Come on, Jay. I don't want to do this either, but we have an appointment.” She looked at me across the room, her face puffy and red. “If you had the typewriter out in front of you, you would look just like him, sitting there behind the desk.” Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked back down the hall.

I had only a moment. What I remembered most about spending my childhood in his study was watching my father write, was how watching him made me decide to

become a writer, so whatever I took from the study would have to reflect that fact. I didn't dare take the typewriter – it was his and always would be. Besides, I thought, a memento should be a little more portable, like a class ring or a favorite pen, not a typewriter that would sit like a paperweight on another desk, then maybe move to the back of a closet, before eventually finding its way to Goodwill.

I tried opening one of the desk's side drawers, hoping to find one of his manuscripts, but the drawer was locked. I slid open the middle drawer looking to locate a key that would unlock the others. Inside, the contents of the drawer were obscured by a writing pad that I took out and set on the desk. I fumbled around, moving pens, paperclips, and spare change, but couldn't locate the key.

Mom called again from another room. "Jay, we're going to be *late*."

I shoved the drawer closed and leaned back in his chair, feeling tears well up in my eyes. I scanned the room again, an uneasy feeling boiling inside me. It couldn't possibly be this difficult. One single thing, an object, anything, to carry with me. My dad was gone and I couldn't even find one fucking thing to remember him by.

I sat forward in the chair and noticed the pad of paper in front of me. There on the page, in my dad's handwriting, were four numbered sentences:

1. a dimly-lit hallway
2. testing of outcomes
3. running for your life
4. the promise of the wrecking ball

They were really more sentence fragments than complete thoughts. Ideas jotted down for later. Perhaps even plot points for some story or book he was working on. I didn't know

what they meant, but there they were, written in his all-caps handwriting, precise and straight lines moving across the page. And around these four things, he had drawn a double-lined rectangle to give the list its proper emphasis, as if to say, “This stuff is really important. Remember it.” I had seen this many times before, often in lists of chores my dad made for me and stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet. The important things, like taking out the garbage or cleaning my room, were always surrounded by that same double-line.

I heard the garage door open and my mom’s car start, so I grabbed the pad of paper. When I walked out of my dad’s study that day, it would be for the last time, and all I had in my hands was that pad of paper, the list of four things, the last words my father would ever write to me. Eventually, I used up all the other paper in that pad, but even now, five years later, I still hold on tight to that piece of paper with his list.

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We’re not invited, but walk into the party like we own the place, like rock stars, full of swagger and certainty, and stand just inside the front door. The crowd inside, a collection of khakis, North Face fleeces, and backward caps, stops its collective conversation in mid-sentence and stares us down. For a moment no one in the room so much as utters a sound, and the Coldplay on in the background serves as soundtrack to this standoff.

This was a bad idea. We may be rock stars, but we’ve run up against 20 or 30 yuppies who probably spend a fair amount of time swimming laps and riding elliptical machines at the country club. I look around the room, avoiding the hard, piercing stares, take in the maple-wood flooring, the eggshell white walls, follow the line of the large

arches that separates the living room from the dining room in the back. Both are filled with people, all of whom stare back at us standing on dark slate tiles in the entryway. I take a small step back toward the door, arm extended back and flailing, trying to locate the handle.

I hear a woman's voice say, in an indiscreet, low voice, "Who are those guys?"

"I think I've seen two of them somewhere before," another woman's voice answers. "But who is that pudgy, sweaty guy behind them?"

Two of us are actually rock stars in the local music scene. To my left is Sebastian, a spindle-legged, teased-hair lead singer. To my right is his bearded, beefy-armed drummer Clint. They play a full frontal assault, in-your-face sort of metal. The kind that melts faces first and asks questions second.

The pudgy, sweaty guy behind them is me. I'm not in a band, don't have their road tested grit and ability to be casually cool in any situation. To this crowd, I probably appear more like a roadie than a member of the band. Part of me thinks this group of partygoers isn't going to kick the shit out of us, but rather line the three of us up and burst into their best rendition of "One of these things is not like the others."

Actually, none of the three of us really belong here. Sebastian and Clint promised me a memorable night out for my birthday by crashing a house party. They told me we would drink free beer, maybe make out with random rich girls who were, in a haze of Jägermeister, looking to slum with guys like us. But right now, after getting stared down and being called out due to my growing waistline, I sort of wish we had just gone to a bar.

Sebastian puts a skinny arm around my shoulder, and, with a bluster cultivated from years of screaming onstage in front of a throng of drunken headbangers, says, “It’s my boy’s birthday, let’s get him a beer. Where’s the keg?”

A tall guy in a pink polo shirt—collar popped—and camouflage shorts points across the living room to a dented keg sitting in a blue tub of ice. Red plastic cups stand in a spire next to the keg on a scuffed dining room table. From what I can see through the crowd of people in the way, some snacks and other finger foods are also on the table. My stomach growls a bit.

Clint flashes the polo guy the devil horns and says, “Rock and roll, man.”

They stride toward the keg, parting the sea of people in front of them, Sebastian and Clint directly meeting the eyes of the onlookers with head nods and a few casual “How’s it going?” No one returns the greetings, but they also don’t seem interested in stopping them as they pass. I scuttle behind in their wake, thinking we must stand out like cockroaches in our second-hand clothes to these upstanding young men and women who will surely go on to do important things like become plastic surgeons or partners in their daddies’ law firms. My aspirations are nearly as immense: I want to make it to the keg without anyone calling me fat again. And I would like to see what sort of food they have here.

At the keg, Sebastian hands me a foaming cup of beer, his pencil-thin moustache turned up in a grin. “I told you it would work. They’re too busy talking about financial portfolios and shit to even worry about us.”

I take a sip and look back across the room. Everyone has returned back to their conversations as though they had never been interrupted. Like we weren’t there, or had

been invited in the first place. “That’s crazy,” I say. “Probably law students or something.”

Clint, red plastic cup in one hand, looks over the food options sitting on the table. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

The three of us surround the table, and spend the next half hour drinking, eating, and assessing the crowd. Coldplay gives way to Norah Jones, and I hear random declarations about summer clerkships, pending nuptials, and Creighton basketball. Surprisingly, people here seem genuinely interested in this highbrow conversation. We talk about whether we can get a shift off from work so we can go see an upcoming show at O’Leaver’s, about how we don’t get out of bed until noon, about how having a retirement plan means preparing to die. We laugh because we live our lives the way we want instead of selling out by chasing after that brass ring, the myth that has all of these people running around for the next ass to sniff. We smirk because we, outsiders to this get-together, shine the ugly truth on the lie that these yuppies-in-training are afraid to look at. We smirk, and we judge these partygoers while eating their snack food.

Clint remarks that the salsa is quite good, while Sebastian sticks mainly to pretzels. I dive in to a plate of Lil’ Smokies wrapped in bacon, tethered together by toothpicks with yellow and blue plastic fringe. The undersized sausages sit in a pile, drenched in a sauce the color of rust. When I pick one up, it leaves a ring of separated oil behind. The sausage is a little cold, and strings of bacon hang off like tendons, but I push through, a champion snack food eater. You might even say I’m a connoisseur. By my fourth beer, I’ve eaten so many of these tiny cholesterol bombs that I’ve lost count. All I

know is that the plate has been reduced to a canvas of abstract smears of sauce. Modern art at its finest.

“Some nice talent here tonight, boys,” Sebastian says, and pops a pretzel in his mouth. “Jay, I think there are even some women here who could get you over Wendy.”

I feel the Smokies slosh around in my stomach, and my chest tightens. I’m not sure if it’s the hors d’oeuvres or the mention of Wendy, my ex, but my face ignites, bringing on another round of the sweats.

“Whatever,” I say. But he does have a point. Scanning the crowd, I notice there are some attractive women here. Definitely a large contingent of Three Wendys, and even a few Four Wendys here and there.

Let me explain. The Wendy Scale is something I’ve devised to categorize potential girlfriends, hook-ups, and basically any woman I see on the street. Sort of a way of testing outcomes. For example, a One on the Wendy Scale is the lowest: This girl isn’t that attractive, doesn’t have a good job (works part-time at a Kum & Go or practices law), likes the Dave Matthews Band, lives in West Omaha. Basically, she doesn’t brighten my day, is nothing at all like Wendy. I find that most of my recent girlfriends fall in to this category, which, I have admit, is pretty much all I can get these days.

Conversely, a Five on the Wendy Scale is hot, has a cool career that is artistic or creative (architect or belly-dancer), likes the same music as me—which is to say good music—lives east of 72<sup>nd</sup> Street. Thinks I’m awesome, makes me happy, is my reason for getting out of bed in the morning, et cetera. All the usual relationship crap. In effect, a Five on the scale is the closest thing to Wendy, other than, well, Wendy herself.

“Jay, are you doing the whole Wendy Scale thing again?” Clint asks.

“What? No.”

Clint’s not buying it. He shakes his head, snorts out a laugh. “That’s pathetic, man,”

“It’s just a way to quantify things,” I say, trying to plead my case. “You know, a kind of rating system. It doesn’t have anything to do with Wendy.”

“Then why isn’t it the Jessica Biel Scale?” Sebastian asks. “Or the Jennifer Aniston Scale of Hotness?” He points to a passing brunette in black high heels and jeans so tight they look painted on. “She’s Four Jennifer Anistons.”

The brunette, no more than Three Wendys, stops and looks at Sebastian and then at me like she is considering what may or may not have been said about her. She looks back to Sebastian, says, “Hey,” and keeps walking.

This is all the provocation Sebastian needs. “I’ll be right back,” he says and disappears into the crowd after the brunette. He won’t be right back. He’s a lead singer. This is probably the last we will see of him tonight.

“Classic Sebastian, man,” Clint says, his mouth full of chips and salsa.

To our right, a woman emerges from a door that must lead to the kitchen carrying a silver baking pan. Her blonde hair is pulled back in to a ponytail and she wears a grey shirt with “Creighton Law” stenciled in blue on the front. At best, she’s Two Wendys, but when she yells, “Hey everyone, Jell-o shots!” she becomes the most popular person in the room.

The crowd lets out a unified cheer and appears to swallow the woman into its center. I turn to Clint to make fun of this fervor over gelatinized alcohol, but he is already gone, having followed the women into the eye of the storm. Classic Clint.

Great. My birthday celebration and my two buddies have ditched me. One for a chick, the other for Jell-o shots. I raise my cup to my mouth and realize I'm out of beer again. My stomach growls its protest, but I know that more beer is just what it needs to settle down. I reach for the keg's tap, surprised when I miss it a few times before I'm able to grab hold and pour another.

I lean back against the table, take a small sip. I can feel the cold liquid work its way down my esophagus, drop into my agitated stomach, bounce, and start to come back up. I let out a silent, burning burp that smells like hot dogs cooked in hydrochloric acid, and am grateful that nothing else came up with it. I feel suddenly unsteady on my feet—probably drunk already—and grab a handful of pretzels to stuff them in my mouth, hoping that they will stabilize me while soaking up whatever is going on down in my stomach.

A girl with shoulder-length blond hair, wearing one of those puffy vest things, comes up to me just as I shove another massive handful of pretzels in to my mouth. She carries a small paper plate with two trembling squares of Jell-o on it. "How's it going?"

"Omph," I say, and spray bits of pretzels at her. I try to grin an apology by pointing to my furiously grinding jaw.

"Oh, sorry," she says and looks away. I'm not sure if she's embarrassed at catching me with my mouth full or just trying to avoid having pretzel spit on her.

Either way, this gives me a chance to steal a look at her. She's as tall as I am, pale blue eyes, hair that frames her round face and Nordic complexion. She looks so Scandinavian that I feel like I could stroll in to any IKEA and pick her off a shelf. Or

maybe drive up to a South Dakota beauty pageant. At any rate, she's cute. A potential Four Wendys, if you want to put it in those terms.

I choke down the last of the pretzels. "Sorry about that."

"I saw you standing over here and I thought you might like one of these," she says, and holds up the Jell-o shots.

In my stomach, the Lil' Smokies have declared war on the pretzels and the last thing I want to do is give them more ammunition by introducing vodka into the mix. But my will is not strong. "Sure," I say, and take one of the wobbling Jell-o squares. There is no elegant way to eat a Jell-o shot, so I just open wide and throw the whole thing in there. IKEA Girl follows my lead and we both make embarrassed smiles at each other. I feel the Jell-o wiggle its way south and wonder if it is the biggest mistake I've made in a long time.

"So," she says, and clears her throat. "What do you do?"

"Law school. Second year. You?"

"Me too," she says, looking at me with an arched eyebrow. "I've never seen you around."

"Lincoln," I say quickly. "I go to Nebraska, not Creighton. My buddies and I are just up for the weekend."

"Yeah, I saw those guys with you. They're . . . interesting."

"Well the tall guy," I say, and point at Sebastian who is now in the corner of the living room with his back to us, clearly making out with the brunette, "he works as a maid. You know one of those in-home cleaning services? Yeah, he cleans my apartment."

"Oh," she says, but her eyes narrow like she is a little confused by my answer.

“And the other guy,” I say, and nod toward Clint, “the one with Jell-o in his beard, he’s our special friend.” I make air quotes with my hand to indicate what I mean by special. “He sort of follows us around wherever we go.”

“Really? Wait. Are you serious?”

“Can I get you another beer?”

I lean over the keg, and thankfully fill two glasses with a relative amount of dexterity. In my stomach, the pretzels’ blandness is proving no match for the Smokies and vodka. They seem to have teamed up with the beer and all three are giving the business to the pretzels.

I hand IKEA Girl a half-full cup of beer. “I have a question for you,” I say, and point at her vest. “Do your arms ever get cold? I mean, because if they do, you could probably buy some sort of vest extension for the arms.”

She looks down at her vest, realizes I’m teasing her. “Very funny,” she says. She stares at me for a minute like she’s trying to figure me out. “Let me ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“What classes are you taking this semester?”

It’s always embarrassing when the person you are hitting on is way smarter than you. It’s not a situation that has ever ended well for me, unless the girl happens to be into fat, sweaty guys. Experience tells me that’s rarely the case. “Well,” I say, trying to recall what I remember from *The Paper Chase* and *Ally McBeal*. “There’s Contracts . . . Property . . . and Criminal.”

IKEA Girl leans in like she is waiting to hear more. When I don’t say anything, she says, “Criminal? Is that Crim Pro, or Crim Law?”

I have no fucking clue what she's talking about. "It's a little of both, actually."

"And Contracts and Property? Those are first year classes. Didn't you say you were a second year?"

She got me on the ropes, and we both know it. But I'm not willing to go down without a fight. "Second year? No, I'm pretty sure I said first year."

"You're not a law student, are you?"

"Got me," I say, and try to smile, trying to pass all of this off as a little joke. She isn't laughing. By now my stomach feels like it's expanding and could explode in a toxic eruption, spewing an unholy mixture on everything in a three-mile radius. "No, I'm not in law school."

"And your buddies?"

"Sebastian is a lead singer in a band. Clint is the drummer," I say. "But he's still our special friend." No air quotes this time because I'm afraid that any motion, large or small, will bring forth something unpleasant. Still, I soldier on, putting on a brave face. "We're out celebrating my birthday. I'm twenty-six today."

"Well, happy birthday then," she says with a smile that reveals perfectly white teeth. Her tone is surprisingly pleasant, considering how this conversation has gone.

"And what do you really do?"

All I've done so far is lie to her and make fun of her vest, but despite the rocky start, I just might have a chance with her. Maybe she does like fat and sweaty guys. I momentarily ignore the warning signs in my stomach in order to concentrate. Just try to impress her, that's what she wants.

“I’m a purveyor of truth.” The second it comes out of my mouth, I know it’s a mistake. A horrible, pretentious mistake.

“What?” she says, and takes half a step back like my idiotic response has physically repelled her.

For reasons beyond my understanding, I say, “You know, a transmitter of the human condition.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” I say, mainly because I don’t know. “I guess...sort of...like the promise of the wrecking ball.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Another half step away from me.

I don’t actually know what the hell I’m talking about at this point, so I take a drink of my beer in order to stall, and come up with something reasonable to say. Why I can’t just tell her that I’m a writer is beyond me. But I have more pressing concerns. By now, my hand has warmed my beer to the temperature of water from a hose that’s been in the sun too long. As it travels downward to join the fracas in my stomach, I realize that the Jell-o shot was not, in fact, the biggest mistake I’ve made in a long time. It’s this sip of beer.

Fortunately, I’ve been here before and know quite well the proper procedure for a situation such as this. As soon as the beer hits bottom, my stomach does a few final somersaults and I turn my head away from IKEA Girl. My body convulses and I wretch from deep inside and let chunks of Lil’ Smokies bathed in beer foam fly from my mouth onto the table. Some Jell-o red is mixed in for good measure, and the whole mix looks kind of like some chili I tried to make a few years ago.

From behind me, I hear IKEA Girl let out a horrified “Ewww!”

I fall to my knees, one hand on the corner of the table, the other on the keg. I laugh a little at the irony of the food ending up back on the table where I got it, and am about to make fun of the girl for sounding embarrassingly amount like Paris Hilton when my stomach quivers again, my chest jerks forward, and I let loose with more vomit. It’s mainly foam and some greenish bile jumbled in, but this time the keg, and not the table, becomes part of the collateral damage.

My stomach unclenches and I move from my knees to a sitting position facing away from the carnage. From my vantage point on the floor, I see a cavalry’s worth of flip-flops angled toward me. I look up to find, for the second time tonight, the whole party staring at me. This time, though, the soundtrack is Jack Johnson.

I smile the best I can. “Is the party over?”

“It is for you, asshole.”

I look over to see the girl with the ponytail, the one with the Jell-o shots, standing over me, arms crossed. “This must be your party,” I say.

“It is. And now it’s time for you to go. I’ll call a cab.” She steps back and says, “Get him out of here, guys.”

Pink Polo Guy and his friend, or maybe brother, Yellow Polo Guy, grab me under the arms and lift me to my feet as the host flips open her cell phone. “Let’s go,” one of them says.

“Have you seen the guys I came with?” I ask Yellow Polo Guy.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” he says, and puts an oversized hand all the way around my bicep, pulling me toward the front door.

“Wait,” I say, struggling to wrench my arm free, but am unable break out of his vise grip. “I can walk.”

But I can’t walk. As soon as Yellow Polo Guy releases my arm, my legs revolt, turning hollow and giving way before I take a step. I feel the meat hooks under my arms again before I make it all the way to the floor. Pink and Yellow Polo Guys pull me back to my feet and try to walk me to the door, but I can’t seem to make my legs work. They drag me across the room like security at a fancy restaurant throwing out a bum who’s wandered in off the street. The patrons here turn away, pretend to talk about something else, look at me with furtive sideways glances as I’m lugged through the middle of the room.

The host holds open the front door, waiting for us when we get there. “Cab’s on its way.”

Pink and Yellow Polo Guys drag me to the front stoop and prop me up so that I’m standing on my own. I sway like a newborn, and am forced to put a hand on the brick exterior of the duplex. “Can’t I wait inside?”

“And let you puke in my house again? You can wait outside,” she says. The Polo Guys stand behind her, arms crossed, like sentries the gates to an ancient city.

“But what about my buddies?” I ask. “Why don’t they have to leave? It was their idea to begin with.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about, but I doubt it was their idea for you the act like a high school kid who doesn’t know his limits,” she says, and starts to shut the front door.

“Wait. Don’t close the door yet,” I say in my best wounded dog yelp.

“What?”

“There was this girl. Blonde. White vest. Super cute. Do you think I could just get her number? And then I’ll wait out side. Promise.”

“Listen, buddy,” she says, hands up like this is the dumbest thing she’s heard from me yet. “Most people here are law students. As in going to be lawyers. We’re adults. This isn’t some party for immature losers. Nobody here wants to give you their number.”

“I’m not immature,” I say, as she slams the door in my face, knowing that she didn’t hear me, and, worse, that she wouldn’t care. “But I’m thirty-one,” I say in a whisper to the wood grain of the door. My only answer is hearing the deadbolt slide in to place.

For I minute, I stand at the front door, look in the small, arched window. I think I see Sebastian kissing his brunette and Clint holding court in the middle of four or five people who seem to be laughing at whatever story he’s telling them. I try waving to get their attention, to let me back in or to at least leave with me so we can hit a bar or two before last call. But the party is crowded, and they don’t seem to notice me. Eventually I stop trying to get their attention, sit on the front stoop like some whose backstage pass has been confiscated, and wait for the cab.

## CHAPTER TWO

I extend a shaky arm toward my nightstand, hand searching for the goddamn vibrating phone that has awakened me. After knocking over my alarm clock, which knocks over the lamp, both of which crash on to the floor and send a thousand volts of pain straight through my temples, I realize the vibrating is coming from my pants. Throwing back the covers and opening one eye just enough to let a little light into my brain, I see my jeans are still on from last night. Same for my shirt. Same for my shoes.

I flip open the phone, wondering who could possibly be calling me this early in the morning. “Hello?” I say in a cotton-mouthed croak.

“Happy Birthday a day late, Jay.”

It’s Wendy. The original. The one and only true Five Wendy on the very scale she inspired.

“Thanks. Why are you calling me so early?”

“Jay, it’s one-fifteen. In the afternoon. You were supposed to meet me for lunch over an hour ago.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

“What did you *do* last night?”

What *did* I do last night? Party crashing. Yuppies. Beer, Lil Smokies, Jell-o shot. Talked to Four Wendys girl. Then . . . oh, no. My stomach gurgles on cue and nausea rolls over me like a Mack Truck. What else. Something about the superiority of lawyers and being locked outside. Then a cabbie prodding me with a tire iron in order to wake me up in the backseat when he stopped in front of my building. And then my phone woke me up.

“Not much really,” I say. “Hung out with Clint and Sebastian. Had some drinks and called it a night pretty early.”

“Doubtful,” she says. We both know she’s right to doubt me.

“Sorry about lunch,” I say, moving on before the conversation gets awkward. “Do you want to meet up later?”

“Sure. Meet me at Toads after I get off work and I’ll buy you a drink for your birthday.” The thought of another drink makes my stomach turn over, but I know I won’t pass up a free one. “And get out of bed and do something today. Like writing that novel you’ve been talking about ever since I met you.”

“Be nice. I’m hung-over and it’s my birthday.”

“No, yesterday was your birthday.”

“Whatever. I’ll see you later,” I say, and hang up.

I roll out of bed an hour later, and walk in the main room of my apartment to find a couple ibuprofen and drink some water so my kidneys stop hurting. I live in a five-story building that hasn’t been updated since before I was born. These fancy places seem to be popping up all over Omaha under the guise of urban renewal, apartments with wood floors harvested from sustainable forests, that come standard with granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and floor to ceiling windows. My apartment isn’t one of those. The developers haven’t dug their claws into this place yet, making it suitable for young professionals and empty nesters, and I like it that way.

Really, my place is pretty basic: A living space that flows into a kitchenette, one bedroom, one bathroom. The frayed, gray, industrial-grade carpet in my place is so thin that it feels like walking on concrete. The refrigerator is older than me, with yellowed

plastic shelves, and a smell that puts you on fair notice that food will only last about thirty-six hours in there before turning on you. The faucets and shower spit out a bit of rusty water before running clear, and, like in Mexico, I don't drink the water. A window unit in my room is the only air conditioning, and it only blows pleasantly warm air on hot days.

Still, my place is pretty cool. The building is an unadorned turn of the century warehouse, built mostly with red brick that has aged well over the last 110 years. The ground floor is home to Delice European Bakery and Café, which probably explains why my pants don't fit as well as they used to. The rest of the building is made of small apartments like mine. There's no elevator, but even the stairs have character. Their original stain has faded from a deep mahogany to a dusty brown. Each step bows slightly in the middle and emits its own discrete creak or groan when walked upon. The interior walls of my place are brick and chipped in some places, but still remain as straight as the day they were built. From my corner bedroom, I can look out the arched double windows at some restored warehouses – the fancy, updated kind – across the street, and down on to the Old Market, the cultural center of the city, below.

The overall effect is a place that has a history of something having happened here, whether mundane or extraordinary, before I showed up. Nothing about this building is ephemeral, built with quarter-inch drywall, or can be changed without a jackhammer or wrecking ball. I sleep well at night knowing my building is impervious to change and will be around long after I'm gone.

And my apartment comes with Clint, my de facto, non rent-paying roommate. How he became my roommate still baffles me. Clint drums, and Sebastian sings, for a

band called East Coast Vagina Slang—which is an awesome name for a band, right up there with Noah’s Ark Was A Spaceship and Dance Me Pregnant. One night a few years back ECVS was playing a show at Sokol Underground and I had an after-party at my place. Clint passed out on the couch and just never left. That was nearly three years ago. Now, he’s basically just a part of the furniture.

Clint is strange in that he isn’t spastic or ADD like most drummers. He’s sort of the anti-Keith Moon. In fact, he doesn’t do much besides lay on the couch and watch television. Usually *CSI: Miami* or *Cold Case* marathons. Sometimes romantic comedies with Matthew McConaughey. The only time Clint really leaves is for band practice, which he seems to be doing less of lately, or to play a gig. Sometimes, like last night, he hits a few parties. I don’t know how he supports himself, but I guess it’s not that hard if you don’t pay rent.

I grab the ibuprofen and glass of water Clint has set out for me on the kitchen counter. Clint is in his usual spot on the couch, lying on his back with a bag of chips on his stomach. I stand behind him and watch as the Evangelical preacher on the television sweats profusely into the camera and talks about how Jesus will save us all if we just call the number on the screen and donate some money. Any amount will put us on the path to salvation, but the more we donate, the better off our souls will be.

“What the hell are you watching?” I ask, then put the pills in my mouth and chase them with a gulp of water.

“Some church guy, man.”

“Why?”

“Stepped on the remote and broke it. Whatever channel I push, it automatically turns to this channel. I think it’s the God Network or something.”

“You know you can change the channel on the box sitting on the TV, right? Do you want me to change it for you?”

“Naw, man. It’s cool. This guy’s a trip.” He cranes his head to look at me. “What happened to you last night? Heard some guy puked. That you?”

He knows the answer to that question, so I jump to the important issue. “Thanks for coming to my rescue. I almost got my ass kicked by a couple of Ken dolls. Had to take a cab home.”

“I’m not your babysitter, man. One minute you’re talking to that hot chick, the next minute you’re blowing chunks, scaring the natives. Leave you alone for a minute and look what happens.” He grunts a laugh at his own joke, and turns back toward the screen. “Besides, who do you think hauled your wide ass up all those stairs and got you to bed?”

“Really?”

Clint looks back at me, his expression expectant. “Yeah, man. You were passed out on the stairs outside. I didn’t want someone to steal you, so I carried you in.”

“Shit. Thanks. I had no idea.”

“No problem, brother,” he says, and turns back toward the television. “Think you’ll call that girl you were chatting up?”

“I don’t think she’s all that interested at this point.”

“You should.”

“Anyway. I’m going to shower and then meet Wendy. You doing anything tonight?”

“Naw, man.”

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Wendy is already at Mr. Toad’s when I show up late, despite the fact it’s just two blocks down the street from my apartment. She’s sitting at a corner table in the back room near the window, a bottle of beer in front of her. It’s the table we shared many times when we were together, our table, and I take that as a good sign. The sun slants at steep angles behind her, trying to find its way in to the room, reflecting brightly off a steady stream of dust particles. Above her, dusty tomes sit on high bookshelves that span all four sides of the room. I’ve never been sure what their purpose is—no one actually pulls them down for reading material, so I assume they’re supposed to act as bar decor. Every time I’m here, and that’s often, I have to resist the urge to snatch one of the books off the shelf and see what they are.

Wendy talks on her phone, something about the proofs for a new book being released by the boutique publishing house where she works. She wears a navy suit and has her glasses on, looking as professional as ever. I sit down and she puts up an index finger indicating that I should wait a minute for her to finish the call. I perceive this as an invitation to drink her beer and take a swig. She gives me a go-get-your-own-damn-drink look, but I, with an innocent smile, feign like I don’t understand. She points at the bottle with her free hand, one eyebrow raised, and motions for me to put it back down. I do.

She snaps her phone shut. “Hi. Happy Birthday.”

“Hi. Thanks. Sorry I stood you up for lunch.”

“Don’t worry about it. I figured you probably wouldn’t make it,” she says. “Let me guess. Last night, you drank a lot, tried to make out with some random girl, and then threw up. Probably in that order.”

Damn. She knows me too well, but pride steps in. “I’ll have you know that last night was very tame,” I say. “Just me and the guys. No excessive drinking. No hitting on girls. Home early.”

“Well, I knew you would show up tonight if I offered to buy you a drink,” she says, and grabs her beer back from me, takes a drink.

“At least I didn’t call you last night,” I say. She doesn’t have to know that it would have been difficult for me to drunk dial her while passed out on the stoop.

“You mean your pathetic attempts to get me to come over at 3:30 in the morning? Gee, thanks for not tempting me. You know some of us actually have to work.”

“It could have been fun. Like a few months back,” I say, and steal her beer again.

“First off, that wasn’t a few months ago, it was like two years ago,” she says and grabs the bottle from me in mid-drink, causing beer to run down my chin. “And I don’t consider us being naked and you being too drunk to get it up fun.”

The truth is a motherfucker especially when it’s about your man parts, and the only thing I can do is take it and sit there in silence. I can’t believe that was two years ago. I feel the beer making its way down my chin and onto my shirt, so I wipe it off with my hand, which I dry on my jeans. My face feels heavy and I’m sure that I’m pouting like a scolded puppy.

“Sorry,” she says. “It’s just that we broke up a long time ago and I don’t want us to fall into any bad habits. Besides, you know I’m with Paul.”

“Who? That idiot who drives a PT Cruiser?”

“His name is Paul.”

“What guy in his early thirties drives a PT Cruiser? He’s either gay or a middle-aged woman.”

“Listen, Jay,” she says, leaning in towards me and pointing an index finger at my chest. “We broke up because, among other indiscretions, you didn’t have your shit together. That was nearly five years ago and you still haven’t done anything.”

“I’m writing a novel.”

“Great. Let’s see it. Maybe I can take it to my boss and see if she wants to publish it,” she says. Wendy leans back in her chair and the low evening sun blazes directly in my eyes. “We both know you haven’t been writing anything.”

I choose to not dignify these remarks with a response.

“Listen,” she says. “I know things have been tough with your dad dying. I know that is part of the reason that you’ve been stuck in neutral so long. I know it’s part of the reason we didn’t work out.” She tilts her head down low, trying to look me in the eyes, but I won’t look up at her. “But you’re thirty-one now. Your dad died a long time ago. You need to get going with things.”

And there it is. The truth exposed for me to see it, acknowledge it, and maybe even move on. But I’m paralyzed by it and by the fact Wendy can see it so clearly. We sit there in silence for a few minutes. Wendy raises her beer to finish it off, casting a shadow over my face, giving me some relief.

“You know, my dad was thirty-one when I was born,” I say finally. “He had done so much by now. Married. Kids. A career. A house. I don’t have any of that.”

“But you could. You’re just choosing not to do anything.”

“It’s that dammed list,” I say. “I can’t figure it out. It should be everything I need to write – they’re plot points for crying out loud. But every time I sit down and look at them – ”

“You know, maybe you should just forget the list. Write whatever you want, and then come back to it some other time.” Her phone rattles on the table and she picks it up and eyes the message. “Shit. I have to go. Work needs me.”

“Really? I thought you were going to buy me a drink. We were going to talk about the good old days?”

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her eyes get serious and she gives me a look I haven’t seen since she broke up with me. “But there is something I need to tell you before I go.”

“What? Is everything ok?”

“Well, I don’t really know how to say this,” she says, and looks down at her empty beer bottle on the table. “But, Paul and I are getting married. A year from now.”

My body goes limp and the edges of my vision begin to creep inward, everything going to black. Although there is only a small table between us, Wendy seems so far away that I can barely see her. Her lips move, but I don’t hear anything. Something touches my arm, shakes me.

“Jay? Jay. Are you ok?”

Everything comes back into focus and I realize it’s Wendy shaking me.

“What?” I say. “Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Sure.”

Her phone vibrates again. “I’m sorry, Jay, but they really need me at work. I have to go now,” she says, and puts her phone in her purse. “I thought we would have more time to talk about this. Do you at least want to walk me back to my office?”

“No, I think I am going to sit here for a bit.”

“O.k. I’m sorry to spring this on you,” she says, and gets up. “We’ll talk soon.”

I feel her standing over me, like she can’t decide if she wants to stay or maybe say something to me, but I won’t look at her. After a few seconds, I feel her leave and then see her outside walking past the window. I just sit at the table for a while with the empty beer bottle in front of me.

Eventually, a waitress makes her way over. “Can I get you anything?”

“Shot of Wild Turkey,” I say. “Bring two.”

I look out the window, not really seeing anything. The sun has nearly set and casts an amber color on the tops of the surrounding buildings. The street level is dark enough for me to almost see my face partially reflected in the window. Married? To Paul? How did this happen?

The waitress returns and puts the shot glasses full of dirt-brown goodness on the table. Each makes a surprisingly heavy clunk against the wood.

“Two more, please,” I say, and reach for one of the small glasses.

She huffs at this and I think for a moment that we’re going to have to argue about the customer always being right, but she stomps off toward the bar. I throw the first shot back, feeling a sharp sensation in my throat. The second burns less.

The waitress comes back over, puts the next two shots on the table. I down them, order two more, and call Sebastian. I tell him I have some bad news and that he should

come get drunk with me. I flip my MasterCard on the table, tell the waitress to keep them coming, and wait for Sebastian to show up. By the time he gets here, I can barely see him, and I certainly don't understand what's happening when the cops show up later and arrest me.

### CHAPTER THREE

When I woke up today, I felt an urgency I thought I had lost. Maybe it was because it was the first time since my birthday that my head didn't feel like it was being hammered by an aluminum baseball bat. Maybe it was the thought of moving in the right direction again. Whatever it was, my body seemed to pull me out of bed without my brain telling it to quit messing around.

I've laid low these last few days. After finding out Wendy is getting married to PT Cruiser Boy, after spending the night in jail, after an incapacitating two-day hangover, I decided I needed a break from my rock and roll lifestyle. So, after a stop at Cubby's, a grocery store a few blocks over from my place, for several one-gallon cartons of Rocky Road ice cream and a pack of American Spirits, I've been holed up in my room. Most of this time was spent acting like a teenaged girl watching the latest Nicholas Sparks movie – alternatively sobbing (why can't Noah and Allie just *be* together) and shoveling pecan-and-marshmallow-laced ice cream down my gullet.

A few times, Clint knocked on the door, asking if I was ok or if I needed anything, but I couldn't respond with anything more than snot-filled sobs and infant-like gurgles. The silhouette of his feet under the door would pause there for a moment like he was waiting for a more coherent answer, or debating whether or not to open the door. Eventually, though, the shadows would disappear and I could soon hear the proselytizing ramblings of some TV preacher or the rhythm of a choir's joyous hymns. At one point, I even thought I heard the voices of real people out in the living room talking about God, but chalked it up to being on a Rocky Road high.

Last night Clint knocked again and waited. When I didn't respond, he finally said, "I'm coming in, man." The crystal knob turned and the solid oak door slid heavily against its frame, reluctantly giving way. He stood backlit for a moment gazing around the dark room. "Good Lord, what a mess."

I wasn't sure if Clint was talking about the room or about me. I hadn't showered, shaved, or even bothered to change clothes in three days. I looked around from my spot on the bed, noticing empty ice cream containers that stood as monuments to my misery. Two were on either side of me in the bed, a third was on my desk chair where I had originally stacked them. Bouquets of used tissue bloomed all around me as though growing from the mossy green of my bedspread or pushing up through the faded hardwood floors. I sat up in bed, catching a whiff of the pungent odor, somewhere between skunk and hard-boiled eggs, coming from under the covers.

Clint moved an empty carton from the chair onto my desk next to the disposable lighter and unopened pack of cigarettes and sat down. "How's it going, man?"

"Well, Wendy's getting married, and I got arrested," I said before realizing he already knew those things. I leaned back against the headboard, looking up at the chipped paint on the ceiling. Clint remained silent, and when I looked back at him, his elbows were rested on his knees, hands together pointing up in front of his face. He was silent and patient, as though waiting for me to ask for help. Although I didn't want to give in, his calm unnerved me. Finally, I asked the one question that kept circling my mind. "What am I doing? I mean with my life?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

“Why the hell are we having this conversation if you aren’t even going to give me the answers?”

“Because I can’t tell you what to do with your life, I can only guide you in the right direction.” He remained still on the chair, eyes never moving from mine.

“That’s great, Father Clint, but you know what I want. To be with Wendy. You know, like, married and all that stuff.”

He leaned back in the chair, eyes wandering around the room, and took a moment to rearrange himself before bending back toward me. “No, man. You don’t. You never even mentioned getting married to her before she dumped you. I want to know what you really want to do with your life.”

We sat in silence for a little while because anybody who knows me knows the answer to that question. I want to be a writer, have always wanted to be a writer since I was a little kid and wrote a story about a Pilgrim who set his pants on fire during the first Thanksgiving. But saying “I want to be a writer” out loud has always been difficult for me. Even though I’ve done all my course work at Omaha University, I haven’t been able to get my PhD in creative writing because I haven’t written my dissertation, my novel. Maybe that’s because, in my mind, writing’s never seemed like a real profession. Sure, fifty years ago, you could write novels and that was your job. Nobody would ever think twice about it if you told them that’s what you did. Now, unless you are a reporter, writing is something that people do as a youthful flight of fancy, or something they do as an adult on the side, after they come home to their real life from their real job, like my dad did. Just a hobby, not a reason to get up every morning. Ask anyone. Try telling

people you are a writer and see if they take you seriously. More likely than not, they'll think you belong to some arcane nerd cult.

I looked back at the craters in the ceiling. "I want be a writer."

"As a man thinks in his heart, so he is, man."

I thought about this for a few seconds and then looked him in the eyes to see if he was serious. He still sat there, a foot from my face, and didn't blink, not even a flicker of a grin beneath his close-cropped beard. But I couldn't resist. "Been watching the God Network again?"

"Yeah, man. But it's still good advice."

"You think if I write this novel that Wendy might like me again?"

"Does that matter, if writing is really what you want to do?"

He was right, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. We sat there not talking for a while until Clint stood up and said he was going to watch some more TV.

"Thanks for checking in on me, Clint."

"No problem."

"So, do we, like hug each other now?"

"No, man, you stink. You seriously need a shower."

I did shower when I woke up today. I put all the ice cream cartons and Kleenex in the wastebasket under my desk. I made my bed and opened the blinds that covered the two large, arched windows in my room, letting the sun shine onto the bed covers. I sat down at my desk on the opposite wall of the windows and turned on my iMac. As my computer warmed up, I got up again, and walked around the bed to where my record player sits atop two unfinished wood crates that were meant to store wine bottles. I use

them instead to store my collection of second-hand records. I bent over and flipped through them, their cellophane wrapping crinkling, until I found some artistic inspiration: Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," a hand-me-down record from my dad.

I put the record on the turntable, and walked back over to my desk as the first few soft notes of saxophone sighed out over the tapping cadence of a high-hat cymbal. I sat down, set my phone to vibrate, cracked my knuckles, perched them over the keyboard, ready to attack. Then I opened the same document on my computer – with the four things from my dad's list – I've been staring at for years.

That was an hour ago. Since then, I have sat here, staring at the screen. The cursor plays a game of peek-a-boo with me in the upper left corner while Coltrane goes crazy on his sax, his frenetic melodies ridiculing my lack of creative juices. What do these things mean? They're plot points, a ready-made story somewhere in there. I just have to find what my dad was trying to say to me. Hemingway once said there is nothing to writing: All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed. Well, Papa, I'm hemorrhaging all over the place right now and I can't even come up with a good first line.

It's not like I can't write. I'm actually a published author. Two of my short stories have appeared in journals – the ones all young writers try to get into, but nobody actually reads. My stories were sort of these postmodern takes on the human condition. Crap like that. It's what got me into my PhD program in the first place.

I lean back in my chair and decide what I need to get me started is a smoke because that's what writers do. I tamp the pack of cigarettes against my thigh, take one out, and put it in my mouth. I fumble with the red childproof lighter for a moment,

sparkling the flint a few times until I finally draw out the flame and light the cigarette. I draw in deeply, anticipating the writerly inspiration that will fill my lungs.

To my surprise, it's only smoke that fills me, not genius wordsmithing. I snort out bluish smoke from my lungs in a series of uncontrolled, shrill coughs that leave me doubled over, tears in my eyes and a string of drool hanging from my chin. "Fuck me," I say aloud between hacks. I'm not sure why I thought this would work. I haven't smoked since trying to impress Peggy Vandressen at the Junior-Senior Prom after-party, a stunt which, it should be noted, ended much like this one.

My phone vibrates and I see Sebastian is calling. I stub the cigarette out in one of the empty ice cream cartons, wipe the slobber off my chin, and flip open the phone. "Hello?"

"Dude, you're supposed to be here over an hour ago."

I look at the clock on my nightstand. It's already two in the afternoon. "On my way," I say and close the phone without waiting for a reply. I resave the list as *Great American Novel*, and head for the door.

After hiding out like a vampire for the last few days, the afternoon sun stings my skin and burns my retinas as I step outside my building. Nonetheless, being outside in the Old Market energizes me. The reason I live in such a shabby apartment is that the Old Market is great place to live. There are all kinds of bars, restaurants, and shops down here. Most of them are local businesses, too. No Applebee's or Best Buys, or any of those bland, spirit-destroying corporate type places, nothing like West Omaha. The buildings here look like mine, dark red brick reaching up five stories, broken only by tall windows and the zigzags of black fire escapes creeping back down to street level.

One of the great places down here is Sutton's Used Books, where I work part-time. Of course, if it were up to me, I wouldn't work at all, but Wendy thought it was a good idea after I lost my job, and thus my paycheck, working as a graduate teaching assistant at school. The English Department and I had a little disagreement about my teaching responsibilities. I only showed up once, on the first day, to tell my students that I would be canceling class for the entire semester and that everyone would get an A if they didn't tell anyone. That lasted about a week before the department chair called me into her office and told me she didn't appreciate my "hands-off" approach to teaching. I told her it was the only way to let the students find themselves. She told me the students needed to learn how to read critically and understand the rhetorical triangle. I told her my way was the only way I knew how to teach, and besides, does anybody really use all that stuff in real life? She told me my services were no longer needed. A week later, I started at Sutton's.

I walk east along the wide sidewalk, dodging pedestrian traffic. The oak trees along the streets have already lost their leaves, but people are out in droves trying to enjoy the remaining few days of nice weather before it turns cold. Moms push toddlers tipping sippy cups in strollers. Businessmen in pinstriped suits, Bluetooth earpieces clinging to their jawlines, push past, appearing to talk to themselves. The outside seating at Billy Frogs is filling in with its usual crowd of frat boys drinking Bud Light out of cans and reaching for curly fries served in grease-stained cardboard boxes. The outdoor tables at M's Pub are busy with waiters dressed in black who are serving vegetarian lahvosh and New York strip steaks to patrons sipping on red wine. Cars pass slowly on Howard Street hoping to find a parking spot, their tires making that distinct humming sound on the worn

herringbone-patterned brick streets. The vitality inspires a quicker cadence in my step as I make my way the few blocks towards Sutton's.

I smell Suttons before I walk in the front door: a combination of incense and cigarette smoke permanently ensconced in threadbare carpeting and dusty, old books. They've got the door propped open, trying to invite in the casual window shopper. The open door, however, is the only inviting part of the store. Even though I've worked here for the better part of three years, I still feel overwhelmed by the immense stacks of books. The bookshelves are at least twelve feet tall and are spaced only an arm's length apart. They overflow with books shelved the normal, vertical way, but also have more books stacked horizontally on top of them, using up every inch of real estate. Books are stacked knee high on the floor, further narrowing the available space for customers to maneuver down the aisles. In fact, it's impossible for two people to pass each other in these stacks – one person always has to back out and let the other through. It's a wonder, with the door open, that books don't just tumble out on to the sidewalk.

The overall feel of Sutton's is that you could get hit in the head with a falling book at any time. The store seems to be devoid of any organizing principle or shelving scheme – probably because there is no organizing principle or shelving scheme. There are little placards on each shelf to indicate what kind of books should be shelved there, but you're just as likely to find *Infinite Jest* under the Self Help section as you are to find *Codependent No More* in the Gardening section.

Sutton's policy is that we will buy any book in reasonably good condition, regardless of its usefulness or relevance. When I started working here, the owner, Ralph Emerson Sutton – that's seriously his name – told me to buy anything the customers

wanted to sell as long as the cover wasn't missing or falling off. As a result, over the years, we've undoubtedly bought a hundred times as many books as we've sold. And with no shelving system, we basically throw the store's new additions wherever we can find a space. Not the best business plan, but rumor has it that Ralph has money and just runs the business for something to do. At any rate, this policy explains why we have no less than fourteen copies of *The Rainmaker* floating around the store, none of which are shelved anywhere near each other.

I walk in the door and see Sebastian and Charles standing near the cash register talking to a girl I haven't seen in the store before. Sebastian cracks me up. There are basically two versions of him. There's the one who induces me to crash parties with him and Clint. This is the one who is the lead singer of East Coast Vagina Slang and runs around shirtless onstage screaming lyrics about evil dwarves and pagan rituals, stage dives, does body shots off the hottest girl in the bar, and then takes home said hottest girl.

Then there is the Sebastian who works at Sutton's. This guy shows up to work on time, treats the infrequent customers like royalty, and speaks so softly that you can't hear him unless you are standing next to him. This guy pulls back his long, stringy hair into a ponytail, wears a button down and slacks, and horn-rimmed glasses. He claims his mom buys him the button downs and slacks, and that the glasses make him appear more literate to the customers. But really, he looks like a Gap commercial gone terribly wrong.

Sebastian looks up and says, "Dude, you're late. My shift ended two hours ago." That's about as worked up as he gets offstage. The fact that he said anything at all means he's pissed. "I was supposed to spend some time in the studio working on backing tracks for the new album."

“Sorry I couldn’t make it in earlier. I owe you a beer.”

“At least you’re back from the dead,” he says, and grabs a beat-up guitar case from behind the counter.

“You know a phone call would have been nice,” Charles says. No one really likes Charles and I’m not just saying that because he’s being a dick right now. He’s one of those academic types who reads obscure shit so he can quote it and appear smarter than everyone else. I mean, who reads the letters Wordsworth sent to his mom while away at boarding school? Charles does. I suppose that’s why he’s getting his PhD at Omaha University, and writing his dissertation on the role animals play in postcolonial narratives. I think he looks down on me for getting my PhD in the same program, but in creative writing instead of literature. I don’t blame him – his program seems way more boring than mine.

Still, Charles, like me, has lost a parent – his mom died in a car wreck – so I have a small soft spot for him. But our relationship has become overly antagonistic to the point of no return, and it would take electrodes hooked up to my man boobs before I’d admit to him that I think he’s smart and feel a sense of camaraderie over our dead parents.

I ignore Charles and focus on the girl instead. She’s been standing there watching us carrying on like the Three Stooges, not saying anything. I extend my hand to her. “I’m Jay.”

“Hi,” she says, and smiles. “I’m Sasha. I just started here.” She has short, choppy black hair and wears skinny jeans with black Chucks. Her tank top reveals a large tattoo on her left shoulder of a leafless tree that looks like something out of an Edgar Allen Poe story. The overall effect is that she’s cute in an indie-girl sort of way. Probably Three

Wendys. Cute, works in a bookstore, has a tattoo. She could be Four Wendy material, but she sort of looks like she shops at Hot Topic and she works at Sutton's instead of a real bookstore – basically has the same job as me, which is to say not a real job.

“She’s going to take my shifts when we go out on tour,” Sebastian says.

Sasha is definitely an upgrade to Sebastian. “Well, I look forward to working with you,” I say. I hear the guys laugh and realize I am still shaking Sasha’s hand long after what is considered socially acceptable. I let go. “Oh. Sorry.”

“No problem,” she says, and avoids looking at me like my gaffe has made her uncomfortable.

“Where’s Ralph?” I ask Sebastian. “I need to ask him something”

“Upstairs, doing his thing.”

“Jay must owe him some money,” Charles says. This is meant to embarrass me in front of the cute new girl. It does.

“No I don’t,” I say, and walk to the back of the store. “I just need to talk to him about something.”

To get to the stairs to the second level, I need to get through the employees-only back room. I walk past the sign that says: *If you don’t see the book you’re looking for, just ask. We might have it in the back room.* This isn’t true. There is no secret stash of books from which your book can be located, and any employee who’s asked to look simply gets a few minutes to sneak a couple of drags from his cigarette on the back dock. The back room basically consists of an old metal desk that has our time cards and a miniature fridge sitting on it, a mop and bucket in the corner, and a bathroom that hasn’t been cleaned since I started here. The only books back here are the ones we bring in for

breaks, or the rare good one from the sales floor that we buy for ourselves before any customer has a chance at it.

We think that Ralph owns the building, but we don't know for sure. At any rate, he uses the second level as a studio. His love for painting is apparently second only to his love for running a money-losing bookstore. In fact, he spends so much time painting in his studio and so little time in the store that the painting consumes most of his day. Based on the time Ralph spends up there, he should be a famous artist by now. The strange thing is that I've never seen any of his work, and, to my knowledge, neither has anyone else. For all I know, he's doing Paint By Numbers for eight hours a day up here.

I walk up the metal stairs to the second level hallway, which is lit only by solitary hanging bulb. Ralph answers my knock and steps out of the studio, closing the door quickly behind him. If he isn't painting, he sure looks the part. His jeans and shirt have various multi-colored streaks and smears on them like a Jackson Pollack painting. An unlit cigarette hangs from his mouth and a smudge of dark blue stains his forehead. "Hey, Jay. Nice you could show up today."

"Yeah, sorry about that," I say. "Listen, thanks for bailing me out. I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about it," he says, and puts a paint-splattered hand on my shoulder. He has a long ZZ Top beard that is either smearing yellow paint on his coveralls or having yellow paint from his coveralls smeared on it. His beard gives way to a large belly that enters any room before he does. "I'll take it out of your next check. How are things?"

"Good. No worries."

Ralph looks me directly in the eyes, his hand still on my shoulder. He's always done the fiscally unsound thing by keeping me around despite our limited customer base, and now he knows I'm not telling the truth. "Aside from a little trouble with the authorities. But you already know that."

He smiles a little from behind his beard. "And how's Wendy?"

"Oh, she's good."

"The guys tell me she got engaged."

"And that." I fake a smile, but I can feel my body wilt a little.

"Do the two have anything to do with each other?"

"Not really, just Sebastian and me blowing off some steam."

"You sure? I wouldn't blame you if they did," Ralph says. "I can remember doing some pretty crazy stuff when Jeanne left me. Some booze, some drugs, some women with flexible morals."

This disclosure is beyond the normal bounds of our relationship. Our friendship has always been based on my mediocre skills as a bookseller and his willingness to put up with me. We don't discuss real-life concerns. "I'm good, Ralph."

"I hope you're not still chasing after her. I thought you would have learned by now."

"No, it's not like that. I'm over Wendy now. She's just a friend at this point." I shrug as if this whole Wendy thing is no big deal. "Who knows, maybe I will ask out that Sasha girl you just hired."

Ralph drops his hand from my shoulder. He looks at me with one eyebrow arched as if trying to determine if I'm serious. "Maybe that's not such a good idea, Jay."

“Why not?”

“Maybe it’s better for you to just figure some things out before you move on, that’s all.”

“Ok,” I say, and move toward the stairs, hoping to avoid repeating the talk I had with Clint. “Well thanks. I should get downstairs.”

“All right, Jay,” he says, and opens the door to his studio. “You know where to find me if you need me.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sunday nights are reserved for dinner with my mom. Dinner with my mom means driving out to West Omaha and the inevitable questions about what I am doing with my life. But because it was my birthday last week, tonight should be different. Some of the usual questions, I know, won't be asked out of respect for my birthday meal. I hum to myself as I drive west in my twice-handed-down BMW. My dad's in the late 80s, my sister's in the mid 90s, and mine ever since I bought it from her for \$500 when she moved to Chicago after medical school. The odometer stopped rotating new numbers a few years back, the wood paneling on the dash is pretty much chipped away, and the tan leather seats are striated with cracks. But good old Black Beauty still runs pretty well, the front bumper sticking out like a fierce under bite, warning people to get out of my way. Beats a PT Cruiser any day of the week.

My mom is already sitting in a booth when I get to Mama's Pizza twenty minutes late. She's wearing a purple tracksuit, and her dark, oversized sunglasses – the kind that threaten to overtake her entire face and the face of anyone within a five foot radius – sit on top of her head and keep her bangs out of her face. She gives me a deadpan stare as I take a seat in the booth across the table from her. “James, I don't know why we have to eat here.”

Wow. No formal salutation or birthday greetings, just launching right in. I decide to take the high road for once. “Hi Mom. Sorry I'm late.”

“This place is fine, but it's just not the same as a home cooked meal. And pizza? For your birthday meal?”

“Come on, I like this place.” This is not exactly true. I like the Mama’s Pizza in Midtown. It is the kind of place where you order your pizza, onion rings, and pitcher of beer at a counter, then pick them up at another when they’re ready. You eat your meal on red and white checkerboard tablecloths while sitting in banquet chairs and looking at pictures of slow-pitch softball teams the place has sponsored over the years. It’s not uncommon to share your pizza with some strange child who had decided to sit down at your table for a slice or two, and your kindness is repaid with a refill of Busch Light from the kid’s parents.

But we are not at that Mama’s. My mom refuses to come east of 72<sup>nd</sup> street because she thinks I live in a “dangerous neighborhood.” If historical buildings, used bookstores, and the occasional homeless guy make things dangerous, then I guess she’s right. So instead, we are at the West Omaha version of Mama’s Pizza that comes with waiters and real tables and booths. It’s clean and quiet and kids don’t run around screaming or using their cuteness to pilfer food from other tables.

“I know you do,” my mom says. “It would just be nice if you could come home and I could cook you a meal for once.” She concentrates on unwrapping the white paper napkin enveloping a knife and fork. Without looking up, she says, “You know you haven’t been home since . . .”

Her voice trails off as she puts the napkin in her lap, moving her hands over it, trying to smooth the creases. This is as close as she’s ever come to acknowledging our song and dance. We don’t talk about my dad’s death. It’s just not how my mom and I work. We have a tacit agreement stipulating that I come out west to meet her for dinner on Sundays at some bland restaurant. At dinner, she will ask me the usual Mom

Questions: When am I going to get a real job? When am I going to get married? Why can't I be more like my sister? And the always popular, When am I going to give her grandchildren? I bob and weave my way through these landmines, telling her I already have a real job and that other stuff will happen when it happens.

For my efforts, I expect that she pays for the meal, and that I score points with her because she feels a little better knowing I haven't been killed living in the dangerous part of town. And, once a month, I get a check. I realize the absurdity of a mom giving her thirty-one year old son money every month, but I think it's her attempt to make up for not having my dad around anymore. Besides, who am I to complain? Sutton's doesn't pay that well, and I'm not going to turn down free money.

"You know I don't really like that place," I say.

Before she can respond, a thin, pimply girl wearing dark eyeliner shows up to take our order. Normally, I would immediately rank her on the Wendy Scale, but she looks to be about sixteen. I realized last year when I turned thirty that it's creepy to put teenagers on the scale. Besides this girl has a crappy part-time job and probably lives out here in West Omaha, which means that she would only be a One Wendy anyway.

The girl welcomes us to Mama's in a flat, disinterested monotone, and asks if she can take our order. She says all this without actually looking at us, like our mere presence is an imposition or like there is something infinitely more interesting going on across the room. My mom doesn't seem to notice and orders a chicken salad, Italian dressing on the side. I order a larger pepperoni pizza with a side basket of onion rings.

"James. How can you say that about where you grew up?" my mom asks after the girl trudges off with our order.

We catch each other's eyes for a second and reflexively look away. In that second, though, I see, for the first time, how tired my mom looks. Splotches of purple swell under her eyes like bruises, fissures run parallel to each other on her forehead, skin gathers under her chin. In that second, I see my mom has lost something too.

"I don't know, Mom," I say.

But I do know. I've always known. The question isn't how can I say bad things about where I grew up, but how can I, or anyone for that matter, love the suburbs? Ours was the type of subdivision that's named for what used to be there before the earthmovers flattened and cleared the land, stripping it of the very feature that only remains in name: "Green Meadows," "Maplewood Estates," "Deer Ridge." The type where the developer jams as many houses as possible next to each other, like rush hour commuters on West Dodge Road, in order to maximize profits. Where you don't pick a home, but one of three models the same developer names after his ex-wives: the Vicki, a turn of the century Victorian on the outside, but with a modern open floor plan and en suite master bath on the inside; the Nicollet, a high-maintenance, chic home with large windows and vaulted ceilings; the Bertha, a squat rambler that pushes to property lines in order to fit all 3200 square feet, including 5 bedrooms and 3 ½ baths. The most prominent feature of each lot is a concrete driveway leading to a three-car garage, the front door tucked away from the street behind this buffer. The options for exterior colors extend only as far as a palate of muted earth tones can go, with made up names like "Aspen" and "Wicker" and "Driftwood," amounting to a choice of beige, light beige, or dark beige. Manicured yards, small, green, and contoured by lawn mowers, hide behind 8-foot privacy fences designed

to keep out the neighbors, people who have likewise sought the serenity of the suburbs, from interfering with your artificial sanctuary.

I don't have the heart to tell my mom any of this. I don't want to say that our house is no different from the other thousands of homes in West Omaha. I don't want to say that it's impossible to come back to a place that, but for the street address, looks the same as the neighbor's house. That the color of the vinyl siding the developer called "Sterling" is really only gray. That the yard Dad spent so much time fertilizing, edging and mowing was really wasted space, only there for aesthetics, too small to throw a football or baseball around on. That the immature oak trees the builder planted before we moved in, staked to the ground to fend off spring storms and winter blizzards, weren't big enough to climb. That on the day the cancer finally killed my dad and I watched from the bay windows in the dining room that we spent extra money on while his emaciated remains were carried from the house by the coroner, I knew I would never go back there. I can't – won't – tell her any of this, so I sit at the table, playing with my silverware.

"How was your birthday celebration?" she asks just before our silence becomes uncomfortable. "You never told me what you did."

"Not much," I say. "Just hung out with Clint and Sebastian."

The nice thing about the unspoken agreement between me and my mom is that I know she won't ask me anything else. In fact, she probably doesn't really want to know the answer to begin with. I'm sure I could regale her with a story about puking in front of IKEA Girl, and being shown to the door by Abercrombie and his brother Fitch. My mom, I'm sure would marvel at a story about my freak out over Wendy that ends with me getting arrested. But that's not how my mom and I work. Silence is golden between us on

most matters. It's been that way since that night in college when my friends dumped me in the front yard, drunk and incoherent, and drove off. My mom found me asleep among the hostas and azaleas the next morning. Think Dong from *Sixteen Candles*. Ever since, I can pretty much get away with non-answers as far as my mom is concerned.

I look over my mom's shoulder and see a family take the booth behind ours. The dad, wearing a grey pinstripe suit, talks on the phone and remains standing. The wife sits facing me, and two little boys with matching faux-hawks scamper in to the booth across from her. The mom digs into her purse and pushes crayons and two coloring books across the table at the kids. The light catches her ring, and I see the diamond is nearly the size of a golf ball.

"Now Dayton, Jackson," she says to her kids, her eyes moving back and forth between them, "work on your coloring and don't make a fuss while Daddy's on the phone. Ok?" The woman turns to her purse again and pulls out a compact, then flips it open and cocks her head at strange angles to better see herself in the mirror.

Our waitress comes over to their table and sets down four glasses of water. Before she has a chance to start her spiel, the man covers his phone's mouthpiece.

"We need a large vegetarian," he says to the waitress. "I'll have a martini. And she'll have-"

"A glass of chardonnay," the woman says.

"Chardonnay. And we're in a hurry, so could you make it fast?" he says.

"We don't have those," the waitress says. "This is a pizza place."

The man covers the mouthpiece again. “Just get us whatever. Fast.” He returns to his phone call, telling the person on the other end that he doesn’t care what it takes, he needs the Peterson file tonight.

The woman goes back to her compact, ignoring either Dayton’s or Jackson’s plea to look at what he has colored. The other boy reaches his coloring book toward the woman and knocks over his glass, spraying the backside of his dad’s suit.

“Oh, goddamnit!” he shouts, and turns to see what happened. Both boys start crying immediately.

“Travis,” the woman says to him. “Language in front of the boys. It’s just water.”

The kids’ sobs soften a moment, but the one I think is Dayton lets out a loud wail and the one I think is Jackson follows, and they are at full volume again.

“Trisha, let’s just go. The kids are upset, and I’m not going to sit here with wet pants.”

“Fine,” she says, stuffing the compact and coloring books back in to her purse.

“But none of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t yelled.”

“Yeah, this is all my fault,” he says, and walks toward the front door.

Through the front window, I see the family get into a black Expedition, and hear the sound of the heavy doors latching closed. The man and the women have a heated exchange in the front seat, before the engine’s eight cylinders bellow and the SUV backs quickly out of the parking spot.

“Can you believe that?” my mom asks.

“Keep that in mind the next time you ask me when I’m going to get married.”

“Oh James. Not everyone is like that. Your sister is happy.”

My sister. Successful medical practice in Chicago. Married last year. It's only a matter of time before she starts having kids. She's two out of three, and according to Meat Loaf, and my mom, that ain't bad. When she gets pregnant, she'll have defeated me in the Mom's Holy Trinity Contest. The grand prize for our winner is . . . what?

"I'm glad Katie's doing well," I say. "I just haven't found the right person yet."

"Have you talked to Wendy lately? It was nice when the two of you used to come over for dinner."

Every time my mom asks me about Wendy – and it's more often than she should considering Wendy and I broke up five years ago – I want to tell my mom that Wendy dumped me because I cheated on her, that I'm not Wendy's version of a husband. I'm not the West Omaha, PT Cruiser kind of guy. I want to tell my mom all of this, not for its cathartic value, but just because I want to see her reaction. My guess is her face would redden like a tomato and the conversation would make an abrupt turn. But this isn't the day for that sort of thing, especially since she hasn't handed over my check, so I go easy again. "Haven't heard from her."

"You know my friend Margie? She has a daughter about your age-"

"No." The last time my mom had a friend who had a daughter about my age was a disaster. First she was a Westie. She had a job downtown, but *chose* to live out west. That's like being allergic to cats, but choosing to own three. Second, when I told this girl I was working on my PhD in creative writing, she said, "They have those?" Third, she told me the last thing she'd read was an issue of *UsWeekly*. And, finally, she didn't like Death Cab for Cutie's music. I mean, what self-respecting person doesn't like Death Cab? This is the only girl I've ever known who didn't register on the Wendy Scale.

“James, I was just thinking-”

“No. Remember last time?”

“I don’t know why you can just be more open to meeting people.”

“Meeting people? I meet plenty of people.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean meeting someone so that you can have grandchildren? Fine. I will ask out the next girl I see.” I crane my head, looking around the restaurant, even though I already know I would never be interested in woman who would choose to come to the West Omaha Mama’s.

Our waitress appears, balancing a large tray on her shoulder. She sets my mom’s salad and my pizza to the table. “Chicken salad. Pizza for you. And I will be back with your onion rings.”

“Great. Thanks,” I say. I can feel my mom staring at me, but I know she won’t do anything to stop me. “Say, I was just wondering if you wanted to go out on a date sometime.”

Her face scrunches up like something smells really bad. “What? No.” She gathers the tray, and walks off.

I look at my mom. Her face is more cherry red than the tomato color I expected. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open like she too smells something really bad. I shrug my shoulders at her like I had given it my best, but my best just wasn’t good enough. “I tried.”

“James. That’s horrible. You should apologize to her.”

“She’ll be fine, Mom.”

“Well, that was just awful,” she says, and looks down at her salad. She uses a fork to push her food around, eating the grilled chicken pieces and green peppers, while moving some browning iceberg lettuce to the side.

As I eat my pizza, I can’t help notice the small pools of grease on each slice of pepperoni. They remind me of the Lil’ Smokies and my stomach balks for a second, but I power through by telling myself that pepperoni pizza loves me as much as I love it.

After my third slice, a guy with thin patches of facial hair that I guess is his version of a beard approaches and flings a cardboard container of onion rings at me, giving me a dirty look while he does. They slide to one side of the box, and two of them fall out and onto the table. His nameplate says “Dale” on it. But before I can say anything, he walks away.

“Thanks, Dale,” I say to his back. Must be our waitress’s boyfriend. Yet another reason to not put teenagers on the Wendy Scale: They have teenage boyfriends.

My mom and I spend most of the meal in silence, my mom throwing me a few softballs about Suttons and what she calls “the eccentric cast” of people I work with. We talk about the weather. She tells me about her weekly tennis league, and I feel my eyes glazing over. I tell her about some bands I want to check out, and I see her eyes glaze over.

We finish our meals and walk to the cash register at the front of the restaurant. While my mom pays, I walk over to the Golden Tee video game stashed in the corner of the waiting area, and mess around with the white trackball, wondering why anyone would play such a stupid game. Do guys who pump quarters in to these machines really think that girls find them attractive because they are good at fake golf? Or that shooting an

orange “shotgun” at virtual deer is sexy? I mean, if you want to play video games with your frat brothers, stay at home. It would make my life much more enjoyable.

From behind me, I hear someone say, “Hey Jay.”

I turn around and it takes me a second, but I recognize him. “Hi, Matt,” I say, and we shake hands. His blond hair is cropped short, an admission to losing the hairline battle, and he carries a paunch around his stomach, but otherwise looks pretty much the same as he did in high school when we used to hang out in the journalism room studying for Pre-Calc exams or the AP History test. “How have you been?”

“Good. It’s been a while,” he says. “What have you been up to?”

“Some graduate school. Working mainly. You?”

“Married with a couple of kids. A lawyer. You know, the usual early-thirties stuff.”

I’m not really sure what he means by “the usual,” but I probably don’t need to subject him to a rant on why normative social conventions are crap. How expecting everyone to cross the same milestones at the same time is not only unoriginal, but sucks the soul out of people, giving way to the thought that the suburbs are a good place to live. It’s basically the whole square peg in a round hole thing as far as I’m concerned.

“That’s great,” I say. “So what neighborhood are you living these days? Dundee? Aksarben?”

“No, I live out here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. A few blocks over from my parents. They pick up the kids from school and watch them when Christina and I have to work late. It’s really a perfect arrangement.

Plus we're so close to everything out here, except work. That gets a little long, but we really couldn't be happier out here."

I listen for any telltale hint of sarcasm in his voice. I look for any facial tics, rapid blinking or a forced smile, to expose the lie. I stare at his mouth to see if it curls into a grin, revealing the joke. I wait for him to come clean. I expect him to show some of that fiery temper he used to win debate tournaments in high school. I want him to tell me that his life is horrible and how he wishes he could do it all over again. I am prepared to tell him it doesn't have to be this way, and he can come live with me downtown as long as he doesn't mind sharing the couch with Clint. But none of this happens. He genuinely seems happy.

"You don't happen to drive a PT Cruiser, do you?" I ask.

"No." He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "Wouldn't be caught dead in one of those. Why?"

"Just wondered," I say. "Well, I should go. I was nice to see you."

"Here," he says, and reaches for his wallet. He pulls out a card, hands it to me.

"Give me a call sometime if you want. Legal advice or otherwise."

"I just might be calling you sooner than you expect." In fact, I already know I will be calling him. But he might think I'm a loser if I tell him about getting arrested. It doesn't really scream success to someone you haven't seen in over a decade.

"Hope you do," he says.

I take his card, we shake hands again, and I walk back to the front door where my mom waits. "Do you remember Matt from high school?" I ask her.

"Matt? Oh sure. He was a nice boy. How is he?"

“Good, apparently. He’s a lawyer and has a family.”

“Oh that’s great. I always figured he would be successful. The two of you were so much alike. At least you were back then.”

I’m not sure whether or not my mom has read *Hamlet*, but the concept of speaking daggers is not lost on her. I think she’s perfected it, and I can feel that last one rattling around deep somewhere inside me. It’s so embedded that it’s probably best to let her twist it rather than giving her an opportunity to throw another one later. “And he still lives out here, near his parents,” I say.

“Well at least some people haven’t forgotten where they’re from,” she says while looking through her purse. She finds an envelope and hands it to me. “Here’s your check.”

“Thanks, Mom.” The envelope feels heavy in my hands as I turn it over, as though the weight of my guilt is stuffed in there as well. There is a window on the front in which I see the words James Matthew Barry.

“Eventually, I’m going to have to stop giving you money, Jay.” She’s never mentioned this before, although it makes sense. But, just in case I missed its implications, she adds, “You’re thirty-one now. An adult.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Well, I hope your birthday reminds you that you need do this writing thing, or you’ll have to find a real job.”

She leans in to kiss me on the cheek, but it I hardly feel it. When she says goodbye, I can barely hear her, as if we are talking on the phone long distance. I begin

walking through the parking lot, head down and turning the envelope over and over, careful to not hold it too tightly, careful to not let it go.

I'm jolted out of my trance when something hits my shoulder. Pain shots down my arm, dissipating through my fingertips. I'm not sure what's happened, but I've crashed into something that feels like a concrete slab.

I look up and see a meathead glaring at me. He's got the full complement of Westie giveaways: backwards hat, cut-off shirt that reveals some sort of tribal band tattoo around his massive left bicep, and a dull look on his face, somewhere between Lurch and Slingblade.

"Watch it, bro," he says, stepping toward me, fists clenched.

"Sorry," I say, and continue walking toward my car.

"Yeah you are," he says. "Don't let it happen again, bro."

At this, I stop and turn to confront him. I plan on telling him that I am not his "bro." I plan on reminding him that he is a complete tool whose idea of a raging Saturday night probably out involves a post-workout steroid shot to the ass, followed by calling dibs on the girl with the fake tits that he and his tool buddies have knocked out with the roofie they put in her Morgan and Diet Coke. Furthermore, I plan to apologize for coming out to the god-forsaken, hellscape that is West Omaha and promise to never return.

But I don't say any of this.

I just get in Black Beauty, and slam the door closed. I think about Matt and wonder how he could possibly be happy living out here. Why would I want to waste hours of my life commuting downtown to a shit job, doing work for asshole bosses,

putting money away each month in my IRA so that I can retire to an equally shitty condo in Florida or Arizona? Shop at Wal-Mart, eat at TGIFridays, always on the lookout for muscle-bound dickheads. I don't get it. It's not a fucking life, it's a death sentence. I'd ram my fucking PT Cruiser right through it all, destroying everything in sight.

I slam my palm against the middle of the steering wheel. Black Beauty's horn lets out a wail, causing a passing couple to jump and then stare at me.

"You like that, you fucking Westies?" I yell, hoping they can't hear me through the windshield. The guy mouths a "fuck you" in my direction and the lady flips me off, but they keep walking, their hunger more compelling than the screaming idiot in the car.

Worst of all, Wendy wants this kind of life. The woman I've been obsessing about for all this time is buying into the suburban dream. She's actually moving toward it while I'm running for my life in the opposite direction.

That's not entirely true. I can see myself being married, and am a little surprised that I'm not on my way by now. When I was younger, I thought by thirty-one I would be married with kids and a steady job. But I never figured it would be the suburbia lifestyle Wendy wants. In my mind we would be cool Midtown people who drove a Volvo station wagon or a Prius, not a minivan. We would wake up on Sundays, make pancakes for our kids, Bono and Springsteen, and sip on lattes while reading the *New York Times*. Later, after dropping our kids off at their guitar lessons, we would walk around the farmers market and discuss art, music, progressive politics. I still want all of that. The surprising part is that it won't be with Wendy. It can't be with Wendy.

Well, fuck her then. Fuck her and PT Cruiser Boy. If he is the kind of guy she wants me to be in order to settle down with her, then I'm not interested. I can be

everything that PT Cruiser Boy, or any Westie, can be, only better. I'll prove her wrong, show her what she gave up when she sold out. I can be a reliable husband and good father. I can finish my novel, make some money to support her. I can do all those things, but on my own terms.

In fact, I bet I can get married before she does. That will make her realize her mistake before her wedding day. I have a year, how long can it take? And my bride will be at least a Five on the Wendy Scale. No, she will be so great that she'll be off the Wendy Scale. She'll set the standard for a new scale, rendering the Wendy Scale obsolete. And my off-the-Wendy-Scale-bride and I will get married the same day as Wendy and PT Cruiser Boy. Oh what's that Wendy? No, I'm sorry I can't make your dumb fucking West Omaha wedding with ten bridesmaids, a harp player, and an ice sculpture of a swan. I've got my own shindig happening downtown. Yeah, Clint and Sebastian are standing up for me and Conor Oberst is playing at our reception. Open bar and everything. We're going to party until we burn the motherfucking place to the ground and the cops have to come and stop us, only the party will be so awesome that they'll just join us, and their friends will show up and those people's friend will show up and pretty soon everyone in Omaha who lives east of 72<sup>nd</sup> Street will be throwing down in celebration me and my bride's nuptials. Sorry you weren't invited Wendy, but we couldn't invite everyone, you know?

I blast Black Beauty's horn again and again, not caring if anyone stares. Her four cylinders whinny to life when I turn the ignition, and pull out of Mama's parking lot, pointing her in the direction of downtown. Time to start looking for a wife. Time to get

that novel written. My palms moisten with anticipation and anxiety as I grip the vinyl steering wheel, repeating out loud, “This will work. This will work.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

I awake the next morning to the smell of French toast and the sound of joyous shouts in praise of Jesus. Walking out into the living room, I see Clint is up already and making breakfast on my George Foreman grill. The Jesus shouts are coming from the television, which is on the God Network again. Clint hands me a plate of French toast and a glass of orange juice as I sit down on the circa-1975, floral-patterned couch I bought at the Goodwill for \$25. Its gold flowers clash exquisitely with its brown background in a way that only 70s color schemes could, and when I'm hungover, I find the color combination nausea inducing. Still, you can't beat a \$25 couch.

"Bacon's almost ready," Clint says, and walks back to the kitchen.

"Thanks," I say. "Do you mind if I change the channel? I can't eat knowing that if I don't give this guy some money, my soul is condemned to hell."

"It's still broken, man," Clint says from the kitchen. "Doesn't matter what buttons you push, it always goes back to The God Network."

I grab the remote and consider the dent that travels down its middle as if someone tried to bend it in half length-wise. The buttons are all still present and accounted for, but the black plastic has warped to white near the 2, 5, and 8 buttons. I press the 3 and the 1 buttons for ESPN. The screen flickers like it is going to change, but comes back to the God Network. I try 51 for the Cartoon Network, 46 Comedy Central, even 59 for the Home and Garden Network, but the TV stays locked on channel 71.

"Ruins my appetite," I say aloud to myself. But, really, it would take more than this to ruin my appetite when Clint's cooking is involved. He may not pay rent or do much of anything around here other than watch TV, but he's a great cook. One night soon

after he moved in, I was preparing my dinner specialty – microwaved hot dogs, with a side of ketchup – when Clint jumped up off the couch and told he would cook. After fifteen minutes of banging around in the kitchen, he served us proper Coney Island hot dogs, complete with chili, mustard, and onions. I didn't even know I had those other ingredients in my kitchen. Even since that night, he's done all the cooking for us, and I've got to say, beyond being delicious, his cooking spares me from a diet of Ramen, Hot Pockets and popcorn.

Clint walks out of the kitchen, scoops some bacon on to my plate with his fork, and sits next to me on the couch. We eat in silence, watching the television. The preacher has an old lady up onstage with him. She leans on a walker and has a confused look on her face as the preacher places his hand on her head and asks the Lord for a miracle. It's clear by the emptiness in her eyes there is no way the old lady knows what is going on right now.

“How can you watch this shit?” I ask.

“It's not bad. I kind of like this guy, Preacher Goodspeed,” Clint says. “He's nice to these old people.”

“Yeah, he puts one hand on her head while the other takes money out of her purse.”

“He has to make a living somehow. Besides, I think he has some interesting things to say about life.”

I look over at Clint to see if he is serious. He doesn't take his eyes off the screen, so I shrug my shoulders and finish my breakfast. “I've got to get to the bookstore,” I say. “I think I'm going to ask out this new girl who just started working there.”

“I’m probably going to keep watching the preacher for a while,” he says without breaking his lock on the TV. “After that, I don’t know.”

I wait for a second, trying to determine if he heard me or not, but he is so enraptured by Preacher Goodspeed that he no longer seems to know I’m in the room, and I walk out the door without saying goodbye.

I always forget how much I like mornings in the Old Market. Part of this is because I usually sleep until the afternoon, but maybe that’s why I enjoy the rare morning when I’m up. Today is crisp and bright, a great fall day. The sun shines on and between the old buildings, the exterior bricks glowing where it strikes them. The fall air is cool, but the sun warms me as I walk the empty sidewalks. A handful of cars from the night before remain parked in the metered spots along the streets. The beeping of a delivery truck backing into a nearby dock breaks the quiet, and I watch two sparrows squabble on the sidewalk while they fight over the abandoned remains of a hot dog bun.

As I walk the couple blocks to Sutton’s, I think about Wendy and wonder if she knows about my arrest. Probably. My freak show antics always seem to make the rounds of gossip in the circle of our friends. Well, her friends, really. They all seemed to pick her after our break up, and I don’t blame them. I also wonder what my dad would think of all this if he was still around. He was a self-made man, on his own after high school, selling insurance through handshakes, long hours, and his pathological need to make a better life for us. He would probably just shake his head in disgust over the person I’ve become.

The door at Sutton’s is unlocked when I get there even though we’re not open for another ten minutes, but Charles is already in deep discussion with a customer about whether or not the accessible voice in W.H. Auden’s poetry means that he was T.S.

Eliot's successor or if their respective styles were too different for a direct lineage to exist. I personally don't give a shit, but since the customer is arguing that Eliot did beget Auden, I agree with him simply because Charles is arguing for the opposite side.

Sebastian is at the register, but I don't see Sasha. I walk through the narrow stacks looking for her, trying to avoid knocking over any piles. I look in the Photography section and spot a copy of *The Rainmaker* tucked in between coffee table sized Ansel Adams and Annie Leibovitz books, but no hot alternachick named Sasha.

I walk to the sections in the back of the store where the canyons of shelves block the sunlight shining in from the store windows in the front. People rarely venture back here to our Travel section because most of the guides are outdated. Thanks to Sutton's policy of buying any book a customer brings in, we have a surprisingly broad collection of travel books from countries that no longer exist. I see guides for Yugoslavia and West Germany, another copy of *The Rainmaker*. I'm not sure why I expect to find Sasha here. I think the last time I was back here was to ask a couple, as kindly as possible, if they wouldn't mind finding another place to have sex. We threw out the *Atlas of the Soviet Union* they were doing it on, and immediately instituted one of Sutton's few storewide policies, which says that any book mistreated in such a manner is to be disposed of forthwith.

Sebastian and Charles are hanging out near the counter when I make my way back to the front of the store. Our single customer has left and Sutton's has reverted to its quiet, money-losing self. Sebastian leans against the counter looking at an old *Rolling Stone* with Bret Michaels and C.C. Deville from the 80s glam-band Poison on the cover. They both have their hair teased impossibly high and are wearing make-up. Bret has his

arm around C.C., giving the camera his best “come hither” look while C.C. holds his guitar low and points it toward the camera like an extended phallus. How those guys sold so many records is beyond me.

Charles hunches over a huge book lying on the counter. He scowls at whatever he is reading and I can’t resist the opportunity. “Who won the super-interesting argument?” I ask. “You or Dork Number Two?”

He looks up contemptuously, eyes squinted like he’s bothered by the fact someone with my meager intellect dare ask someone with his largesse of smarts such a question. “Why does it matter? You couldn’t have possibly understood what we were talking about anyway.”

“It must have been Dork Number Two.”

I hear Sebastian snort a laugh from behind the magazine. Charles shoots him a look, but Sebastian doesn’t lower the magazine. Charles looks back at me, scratches at his chin whiskers, and says, “You writers have no idea how hard Lit people work. We make writers relevant. We enable their books to stand the test of time.”

He can’t be serious with this crap, but he continues looking at me, just begging me to challenge him. If this was a movie, tumbleweed would blow across the store’s floor and out on to Howard Street.

“Let me ask you this, Charles,” I say, stroking an imaginary beard on my chin. “Which group, writers or critics, could exist without the other?”

Another snigger escapes from behind Sebastian’s magazine. Charles looks at me like he wants to say something, but can’t figure out how to answer my question. His

mouth opens like he is going to answer a few times, but he doesn't say anything and finally retreats back to his book while giving me a dismissive flourish with his hand.

"That's what I thought," I say. "Hey, Sebastian, have you seen Sasha around?"

He lowers the magazine. "She's in the back clocking in. Why?"

"No reason," I say, trying to sound as casual as possible. "Just thought she might like to go see a show with me."

"Uh, that might not be a good idea," he says. "I not sure she's going to be down with that."

"Are you going to ask her out?" Charles asks, suddenly no longer interested in his book.

From behind me, I hear Sasha's voice. "Ask who out?"

I turn around and see Sasha standing there. She's wearing a black tank top again. I'm a little thrown off by her apparently limited wardrobe, but the tank top totally works for her, so who am I to judge? It works so well that I just might move her up to Four Wendys.

"You," Charles says. "Jay was just going to ask you out on a date."

My discomfort is making him smile like a fucking idiot. "Quit smiling like a fucking idiot," I say to him.

I look back at Sasha who seems to be generally horrified at the situation. Her arms are folded, and she clutches a stack of books against her chest like a shield.

"No, Sasha, I wasn't asking you out on a date, per se," I say. "It's just that The Good Life is playing at Slowdown on Friday, and they're awesome and I thought you might like to go."

It's suddenly very warm in here and I feel sweat beads forming on my forehead. My heart rate is surely exceeding a safe level of beats per minute. This is not the way I wanted this to go down. With my luck, I'm halfway surprised that Wendy doesn't walk in during all this. If she does, I'm pretty sure I will have a heart attack and die.

"Sure," Sasha says. "I was planning on going anyway."

"Perfect. Now you will have someone to go with."

"But you have to do something for me if we're going together."

"Sure. What?"

"Not dress like an old man. You know the 90s ended almost a decade ago."

Sebastian and Charles giggle like schoolgirls. I feel my face flush. I want to ask what's wrong with my clothes. I want to tell her that I happen to consider myself very fashionable and that wearing a t-shirt with Bob Marley's face on it used to get me laid sometimes back in college. I want to say something, anything, to save a little face here, but Sasha has already disappeared again in to the book stacks.

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On the day of the show, and my date with Sasha, Clint and I walk down 13<sup>th</sup> Street to NoDo. "NoDo" is short for North of Downtown, sort of like SoHo means south of Houston Street in Manhattan. It's a stupid attempt at making the area seem more urban chic, but, despite the name, NoDo is actually a pretty cool part of the city. It's meant to be an extension of downtown's entertainment district, and has an independent movie theatre, a rock club started by the Saddle Creek Records guys, some apartments, a few restaurants, and a coffee house.

It also has an Urban Outfitters, which is why Clint and I are here. I open the glass door and we step inside, only to stop just inside the door to look around. I've never been here before. The store opened two years ago, but as a boy in his thirties, I felt like I would be too old to shop here. Instead, I've been relegated to haunting thrift stores. Or Banana Republic.

But standing here now, I know I was right to be afraid. In front of us, the store is an ocean of 80s kitsch. Simon Says key chains, Hello Kitty bandages, a Darth Vader alarm clock, a framed drawing of a raccoon, Springer spaniels watercolored onto plates, screen printed classic rock t-shirts for Bowie, AC/DC, Van Halen.

"Behold, I send you forth sheep in the midst the wolves," Clint says as he scans the racks of clothing.

Clearly he's never been here before either. I'm about ready to suggest that we leave, but I see an employee walking over to us. She looks like she's about twenty and has just stepped out of a 1987 photo shoot. She's wearing a gingham one-piece with a bloused top, fitted waist and short shorts. I only know this because I can read it off the placard next to me describing the mannequin that wears the exact same outfit.

The girl looks me up and down, making no attempt to hide it. When she gets back to my face again, she rolls her eyes and exhales a short laugh to let me know I've been judged and found guilty by the Fashion Police. "I can help you," she says, as if I had asked for help to begin with. "Let's start with the pants." She turns away without waiting for my response, her index finger beckoning me to follow.

We walk over to a shelf and our helper searches through piles of jeans. Mannequins above the shelves display the variety of jeans available, most of which are

the typical color variations of the standard blue jean. Some are black, and I think I even see some acid washed variety. But the problem is that they are most definitely all skinny jeans.

Let me say something about skinny jeans, specifically, and this whole 80s fashion revival thing happening right now. Fashion in the 80s was ridiculously horrible. I know because I was there the first time around, and we all looked stupid back then. Dudes wearing red leather Michael Jackson jackets. Women wearing neon rainbow patterned leg warmers. So when I see hipster assholes with ironic mustaches walking down the street in their skinny jeans and deep v-neck t-shirts, or women at a show who look like they're ready for aerobics class to begin, I want to tell them to quit dressing like idiots. I want to tell them that I remember what it was like to wear ball-crushingly tight jeans with tapered legs. I mean, why do you think loose fitting jeans were so popular in the 90s?

"Are these all skinny jeans?" I ask. "I'm not sure that's what I'm looking for."

"Don't worry, they have spandex so they aren't too tight," she says.

"Terrific. Spandex is just what I need."

"What are you, about a 36 waist?" she asks.

"Closer to a 34. Well sort of in between a 34 and 36," I say, knowing full well that my waist has been north of a 34 for almost a decade.

"Oh. Ok," she says, and moves to another shelf, which I can only assume must be the shelf for fatties who actually eat occasionally. "Here, try these," she says, handing me a pair of Levis. "They're as big as we have."

I walk to the fitting room, ego bruised, and wondering why I'm doing this to myself. For Sasha, I suppose. Yes, I am about to try on silly looking jeans for a girl who,

up until I asked her out, seemed like she couldn't be less interested in me. And I have to admit that, even though she agreed to go out with me, she still doesn't seem all that interested. But she also doesn't appear to be the type who would want to live the suburban lifestyle. I know she reads books, which means that she might have interests that extend beyond Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan. That alone disqualifies her from living in West Omaha.

As I close the fitting room door and drop my ball-friendly jeans, I hear the girl talking to Clint, something about how she feels like she's seen him somewhere before. I already know how this is going to play out: He will tell her that he's the drummer for East Coast Vagina Slang, and she will tell him that ECVS is her favorite local band, and then I will wake up the next morning to find that she slept over at "Clint's apartment." Guys in bands have it way too easy.

Holding my breath to suck in my gut, I button the fly and consider the sight of skinny jeans on me in the mirror. I turn in a circle, taking in the train wreck from all angles. From the front, I feel like my junk is on display for the entire world to see. This would be bad enough if I had the stuff to flaunt in the first place, but I don't, which makes things even worse. From the back, my ass looks like it has retained every single one of the pastries I've eaten from Delice over the past few years. And my spare tire hangs over the entire mess, confused as to where it's supposed to go. Basically, I look like an overstuffed sausage.

"How are you doing in there?" my helper asks.

"Let's have look, man," Clint says.

Great. Now he's on her side.

I walk out of the dressing room. Clint sees me and doubles over in laughter, pointing one of his meaty fingers at me.

“Fuck off.”

“No, you look great,” the girl says, without taking her eyes off Clint. “Clint, would you mind if I got a picture with you?”

“Sure,” he says and grabs her by the waist. “Don’t you think those pants are going to help out my boy on his date tonight?”

“Totally,” she says, and she puts an arm around his shoulder, taking a picture of them with her Blackberry. She looks back at me. “Don’t worry, she’ll love them. Do you want to wear them home?”

“Yeah, man. You should totally wear them home.”

“No, I think I’ll just save them for my date,” I say, and go back to the fitting room to put my other jeans back on.

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I’m nervous.

My new skinny jeans are smashing my balls and I’m nervous.

She’s going to be here any minute and my new skinny jeans are smashing my balls and I’m nervous.

“Hey man, dinner’s on,” Clint says from the living room.

Maybe I should put on some normal fitting jeans for tonight. These can’t look good on me. But Sasha wants me to look “cool,” whatever that means. I look at myself in the mirror on the back of the door, scanning from top to bottom. I wear my lucky Ramones t-shirt, the one with their names around the presidential seal, because it goes

past my waist, partially obscuring the overhang caused by my skinny jeans. My eyes reflexively jump over the jeans, sparing me any more psychological damage, and move down to my black Chucks. I look good. Well, not bad. Serviceable, maybe. At least I won't be the worst looking guy there tonight.

“Come on, man, it's going to get cold,” Clint says, and I can hear the clunk of our plates being set on the coffee table.

I do some knee raises to try to loosen up the jeans, but they only seem to get tighter the more I move around. I try to take a deep breath to clear my head before I walk out of my room, but the waistline won't allow it. It just digs deeper in to the cookie dough, pressing lines and contours into the flesh.

I walk in to the living room where Clint sits on the couch. He's watching a gospel choir sing an up tempo version of “Amazing Grace” on the TV. The choir sways back and forth, their deep cardinal robes flowing a half count behind them. Clint's head bounces in time to the music and his foot taps out the beat. I stand near him with my arms crossed and stare at him until he looks at me.

“What?”

“I thought you were the drummer in an ass-kicking heavy metal band?”

“I am. But gospel music is where it all started. Without gospel, there would be no blues. No blues, no rock and roll. No rock, no metal. They're all connected. One begets the next and so on.”

“Of course. I'm sure the first gospel singers envisioned East Coast Vagina Slang as the natural end result of their spirituals. They must be so proud of you guys.”

Clint grins and says, “Shut up and come eat. I want you well fed for your date tonight.”

“What do we have?” I ask, and sit next to him on the couch, eyeing the food.

“Well, good sir, for your dining pleasure, we have beef tenderloin served with a roasted shallot sauce,” he says, and waves his hand like Vanna White over meal he has prepared for us.

I grab a knife and fork and take a bite of the tenderloin. “Clint, you’ve outdone yourself again. You should be a chef in a restaurant.”

“No, man, I’ve got other things I want to do.”

“Like being a rock star?”

“Bigger than that.”

We eat and watch the choir sing, sway, and sweat hymnals on the TV, until a discordant vibration from my phone interrupts. I grab the phone, see it’s a text from Sasha.

“All right, Sasha is waiting for me outside,” I say. “How do I look?”

“Those jeans are ridiculous,” Clint says. “They remind me of when Sebastian used to wear women’s pants on stage. Nothing but hips, a happy trail, and a bulge. Chicks dug it.”

I want to talk about this, get as much information as possible for the next time I see Sebastian. But there are more important things to worry about right now, so I file it away in my mind under *Things Mick Jagger Would Do That Henry Rollins Wouldn’t*. Besides wear women’s pants, the only other things on the list are singing in a falsetto and sleeping with David Bowie.

“Should I change? I think I’m going to change.”

“No, man. That girl at the store said Sasha’s going to love them.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Forty-five minutes in to my date with Sasha, I'm pretty sure the skinny jeans have done irreparable damage to my balls, and I know they'll never forgive me for smashing them against each other in this denim vise grip. Sasha and I stand to the right of the stage at Slowdown, watching local heroes Neva Dinova work their way through a set of guitar-driven rock. Their lead singer moves away from his mic, so that only his apple red Stratocaster remains washed in the spotlight. He tilts his head back, eyes closed, one hand strumming the strings while the other fingers the fretboards as if is simply willing the rock out of the guitar.

Sasha and I don't say much to each other. Except to nod and smile occasionally in approval of songs we like, we don't really look at each other either. Our date didn't get off on the best foot. When I got in to her car, she confirmed my mistake by rolling her eyes and saying, "Those are some nice jeans." That took some wind out of my sails, but then she went after my Ramones shirt, telling me it was funny when older guys like me try to look younger by dressing like we used to in our twenties. I realized at that point that Sasha probably wasn't going to want to make out with me tonight, and I was all too happy to arrive at Slowdown, where the music would hopefully be too loud for any more conversation.

Slowdown is one of my favorite places in Omaha. Needless to say, I spend a lot of time and money here. If it was only a bar, it would one of the nicest in the city, with a low key, elegance, black tiled walls and glossy concrete floors. And even though I'm a High Life and PBR guy, the bar here can make pretty much any drink you can think to order, from the top shelf stuff down to the lowest well. At the same time, if Slowdown

was only a music venue, it would be one of the best in the country. The stage is past the bar, and between the two is a recessed area for the crowd to stand, which allows people at the bar, drinks in hand, an unobstructed view of the stage. It also has a balcony that provides a big venue vibe where you can lean on the rails and loom over the crowd below. I've been to some of the best clubs in the country – First Avenue, The Continental Club, The 9:30 Club – and I would put Slowdown ahead of them all. I love a good hole in the wall with its regular crowd of drunks and a muddled sound system saturated by beer and cigarette smoke, but the venue here is pristine, and the sound so amazingly pure and crisp, that I've been spoiled.

This is the place where Wendy and I had our first date. It's the place we spent countless nights during our relationship. Ours was a relationship forged on the dark-wave dance beats of The Faint, the emotive folk of Bright Eyes, and the angular punk of Cursive. Paper bracelets with *21 and Over* printed on them clung around our wrists. A plastic cup of beer in one hand, a smudged ink stamp on the other. Singing at the top of our voices, drowned out beneath stacks of amps. Scratched voices calling for second encores, answered by the band's return to the stage to play songs never before played live. The feeling of strangers being swept up together in something larger and communal, knowing that nothing else matters until the house lights come up and we all go our separate ways. This is where Wendy and I fell in love.

“Jay? You in there?”

On stage, two pencil-thin guys with long hair skitter around, carrying instruments and jumping over wires, breaking down the equipment and setting up for the next band. I

realize that I've somehow missed most of Neva Dinova's set, and look over to see Sasha looking at me, a grin on her face.

"You're really upset about Delice closing, aren't you?" she asks.

"Yeah, I guess," I say. On the ride over, I told Sasha about how the bakery on the first level of my place had closed. One day the smells of yeast in rising bread, the sweetness of cinnamon and cookie dough stopped, and signs announcing their imminent closing were taped to the windows. *Everything Must Go!*, the signs said in large letters. *No Reasonable Offers Turned Down!* They were selling French baguettes and almond raspberry tortes alongside refrigerated display shelves and lighting fixtures. Clint nabbed an espresso maker. I walked out with a dozen cream puffs. The cashier told me they had to close because the owner of the building raised their rent too high. The owner said he could be making a lot more money on the building if he charged what he should. A week later, the silver outdoor patio furniture and red awnings disappeared. White shades were drawn closed and the lights turned out.

"Don't worry," Sasha says. "You'll be fine. They'll probably just put a Starbucks in there. Maybe a Dunkin' Donuts."

"Right," I say. "Another corporate chain, just what we need downtown." We sort of stare at each other with fake smiles for a few seconds as though we've really connected over the crisis of Delice's closing. I can't think of anything witty or even mildly charming to say. I look past her, over her shoulder, because if our eyes meet I'm going to have to say something, and I'm sure it'll be something stupid like, "Sure could use some rain," as if our livelihoods are dependant on making sure the corn has enough water before harvest. Not only would this be a stupid thing to say, but the idiocy would

be compounded by the fact that I live in Nebraska and don't have any idea when the corn is supposed to be harvested.

My eyes scan Slowdown's entrance, hoping to spot some people I know who could maybe help alleviate the awkwardness of my date. Instead, I see a guy and girl walk in. She's wearing a long navy dress coat and heels. He wears khakis and what can only be described as a black, form-fitting turtleneck. They look like they're going to a Creighton School of Dentistry class of '89 reunion. These two don't seem to belong here, but I always hold judgment after the time when I described four guys wearing suits and ties at a show as "hipster assholes," only to be told they were Interpol, the very band I had come to see.

I expect this lost couple to realize their mistake and do an about-face, or to play it cool, order a martini at the bar, and slink out after one drink. Instead, they weave their way through the crowd and the tables towards where Sasha and I are standing. It's not until they are almost upon us that I see that this isn't just any random couple. It's Wendy and Paul.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say, and move so that Sasha is between me and them. I hunch my shoulders, making myself as small as possible, and turn my head away. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Wendy and Paul stop about ten feet away from us.

"What's wrong?" Sasha asks. "Do you know how dumb you look using me to hide? You're like twice the size of me."

"Hide?" I say, feigning ignorance, but remain hunched. "I'm not hiding." I sneak look over in the direction of Wendy again, which happens to be at the same moment she

looks in my direction. I look away quickly, but know I'm busted, so I look back at her. She cocks her head as if to say, "I see you, Idiot," and waves to me.

I straighten up and put my left arm around Sasha. It's about as smooth as the pretend-to-yawn-but-instead-put-your-arm-around-a-girl trick. I gently pull her in closer to me, and look over at Wendy, giving her the cool guy head nod.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sasha says. She takes my arm off her shoulder and steps away from me.

"Oh, sorry. It's just. Well, I just wanted to let you know I'm having a great time."

"Don't do that again. Ever." Sasha nervously fiddles with her phone for a minute, and then looks back at me. "Why don't you get us some beers or something?"

"Ok. I'll be back," As I moved toward the bar, I turn my head to see if Wendy is still looking. She is. I shrug my shoulders like I have no idea why a girl I barely know wouldn't want me to put my arm around her like we've crossed the boyfriend/girlfriend touching barrier. Wendy just shakes her head and turns her attention back to Paul.

At the bar, I order a couple of High Lifes. I see Hank, trademark camouflage hat on, PBR in hand, sitting at the far end of the bar. He sees me, tips his drink, and takes a few hearty swallows. Hank is somewhat of a local legend at shows. He looks like the central casting version of an old creepy regular at any given shithole of a bar: bushy gray beard, tattoo of a tiger running down one forearm, a stained, wrinkled "God Bless America" shirt with an eagle in the center. But he's not that guy. He seems to know everyone, including me even though we've never been introduced. He calls everyone by their first name, asks them how things are going. Dudes in bands buy him his drink of choice, 20-ounce PBR tallboys, so often that it's not uncommon to see a line of white

cans with blue script spread out in front of him. And the girls don't seem to be afraid of him. On more than one occasion, I've seen a girl cozy up to Hank while her friend takes a picture, like he's some freak show side attraction. But Hank, he doesn't mind. He just cracks open another tallboy, tips his hat at the girls, and smiles.

That kind of disposition would make anyone popular, I suppose, despite that fact that no one knows anything about Hank. Some people say he's a retired Union Pacific executive. Others say he's mentally ill and was put out on the street when they closed the Paxton building – and its home for the sick and infirm – in order to turn it into condos. All I know is one night a few years back, Clint, Sebastian, and I came to Slowdown to see a Little Brazil show. Hank was in his customary seat at the bar, farthest away from the stage. After the show, we decided to catch the end of the Ladyfinger set at The Waiting Room. When we got there, fifteen minutes later, we saw Hank, sitting at the bar surrounded by a fiefdom of PBRs like he had been there the whole night. We think Hank is awesome for this inexplicable ability to be in multiple places at once, never missing a show, and never out of PBR. Clint and Sebastian tell me that I'm going to be like Hank when I'm older. I'm not sure if it's an insult or compliment.

The bartender at Slowdown puts two Miller High Lifes in front of me just as I hear cheers marking The Good Life's appearance on to the stage. I hand over some cash to the bartender, grab the beers, and turn around to find Sasha just in time to see her walk across the room towards a blond-haired girl. The blond, a solid Three on the Wendy Scale, is smiling a wide, toothy smile at Sasha, and anxiously shifts her weight back and forth like a little kid looking at a pile of presents under a Christmas tree.

I watch Sasha as she embraces the blond and then begins to kiss her. And by kiss her, I don't mean the European "It's nice to see you again" kiss on the cheek sort of kiss. Nor is it the innocent familial peck. It's more like the Jenna Jameson and Tera Patrick, girl on girl, let's play tonsil hockey sort of kiss that you might find yourself watching on the Internet late at night.

I stand there, double-fisting the High Lifes, unable to move or comprehend what I am seeing. So, my date is kissing another girl. Do I go over there now or wait until they've stopped making out? Should I even be watching them? And most importantly, how does this event affect my chances of kissing Sasha later on tonight?

Eventually, I'm brought back from my own private peep show and deep philosophical questions regarding said peep show when I realize the girl standing next to me at the bar is laughing as she uses a napkin to wipe my chin.

"Jesus, Muffin Top," she says. "You were staring so hard at them, you started to drool a little."

"Thanks," I say, and point a High Life in Sasha's general direction. "I'm here with one of them and –"

"You may have come with one of them, but I don't think you're actually *here* with either of them."

"You may have a point there." My face is warm and I'm sure I'm blushing right now. It dawns on me that this is probably why the guys at the bookstore didn't want me to ask Sasha out.

“The thing about the dark haired one,” the girl next to me says, “is that I’ve seen her here a few times. And sometimes she leaves with girls, but other times she leaves with guys.”

My new friend’s words strike a chord deep inside me. The dark haired one is Sasha. Sasha agreed to come to a show with me and has now porn-star kissed another girl in public where she knows I will see. My mind travels to a place most men fear to tread, despite publicly proclaiming otherwise. It’s a place we all want to go, but fear, because it feels like walking into the abyss, a place that holds the potential to become our greatest triumph or our worst failure. Our Omaha Beach, or our Waterloo. Either way, after treading there, you are changed forever. You come out the other side either a walking deity or mere mortal, nothing in between.

My new friend looks at me with one eyebrow raised, the corner of her mouth turned up in a slight grin. The possibilities running through my head make it impossible for me to say anything, so I just stand there, dumbly holding the beers, and stare at Sasha and the blond girl.

“So I guess you never know,” my new friend says. “Anything’s possible. Maybe you should go over there and give it a shot.”

Give it a shot. One shot to make the Dude Hall of Fame. One chance at immortality or to crash and burn. All or nothing. I haven’t been this turned on since the Clinton administration.

Beers in hand, I walk toward Sasha and her friend, my jeans keeping each stride a little shorter than normal. From behind me, I hear my new friend say, “Good luck, Muffin Top,” but I don’t acknowledge the gesture of goodwill. I have more important matters to

focus on. Even my smashed balls have stopped complaining, realizing, perhaps, that this is the only way I can apologize for having worn skinny jeans.

As I half-stride toward Sasha and the blond girl, I wonder what to say. Or how to break the ice. Or how to discern whether what I have in mind is what they have in mind. Surely decent manners dictate that I don't just go over there and ask the question. That would be rude and mark me as inexperienced in these sorts of situations. Of course, I am inexperienced in these sorts of situations, but nobody has to know. There has to be some sort of decorum associated with these circumstances. I mean, do people who are into this sort of thing just know what similarly situated people look like? Is that why so many guys are growing ironic moustaches these days? Are my skinny jeans putting out signals I'm not even aware of? And what do I even call it? What do they call it? Does using the French name make it classier, or does it make me a pretentious asshole? Charles would use the French and he's an asshole, so I won't say "ménage a trios." And why the hell am I thinking about Charles right now? I'm moments away from the greatest moment of my life. No, I'm moments away from the greatest moment in any guy's life. Ever.

Suddenly, I'm standing next to Sasha and I still don't know what to say. She doesn't notice me because she and the blond girl are alternating between looking deeply into each other's eyes and making out. I think about doing the whole throat-clearing thing for a moment to let them know I'm here, but decide that would be impolite. I'm about to set Sasha's beer on the ground next to them and walk away when Sasha sees me and pulls away from the blond girl.

"Oh, hey Jay," Sasha, says and pulls the hair back from her face, revealing a soft shade of red flushing her skin.

I think this is the first time I've seen her even slightly off guard or embarrassed.

"Here's your beer," I say, and it to her.

"Thanks," she says. "This is my girlfriend, Renee. She just got back from studying in Paris."

Paris is in France. The French have a name for what might happen latter. It's definitely a sign. Wait. Did she mean girlfriend or friend who happens to be a girl? It doesn't matter. Say something smart. "Bonjour. Enchante," I say.

"Comment ca-va?" Renee asks. "Parlez-vous francais?"

"Oh, I don't actually speak French," I say. That wasn't smart. She probably thinks I'm an asshole now.

"Don't you like his jeans," Sasha says to Renee and they both giggle.

I am never shopping at Urban Outfitters again. Not only are these things uncomfortable, but they are standing in the way of what will surely be my greatest life accomplishment. Some climb Everest, others race the Ironman Triathlon. But this is my Iditarod. I need to focus on the task at hand. Be casual. Be cool. Act like you've done this before. Try your best not to be an asshole.

"So are you guys, like, together?"

"Yeah, for about a year before I left for France," Renee says. "We haven't seen each other since I left though. I guess it's been about four months."

"Four months, two weeks, and 3 days," Sasha says. "Renee wasn't supposed to come home until Christmas, but –"

"I came home early to surprise her," Renee says, completing Sasha's sentence like an old married couple.

“Sasha,” I say, “I didn’t know that you were a, uh –”

“Lesbian?”

“No. Well, yeah, I guess that’s it. A lesbian.” Clearly being cool has gone out the window. “It’s just that you agreed to come here with me on a, well –”

“Date?” She and Renee laugh.

At this point, I know I should abandon the idea of it. If you are taking heavy casualties, you don’t keep fighting. You retreat and live to fight another day. But now this thing is in my head and even the remotest possibility of it happening makes me want to try. I don’t want to be the guy who could have, but didn’t have the stones to make it happen. That would reflect poorly on me.

“Yeah, a date,” I say, trying to give my voice a deep and confident tone that it normally lacks even on my best day. “And then you were kissing Renee here, who’s beautiful by the way, and I thought that maybe you did that in front of me on purpose and that maybe you guys, I mean gals, might be interested in a –”

Sasha moves closer to me. “A what?”

“Well, there are many names for it. I’m not sure what you call it.”

“Yes you are.”

My heart feels like jackhammer in my chest, pounding one hundred times faster than the drumbeat on stage. For a second, my legs give a little, darkness creeps around the periphery of my vision, and I think I am going to pass out, but then I remember that greatness is on the line. I stand up a little straighter, take a breath, look Sasha in the eyes. Here goes casual. “A threesome.”

They laugh. I laugh also because I'm not sure what else I'm supposed to do. I think Sasha might have tears in her eye because she is laughing so hard. And it's one of those things where the laughing dies down for a second or two and then one of them looks at the other and it's hysterics all over again.

It's not until Sasha connects with a haymaker right hook to my face that I know I've succeeded in being an asshole. She hits me with enough force that I feel myself falling uncontrollably backwards. By the time I hit the ground, my hand is empty and I hear my High Life skittering away from me on the concrete floor. People around us begin to look to see what they missed out on and all I can do is press my hands against my left eye to keep the thousand pinpricks of pain from radiating out.

From the stage, I hear a voice that sounds a lot like Tim Kasher, the lead singer of the Good Life, say, "Everyone all right out there?"

To which someone in the crowd responds, "Shut up and play some fucking music."

"Fuck off. This is my stage and I'll talk all goddamned night if I want to," he says, but the band starts playing again, falling back into their set like nothing happened.

Sasha stands over me, leaning down, her face next to mine. For a second I think maybe she has reconsidered my offer and the punch was just an obligatory denial before answering my inquiry with a grateful, "Yes." But it's just not to be. "First off, Jay," Sasha says, "Renee and I are in a committed relationship. I haven't spent the last four plus months of my life being faithful to her only to share our bed with someone else."

I will admit that's a good point.

“Secondly, if we were to have a threesome, which we wouldn’t, but if we were, it wouldn’t be with some guy we hardly know who doesn’t have his shit together.”

Also a good point.

“Third,” Renee says, “those pants look absurd on you.”

They both look down at my jeans and start laughing again. In between guffaws, Sasha manages to say, “Thanks for the entertainment. See you around, jerk.”

Through my one good eye, I watch them walk away and disappear in to the crowd. As I gather myself to stand up, someone grabs my arm and helps me up.

“Are you ok?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for the help,” I say, before realizing it’s Paul who has helped me up. Wendy stands a few feet behind him, arms crossed, shaking her head again, looking up to the ceiling like she’s asking God to help her find the strength to help me.

“Looks like she got you pretty good,” Paul says with a smile and gives me a good-natured clap on the shoulder. “Nothing a beer or two can’t solve.”

“No thanks,” I say.

“You should at least let me take a look.”

Having made her peace with God, Wendy walks over to us. “Jay, it’s pretty swollen already. Move your hand and let me look at it.” She reaches for the hand I’m using to cover my eye.

“I don’t need your help,” I say, and walk past them towards the bathroom. They’re right, I can feel the puffiness that has nearly closed my eye, but I can take care of myself. I don’t need my ex or her fiancé to take pity on me. They don’t even belong here anyway. They are in violation of the terms of our post-break up agreement – the

sacrifices inherent in every failed relationship. Common friends and places have to be divided equally. I didn't want any of her latte-sipping corporate-type friends so I gave them back to her in exchange for all the music venues in the city. This is my scene, not theirs. As per the agreement, they should be at some multiplex theater watching the latest Meryl Streep movie, not at a show Wendy knows I'm to attend. Those are the rules, and they cannot be revoked unless said dissolved couple gets back together, or one of them dies. Everyone knows that.

When I come out of the bathroom, after tending to my wounded eye, the house lights are up, the stage is empty, and everyone is moving towards the front door. Damn, missed the entire show. The Good Life are one of my local favorites. Their songs are filled with the rawness of relationships lost and gained, exploring how the pain of one relationship's end affects the beginning of the next one, and how all choices made, for better or worse, play out over time. It's beautiful and sad all at once, my own personal life soundtrack.

I head back toward the bar looking to see if Sasha and Renee are still around, but I'm not surprised when I don't see them. I take a seat at the bar, order another High Life and an ice pack.

"Lost your friends, Muffin Top?"

Great, my new friend is back. I love being kicked when I'm down.

"I saw them leave about 20 minutes ago," she says. "Oh shit, what happened to your eye?"

I look at her through my one good eye and take the ice pack off the other so she can see the damage. "They didn't like the suggestion I made."

“Ouch,” she says, and cautiously touches the impact zone. “I guess the threesome didn’t work out. Sorry. I thought for sure that you were in there.”

All right, I’ve had enough out of her. I’m injured and I don’t need her smart-assed remarks. After all she’s the one who got me in to this mess. I turn to face her so that I can really let her have it, but in the throes of my earlier male fantasyland, I failed to realize how attractive she is when we first talked. Despite the low light in the bar, her blue eyes still have a spark to them. Light brown hair down to her shoulders. Nose angular, a little off center, but in a good way. Sort of imperfectly perfect. I try to place her on the Wendy Scale, but I’m unsure where she fits. Definitely high on the scale, but I can’t place her. I start to say something, feel my mouth open, but close it when nothing comes out.

“What?” she asks.

“It’s nothing. I just have this thing I normally do in my head when I met a woman- well anyone really, and I can’t seem to do now.”

“I hope it isn’t some juvenile rating system that guys do,” she says, and takes the seat next to me at the bar. “That would be disappointing.”

“No it’s not that, it’s something else,” I say. I put the ice pack back on my eye. Disappointing? Who is she to judge the Wendy Scale? Besides, she’s the reason I got punched to begin with. I muster up some half-hearted anger. “Why are you doing this to me? And who are you?”

“I’m Belle, and I’m not doing anything to you. I merely made a suggestion and you ran with it, Muffin Top.”

“Why the hell are you calling me that? My name is Jay.”

“Well Jay, have you seen yourself in those jeans? You don’t quite have the body to pull them off.”

“So I’ve been told. But what do muffins have to do with it?”

She reaches over and, before I can squirm out of the way, grabs a handful of my belly fat. “See this? How it hangs over the top of your jeans? It’s like a muffin top.”

She smiles at me the whole time, and although I know she’s just giving me a hard time, I move her hand away from my stomach. “Don’t touch that,” I say. “Listen. Do you have a car? My ride seems to have left me.”

“Yes, I do. But no, you can’t have a ride because I don’t know you. But you can be a gentleman and walk me to my car.”

We finish our beers and walk out of Slowdown and down the sidewalk crowded with smokers getting one last cigarette in before heading home. We come to her car, a black Honda Civic Hybrid, and she leans against the door, facing me. “Listen,” she says. “I feel kind of bad about something. I had never seen those girls you were with before tonight. I was just messing with you.”

“Oh well that’s great. Thanks for that, I really appreciate it,” I say, and start to walk away, but she grabs my arm and pulls me back.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it, and I didn’t think you would get punched. Slapped maybe, but not punched.” She laughs a little at her joke, but I keep a straight face. “Anyway, it’s just that you were so mesmerized by the whole thing that I couldn’t resist. I’m sure you’ve been in a situation where you just couldn’t help mess with someone.”

“Yeah, I suppose I have,” I say, and feel a small grin creeping up my face, which I stop immediately and turn in to a scowl. “But still, that wasn’t cool.”

“Well, you sort of ran with it, didn’t you?” she asks, and flashes me a smile.

“Anyway, the point is I’m feeling magnanimous, and I want to make it up to you.”

“Magnanimous?”

“Yes, look it up. How about I buy you a drink sometime?”

Is she asking me out? This unrepentant woman who caused me the pain of getting knocked out by a girl and the embarrassment of being helped to my feet by my ex’s fiancé thinks that buying me a beer is going to make things all better. She better believe that I can’t be bought off so easily. Who am I kidding? She’s cute, and I can’t resist.

“Sure. When?”

“The next time we see each other. I’m here at shows all the time.”

“OK, me too. Drinks are on you next time. But no fat grabbing.”

“Then wear age-appropriate jeans,” she says, and gets in her car.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I arrive back at my apartment and flip the switch for the light in the living room. My chandelier, a single uncovered bulb hanging from the ceiling, casts a pale yellow over the room. My Star Wars blanket – a holdover from my childhood – obscures a lump on the couch, leaving only two heads exposed. The beard and thick hand covering the eyes of one head tells me it belongs to Clint. The other head has short, blond hair and hides its face on Clint’s chest.

“Hey, man,” Clint says, in a sleepy grumble, and draws the girl closer to him.

“Turn it off.”

“Shit,” I say. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were here.”

Clint strikes again. I’m out propositioning lesbians, and Clint probably just walked down the street and picked out the first hottie he could find. He has the ability walk into any random bar, point at a woman, any woman, and say with all the linguistic abilities drummers possess: “You. Buy me a drink. I’m in a band.” At first, she would be caught off guard, maybe even offended by this caveman approach. But then she would see his beard and notice he was dressed in all black, including the t-shirt for a band even more obscure than his own, and she would somehow magically believe that he was actually in a band. And she would buy him a drink, become enamored with bullshit stories from the road – “We rocked so hard that night that even the grizzled sound guy said he’d never seen anything like it,” or “No, I’m not into groupies. I prefer committed relationships” – and that would be all it took. No questions asked.

But really, that’s probably more effort than Clint is used to putting in. In fact, I bet he was just sitting somewhere having a beer and she, out with some coworkers, or for

a bachelorette party, hit on him. Clint would hear the giggles coming from a booth off to the side and know, sooner or later, that one of them would detach themselves from the crowd, even if only on a dare, and take a seat next to him at the bar. She would tell him how she normally doesn't do this, maybe even tell a story about the funny thing her cat did the other day, and Clint would just sit there. He would nod every now and then or even grunt in approval if what the cat did was particularly funny, but he wouldn't say anything, just drink until his beer or whiskey was empty. She would see this, offer to buy him another, to which he would just nod his tepid consent. The silence would start to bother her, and maybe she would look back at her friends for help, but they would just egg her on, and she would finally say, "So what do you do?" A hint of a smile, imperceptible to the woman, would lurk behind Clint's beard, and he would say, "I'm in a band called East Coat Vagina Slang." And if she giggled because of the word "vagina," and I like to think they often do, it would be all over.

I have to start a band. Or at least grow a beard.

I turn off the light and walk past Clint and his friend in the dark, ignoring the urge to sneak a look or two, closing the door to my room behind me. I suppose I should just be glad they didn't do it on my bed. It's happened before, despite the clear and unequivocal ground rules I laid down for Clint. Not having sex on my bed right up there between putting the toilet seat down and not drinking straight from the milk carton. But I guess when he asks a girl if they want to come back to *his* apartment, my bed necessarily has to become *his* bed as well. And he wonders why I use bleach when I wash my sheets.

I examine my eye in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of my door. If anything, the swelling has gotten worse on the walk home. I touch the engorged area

under my eye, watching the deep purple fluid momentarily recede, the skin turning white under my finger, but have to stop when I feel a shockwave travel from my eye back to my temple and down my jaw line. A moment later my stomach does a back flip and I get dizzy, becoming unsteady on my feet.

I try to keep the focus on my eye, to not zoom out at the rest of my reflection, but like at a car crash, I can't help but look. I stare at myself in the mirror, not sure who's looking back at me. The skinny jeans cling to my legs like denim Saran Wrap around Kielbasas. The neck is stretched downward on the Ramones t-shirt like a Novocain-numbed mouth. It always remains untucked – always – in a flaccid attempt to hide the stomach. The hair has no real shape or style, alternating between greasy in some areas and matted down in others. The Chucks on the feet have faded from black to a murky gray, a hole forming in the left one near the toe, the shoelaces in both shredded.

Standing there, beholding this stranger, I can only say, “Jesus, Jay.” It's so depressing that I don't know what to do or where to start to make it better, so I turn off the light, undress in the dark, and get into bed.

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I finish Sunday dinner with Mom in West Omaha at the Upstream, a brewpub with decent beer and pretty good food. There's an Upstream in the Old Market, so I've spent most of the meal complaining to my mom about how the food is so much better at the one downtown and how the service is faster and friendlier. But despite my proclamation that I'm never coming to this one again, they're pretty much the same, and if my mom is picking up the tab, I'll be back.

As we walk out the door, I expect the usual parting shots about her not having grandchildren. But my mom doesn't say anything when we get outside. She simply smiles and then nods her head toward the parking lot. I follow her gaze and see something has gone terribly wrong. All of the cars in the parking lot – the Mercedes, the Cadillacs, the five-mile-to-the-gallon SUVs – have turned into silver PT Cruisers. I half-walk, half-jog down the first line of PT Cruisers to where I think I've parked Black Beauty, but only find another PT Cruiser.

When I turn to look back at my mom to ask her what circle of suburban hell we've entered, I notice everyone in the parking lot has turned in to replicas of the tool from outside of Mama's. Women walk around with backwards hats. Children wear sleeveless shirts and tiny tribal bands wrap around their small arms. Even my mom has been afflicted. Her uncovered arm wrapped with a barbed wire tattoo waves at me and I think I can hear her yell, "I want grandchildren, bro!"

I run for my life.

I have to get home. I have to get back downtown, back to a safe place. I look over my shoulder and see a fleet of driverless PT Cruisers following me, driving just fast enough to keep me running at break-neck speed. On the sidewalks are more tools. They meet my look with raging stares, flexed biceps, and step menacingly toward me, yelling, "What are you looking at, bro?"

I run into the nearest subdivision, where the houses all look the same: the Bertha model, Sterling vinyl siding, solitary oak sapling in the front yard. As I pass each house, a muscle-bound freak steps out the front door and says, "This isn't your house, bro" or "Get off my street, bro." A garage door opener appears in my hand and, as I continue

sprinting, I push the button hard and fast again and again, hoping a garage door will open and I will know it is my house.

One garage door opens, and though I know I don't, would never live here, I sprint toward the garage. When the garage door opens fully, Black Beauty is not in there. Two silver PT Cruisers occupy the space. The front door of my house opens and two little boys, identical twins wearing the same backwards hats and cut-off shirts, sporting tribal band tattoos around one arm come out with a golden retriever. "What's wrong, bro?" they say in unison.

"Woof!" the dog says.

I don't know what to say and they quickly lose interest in me. They pull out matching cell phones, flip them open, and are soon texting each other.

The front door opens again and Sasha and Renee come out. Both of them have impossibly blond hair, fake boobs too large for their petite frames, and each wear matching pink velour tracksuits.

"Mommy," the kids say, as Sasha and Renee walk toward me on the driveway. "Something's wrong with Daddy."

Daddy? This must mean that either Sasha or Renee is my wife. This is my house. Those are my PT Cruisers in the garage. This is my life.

Sasha puts a hand on my back. Her hand is cold like a corpse and sends a chill through the rest of me. "Why don't you come inside with us?"

At the end of the driveway the passenger side door of one of the PT Cruisers opens up and I can see Paul, Wendy's Paul, lean over the seat, waving me over. "Come on, I can get you out of here. I'll take you to where you are safe."

“Woof!” the dog says.

I don’t want to stay here, but I can’t go with Paul, so I let Sasha and Renee lead me to the front door of the house. Inside the door, I’m in my bedroom at my downtown apartment. A rustling comes from my bed, but I stand there in the dark, looking straight ahead, shaking a bit, afraid to move.

“Come on, Jay. We’re waiting.”

I look down and find Sasha and Renee on my bed. They both lean back on their elbows, eyes peering up at me. Each has a leg extended towards me, a foot rubbing flirtatiously against my legs. “We’re waiting for you to join us,” Sasha says.

I feel a small stirring in my skinny jeans. Even so, I’m skeptical. “But I thought you told me you were . . .”

“Lesbians?” Sasha replies and they both giggle. “I just tell guys that so they leave me alone,” she explains. “I only tell the hot guys like you that I’m straight.”

They giggle again.

“What about you?” I ask Renee.

She flips over on her stomach and stares at my crotch. “Oh, I’m a lesbian,” she answers. “But I knew I had to have you the moment I saw you.”

“So are you in, Jay?” Sasha asks.

“Come over here,” Renee says.

I put a hand and a knee on the bed, leaning in to finally kiss Sasha and let the night go where it’s going to go, wondering what I’m going to say in my Dude Hall of Fame acceptance speech. But instead of meeting Sasha’s lips, I fall. And fall. And keep

falling. Somewhere in the background I hear an acoustic guitar playing and voices singing and I wonder if it's an Indigo Girls song and

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I wake up.

I look around to find Sasha and Renee, but I know they were never here. It also occurs to me that, even in my dreams, I still can't have a threesome with them. How depressing. Oh irony, go fuck thyself. I pull the covers over my head and put a pillow over my face as if to smother myself and yell, "Shit," into it as loud as I can.

The sounds of a guitar find their way through the folds of the blanket and I realize the music was not part of the dream. I hear voices in the living room singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Normally, I would try to sleep off last night's horrible events and even stranger dream, but curiosity gets the best of me, so I get out of bed.

Clint and a girl who I assume is the blond head from last night sit on the couch. They both sing as he strums his guitar. On the floor in front of them are two guys I don't know. Both have the scruffy-on-purpose look going on. One wears thick-rimmed glasses and has bedhead that is no doubt propped up by some expensive salon product. The other has long hair and is unshaven, neither of which do much to hide small wrinkles around his eye and mouth. They both look vaguely familiar in a sort of indie-rocker way, but appear to be too old to be part of the local music scene. Preacher Goodspeed, sweat pouring down his face, is on the television again, waving his arms spastically in name of the Lord, but the volume is turned down so he looks more like he's having a seizure.

"What are you guys doing," I ask through a yawn.

Clint stops playing the guitar and says, “Just a little morning song to get the day started off right.”

“Is that the new ECVS single?”

“No, man. Come on. You know this song,” he says, and plays the chords to the chorus. “Didn’t you go to Sunday school?”

I look at the blond sitting next to him. “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“This is Sydney,” Clint says. “From yesterday at Urban Outfitters.”

The girl who sold me the skinny jeans. Part of me wants to get them from my room and use them to strangle her. A larger part of me knows that it’s not her fault that an out-of-shape thirtysomething bought them in order to impress a twentysomething lesbian.

“Right,” I say. “How’s it going?”

“Good. How did the jeans work out on your date?”

“They were merely a minor cog in the clusterfuck that was last night.” I nod in the direction of the Old Indie Twins. “Who are they?”

“That’s Timothy and Glen,” Clint says.

I notice Glen, the one with the long hair, has a Bible on his lap. “Isn’t it a little early for visitors who didn’t spend the night?”

“Naw, man. These guys are cool. They’re just here to join some good talk about being better people and making the world a better place.”

I have no idea what Clint is talking about, and I sometimes wonder if even he knows what is coming out his mouth. But I’m too discombobulated by the previous twelve hours to get into a discussion about letting strangers into the apartment.

“I was going to ask you about your date,” Clint says, and then nods in my direction. “But judging by the black eye and that tent pole you’ve got going on right now, I imagine things didn’t work out like you planned.”

I look down and see my boxers tented out in front of me. I look back at Clint and Sydney and the Old Indie Twins as they focus on my face, clearly afraid to look down after the elephant in the room has been acknowledged. We stare at each other, unsure what happens next. “Well,” I say after the longest fifteen seconds of my life. “Thanks for pointing that out to everyone, Clint.”

“No problem, man.”

“It was nice meeting you again,” Sydney says, deftly ignoring the tension my hard-on has caused.

“Yeah, you too. Have a nice day,” I say, and walk back to my room.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Everyone is gathered around the counter when I show up for work. Even Ralph is there, which can only mean that something big is going on. They all straighten up and stop talking when I walk in. Sasha gives me a squinty-eyed stare that suggests she still isn't interested in a threesome. Sebastian throws me the "what's up" head nod, while Charles blushes and seems suddenly interested in something only he can see on the counter.

I've been dreading this day, the first time back at work since the incident at the Good Life show, and it seems my worst fears have come true: Sasha has told them about what happened. I thought maybe it was embarrassing enough for her that she wouldn't want to say anything, but I guess I was fooling myself, hoping that night would just go away. Now I'm about to be judged and they've brought Ralph to help out.

"What's going on?" I ask, expecting threesome jokes to follow.

Ralph smiles at me and hands me a flyer. I take it and read:

Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts  
presents:  
**A Collection of Paintings by  
Ralph Emerson**  
Opening Reception:  
Saturday, December 20  
7-10pm

"Ralph got his own gallery show," Sebastian says. "He's a rock star in the making."

Charles rolls his eyes at Sebastian. "No, he's more than just a dumb rock star. He's our own Renaissance man. Our da Vinci."

“Well, I don’t know about all that,” Ralph says. “But thanks anyway.”

“Wow, that’s great, Ralph,” I say, but feel a sinking in my chest. On the one hand, I’m glad this meeting isn’t about the threesome. Maybe Sasha didn’t say anything after all. I’ve iced my eye every night so the swelling is gone, but nearly a week later, it’s still purple and black from Sasha’s punch, a reminder of what happened. On the other hand, I can’t help but feel an undeniably jealous churning in the pit of my stomach. I guess Ralph wasn’t just hiding out upstairs. He was actually painting, creating something new. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for him, but all this time I thought he was just an eccentric, rich guy with nothing better to do after his divorce. I never dreamed he would actually have any success.

“Thanks, Jay. Things seem to be coming together with my painting,” Ralph says. “I hope you can make it for the opening.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say, but I’m already thinking of outlandish excuses to get me out of going. I’m working with the City Council to legally divide Omaha from West Omaha with a Berlin Wall-style border to keep the Westies out. I’m out of the country on a fact-finding mission for the UN to determine whether or not developing nations need a Starbucks in every village. I’m a writer in the middle of completing my novel and cannot be disturbed.

“Great,” Ralph says. “Let’s get back to work, everyone. Jay, there are a bunch of full boxes in the back. I’ll help you carry them to the stacks and then you and Sasha can shelve them.”

There are several things about this that are strange. First, Ralph never does any work in the bookstore. Apparently he’s been painting. Second, he never tells us what to

do. I've been screwing around here for many years and he's never cared to give me any sort of direction. Third, I'm pretty sure I know which boxes he is talking about and I'm pretty sure they have been in the back since before I started working here. Fourth, he specifically told me I had to work with Sasha. That could only be awkward for the two of us, so I take it to mean she hasn't told them about what happened, which means I'm in the clear.

In the back room though, Ralph seems to forget about the boxes of books. Instead, he looks at me with his head cocked to the side, forehead wrinkled, and concerned, fatherly eyes. "How are things going, Jay?"

Damn, it's one of those talks. I should have known. When a guy who never comes down to work in the store suddenly shows up and volunteers to help out, it can't be good. Protocol in these situations calls for an initial evasion, followed by a change of subject, and a final escape. "Fine. Couldn't be better," I say, giving my standard evasive response. Now the change of subject: "So how did you get your own show? I mean it's great, but none of us has seen your work. We don't even know what you do."

"I primarily do oil paintings," he says. "Some mixed media stuff too. I know some people in the local arts scene and invited them to take a look at my work, and I guess they liked it. I got a phone call last week saying they had a cancellation for next month and wondered if I would be interested."

"How could you not?" I ask, feigning interest. It's working. He's forgotten why he asked me to come back here. Evasion and subject change completed. Now for the final escape.

"I know," he says. "This feels like something I was always meant to do."

“That’s really great,” I say. I thump the pile of boxes with the palm of my hand. “So, let’s get these boxes up front.”

And that’s the final escape. It’s just like Billy Dee Williams used to say in those malt liquor commercials: “Does it every time.” Thanks Billy, you’re an inspiration.

“In a minute, Jay. I want to talk to you about something.”

Damn it Billy, how could you let me down?

“I heard about your little incident with Sasha the other night,” he says. “That’s quite a shiner you have there. Want to tell me what was going on?”

No. No, I do not. I would rather discuss the prominence of Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with Charles right now than recount what happened the other night. “I don’t really know,” I say. “Things just got out of hand, and there was this girl who was egging me on. Kept calling me Muffin Top. And I was sort of confused, and for some reason I thought it might happen.”

“There may have been people telling you it was a good idea, but that’s beside the point. You were the one who brought it up, not some girl or anyone else.”

“I know. I feel bad.” And I actually do feel bad. I knew it at the time, but that woman – Belle – kept telling me it was possible, that it was a good idea. So, really, it’s her fault, and I blame her for my black eye.

“You should feel bad,” he says, and pokes me with a pointer finger gently, but with sincere intent, on the shoulder. “Hell, I grew up in the 60s. Peace, love, and harmony, and all that stuff. You know, sex drugs, and rock n’ roll. And I never even considered the possibility of a threesome as something that could actually happen.”

For a minute, Ralph stares up at the ceiling, as though lost in the thought of his ex-wife. I immediately recognize a second chance for escape, so I grab a box and turn towards the exit.

“I mean,” he says, coming back to the present time, “did you actually think it was going to happen?”

“I guess not,” I say, and put the box down again.

“Jay,” he says, and puts his hands on my shoulders. “You should really apologize to Sasha. I know she’s a tough kid, and by the looks of your eye she got you back, but it might smooth things over. You guys have to work together. Besides, it’s the right thing to do.”

“Ok,” I say. “Do you still want to take these boxes up front?”

“Might as well.”

Ralph and I haul the boxes up front and stack them behind the counter. Sebastian, not interested in helping us, reads an old issue of Creem Magazine with the guys from Kiss on the cover, clad in their usual S&M gear and clown makeup. Charles is trying to look busy by rearranging the books on the floor next to the counter.

“I guess that’s all of them,” Ralph says after he sets down a box. “I need to head back upstairs and get to work.”

“Hey, Ralph. I almost forgot,” I say, and drop my box on the pile we’ve created. “I need a day off at the end of the week. I have to go to court.”

“Right. Ok. Make sure you take care of that,” he replies, and disappears in to the back of the store again.

I feel eyes on me and see Sasha shaking her head from between two overflowing bookshelves. “What?”

“Nothing,” she says with a shrug.

She’s judging me. I can’t win with this girl. “I had some trouble. No big deal.”

“Getting arrested for indecent exposure is no big deal?”

“Godammit, people,” I say in a loud voice meant to get Sebastian, Charles, and any hypothetical customer’s attention. “Who told her?”

Sebastian lowers his magazine and says, “She was bound to find out anyway.”

“Is nothing sacred around here?”

“Sacred like the love between a man and a woman and that woman’s girlfriend?”

Charles asks, a mile-wide grin plastered across his face.

Sebastian laughs, but I don’t have the time to deal with him or Charles right now.

“They know about that?” I ask Sasha.

“Well, yeah,” she says. “They asked how the evening went and I told them. I told them about everything that happened.”

“Dude, I give you props for even trying. You’re a better man than me,” Sebastian says, and returns to his magazine.

I can’t believe she told them. I don’t mind Sebastian knowing. I don’t even mind that Ralph knows. But Charles? He’s the last person I want to know about my failures. Lit guys are always looking for the upper hand over us writers, even if it doesn’t have anything to do with writing. He’ll probably tell all of his nerdy Lit buddies at school, and they’ll laugh at me while enjoying their daily tea and crumpets. Even though they’re all probably virgins, they will talk about how threesomes are so bourgeois and how they

would never even think of doing something beneath their station in life. And then they will talk about how excited they are to finish their dissertations because everybody knows the chicks in the Linguistics Department dig Lit guys with PhDs.

I pick up one of the boxes and walk toward the stacks, looking for a shelf or spot on the floor that has enough room for the books. Sasha picks up another box and follows me. I see a relatively uncrowded shelf in the History section where we drop our boxes.

From behind us, Charles says, “But there’s only *two* of you. You need one more! Do you want me to join you guys?” He giggles like he’s told the funniest joke ever known to man.

“No thanks,” I say, yelling back over my shoulder. “You can just stay there and fuck off.”

Charles stops giggling immediately and I think I’ve finally got him to shut up.

Then I hear Sebastian say, “Sorry about the rough language, Ma’am. Will that be cash or credit?”

I stick my head around the end of a shelf in order to see the front counter. A middle-aged woman stands there, a stack of three books on the counter in front of her. She wears dark jeans with high heels, and, despite the low light in the store, sunglasses. She clutches a purse, probably Gucci or Louis Vuitton, close to her chest.

“Credit,” she says, and hands Sebastian a card delicately pinched between her thumb and index finger like she is afraid of any direct contact with him. “And I don’t think I will be shopping here anymore after hearing that kind of filth. To think I drove down here from Millard.”

“Well thanks for making the trip, Ma’am. Sorry to have offended you. I’ll make sure our boss reprimands him.”

Sebastian takes the card and swipes it while the lady looks around at Sutton’s, no doubt appalled to find herself in such a regrettable place. “Please see that he does,” she says.

I move back around the shelf and sit on the boxes. Charles has the upper hand on me and now I’ve managed to permanently scare off the only customer we’ll probably have all day. Great start to the day, Idiot.

I hear the front door close and Sebastian say, “Nice work, Jay.”

“Who cares?” I yell back. “She’s from West Omaha anyway. Most likely the first time she’s made it downtown since the opera season ended.”

“Well I doubt she’s going to make the trip again. It might be nice if we occasionally had some repeat business from the Westies. The five people who live downtown aren’t really enough to pay the bills around here.”

It’s true that not enough people live down here to support this place, but I don’t really care. “Fuck her and her irrational fear of downtown. We don’t want their business anyway.”

“Yes, sir,” I hear Charles say. “I think we have that book right over here.”

Oh Christ. I did it again. Sasha gives me a “what are you doing” look and I can only proclaim my massive idiocy with shrug. A heavy silence descends over the store and I listen so intently, I’m afraid to move, wondering if the man heard me or if he is going to raise a fuss about the F-bomb I dropped.

Charles starts giggling again and says, “Just kidding, there’s no customer here.”

Sasha laughs and yells, “Good one, Charles. You should have seen how white Jay’s face got. I think he stopped breathing for a few minutes there.”

“Come on, funny girl,” I say to Sasha. “Let’s get these books on the shelf.”

Jamming the books on the shelf where they clearly don’t fit is a team effort, but Sasha stands there and watches me struggle to squeeze a copy of *Talking to Children About Nuclear War* on to an over-stuffed shelf. “Are you going to help? Just push the books towards one side.”

“Fine,” she says, and pushes the books already on the shelf against one side while I squeeze the new ones into the thin spaces she creates. We’re able to get a copy of *Johnny’s Such a Bright Boy*, *What a Shame He’s Retarded* and *Born to Run: The O.J. Simpson Story* on the shelf. When we can’t do this anymore, we stack *Disco Roller Skating*, *The Family Foot Care Book*, and *How to be a Reasonably Thin Teenage Girl* horizontally on top. We eventually move through much of the store, emptying all of the boxes this way, making room for the books anywhere they fit without regard for putting them in the proper section or organizing them alphabetically within the sections, thus meeting Sutton’s rigorous shelving standards.

Near the end of our shelving, Sasha skins her knuckle on the edge of the wood shelf as she finds a home for a copy of *The Rainmaker* in the Foreign Language section. “Shit,” she says, and looks at the drop of blood on her middle knuckle.

“Let me see,” I say, and hold out my hand. Sasha looks at me for a moment, unsure of my intentions, before she gives me her hand. I take it and see that she’s sheared a small chunk of skin off the knuckle. “Ouch,” I say, and take a tissue from my pocket and blot away the blood. “I always keep a Kleenex with me for situations like this.

Unbeknownst to many outside the book industry, this is the number two occupational hazard of the job.”

“What’s the first one?”

“Getting punched by a lesbian coworker who you’ve just propositioned for a threesome.”

She laughs a little, takes her hand back, and puts her knuckle in her mouth.

“Listen,” I say. “I’m sorry about the other night. I realize how out of line I was for even thinking that it could happen, let alone suggesting it to you and Renee.”

“That’s ok. But I can’t say I’m sorry I punched you.”

“I deserved it. You have a great right hook by the way.”

“Yeah, you did deserve it. But I generally don’t go around punching every asshole that propositions Renee and me. If I did, my knuckles would look like this all the time.” She holds her hand out in front of her, flexes her fingers into a fist and opens them again. The round wound goes from pink to a deep red each time she closes her fist.

“I just wanted you to know how sorry I am,” I say. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I swear I will punch you again. This time in the other eye.”

“No, no. It’s not about that,” I say, leaning back with hands up in a defensive stance. “It’s about something you said that night.”

“What?”

“You told me that even if you guys, gals, were going to have a threesome, it wouldn’t be with someone like me,” I say, doing air quotes for the “someone like me” part. “What did you mean by that?”

“I think what I said was someone who didn’t have his shit together,” she says, mocking my air quotes for the “didn’t have his shit together” part.

“Whatever. What did you mean?”

“Come on, Jay. You know what I meant,” she says, and looks away.

“No I don’t.”

She looks back at me for a few seconds and then away again. She starts to say something a few times, but stops, like she doesn’t want to tell me what she’s thinking. Maybe she knows that after the other night she’s already beaten me and doesn’t have the heart to kick me when I’m down. Eventually she sighs and says, “Well, I mean, look at your life.”

“What about it? I like my life.”

“Really? You’re in your thirties. You work here part time. You’ve recently been arrested for some frat guy stuff. Apparently, you’re a writer, but you never talk about what you’re writing. Nobody’s ever seen your writing. And people assume you aren’t actually writing anything.”

“Who told you that?”

“Guess. Who tells me everything?”

“Charles? Charles has no idea what he is talking about.” And I am going to punch him in his Auden-quoting, literary-snob mouth.

“Fine. But those other things are true,” she says. “Isn’t that a fairly accurate picture of things?”

I don’t say anything because there isn’t anything for me to say, other than the fact that she left out how my dad’s death has left me a mental midget. Or the fact that I’m still

hung up on my ex-girlfriend who is engaged to marry a guy who drives a PT Cruiser. But I don't say any of that because I don't want to give her any more ammunition. "I guess so," I say.

"So that's what I meant by you not having your shit together," she says, and again mocks my air quotes. "Listen, you're not a bad guy aside from having unrealistic male fantasies and poor, poor choice in jeans."

We both laugh at her joke because it's the only thing to do.

## CHAPTER NINE

Luck, which always comes in threes, is on my side today:

Lucky Thing #1: Clint, Sydney, the Old Indie Twins, and a handful of other people I don't know singing hymnals this morning in the living room. Last night Sebastian and I had a few too many at the Homy Inn, our favorite bar, where stale cigarette smoke clings to everything, old newspapers become wall art, peanuts are served in doggie dishes (one for the fresh nuts, the other for the spent shells), and champagne is served on tap. Not sure if my alarm went off this morning. Not sure if I set it. Either way, it was Sydney's jangling tambourine that woke me from my stupor.

Lucky Thing #2: The Douglas County District Courthouse, an ugly concrete high-rise with small windows that connects to the historic courthouse, with its turn of the century decorative stonework exterior, is only five blocks up the hill from my apartment. This is helpful when your court hearing started ten minutes ago and you grab the first collared shirt you can find on the floor and run, double time, to meet your lawyer.

Matt was waiting for me outside the door to Courtroom 24 when I came in, panting and sweating. "Jesus Christ. You're late. Where's your fucking suit?"

This is the Matt I remember from high school – unflinchingly direct. Probably helps him in the courtroom. This gives me some hope for today, but after running – ok, jog-walking – here, my head feels like it's being smashed with a baseball bat, and I can't catch my breath enough to say anything. I bend over, hands on knees, trying to gulp air.

"You don't have one, do you?" he asks.

I shake my head, still unable to respond in between pants.

"You could have at least worn a button down shirt."

I stand up too quickly, and for a few seconds, it feels like everything I consumed last night – the Asti Spumante, large handfuls of peanuts – are going to violently project out of me and onto Matt. “Got it,” I say between huffs and hold up the wadded shirt for him to see.

“Put it on then,” he says, and opens the door to the courtroom. “Where’s your tie?”

“Don’t got it.”

“Jesus,” he says, and lets the door close. He yanks at the knot on his tie. “Take mine.”

I stuff my arms in the wrinkled dress shirt and button it, covering my Rage Against the Machine t-shirt, and do my best to knot Matt’s tie without the benefit of a mirror. I can’t say when the last time I wore this shirt was, but it’s been a while because it fits a bit too snugly over my belly. “At least I wore khakis,” I say.

“Those aren’t khakis,” he says, and opens the door to the courtroom again. “Those are fucking cargo pants.”

We walk in and I’m underwhelmed by the courtroom. It looks nothing like they do on television. There is no high grand bench with ornate woodwork for the judge to sit behind and stare down at the people in his courtroom. There are no podiums for the lawyers and no microphones for them to make impassioned speeches to the jury. In fact, there’s not even a place for the jury to sit. There is no hustle or bustle, no sense of justice being served. No uniformed security guarding the doors, no reporters scrawling in notepads, no gallery of people for the judge to bang his gavel at and reprimand for their disruptive reaction to the drama playing out before them. Instead, there is only a plain

wooden desk for the judge, two garden-variety banquet tables next to each other, and a steno machine for the court reporter. A few rows of wooden benches sit behind the tables. Aside from a guy in a suit at one of the tables, the place is empty, except, to my dismay, for Wendy, sitting in the last row of the room. How she knows about this is beyond me. I certainly didn't tell her and was hoping that she would never find out.

"Go sit up there," Matt says, and points to the empty table up front. He walks over to The Suit at the other table and says, "This is my guy."

They leave through a door near the judge's bench, and Wendy and I are alone in the room. I turn back to her and say, "What are you doing here?"

"Sebastian sent me a text last night and I thought I would come lend you some support," she says, and leans back against the church pew-like bench, one arm up on the back. "Nice you could show up."

I thought maybe it was a dream, but I guess that vague recollection of grabbing Sebastian's phone while he was taking a piss and sending Wendy a text last night actually happened. She doesn't need to know it was me. "I thought there would be more people here."

"There were. A bunch of other people like you here, all telling the judge they were guilty or not guilty. Lawyers running around. Police officers, a court reporter, some people sitting back here by me." She sits up and leans forward in her seat. "Jay, they called your name and when you weren't here, the prosecutor asked for a warrant for you. Something about failing to appear and revoking your bond. If it wasn't for Matt assuring the judge you'd be here, you'd have a warrant out for your arrest right now."

"Really? They can do that?"

Wendy puts her head in her hand, rubs her temples. She used to do this when we were dating, too. It was her way, I like to think, of taking some time to convince herself that I was worth the trouble, like when I didn't have enough cash to cover my bar tab, or when I forgot our anniversary, or didn't put the toilet seat down. She looks up again, considers me, and says, "Your eye looks awful."

Matt and The Suit reenter the courtroom from the side door. Not having to continue this conversation is Lucky Thing #3 of the day. Like I said, they always come in threes. I give Wendy my most sincere shrug I can, indicating how sorry I am that we can't continue our conversation.

Matt sits down next to me at the table. He leans over and says, "Ok this is what's going to happen. The judge is going to come back in and ask you to enter a plea. You will say 'guilty' and the prosecutor will read the facts and the judge will sentence you. Probably get probation and a fine. Got it?"

Probation? Fine? I don't like either of those things. "What happens if I say 'not guilty'?"

Matt looks away from me and exhales heavily as if he's caught me in bed with his sister. He looks back at me for a minute, searching for the precise words. "I've seen the police report," he says in one of those voices that has all the inflections of yelling, but is still a whisper. "And what will happen is we'll come back in a month or two, the cops who arrested you will be here to tell everyone about what an asshole you were that night, and the judge will find you guilty. He will sentence you to probation and a fine. And I will charge you three hundred dollars for every hour you make me waste on this case."

When he puts it like that, I suppose just pleading guilty is probably the best thing to do. I don't like the sound of having to be on probation. Or paying a fine for that matter. Those things make me seem like a criminal, which I am not. All I did was have a few too many. It's not my fault people get bent out of shape when rock stars, writers, and other artists like me and Sebastian go out and have some fun, tear things up a bit. I mean, really, it's just part of the lifestyle. Look at Johnny Cash, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix. Hunter S. Thompson, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote. Kerouac, Faulkner, Fitzgerald. Hemingway's partying is as much a part of his lore as his writing. I even heard somewhere that he got drunk one time down in the Keys and punched Auden. Hell, Byron said that gin and water were the source of all his inspiration. And if they were doing it back then, it can't be all that bad. So don't call me out, label me a deviant because some right wing, moral police asshole is jealous of me and pissed that his life sucks. I'm just living the writing life the best way I know how.

The side door opens again. A woman pokes her head out and says in a loud voice, "All rise for the Honorable Judge Statham."

A short man, with a close-cropped beard, wearing a robe, walks in. And by short, I mean really short. Like Napoleon short. Has to sit at the kids' table for family gatherings. Needs a step stool to reach things at the back of the kitchen counter. Can't ride the big-boy roller coasters at Worlds of Fun. Shops for clothes in the Young Men's section at Younkers. Needs a booster chair at Old Chicago. Uses the lowest urinal in public bathrooms. Straps himself in a car seat before driving his Mini Cooper to work.

Judge Shortman takes his seat, tells us to do the same, and puts on glasses to read the file his bailiff has left for him. As I sit back down, I can't help but wonder if he's

sitting on a phone book. And where did they find a robe to fit him? Somewhere a kid about to graduate from junior high can't find his gown. I feel a smile creeping up my face, and I bow my head and put a hand on my brow so no one notices.

The prosecutor calls up my case and he, along with Matt and Judge Shortman, talk about some legal things I don't understand. Eventually the judge says, "Mr. Barry, how do you plead?"

"Guilty," I say.

Matt looks over at me. In that same whisper-yell, he says, "Stand. Up."

"Sorry," I say, and stand up. "Guilty."

Judge Shortman tells me a bunch of stuff about how this means I won't have a trial and can't appeal and some other legal things I don't understand. He asks me several times if I understand. The first time, I nod my head and he just stares back at me. Eventually, he says, "Let the record show that the defendant is nodding his head. And Mr. Barry, in the future, please answer out loud so the court reporter can take down your answer. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your Honor," I say this time and every time after.

"Very well," he says. "Mr. Kroeger, will you please give the facts?"

"Yes, your Honor," The Suit says. He holds a file in front of him and begins reading: "The State would show that on October 28 at Brother's Lounge, located at 3812 Farnam Street in Omaha, Nebraska, the following events did happen."

I don't know how The Suit knows what happened that night or where he is getting his information. I certainly don't remember being at Brother's that night, and if the court wants to know, I can just tell them that Sebastian and I were having some drinks, talking

about how Wendy got engaged, and generally just blowing off some steam. A pretty typical night as I remember it, until the cops showed up and put me in handcuffs. I lean over to Matt and whisper, “What’s he reading from?”

“The police report,” he says, and hands me a copy.

I follow along as The Suit reads: “Officers Skiermont and Williams reported to a disturbance at said address. Upon their arrival, the officers observed the defendant, Mr. Barry, standing on the bar. The officers would testify that the defendant was holding a drink in each hand and was swaying back and forth in a manner consistent with being intoxicated. The officers later determined one of the drinks the defendant was holding contained Jack Daniels Whiskey and Coca-Cola. The other contained Absolut Citron Vodka and tonic water.”

Standing on the bar, double-fisting it. Classic night out with Sebastian. As I recall, I had just called out Sebastian for not being man enough to finish his Jack and Coke, and I wanted to let the whole bar know that I could out drink him, and that I was, in fact, that evening’s rock star. I can’t help but smile at this memory and have to bow my head again to hide the grin.

“The officers would testify that they were able to take the drinks from Mr. Barry, but when they asked him to come down from the bar, he ran down to the other end, screaming, ‘You can’t catch me.’”

I cover a giggle with a throat clearing noise when I hear this. I don’t remember any of this, but I have to admit I’m enjoying my night being recounted back to me. I understand now why hip-hop moguls and professional athletes always have someone in

their posse videotaping their nights out. If I had this on tape, I would make people watch it every time they came over to my place.

“At this point,” The Suit continues, “several bar patrons unsuccessfully attempted to get the defendant off the bar. The defendant responded to these attempts by yelling profanities at them. He then asked them several times if they would like to see ‘it’. The defendant then pulled down his pants and underwear, exposing himself. He then began urinating off the bar and onto the floor while screaming, ‘I am the Lizard King. I can do anything.’”

Jim Morrison lives. Right here in Omaha. Who knew? This is too good to be true. I have to put my hand on my head, covering my face so no one can see that I am about to burst out laughing. I concentrate so hard on not laughing my forehead begins to sweat.

“The officers would testify that they grabbed the defendant by his shirt and pulled him off the bar. At this point, the defendant was yelling, ‘I can do anything. I can get Wendy back from that guy. She’ll never be as happy with him as she was with me. She’s a loser if she thinks he’s as good as me. And she knows it.’”

Oh shit.

Hot, panicky waves travel up my spine, making me lightheaded. I put my elbow on the table and my head in my hands, this time to avoid passing out, and falling face first on the table.

The Suit concludes that night’s comedy of horrors: “At this point, the officers arrested the defendant for suspicion of lewd conduct and public drunkenness.”

Some more legal wrangling takes place, but I can’t concentrate enough to pay attention. All I can think about is Wendy sitting in the back of the room, hearing what I

just heard. I want to turn around and see her reaction, but I'm too scared to meet her glare. I know that look too well. Calm, steady breathing. Mouth turned ever so slightly down. Eyes in tight slits. Part of me hopes she left the courtroom before that last part, but I know she is still. My luck is just that good.

Matt nudges me and says, "Can you pay that fine?"

I have no idea what he is talking about, but know that I don't have the money to pay any fine. "No."

"Your honor, my client requests community service in lieu of a fine."

"Why?"

"My client is concerned that he won't be able to pay the fine."

Judge Statham sighs in irritation. He takes off his glasses and tosses them on the desk. "Stand up, Mr. Barry."

I stand. He stares at me, says nothing. My legs shake and feel like they may give out. I don't know if it's the hangover or being trapped between his look and Wendy's glare. I feel very alone.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Barry?"

Before I can stop myself, I say, "I'm a writer."

"Have anything published?"

"Not recently, your Honor." I hate this. People always think that publishing is the most important part of writing. It's not. I mean, look at my dad, not to mention the thousands of talented writers out there who aren't published. Some haven't been discovered. Others are just too good to be read and enjoyed by the masses who would prefer Nicholas Sparks. I'm not sure which category I fit into, but it still pisses me off

that Judge Shortman is, well, judging the merits of my writing based on publications alone without actually reading my in-progress novel.

“So, it’s not working out very well for you,” he says. “Are you at least working on a book so that you can pay any more fines that may be imposed on you at a later date by the judicial system? I doubt this will be your last legal entanglement.”

“I’m working on a novel,” I hear myself saying, and realize that it has become no more than reflex to call myself a writer at this point. I’m not sure why I’ve never noticed this before. I don’t have book. I rarely write. Maybe it’s because I’m talking to a judge, but I have to admit calling myself a writer feels like a lie.

“What’s it about?” Shortman asks.

“Well, you Honor. It starts with a dimly-lit hallway, and, you see, the protagonist is engaged in a testing of outcomes, and he guesses wrong and has to run for his life.”

Shortman looks at me, one eyebrow cocked, as though he isn’t quite getting the genius of my book. And, really, I’m not sure what I’m talking about. “But it turns out fine,” I say, hoping some great idea will come to mind. I try to clarify what I’ve just said. “Because, in the end all the bad things that happen actually show him a new path – I like to think of it as the promise of the wrecking ball.”

The judge stares at me, taking in the load of crap that I’ve just flung his way. “Sounds strange, Mr. Barry. Not something I’m likely to read.” He scribbles something down on the file in front of him, probably a note to order a psychiatric evaluation for me. He looks back up. “What do you do to actually make money?”

“I work at Sutton’s. It’s a used bookstore down the street. In the Old Market.”

“Never heard of it,” he says. He picks up his glasses, puts them on again. “Son, it seems that you’ve gone down the wrong road. You do this stunt at the bar. You can’t pay a hundred dollar fine. Look at how you’re dressed. Did you tie your tie?”

I look down and see the knot is crooked, the wide end of the tie is at least three inches higher than the thin end.

“And the eye,” Judge Statham says. “What happened to your eye? Who hit you?”

I consider lying, but don’t. “A girl.”

Judge Shortman leans forward in his chair and says, “What’s that?”

“A girl hit me, your Honor.”

This draws laughs from Judge Statham. He covers his face with a file, but I see it shake and know he’s laughing behind it. Even The Suit and Matt laugh at me. I listen for Wendy’s laugh, but don’t hear it. For once, I don’t much feel like laughing.

Judge Statham lowers the file, his face flushed. “My goodness, Son.” He looks at the court reporter. “Ok. Let the record show that the defendant, Mr. Barry, does not have the means to pay a fine. Instead, he will complete forty hours of community service and six months probation.”

Judge Statham dismisses us. The Suit comes over and tells me how to set up probation. He tells me to take care of the community service as soon as possible and to not screw it up or else he’ll have me back in court and have the fine reinstated. I tell him I understand, and I thank him and Matt for their help. They dive into a discussion of another case and forget about me.

Part of me hopes Wendy has left by now. Surely she has more important things to do than sit in court all day. She has clients to call, manuscripts to read, meetings to

attend. I know it's all false hope and I am not surprised to see her when I walk out of the courtroom.

She stands there, arms folded, corners of her mouth turned down. "I think we need to have a talk."

Let the record show my luck for the day has definitely run out.

Wendy walks next to me as we leave the courthouse, and I try to remember what happened that night. Details are sketchy. Wendy tells me she's engaged. Sebastian meets me at Toad's for drinks. Somehow we end up at Brothers. And then my synapses shoot blanks. Blackness brought on by a dizzying inebriation. Nothing until I woke in the drunk tank, curled in the fetal position on a metal bench, my head on the lap of a very large man, his heavy arm placed lovingly around me.

"Good morning," he said when I opened my eyes. He had a mangy mullet hanging down over the collar of his jean jacket and a handlebar moustache framing his mouth. When he spoke, his breath stunk of whiskey and cigarettes. "How was your sleep?"

I sat up quickly, not knowing where I was, what happened, or how I made a new friend.

"Don't worry," he said. "No one messed with you. I watched over you all night." He smiled, clearly proud of himself, revealing a dark gap where his two front teeth should have been.

"Thanks, I guess," I said, not knowing what to make of all this, and retreated to an unoccupied corner of the cell. I sat in the corner, trying to make myself as small as

possible, and looked around the cell, avoiding my new buddy's toothless grin. Some men slept on the floor, their clothes ragged and dirty from their wild night out. Others paced, talking to themselves, arms gesturing wildly as they made emphatic points to an invisible audience. The stench of piss and sweat hung in the dank air, clinging to me. I remember wondering if I would ever be able to get it off my skin.

In the opposite corner of the cell, I could make out a guy trying to hide like I was. His eyes darted back and forth as he rocked himself nervously. His nostrils were crusted with a deep red and his nose was cocked at a funny angle from the rest of his face. Backwards hat. Polo shirt, collar popped. Flip-flops. A Westie, no doubt about it.

I watched with satisfaction as this tool squirmed, flinching at even the smallest noise or whenever anyone came within ten feet of him. I wondered where the arrogance went when these guys got arrested. Why they suddenly stop talking shit to everyone and hide in the corner. Come on tough guy, I wanted to say, dazzle me with some witty repartee, flex a banded bicep, show me your new iPhone. No? Nothing?

I sat there for the rest of the night in my corner of the holding cell, keeping my head down and out of the way, my fear dissipating as the Westie's grew, with each of his flinches, until a guard finally appeared and told me someone had bailed me out.

All of this, I remember. But proclaiming myself to be the Lizard King? No fucking way. I like the Doors, but, with the exception of the excessive drinking, I would never think to compare myself to Jim Morrison, let alone his alter ego. And whipping it out and pissing on the floor? That's unimaginable. I can barely use a public restroom, let alone showing brain to an entire bar. But still, Officer So-and-So would testify and I

don't suppose cops are prone to making things up so that they can throw white guys in jail.

Wendy nudges me a little as we walk and says, "You ok?"

"Yeah. I guess. Just trying to wrap my mind around that night." I'm not sure if I should be more concerned about my conviction for lewd conduct or about the things Wendy heard in the courtroom. She's upset, probably has a right to be, but I don't know what her silence means. Maybe she's gathering all her anger and is going to destroy me like a summer twister, spinning an intense and sudden violence on me. Maybe she just wants me to think about everything that's happened.

"Want to go for a beer?" I ask, not knowing if the bars are open yet.

She stops walking. "Jay, are you kidding me?"

It's not that bad an idea. Maybe it would ease some of the tension between us. Could help my hangover. Hair of the dog. Maybe even get some tomato juice to add in. But after this morning's events, I can see why she might think not be game.

We sit at the west end of Gene Leahy Mall, a two-block green space north of the Old Market, on the steps leading down to a small lake. A sharp wind blows. In my panic to get to the hearing this morning, I hadn't noticed how cold the day is. It's that strange time of year in Omaha where fall has ended, but winter hasn't started. Cold, but the lake isn't frozen yet. The leaves are off the trees and the geese are gone, but we haven't had our first snow, and the city has yet to put up the usual thousands of holiday lights around the Mall. The homeless people who hang out here during warmer days are noticeably absent, most likely across the street staying warm in the library.

Wendy and I sit there and let the wind lash our faces. I steal glances when I'm sure she isn't looking. Her face looks slightly older than how I picture her in my mind. Lines that used to only appear around her eyes and mouth when she frowned or cried seem to remain there all the time now. I wonder how much our relationship has aged her, tired her out, but then think maybe she has other, more pressing, things to worry about.

She catches me looking at her and holds my stare. "So are we going to talk about this morning or not?" She pulls a strand of her hair out of her face and tucks it behind her ear.

I would rather strip naked and jump in the ice-cold water instead of having this conversation. That's a first—thinking about getting naked around Wendy is usually accompanied by a desire to get in bed with her, say I'm sorry again, and have make-up sex. But even if I wanted to, it wouldn't matter. With Wendy, I understand there is no avoiding these talks. She's a fixer of all problems, real or imagined. Of course, with us, the problems were always real, despite my preference that they be imagined. And with what was divulged in court earlier, I can't pretend no problem exists between us this time. "Look, Wen," I say, "I'm sorry about what you heard in court. I was drunk and an idiot and didn't mean any of that. You shouldn't have found that stuff out like that."

Her eyes narrow like they did in court and I know I'm in trouble. "First off," she says, the storm slowly gathering strength, "we both know the only time you tell the truth is when you're drunk."

This is truer than I like to admit, and before I can respond Wendy quiets me by insistently holding two fingers out in front of my face. "Second," she says, "we both know that Paul is exactly what I need after being with you. Despite your drunken

outburst, he's a great guy. He makes me happy and I love him and we're going to get married."

I feel like I've been punched in the gut. She used the "L" word about him. I look down the Mall toward the slides at the other end. Two little kids, bundled in winter coats and bright red wool hats, waddle up the stairs, and each sit at the top of one of the two slides. The slides, I remember, parallel each other above the gravel landing area and are split by more stairs leading up from the landing area. The slides are metal and steep with a bump in the middle big enough to send little kids like these flying through the air. That is if their dad has remembered to bring a sheet of wax paper for each of them to sit on – the wax paper being critical for maximum speed, and therefore a higher flight.

My dad taught me about the wax paper and would always bring it along when we came down here when I was little. How he knew about the wax paper trick in the first place is beyond me. The slides didn't even exist when he was young, but still, he knew. I watch as the kids disappear down the slide, hoping that I might see their hats and hear happy shrieks as they rise through the air. But I don't see or hear them at all.

"And one last thing," Wendy says. "Paul would never cheat on me."

This snaps me back to our conversation. I don't know how many years have to pass before she stops bringing up the fact that I cheated on her. It's like bringing a nuclear bomb to a fistfight. If she wants to go Hiroshima on me, she better be prepared for the fall out. I go to DEFCON 1 and launch an old reliable: "But my dad had just died."

I'm so embarrassed by this tactic that I can't even look her in the eye when I say it. Now that it's out there, I feel even worse than before.

She punches me in the arm and yells, “And you slept with that whore after the reception while I was with your family!”

“Don’t I at least, after all this time, deserve some credit for telling you about it? You would have never known otherwise.” I say, knowing that I don’t deserve any credit.

“You were drunk when you told me!”

Shit. I forgot about that detail. I guess that sort of reaffirms her first point. I want to explain this to Wendy again, to finally settle it. I want to say that the girl wasn’t a whore, even though I can’t remember her name, even though I have never talked to her or wanted to see her again since that day. I want to describe to Wendy the immeasurable pain I felt when my dad died. How when I slept with that girl, I needed to feel something, anything, besides the loss, the grief. I want to tell her how sorry I am and how I would take it back, make things better like they were before if I could. Right now, though, sitting here in the cold, I’m somehow incapable of saying anything. I understand for the first time nothing I can do or say will ever fix Wendy and me.

Wendy looks past me toward the sky as if reading her words from a teleprompter in the clouds. “You always blame your dad’s death,” she says. “I cheated on you. I can’t start my novel. I can’t do anything with my life. But my dad died.” She sighs. “I’m not going to sit here and tell you that you need to get your shit together. I’ve done it too many times before. Your mom tells you. And now a freaking judge has told you.”

And a 19-year-old lesbian with a great right hook.

She looks at me and her face softens. I think she’s going to say something nice, but instead, she looks at her watch and stands. “Ok, I have to get back. But the real reason I wanted to talk to was-”

“To say maybe we could work things out?” Jesus. I’m pathetic.

“What? No, Jay. That’s not happening. Ever.” She shakes her head like something awful has just crossed her mind and she can’t get it out no matter how hard she tries. “I actually wanted to see if you would come if I invited you to the wedding.”

“You can’t be serious,” I say.

“Don’t get mad,” she says. “It just that we’ve known each other for so long and even though it’s been messed up, it would seem weird if you weren’t there.”

“I don’t know, Wendy. I think it might be weird if I *was* there.”

“Well, consider it a peace offering from me. And Paul.”

“We’ll see,” I say, knowing I will make a huge scene if the pastor is dumb enough to ask about anyone having an objection to Wendy and Paul getting married. Forever hold my peace, my ass.

“Thank you,” she says. She gives me a friend hug, hips apart.

As she walks in the direction of her office, I call after her, “Don’t forget to pitch my novel to your boss.”

“I’ll get on that right away,” she says over her shoulder without breaking stride.

I watch her walk away for a second or two and then I head in the opposite direction. The walking path in the Mall is covered with leaves no one will pick up until the spring. They crunch underneath my feet as I walk on the deserted path until it ends at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the slides. The kids are gone, having only left footprints in the gravel. The place feels unusually quiet.

Whenever my dad and I came down here, I always made him stay with me at the top of the slide. To a little kid, these slides are big and fast and scary and fun. He stayed

with me until I was ready to go. When I gave him the signal, a thumbs up, he would run down the stairs to the end of the slide. And when he appeared at the bottom, I let go, knowing he was there to catch me and make me safe at the bottom. I would giggle in his arms as he nuzzled me with his beard, and I would yell, “Again!” and he would carry me, wax paper and all, back to the top.

It was my dad, years later, who made me feel safe about my decision to become a writer. Despite all of our time spent in his study, he didn’t really actively encourage me. That wasn’t his style. He just gave me some great books to read out of his library – *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill A Mockingbird* – and he supported me when I told my parents I didn’t want to be a lawyer or a doctor. While this news made my mom dig her nails in to the arm of the chair and force a tight-lipped smile, my dad stood up, put his arm around me, and said, “Well, Jay, there are too many lawyers in this world and not enough poets.”

When I got my first stories published, he was so proud, shoving the obscure journals into the face of any poor soul who was unfortunate enough to come to our house. “Look,” he would say, “my boy’s a published author.”

The only arm around my shoulder lately is some smelly, fat dude in lock up. I wonder what my dad would say to me right now. I haven’t had anything published since he died. I just stare at his list on the screen, waiting for some inspiration, for him, travelling somewhere out in the cosmos, to find me. If I could only catch a glimpse of it, maybe I could start writing again.

The wind blows hard, scattering leaves around me, and a shiver hits me deeper inside than I thought possible. The clouds, gray around the edges and lighter in the middle, hint at snow.

## CHAPTER TEN

Wednesday.

The perfect night to go out.

Actually, any night of the week is a good night to go out, but Fridays and Saturdays are to be avoided when possible. Too many posers, wannabes, and idiots for my taste. People who are cooped up all week in the nine-to-five grind unleash their self-loathing misery in the form of power drinking and fighting other miserable bastards. It's like *Animal House* meets *Fight Club*, minus the insightful social commentary. If standing in line behind a group of moron Westies with their backwards white "Beavers" or "Cocks" baseball caps to pay for a five-dollar beer served in a plastic cup is your thing, then go for it. Be my guest. While you're at it, be sure to high-five the other group of Busch Lite-swilling Westies with whom you will inevitably fight later.

All Westies aside, weekends are just too obvious. I mean, even old people go out on weekends. I imagine they post a very specific "Night Out" checklist on their fridge that looks something like this:

Step 1: Hire neighbor girl to watch the kids.

Step 2: Tuck Ralph Lauren polo shirt into pleated shorts.

Step 3: Cinch up pleated shorts with braided belt.

Step 4: Put on Sperry top-siders sans socks (never wear socks!).

Step 5: Hit local Applebee's for Asiago Peppercorn Steak, under 550 calories, and one, maybe two, light beers.

Step 6: Home by 10:30 to get good night's sleep before grocery/home improvement/office supply shopping at Wal-Mart by eight tomorrow morning.

Step 7: Remember to enjoy yourself – you’ve earned it!

No, it’s the nights only a select few can go out that are the best. I have nothing to do tomorrow. No conference calls. No meetings. No boss to make my life miserable. No real responsibilities. This makes me a part of the chosen few who can enjoy a night out on a Wednesday. Sarah Benck and the Robbers are playing at the Waiting Room and I intend on being there. Maybe meet up with Sebastian, have a few drinks.

Pulling on my Black Sabbath t-shirt, I see my computer out of the corner of my eye. It stares at me, the screen saver’s abstract lines floating on the black background. I should really stay in and write. I need to get serious about this. Writing a novel is a serious thing. In my last attempt to write my first line was stunningly similar in its simple complexity to something Joyce would have written if he sucked at writing. I backspaced, sat there for an hour and came up with this gem:

running for his life  
the wrecking ball brings promises  
but fattie can’t write

I need to get serious about a lot of things. A conviction for lewd conduct is a serious thing. But so is finding someone to marry. That’s a hard thing to do – date, get engaged, and married – all in less than a year. I know it’s probably not going to happen, but I should at least find someone to take to Wendy’s wedding. And I can’t find my bride and/or date while sitting at my stupid computer, writing horrible crap.

I grab my keys and wallet off my desk, and my screen saver disappears, revealing an open Word document. I see my dad’s list and the haiku below it. The computer’s fan whirls on, emitting purring that I’m sure is meant to lure me back to my chair, hands on keyboard.

“Shut up,” I say, and turn the computer off. I almost make it out the front door before I hear Clint’s voice behind me.

“Where are you going, man?”

“Oh,” I say. “I didn’t know you were here. No TV?”

“No, man. I’m just doing a little reading. Sydney and some other people are coming over later.”

“What are you reading?”

He holds up a dark blue hardcover book with gold-flecked letters.

“The Bible? You’re reading the Bible? Nobody actually reads the Bible.” I know Omaha’s full of devout, church-going Catholics. I’ve seen them at fish fries during Lent, standing there, beer in hand, in a line that stretches from the church basement all the way around the block. But I’ve never once seen any of them reading the Bible, and I’m pretty sure none of them have ever have. Getting drunk at a church-sponsored event? Yes. Reading the Good Book? No. Modern religion at its finest.

“Some great stories in here,” Clint says, as if it’s perfectly normal for a twentysomething to read the Bible, let alone the drummer for a metal band that calls itself East Coast Vagina Slang.

“I’ll take your word for it. You guys want to meet me at the Waiting Room?”

“No thanks, man. We’re just going to hang out, maybe do some reading from the Good Book here,” he says, rapping his knuckles on the front cover.

There are several music venues among the quaint storefronts along Maple Street in the Benson neighborhood, along with the usual variety of thrift stores and bars, but the

Waiting Room is the best-known venue and draws more established bands for smaller, more intimate shows. I order a High Life and sip it while leaning against the bar, checking things out. I see Hank at the other end, surrounded by a fleet of empty PBR cans and a gaggle of women young enough to be his daughters. An insistent blond with big hoop earrings prattles on about whatever it is she thinks he wants to hear, her mouth literally inches from Hank's ear, like she is whispering sweet nothings to him. But Hank's face has no expression as he stares off somewhere else. An occasional nod of the head and mouthful of beer are the only indication that he is aware of the girl's presence.

On the other side of the room, a roadie type connects wires to mics and amps onstage. One takes down a drum kit, and puts another in its place. Another guy moves from guitar to bass, strumming a few chords, making sure everything is in tune.

In between me at the bar and the stage are tables stacked with empty beer bottles and chairs filled with people hanging out. They carry on, drinking and talking, their cacophony music to my ears. You've got dudes with ironic moustaches talking to girls wearing 50s-era dresses they fished out of the remainder bin at some thrift store. Girls with shaved heads and nose-rings talk to guys still rocking the cowboy shirt look, complete with pearl snaps. I count no less than six Wilco t-shirts, and spot at least two white dudes rocking dreadlocks. Tattoos, mullets, and beards abound. I imagine their conversations are subtle games of obscure music one-upmanship, asking if someone has heard the new Animal Collective album, or wondering aloud about Grizzly Bear's influences. I guarantee no one here is worried about tomorrow. They live in the moment and that moment involves beers and bands. It's Wednesday night drinking at its finest.

The distinction between the bar area and the stage area is clearly marked by the bar area's carpet ending and the stage area's linoleum tile beginning. A support beam hangs low, running parallel to the stage where the flooring splits, giving the impression of a separate room. This looks as though the owners bought the space next to the bar, and put a big hole in the wall so that people near the bar could see the stage. The sound is muddier back here by the bar, but in the stage area, you risk losing your hearing for two days while simultaneously getting spit on by the lead singer.

I see Sebastian talking to some guy over by the soundboard near the far wall. In contrast to the tidy ponytail he wears at Suttons, Sebastian's hair is down tonight. Or perhaps I should say it's out tonight in all of its frizzy glory. Think Axl Rose in the "Welcome to the Jungle" video. Sort of a lion's mane thing. He also wears black skinny jeans, pulling them off in a way I can't. Probably because he is pencil thin and I'm permanent marker fat. Wouldn't surprise me even a little if they were women's jeans. He also wears a black mesh shirt that reveals the following: both nipples, one pierced; several, if not all, of his ribs; and a trail of hair that leads down to god-only-knows where. The whole ensemble leaves me feeling embarrassed for him while simultaneously making me curious where one might find such a black mesh shirt. I doubt even Hot Topic sells them. At any rate, Sebastian looks like a fucking rock star. He hands the sound guy a CD, says something to him, and shakes his hand.

"Hey," I say, as he walks toward me at the bar. "How about I buy you that beer I owe you."

"Can't turn down that offer."

“Can I also offer you some normal clothes? Perhaps something that doesn’t show off your Happy Trail?”

“I’ll just stick to the beer,” he says with a grin that I take to mean he knows, somewhere deep down, just how ridiculous he looks.

“Sasha and her friend are over by the stage,” he says. “Should go say hi.”

I look to where he points and see Sasha and Renee. Sasha waves. “Fuck off,” I say to Sebastian, while waving back at Sasha. Renee just sort of glares at me and turns away. I can live with one out of two. “Who was that?” I ask Sebastian, nodding in the direction of soundboard.

“Jim. Asked him to do the sound at our show in a few months,” he says between swigs of beer. “Gave him what we have so far on the new album.”

“Cool. When’s it all going down?”

“CD should be out in late March. Show’s at the beginning of April. Touring after that, trying to get noticed outside of Omaha. Hopefully, the crowds will be good and we can break even. Sick of financing the band on my credit card. Probably never be able to pay it off, but they keep extending my credit line, so fuck it.”

I know from talking to Clint that ECVS has never made money on their tours. I’m skeptical they will break even on this tour, despite new material. “How’s the new stuff?”

“Good, good,” Sebastian says. “Still have to add some finishing touches, but I think it’s our best work so far. It feels a little more mature, less screaming and shitty guitars. A little more melodic, I guess. Without losing our edge, though. We’re not like Metallica circa 1997. Still metal through and through.”

I like the guys in the band, but it's a pretty low bar for the album to be their best. I mean, really, they're pretty much your standard metal band whose name is the only thing interesting about them.

"Some labels have shown some interest," he says, and tilts the bottle way back, finishing off the last third of his beer in one swallow.

"Wow, that's cool," I say, hoping I've buried the disbelief in my voice. I can't imagine a label actually signing them. I figure Sebastian and I will work at Sutton's for the rest of our lives. If they get signed, he can legitimately wear mesh shirts and not put up with people like me making fun of his fashion choices. But that's a pretty big "if." I mean, every local band thinks they're on the verge of getting signed, and only a tiny fraction do. And even getting a record deal doesn't necessarily translate into real success.

"We'll see," he says. "Hasn't happened yet, but feels like it probably will."

"Let me buy you a congratulatory beer."

"Normally I wouldn't pass up the rare event of you actually buying drinks, but I gotta go. Got some cheap studio time tonight."

"You're not going to stick around and see the band?"

"No. They're great, but we gotta keep working if we want to get signed."

"All right," I say. "See you around."

"Yup," he says. "By the way, you seen Clint? Hasn't made it to practice for a while."

"I think he's at my place with his girl."

"Tell him if he doesn't show up soon, he's out. Need a drummer who wants to be in the band," Sebastian says, and walks toward the door.

Sarah Benck and the Robbers come on stage shortly after Sebastian leaves. Chairs empty as people move toward the stage, jostling for a closer look. Sarah Benck's a sight to behold. She's this tiny woman whose Flying V appears to be as big as she is. On stage the band rips into a bluesy rocker, sounding tight as usual. Sarah lets her voice fly, and I am left wondering, as usual, how someone so small can sing so big and so beautiful – the scratchy soulfulness of a Memphis roots singer emanating out of a pixie's body – it's incongruous and wonderful at the same time.

I hang back near the bar, sipping on another High Life, when I hear a vaguely familiar voice in my ear.

“Hey, MuffinTop!”

I look over and see the girl from the Slowdown show. Belle. I figured I'd probably never see her again after that night. “Hey, Belle. I was wondering when I would run in to you again.”

“Yeah, I saw you earlier, but you were talking to Bret Michaels, so I didn't want to bother you guys. Or was it Vince Neil? I couldn't tell?”

“Very funny. That was Sebastian, friend of mine. He's in a band.”

“I thought he looked familiar. Singer, right? Something about vaginas?”

“East Coast Vagina Slang.”

“Lovely,” she says, and gives me a wide smile. “So what have you been up to since I last saw you? Wooing more lesbians, I presume. I think I saw one of them here, actually.” She looks around the room and I'm afraid if she spots Sasha or Renee, she'll invite them over for drink.

“No,” I say. “I don’t think they’re here.”

“Relax, Jay,” she says, smiling again. “I was just joking.”

She called me by my real name.

And that smile. It’s not so much a thousand-watt smile as it is ten thousand watts. I haven’t had a girl smile at me this way since Wendy. Come to think of it, Wendy hasn’t even smiled at me this way since we first met. “So,” I say, “how is it you’re out on a school night? Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Sure I do. It doesn’t mean I can’t go out for a drink or two.”

This is something Wendy stopped doing when she got her job at the publishing house. It was her first real job and she didn’t let me forget it. “This is the type of job I’ve been dreaming about,” she told me when she got it. “I could make a career out of this. Going out during the week and getting wasted isn’t going to help.” The job and its impact on her, and by extension, my, social life eventually became a major source of discord between us. That and me sleeping with someone else.

“What about you,” she asks, “don’t you have to be at work in the morning?”

No. No I do not. I have absolutely nothing to do tomorrow. But I can’t tell her this. She’ll think I’m a loser. “Well, I don’t have to be up early for anything,” I say, hoping she’ll assume that means I have important matters to attend to in the afternoon. “How about buying me that drink you owe me from a few weeks ago?”

“Sure,” she says. “But let’s go down the street. Somewhere quieter so we can talk.”

We walk a few blocks in the cold, cloudless night past the storefronts, passing a cigar shop, a tattoo parlor, and a coffee house, windows darkened for the evening.

“Ever been in any of those places?” I ask.

“Only the tattoo place,” she replies, her smile at full wattage. “I have two full sleeves and my frat bros and I got matching tats that take up our entire backs. It’s the devil eating babies. It’s totally sick, bro.”

“Nice Westie impression.”

“The what impression?”

How does she not know this? Doesn’t everyone know about Westies? “You know, idiots from West Omaha.”

“Oh,” she says. “I guess I’ve never thought of them that way. As a single entity.”

A middle-aged couple, laughing and stumbling, make their way from the door of España, a tapas and sangria place, to a BMW parked at the curb. From the inside of the restaurant, I hear flamenco music and a chorus of forks and spoons on dishes. The guy wears a sports jacket over a turtleneck, has a ponytail. The car chirps and the lights flash, and he opens the door for the woman. She gets in, pulls the tail of her long jacket in behind her, slurring something about “road head” as he closes the door on her. He gives us a knowing “What’s up?” head nod as walks around to the driver’s side. The Beemer roars to life and the tires squeal as it speeds unnecessarily away to destinations most likely west of here.

“See,” I say. “Westies. Old ones.”

“Ever been there?” Belle asks, her eyebrows raised as if horrified by what we’ve witnessed.

“No, but maybe we should check it out,” I say, and hold the door open. “I think it worked out well for that guy.”

“Dream on,” she says, and lightly hits me on the arm. “Seriously, where are we going?”

I let go of the door and point in the direction we’ve been walking. “Micks. A different crowd than this place.”

We walk farther down the block to Micks. The front door is guarded on either side by a group of thin, bearded guys loitering around having a smoke. Despite the cold, none of them wear coats, instead relying on second-hand scarves, nicotine, and small talk to keep them warm. They don’t acknowledge us as we walk up. They merely take long pulls and stare at the ground in the spaces between talking to each other. One guy puts his cigarette out in an empty planter sitting on the sidewalk.

“This must be it,” Belle says. “They seem like your kind of people.”

“They are,” I say, and hold the door for her.

Belle pays for our beers at the bar and we sit at a table pushed up next to a wall. Even though the place is mostly empty, it feels claustrophobic. The space here is long and narrow, and as many tables and chairs as possible are jammed together in between the exposed brick walls. The vintage plaster ceiling, painted black, feels close and gives off a muted vibe. A guy strums an acoustic guitar in the far corner, occasionally singing in a low voice. He barely moves as he plays, leaning slightly toward the mic, hands in deliberate motions along the neck. The stage is as tall as it is wide, and from where we sit, it looks like he stands on a pedestal, resembling a statue of a man-playing-guitar.

I watch him for a few moments and quickly grow bored. “Should have stayed to see the rest of Sarah Benck’s set.”

“That’s ok,” Bell says. “It’s quieter here. No one seems to be paying attention to him anyway.”

She’s right. Of the few occupied tables, only the one nearest the stage is even looking at him. Probably his girlfriend or mom, and whoever else he could get to show up to see his set.

“Thanks for the beer,” I say, and tilt my bottle towards her.

“No problem,” she says, and clinks the necks together. “You earned it.”

She takes a drink, but her eyes remain on me. If it’s possible, she seems to be smiling while drinking. I feel a grin creeping up my face and cover it by taking a swig of my beer.

“So, Jay,” she says, putting her bottle back on the table, “what exactly is it that you do for a living?”

I was hoping she wouldn’t ask that question. It’s not that far off from when Wendy wants to know what I am doing with my life. Best to keep my answers simple. “I work at Sutton’s Used Books. I’m also a graduate student.”

Good. That seems relatively normal.

“What are you studying?”

This is a tricky question. Not because I don’t know what I’m studying, but because it gets closer to the whole I-want-to-be-a-writer thing. And the whole I-want-to-be-a-writer thing gets close to the fact that I can’t write, so I don’t write. This, of course, puts me in Loserville right next to the “starving artists” who sell their paintings of horses and mountains and grassy meadows twice a month at the Holiday Inn by the interstate. A

nonchalant answer and quick change of subject is in order. “Creative writing. What do you do?”

“Me? Oh, I teach the 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Liberty Elementary.”

“Tough neighborhood,” I say. The school is at the edge of downtown in a sort of no man’s land between the city center’s offices and some of the nicer midtown neighborhoods. I’ve never been able to figure out if people live there to escape the ghettos or because they can’t afford to live in the ghettos. Either way, to say the area has been forgotten by most of the city is an understatement. Even the condo developers, who have appropriated every empty building east of 30<sup>th</sup> Street over the last decade, haven’t figured out how to gentrify the area yet.

“Yeah, but the kids are great,” she says. “It’s the parents that can be hard to deal with.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I say, feeling smug at the successful change of subject. “How long have you been at it?”

“A while. Almost eight years.”

“So you plan on being an elementary school teacher for the rest of your life?” I didn’t mean it like that, but that’s how it came out.

“What’s wrong with that?” she says, looking at me expectantly, her eyes seemingly turning from blue to black. The smile has disappeared and the corners of her mouth turn down.

“Nothing, nothing,” I say. “That’s not what I meant. It just seems like a long time to do only one thing.”

She continues looking at me for a moment. “Well, not that there’s anything wrong with teaching as a career, but I’ve been doing graduate work at Creighton. My goal is to become principal. Run the whole show.” As she says this, the smile returns. “Do you go to Creighton?”

Uh-oh. Back on the school thing. “No. I’m at Omaha.”

“So, are you taking classes now?”

Danger. This is not good. “Well, actually, I’ve finished all my classes.”

“So what’s next?”

Not good at all. “Well,” I say, and reflexively rub the back of my head with my hand. “I have to do a creative project.” I say it, knowing that’s not going to sufficiently answer her question.

“A creative project? Like a book?”

“Like a book. A novel, actually.” I stare down at my beer on the table, afraid to look at her. I steal a quick glance at her and see her face cocked down at an angle, trying to get my eyes to meet hers. She’s grinning at me, probably enjoying watching me squirm. I feel the warmth of my face flushing and realize that I’m smiling at little bit at my own embarrassment.

“That’s great,” she says. “How’s it coming along?”

There it is. The million-dollar question. And I don’t have the answer. Or at least a good answer. “That’s complicated,” I say, looking away and take another mouthful of beer. I can feel her contemplating me from across the table, not sure what to say.

She sits back in her chair and finally says, “I don’t mean to pry. Sorry.”

“No. Don’t be sorry,” I say. “It’s just complicated. My dad died a few years back and I haven’t really been able to write since then.”

“Why not?”

It’s a simple enough question. One that makes sense. But yet another one for which I don’t have a good answer. “It’s just difficult. Like I don’t want to let him down or something. I guess I still want him to be proud of me even though he’s gone. And it’s sort of paralyzing.” Why I’m telling this person that I’ve just met these things is beyond me. I don’t tell anyone this stuff. My mom. My friends. I can’t even talk to Wendy about these things. No one. Something about Belle, though, feels like it’s ok to finally talk.

“What’s your novel about?” she asks, maybe sensing my unease.

“My dad.”

“So you have daddy issues,” she says with a laugh.

“I guess so.” I have to admit it sounds funny hearing someone say it out loud .

“It’s just it’s so important to me that I get it right.”

“Why don’t you just start from the beginning?”

“I’ve tried. I have these four great plot points, I think. But if what I start with isn’t perfect, I can’t move on. If I can’t write the first line, I can’t write the second. And so on, and suddenly those four things are nothing more than a list that has no meaning.”

“I can understand that. Why don’t you tell me your favorite story about your dad.”

Wow. Someone who genuinely wants to hear about my dad. This is new. Wendy would have come out, guns blazing, and yelled at me to get over it already. There are a thousand stories I could tell Belle: my dad giving me a piggy-back ride in the Colorado mountains or introducing me to the Doors or using a wet washcloth to rub my allergy-

infected eyes. I could go on forever, even though bearing my soul to her on our first date seems like a bad move. But as she looks at me from across the table, I hear myself begin to speak. “The one thing to know about my dad is that he always wanted to be a writer, but he never really had the chance.”

“Why not?”

“He got married, had two kids, a mortgage. The American dream, right?”

“I don’t know about that. I guess in some way it is,” Belle says. “It’s not exactly what I’m looking for.”

“Me neither, and I don’t think my dad was exactly looking for that. But he started working for an insurance company, doing cold calls, and I guess he was good at it because he spent his whole career doing it. Even when they offered him a management position, he turned it down. Said he made a good enough living, and didn’t want the stress of being someone’s boss.”

“But what about writing?”

“That’s just it. He would get up early, drive all over the city meeting with clients, and get home in the evening. After dinner, he would sit in his study and write. Every night, like clockwork. Most of my favorite childhood memories are the two of us sitting in his office. He would pull up a chair for me at the corner of the desk, and while he hammered away on his typewriter, I would read my books or do homework.”

“Every night?”

“Some dads shoot hoops or throw the football around with their sons. Mine sat across a desk from me and wrote novels. We barely even spoke. But it wasn’t like I

couldn't interrupt him, you know, and ask what a new word meant or for help with my algebra. He would always stop to help me, no matter what he was doing."

Belle smiles. "That's really sweet."

"The thing of it is, I didn't mind the quiet. It was just being with him that mattered to me."

"Did he ever finish a book?"

"Yeah. I mean, he must have. He spent my entire childhood writing. I bet there are at least three novels just sitting in his desk drawers."

"He didn't publish them?"

"No. Never published anything, as far as I know."

We sit in silence for a short time, sipping from our beers. Every time I look up at Belle, she smiles as though not wanting to interrupt my thoughts.

"My dad and my mom both worked so hard," I say, "to give me and my sister great childhoods, and to afford our big, stupid house. They've given me the luxury of not having to be in much of a hurry to get on with things. I've often wondered, if things were different, if I had to work hard and he didn't, if he couldn't have become a really great writer."

"I bet he could have," she says in a soft voice.

I peel the label off my beer bottle and stare at the wood grain on the table. Belle stays silent, giving me my space for some time before speaking again. "Those are nice memories," she says. "They probably don't make for an interesting novel, though."

I laugh a little. "No, not really."

"What about some other memories?"

“Maybe some other time,” I say, hoping my sudden reluctance doesn’t offend her.

“Sure,” she says, and finishes the last sip of her beer. “You know, I have daddy issues, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, my dad was never around. Left my mom before I was born, so I can totally understand how it messes with you,” she says. Then she puts her hands on my wrists, pulling us closer across the table. “But don’t ever forget how lucky you are to have had him in the first place. Some of us never did.”

I barely know this woman, but it takes all of my restraint to not to freak out and do something stupid. Maybe kiss her. Maybe start bawling. Maybe propose. I don’t know. But as she holds my arms and we stare at each other for too long, I feel like I’m going to jump out of my skin.

She lets go, and says, “I don’t know. Maybe just start with a favorite memory, whatever it is, and go from there.”

I sit back in my chair, feel the electric surge of the moment coursing through my body. I’m not sure what to do or say so I offer her another beer. She glances at her watch. “Thanks, but I can’t,” she says. “I have to be up early for work in the morning. Who’s going to teach the kids about fractions if I’m not there?”

“I guess no one,” I say. “Listen. There’s a gallery show coming up in a few weeks. A friend of mine is showing his work. Do want to go with me?”

She smiles. “Like a date?”

I don’t know what it is about the word “date,” but it always seems so formal, like the first step to getting married, having kids, and living in the suburbs. Granted, two of

those things are worth having, but when I hear that word used in conjunction with my life, I always feel it in my balls. And not in a sexual way. More like the feeling of being a passenger on an airplane that suddenly loses a thousand feet of altitude.

“Uh, sure. A date. I’ll even buy the drinks,” I say.

“How gentlemanly of you.”

“Just trying to be magnanimous.”

She laughs. “Right. Magnanimous. Ok, you’re on.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Why would she pose like that? What's up with the skimpy outfits and long, flowing hair? And is she wearing leather in that one? I'm mean, why would she dress like that if she wants to be taken seriously? It's got to be because she's dumb and doesn't have anything to say. There's no other explanation. But it just doesn't work.

“What are you doing?”

Charles's question shocks me back to the real world. I don't know how he does it, but he's managed again to sneak up on me again. He has this stealthy ability to find me among the swollen bookshelves and chaotic stacks when I'm doing something I'm not supposed to do. Normally, it's something as innocuous as talking to Sebastian about a band or a Four Wendy chick I saw the other night when I really should be finding a place for some unsellable books we've recently bought, or when I take an extra minute or fifteen outside when it's understood that I'm to take the trash to the dumpster in the alley and come right back. But this time, I've been busted.

“What do you mean?” I ask, and shelve the two Ann Coulter books I've been staring at in Sutton's newly-revamped “Politics” section.

Charles looks at me, his face pulled down in a frown. I can imagine him giving his students that look when they haven't properly cited a source in their term papers. He shifts his weight to his back leg, one hand on placed effeminately on his hip, the other fondling his goatee. Yup, definitely his pretentious I'm-nearly-a-PhD look. He scans the section I've been shelving, his eyes scrunched like he's trying to solve one of those Sudoku puzzles. I'm about ready to start ignoring him when he finally points at the Politics section and asks, “Why are you only facing out liberal books?”

His odd questions shouldn't surprise me. Ever since I walked in the door at work, things have seemed odd. The day started out fine. After shoveling down some huevos rancheros Clint made for breakfast, I visited the Starbucks that had opened where Delice used to be in the bottom floor of my apartment building. At Starbucks, however, I did not order a venti Caffé Americano or a grande nonfat Caramel Machiatto or a Mocha Frappuccino with extra whipped cream. I did not open my titanium-skinned MacBook Pro and enjoy the free Wi-Fi. I did not pick up a discarded *New York Times* from the next table over and read about current events. I did not flip through the rack of inoffensive albums by Paul McCartney or Carly Simon, wondering which one would be best for when the Davidsons come over for fondue night. No, I did none of these things. Instead, I played the Penis Game.

The rules of the Penis Game are universal, and go something like this: at least two people sit in a highly populated space –an outdoor café, a park, the lobby of an office building, wherever – and take turns saying the word “penis” out loud, with each person saying it louder than the person before. The person willing to say it loudest wins. I will admit the Penis Game is not new, in fact, I was made aware of it as early as junior high. I will also admit playing the Penis Game is a bit immature for a guy who just turned thirty-one. But when a Starbucks opens in place of your favorite Ma-and-Pa bakery, acts of civil disobedience can't be put off simply because of how one might be perceived by people who lack the balls to stand up for something as important as this.

Clint and I play a slightly different version of the Penis Game. In our version, one of us opens Starbucks' front door, sticks our head in, and says “penis” as loud as we are willing to. We don't actually play together, sort of relying on the honors system that the

other one is playing when he gets the chance. And as for determining the winner, well, I guess it's more about voicing our displeasure than anything else. It's our own version of Project Mayhem, except we don't beat the shit out of each other.

I was with Clint the first time we played. In fact, it was his idea. We had crashed at Sebastian's after an all night rager, and, as we walked up to our building the next morning, out of nowhere, Clint opened Starbucks door and said, "Watch this." He leaned inside, and yelled "Penis!" I unlocked the security door to my building, and we ran up the steps, laughing the whole time. "I think some lady nearly choked on her scone, man," Clint said between breaths.

My first time playing the Penis Game was not nearly as successful. A few days after Clint started it, I stood outside Starbucks door, my hand shaking on the handle, and tilted my head around the doorjamb so I could see inside. You know the type: moms with strollers getting their caffeine fix, business men in their suits talking loudly on their BlackBerrys, and "writers" clattering away at their keyboards, needing to be seen by others as they write the Great American Novel. It was the perfect backdrop for my first attempt, so I inhaled deeply, trying to find my chi, and breathed out a meek "penis." The word would have been louder if I whispered. Even so, I felt strangely unburdened as the word floated away from me. I didn't stick around long enough to see the fallout, but I think I heard someone respond, "Gesundheit," which pretty much killed my rush.

Nevertheless, there was something about today that made me go for it. Maybe it was the huevos rancheros. Maybe it was the chilly bite to the winter air that stung so wonderfully in my lungs. Maybe it was the second or even the third espresso Clint made

for me. I don't know what it was, but today was the day I was going to win, and score one for the little guy in the face of corporate America.

I knew this wouldn't be without risk. Clint had warned me the last time he played the manager started coming around the counter at him before he ran. "Be careful, man," Clint said. "They're onto us." But I didn't care. Damn the risk. Damn the fact that I was already 10 minutes late for work. It had to be done. There was no other choice. Today was going to be the day that I won the Penis Game.

I gripped the door handle firmly and then ripped it open, stepping inside so that both of my Chuck's were inside the building, standing firm on the laminate wood floors. None of this Mickey Mouse bullshit where I just leaned in the doorway. I wanted these people to know I was there. No, I wanted them to *feel* me there.

I drew the deepest breath I could, and reached down into my gut to let the word fly through my vocal chords and out my mouth like a lightning bolt from Zeus. As I exhaled, the word travelled through the store, ricocheting off over-sized porcelain coffee mugs, repurposed oak countertops, and the forehead of a stunned barista wearing a hemp necklace. A silence fell over the store. The gnashing sound of the coffee grinder, the scraping of forks against plates, the murmur of conversation, they all stopped. Even the innocuous guitar strumming and bland voice of Jack Johnson, meant to supply background white noise, seemed to be on mute.

I stood there, basking in the silence I created, and realized both of my arms were raised above my head, fists clinched, in an apparent victory celebration. This is how the Penis Game was meant to be played. This is how the Penis Game is won.

What I failed to realize was the manager had been clearing a nearby table when I entered. In my bravado, I had somehow missed him, despite the fact that he was no less than five feet away when I screamed “penis.” What I noticed nearly too late was the bald head atop his large frame moving toward me, tossing tables and chairs out of his way. I did a double take before I recognized he was an employee, Starbucks’ signature green apron and all. And it was that second look that told me he didn’t fit the profile of your average Starbucks manager. He looked more like a short-order cook at some rancid diner, maybe on work release from Douglas County Corrections. A dude ready to throw down at a moment’s notice, just waiting to eat a guy like me for lunch before going back to serv a Pumpkin Spice Latte to the next person in line.

I spun back outside, ignoring the manager bark, “Don’t you run!” behind me. Despite the his directive, I did, in fact, run, narrowly avoiding getting hit by a car on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, all the way to Sutton’s, savoring the sweet taste of my victory, only partly sure I wasn’t going to heave my huevos onto the sidewalk.

So that part of the day, pretty normal. But when I arrived, wheezing, at Sutton’s, things started getting weird. First, everyone was up front, gathered around Ralph for a meeting. We don’t do store meetings at Sutton’s. If Ralph needs to communicate something to the gang, he usually just tells the first person he sees and they tell everyone else.

Second, when I stumbled in, Ralph looked at me and said, “You’re late.” He’s said this to me before, but this time I think he was serious because when he said it, he sort of tilted his head and raised an eyebrow like a dad scolding his son for missing curfew. Or a Labrador for shitting on the carpet.

Finally, when I caught my breath and tried to regale everyone with the story of this morning's victory, Ralph cut me off. "Jay," he said. "We're trying to have a team meeting so that everyone knows what to do over the next few days."

I'll admit the word "team" sort of threw me off in much the same way that hearing someone scream "penis" must surprise Starbucks' patrons. I mean, the employees at Sutton's are as much a team as any group of randomly selected idiots who happen to come together at a store every so often to avoid selling books or anything else remotely related to the reason they are at that store.

The real curveball, however, was the implication of actually having specific tasks to complete. This is the store whose policy has always been to buy any book a customer wants to sell, regardless of its condition, and find a place for it somewhere in the store, the farther away from where it should be shelved, the better.

"So what we are going to do," Ralph said, "is straighten this place up a bit. Actually, a lot. We need to weed out all the books that aren't going to sell and find the proper home for books that somebody might actually buy."

I look past Ralph's shoulder, scanning the store. From up here, it looks like the store goes on forever. Think the warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. We are going to need top men for this job. Top men. Stacks upon stacks. Piles upon piles. None of it ever sorted. There are parts of this place I've never even seen before. Sure it might be because I'm lazy, but it's also because of my fear of having a crammed bookshelf fall on me. No one would ever know. They would ask, "Where's Jay?" and come to the consensus that I'd overslept again or maybe finally quit. My body would never be found, rotting away under some great and many not-so-great works of literature.

“Uh, Ralph?” I asked. “How are we going to do this? I mean, how do we know which books stay and which books don’t?”

Ralph put his hand on Sasha’s shoulder. “Sasha has final say about that. Most of the time, it will be obvious, but if you aren’t sure, ask Sasha.”

Sasha? The least experienced person here? She can’t possibly handle this project. Might as well just grab someone off the street to lead us. “Ralph, it’s great you picked the new person to be in charge, but the bigger question is why are we doing this?” I could feel Sasha’s eyes boring into my skull, but I ignored her and concentrated on Ralph.

“Well, Jay,” he said. “If you had been here on time, you would know. Let’s just say I want this place to be ready to become a respectable, and maybe even profitable, used bookstore by the New Year. If you or anyone else has questions, ask Sasha.”

When Ralph went back upstairs, Sebastian filled me in, saying there was going to be a literacy drive where school kids could come in to the store and get books for cheap. All the local bookstores were taking part, and since Sutton’s was the only downtown bookstore, we had signed up to participate. In order to do so, however, we needed to actually have a kid’s section. And since we were going to create a kid’s section, Ralph decided we might as well clean up the whole store.

“Who the fuck signed us up to participate in the first place?” I asked, but no one seemed to know.

Sasha pointed to the far wall. “Why don’t you start over there? Make a pile of the books you think should be reshelfed in their proper section and another pile of books that will go in the remainder bin.”

“This whole project should go in the remainder bin.” I said, and picked up a ratty paperback copy of *The Rainmaker*, tossing it in to the dark abyss. From somewhere a few stacks over, I heard Charles yell, “Jesus, what was that?”

Sasha ignored this and continued to give out marching orders: “And if you have books that fit the section, start shelving them alphabetically by author. Everyone will sort their piles and bring them to the appropriate section. Eventually, everything will be shelved in its right place.”

“Eventually? Maybe in a thousand years. This sucks.”

Sasha turned her back with a little wave and walked away. “Have fun.”

So this is what I have been doing for my entire shift. Actually, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. When you're actually working, people tend to leave you alone. Who knew?

Of course, when you work with Charles, you can never expect to be left entirely alone. Maybe he was just as pissed as I was at the fact that Sasha was running things. That would explain why he's standing here like the academic prick that he is, questioning the work I've been doing all day. “Why are the conservative books spined-out, and the liberal ones faced-out?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I'm not doing that.” And I wasn't. At least consciously. Here's a little known fact about selling books: books that are faced-out, that is, with their covers toward the customer, sell better than spined-out books, ones shelved normally like in a library. This means that the lowly shelver, otherwise the lowest person on the bookstore totem pole, actually wields more power than expected, because the shelver can favor books he or she likes by facing them out on the shelves, and effectively

hide, or at least make harder to find, books he or she doesn't like by shelving them spine out. So, for instance, if you prefer one political party to the other, you could help books sympathetic to that party sell better by the way they are positioned on the shelf. In my younger, more ambitious days, I might have done this. But as a thirty-one year old part-time book peddler at Sutton's, I have no interest in putting in the time it takes to perform such guerrilla political actions.

"Yes you are." He points at the bookshelf. "Look. All of these are liberal books."

I consider the stack I've shelved over that last few hours. Seven of them are neatly arranged, each with books packed together perfectly, not too tight, but with no empty spaces, interrupted only by a faced out book every so often. It's almost a work of art. A random mosaic of faced-out titles amongst the tidy columns of spined-out books.

The only problem is that Charles is right. Starting at the top and working my way down the stack, I notice, among other leftist titles, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*, *A People's History of the United States*, and *The Communist Manifesto* are faced out. Memoirs from both Clinton and Obama are faced out. Hell, I've even faced-out Al Franken's *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot* and Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*.

But no conservative books. No faced-out book-length screeds by the aforementioned Big Fat Idiot – Al Franken's words, not mine – despite a healthy number on the shelf. And no Bill O'Reilly books faced-out either. This despite a whole bunch of his books aimed at kids: the creepy *The O'Reilly Factor for Kids*, as well as the comma-challenged *Kids Are Americans Too*. Maybe these weren't faced-out because, on one typically slow day, Sebastian and I had drawn devil's horns, eye patches, and Spock ears on O'Reilly's cover picture, and I was a little embarrassed by the fact that we had

destroyed the books. It's hard to say. At any rate, the strange thing about all of this shelving business is that I hadn't been conscious of it. "Here," I say to Charles. "I'll face these out." I spine-out *My Life*, making a space on the shelf and facing-out the Ann Coulter titles in its place.

"They're upside down," he says, looking at me over the tops of his glasses.

"Oh, sorry. I thought Republicans read that way."

"Because it reflects our world view?"

I love it when all the stars align and a joke comes together like that. It's better than sex. Well, maybe not, but still really good. "You got it."

"You're hilarious, Jay," Charles says, and walks away.

We worked on cleaning out Sutton's for the rest of the day. By the time we closed up for the evening, we had made it through a third of the stacks. It's amazing how much work you can get done when there are no customers around to bother you. The Kids' section was shaping up nicely and was almost presentable. I thought Sasha might punch me again when I found a copy of *How to Get a Teen-age Boy & What to Do With Him When you Get Him* and asked her if we had a Pedophilia section in the store. But other than that, things moved along fine. We got rid of titles like *The Complete Book of Ethnic Humor* and *Your Three Year Old: Friend or Enemy*, as well as a few Arsenio Hall biographies. We ended up with boxes and boxes of books that had been weeded out and would be sold for a quarter or fifty cents. We even had enough copies of *The Rainmaker* to make a nice endcap in the fiction section, complete with a few copies of *Playing for Pizza* sprinkled in for good measure. In another day or two, the rest of the store would be good enough to call respectable.

And I have to admit the work was almost fun. I guess the concept of “Team Sutton’s” isn’t so crazy if you look at in a sit-com sort of way. You know, the reclusive painter, dual-natured rock star, academic nerd, pugilistic lesbian, and soon to be Pulitzer-winning writer. All of us working together in our dysfunctional way. The day felt good. How it’s supposed to be. Everything was in its right place, like nothing would ever change.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The first time I meet with my PO – that’s what us criminals call our probation officers, according to the fifteen-year-old kid wearing his Huskers cap cocked to the side in the waiting room – he gives me a choice on where I would do my court-ordered community service.

“Judging by your background, we could probably fix you up teaching reading or writing or something.” He flips my file shut like he know everything there is to know about me after glancing at it for a good ten seconds, and tosses it on top of a stack of identical folders. His office isn’t much more than a broom closet filled with an old steel desk, two chairs, and mismatched file cabinets in various states of disrepair. One cabinet is dented so badly that I doubt the drawers can be opened. But judging by the stack of manila folders on his desk, the file cabinets probably aren’t in any danger of being used. Two coffee mugs sit at the edge of his desk. One, “World’s Best Dad,” holds two pens and a pencil with the eraser missing. The other, “Probation: Doing Our Best to Help You,” sits empty, stained dark by years of coffee and no soap. A clunky computer monitor perches on a hard drive that I imagine still runs Windows 95.

I sit across from him, feeling the springs in my ass where the foam has worn away, and stare down at the drab gray desk, wondering what bullshit name it would be given if that color was used on vinyl siding in West Omaha. Roman Sterling. Aluminum Cypress. French Cobblestone.

“We got two programs along them lines,” he says. “One is teaching literacy to inmates at DCC. Help them get their GEDs. The other is an after school program, teaching writing to kids up at the North Omaha Community Center. Your choice.” He

leans back, causing his chair to groan under his weight, and puts his hands back behind his head, exposing a belly that hangs over his belt. Despite his girth, the PO isn't soft like me. He has a chest the size of a Mack Truck's grille and heavy arms that look perfect for crushing windpipes or choking out gorillas. If he was vinyl siding, he'd be a slab of Canyon Stone to my Vanilla Cream.

It isn't really a choice at all. DCC is shorthand for Douglas County Corrections. The jail. The same place I spent the night that landed me in court and here in this office in the first place. I wouldn't make it there if I went back, even if only for a few hours a week. At best, I would probably run in to my toothless, whiskey-scented babysitter. I can't even think about what a worst-case scenario would be. Let's just say visions of shower scenes from *Oz* find their way in to my mind. "I'll do the after school thing."

My PO snorts behind his Magnum P.I. moustache and leans forward again, his chair squealing in relief. "Figured as much." He fishes out a sheet of paper under the stack of files on his desk and flips it down in front of me. "Them boys in county woulda done a job on a guy like you."

I want to ask him what he means by that, but he seems like the kind of guy who doesn't like being interrupted.

"Take this with you," he says, nodding toward the sheet of paper. "Get it signed by the supervisor and make sure they put your hours down each time you go. Don't forget the hours. I won't argue about them with you, and neither will the judge."

"What happens if I forget?"

He snorts again. "Them boys in county will get their chance to have their way with you."

So I leave my PO's office, a little afraid of him and a little afraid of being sent to jail. My community service, however, is going to be a snap. Teach kids how to write? No problem. I've taught college before. How hard can it be to show some little kid a thing or two about writing? I'll be done with this crap before I know it.

Despite the best cosmetic efforts of the city and nonprofit groups, North Omaha still struggles. You can use fancy street signs and decorative bricks and planters, but it doesn't address the real problems of poverty and inequality that have a stranglehold on the neighborhood. It's like putting a band-aid over a slit jugular.

I arrive late, as is customary with me, and sit in Black Beauty for a few minutes. I eventually open the door, look around before I get out, and walk in the sliding doors at the front of the community center, a low-slung building of beige-painted cement blocks. Behind the front desk is a woman talking on the phone, typing something on the computer with one hand, and wiping cake off a little kid's face, all at the same time. When she sees me, she hands me the Kleenex, tilts her head toward the kid, and turns back to the phone conversation while typing on the keyboard, this time with both hands.

I stand there holding the filthy Kleenex and look at the little girl. She stares back at me with dark, almond eyes that match her skin tone, except for those areas smeared with white frosting. I kneel down and swab her chin.

"There," I say. "All better. What's your name?"

Instead of answering, the little girl just runs off down the hall and disappears into a classroom.

"That's about right," I say, and stand up again as the woman behind the desk hangs up the phone.

“Thank you for doing that,” she says. “How can I help you?”

“I’m Jay Barry. I’m here to teach the kids about writing.”

Her face drops, and she looks me up and down. “From probation?”

“That’s me,” I say and force a smile to show her I’m innocent, a good guy despite being on probation.

“You’re late. Don’t be late again or I won’t let you be a part of the program. I don’t give a damn if you have to be here for court. I’d just as soon send your ass back to jail then have you waste my time and mess with the kids.” She stands there staring at me for a second to make sure I get her message before walking out from behind the desk.

“My name’s LaDonna. Follow me.”

We walk down the hall, following the same path taken by the cake-covered, ungrateful little girl. “Here’s the multi-purpose room,” she says, stopping in front of a set of double doors. “We do some after school meals in here and use it as a playground in the winter.”

I lean in and see about forty children running around in apparent chaos. The kids are of all stripes. White, black, brown, and everything in between. Some have gym shorts and t-shirts on, others jeans and button-downs. One kid, too impatient to take off his winter gear, is running around in a heavy coat, a stocking cap, and moonboots. Red rubber balls are bouncing around everywhere. Some are being kicked, others thrown, and occasionally some even hoisted towards one of the two baskets on either end. In the middle an older black man, hair graying at the temples, blows a whistle and yells orders, which has no evident effect on the kids. It’s bedlam, anarchy, madness. I’ve seen more order in the mosh pit at an ECVS show.

I turn to share a laugh with LaDonna, but she has already walked down the hall. I walk quickly to find her, passing open classroom doors. In some, kids are painting, while in others, kids are getting individual help with homework. All of the classes seem full of kids, but I see few adults.

“This is your class,” LaDonna says when I rejoin her outside the last classroom in the hall.

“Great,” I say and look in on my students. There are only about ten of them, and they are acting like any kids do when their teacher is late. One hides under a table. Another stands on it. Two of them are at the chalkboard drawing stick figures, while another sits at the desk in front of the room pretending to teach the class. “So what activities do you want me to do with them? Do you have some worksheets or something?” I ask.

“Worksheets,” LaDonna says, smirking at my ignorance. “We can barely pay the electricity bill here. Most of the materials we have are donated. There’s some paper and pencils on the desk up front.”

“What I am supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. It’s your job to come up things for them to do.”

I can feel beads of perspiration forming on my forehead as I try to keep my calm and get some direction. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve never taught kids before.”

From behind us, I hear a little voice say, “Oh, he don’t want to teach us.”

LaDonna reaches past me and closes the door. “Listen. These kids come here after school because they can’t go home. Parents are at work or aren’t around at all. It doesn’t matter what you do with them. Just make it something productive. Let them do some

writing, show them what to do, whatever. Make it fun. I'll be back later." She opens the door for me, and walks back down the hall.

And now here I am standing in front of these kids, not sure what to do next. If this was a room full of adults, they would be staring at me, the buzz of florescent lights the only sound in the room. I would be sweating profusely, shifting my weight back and forth, hoping for some divine intervention, some magic to point me in the right direction. And then maybe I would launch into something about the craft of writing. Good writing's ability to transcend time and place. Its duty to bare witness to tragedy or shed light on the moral failings of society. Some shit like that. Regardless, once I got started, everything would be fine. And maybe, by the end of our time together, I would be spearheading a new literary movement, and some day, after we were all famous and had won Pulitzers and MacArthur Genius Grants, we would return to this very room where it all started, reminiscing on the good old days before we were literary giants.

But this is a room full of kids. And while the difference between the college freshmen I used to teach and 5<sup>th</sup> graders is less than you might expect, I've never worked with kids this age. They aren't ignoring me while frantically texting or updating their Facebook status. No one has come up to me to explain that they are going to miss three weeks of the semester to go on family vacation, but it's fine because they will just do the work from Cabo and email it to me like their last professor let them do.

No. These kids are actually looking at me as though they expect me to tell them what to do next. I stare at them, try to smile, appear friendly. They stare back, tiny heads tilted up toward me. I hear one to my left, a black girl with beads in her hair, snuffle and

use a sleeve to wipe her nose. “Hi everyone,” I say softly, unsure if these little beings speak the same language. “My name is Jay.”

As if commanded by an unseen force, the entire class, in near unison, screams, “Hi Jay!”

I’m a little taken back, but glad the ice has been broken. “Can someone tell me what you normally do here?”

The girl who wiped her nose on her sleeve raises her hand with that same snot-covered arm. “We just have fun time,” she says. “Miss Jones lets us do whatever we want.”

“And who is Miss Jones?”

“The lady who watches us.”

“Ok. Aren’t you guys supposed to learn about writing?”

Snot-girl shrugs her shoulders. “Dunno.”

Another hand goes up in the back. “We used to write,” a boy in a red Huskers jersey says. “But not for a while.”

“How come?”

“Dude just stopped showing up and Miss Jones took over.”

Great. These kids don’t even know what we are supposed to be doing. Even most college freshmen know what they are supposed to be learning in class. Well, maybe not most, but at least a few in each class know. This sucks. It’s a bullshit job, even for community service. I should seriously tell them that Miss Jones will be back in a minute and then just leave. I’ll do my hours somewhere else where they at least tell me what I’m supposed to do. Then again, teaching sweaty inmates at the county jail has to be worse

than this. I mean, the most that can happen here is that I let the kids run around for a few hours and maybe that girl gets some snot on me. Nothing close to *Oz*.

“Ok,” I say, and begin handing out the paper and pencils. “Who can tell me what creative writing is?” I circulate around their desks, hoping to see a hand go up, but they just follow me with their eyes, no one venturing a guess. Back at the front of the room, I try another tactic. “Who in here has written a story before?”

Everyone’s hands go up, except for one kid in the back who I’m pretty sure is asleep. It’s fine, though, because the girl next to him has both hands up. Others are practically leaning over their desks, wanting to be sure I see their hands. I hear a few say, “Me!”

All of this brings a smile to me face that I can’t contain. This is going to be a snap. “Good. You can put your hands down. What I want you to do is to write a story on your piece of paper.”

I expect to see them all grab for their pencils and begin furiously scribbling, and I almost float off into visions of them accepting Pushcart or Whiting awards, even the one kid who is asleep – he just has a different process. But I soon realize no one is writing. Instead, they look at me like lost puppies. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

They all sort of look around at each other like they are afraid to say anything. Finally, the boy in the Husker jersey says, “How do you start a story?”

“It’s easy,” I say. “Just start at the beginning. I’ll give you an example.”

I walk to the blackboard and grab a piece of chalk. What is a good first line for kids? Maybe *The Road*. They’ll like that. After all, one of the characters is “the child.” Perfect.

I scribble the first few lines on the board: *When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him.*

I stand back and realize immediately that *The Road*, in all of its post-apocalyptic glory probably isn't the best example for children. I erase what I've written and put the chalk to the board, waiting for a more suitable first line to surface from my memory. Maybe something weird will do the trick. Something to catch their attention. On the board, I write: *When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.*

I erase this without turning around, knowing Kafka isn't right either. I think for a moment of a good prompt, and it hits me. I begin writing, *a dimly-lit*, but before I finish, I hear a small voice from behind me say, "Look! Snow!" And then the scraping of chairs being pushed out from under desks, followed by a stampede of tiny footsteps toward the window. I look to find all of my kids stacked against the window. Beyond them, I see it's grown dark outside and the first snow of winter falls. Everything has a layer of snow on it, and under the parking lot lights, I see snowflakes hurling themselves towards the ground. The kids press themselves against the window, trying to get as close as they can to the snow. I walk over and join them, the kid inside of me just as fascinated with the first snow of winter as they are.

We watch quietly for a few minutes until an idea hits me. "Let's take our seats," I say, and erase what I had written. When the kids get situated in their seats again, I say, "I want you to write a story using this as a beginning." On the board I write: *It snowed today.*

Heads look down, pencils twirl, some tongues even poke out from corners of mouths. No sounds other than graphite on paper and the occasional out-loud mumbling of sentence forming. Writing is happening. I look over shoulders and see things like: *It snowed today and I am writing a story*, and *It snowed today and my momma will pick me up soon*, and *It snowed today and I am going to make a snow fort in the yard*.

This is the old adage of writing what you know in its purest form. It's beautiful in its simplicity. None of these kids is aspiring to write the next great American novel. They aren't trying to construct sentences for the sake of complexity. They aren't trying to tackle esoteric notions of philosophy. They aren't even trying to elucidate the human condition. These kids are just writing what they know, right here, right now, in this moment. The sentences are simple and uncontaminated. The notions are made of the real world and carry the weight of possibility. The energy in the room is so good, I unfold my dad's list from my pocket as reference, and scratch out a few notes of my own on another sheet of paper. I make a promise to myself to write tonight. Keep it simple. Keep it honest. The juice will come.

I'm feeling so good about what is happening that I'm startled when LaDonna knocks on the door. "It's time for the kids to go home," she says.

As the kids file out of the room, I ask LaDonna to sign my community service time sheet. As she does, the kid in the Huskers jersey walks up to us and hands me everyone's stories.

"What's that?" he asks, and points to the sheet of paper. "Why is Miss Jones signing that?"

“Anthony,” LaDonna says. “It’s impolite to ask questions about things that don’t involve you.” She hands me the signed paper.

“Sorry,” he says to no one in particular. He continues to stand there like he is dissatisfied with LaDonna’s answer and doesn’t care that her signing my probation sheet doesn’t concern him.

“No problem, buddy, Anthony,” I say. It’s probably best to just make something up, some bullshit answer that he will forget as soon as he’s gone. No kid cares about boring paperwork. “She’s just making sure I get paid for being here to teach you guys. She has to sign my paperwork.”

“No she’s not,” he says.

“Sure she is,” I say, and fold the paper in half so he can’t see what’s written on it.

“I know what that is.”

I look at LaDonna for support, but she just shrugs and smiles at me. Guess I’m on my own with this one. “Then what is it?”

“It tells the Procreation Officer that you’ve been going to your work.”

“Let me tell you, Anthony, I wish I had a Procreation Officer. My life would be a lot easier.”

“Stop it,” LaDonna says, and gives me a light smack on the shoulder.

I kneel down in front of Anthony so that we’re eye to eye. “It’s actually from my Probation Officer. But you’re right, LaDonna – Miss Jones – has to sign it to show that I came here to teach you and your friends.”

“I knew it. You’ve been to jail,” Anthony says with a vast grin that reveals recently vacated baby teeth. “How come?”

God knows I'm not answering that. "How do you know about probation sheets?"

The grin disappears. "My dad had one. It just sat on the counter at home. And then he left. Momma says he won't be back for a long time."

"I'm sorry, buddy," I say, and give him a pat on the head.

"He left just like Mr. Jenkins did."

"Who's that?"

"The loser who had your job before you did. Just didn't show up after the first class," LaDonna says. "We don't like Mr. Jenkins or anybody else who just disappears, do we Anthony?"

The smile returns. "No," Anthony says. Then he looks at me, moves closer so that our noses almost touch. "Are you coming back next time?"

The question is so earnest that it breaks my heart a little bit. "Of course I'll be back."

Anthony closes the gap between us and gives me a quick hug, his little arms around my neck and gone before I can return it. "Bye, Jailbird Jay," he says, and is out the door before I can say anything to object to my new nickname.

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I make it back to my building, head so full of possibility that I forget to stop in Starbucks to play the Penis Game. Clint claims they've banned him from the premises, and that they even have an artist's rendering of his face posted on the Community Events board. I've yet to verify this for myself, but tonight, I have better things to do, and I'll just have to take his word for it.

Ascending the creaky stairs to my place, I fish the paper with my notes out of my pocket. “Notes” probably overstates it. I stop about halfway up and read the only words I’ve scrawled on the paper: *Simplicity* and *Honesty*. It just makes sense. I mean, look at Hemingway and Carver. Short, clean sentences. More white space on the page than text. No writers’ workshop pyrotechnics. Yet every sentence is loaded with meaning and feels true, like actually being there in Africa with Francis Macomber or sitting at the table, drinking gin with Mel and Terri. Those stories say so much without relying on anything other than what they are.

I brush some snow off the pile of papers from tonight’s class and find Anthony’s story: *It snowed tonight and I am writing a story. I hope no school tomorrow so Mom and I can play a game, read a book, and drink hot chocolate.*

Simple and honest. I know more about Anthony and his mom from these two sentences than if some MFA asshole had written it. And that’s what I need to do with my writing: keep it simple, be honest, stop being such an asshole. I’m not sure if I can pull off the last one, but the first two seem reasonable.

I tuck away the papers, grab hold of the railing, and pull myself up the rest of the stairs, two at a time, hoping my physical momentum will somehow translate to the page. It’s not until I am about to open the door, that I first hear the music coming from my apartment. The door opens just as I’m reaching for the doorknob and my hand ends up uncomfortably close to some strange dude’s crotch.

“Welcome,” he says, undeterred by my reaching for his junk. He has large, wild eyes behind thick-rimmed glasses, and a wide smile that reminds me of a mannequin. His thin tie and a short-sleeved button down dress shirt give off an ironic working-schmo

thing that I've seen from time to time at the Waiting Room. Without changing his expression, he says, "Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your savior?"

This is confusing for several reasons. First, who the fuck is this guy in my apartment, and what the hell is going on in there? Second, normally when I'm talking to some religious nut job with a frightening appearance of bliss on his face, I'm standing on the other side of the door trying to keep them out of my apartment, not trying to get in. "What?"

He looks back over his shoulder like he's pissed that he has to deal with me instead of being able to participate in whatever is going on behind him. Then he leans in towards me, and repeats the question, this time saying it a little slower, pausing for emphasis between nearly every word. "Do. You. Accept. The Lord. Jesus Christ. As. Your. Savior?"

The condescension jolts my mind back from the confused haze, sharpening my focus. "Listen," I say. "I'm not Rain Man. Don't talk to me like an idiot. And no, Jesus Christ is not my savior, but you're going to need him if you don't let me into my apartment right now."

He steps aside and I walk in to my apartment. Confusion immediately sets in again. The couch has been pushed aside. The place is packed with people dressed like I would expect to find at an indie rock show. It's a sea of hipsters in my living room, including the Old Indie Twins who are mixing some punch in my kitchen. Ordinarily, I would assume we are having a party, and these are my people. But there's no beer, no smokers hanging out the window rather than going outside. There is no Arcade Fire playing in the background. No random acoustic guitars being strummed. Instead, a neon

crucifix, like something found in a bad production of Jesus Christ Superstar, hangs on the wall, the Son of God glowing at the scene unfolding beneath Him. People stand, facing the crucifix. Some are dancing, others clap. Some hug each other. A few seem to be crying, faces and arms raised toward the ceiling. One guy wanders aimlessly, shouting something unintelligible, as though guided by an unseen force.

I don't know any of these people, except for Clint, who's standing on my coffee table, and Sydney, who is escorting people in Clint's direction. The television sits on the table, still tuned to the God Network, providing the soundtrack to this circus. I watch on the tiny screen as a sweaty man in a powder blue suit puts his hand on an old lady's forehead. She convulses under his touch, and eventually falls in to the arms of other worshippers, and I realize that what's happening in my apartment is a revival.

I look back at Clint, standing on the table, and see Sydney leading a guy by the arm to a spot in front of Clint. The guy has tears streaming down his face, but a smile comes over him and he puts his arms out in surrender. Clint puts one of his big hands on the guy's head and yells in a booming baritone. "Let the power of the Lord heal this man. Satan be gone!"

The man falls back in the arms of the Doorman and a few other guys who carry him to the back of the room where they lay him down. His shouts nonsensical slurs, and, although I can't understand what he's saying, apparently what's just happened in a good thing, as the crowd becomes a chorus of "Praise the Lord" and "Jesus be with him." Sydney positions another person in front of Clint, this time a woman wearing a chartreuse dress with puffy shoulders – clearly an 80s bridesmaid's dress scavenged from Goodwill. A long double strand of pearls hangs from her neck.

Before Clint can reach out, I step in front of the woman and say, “We need to talk.”

He steps down from the coffee table and we make a path through the people toward my bedroom. I can feel the eyes of everyone on me, a nonbeliever amidst these saved souls, but I don’t care what anyone thinks right now. In the bedroom, I notice a pile of coats on my bed. Clint and I stand, face to face, and before he can say anything, I attack. “What the fuck are you doing? How could you possibly think having a revival in my apartment is a good idea?”

“There wasn’t any other place to have it, man.”

“No, goddamn it. I mean having a revival at all. Where did you find all these people?”

“Facebook,” he says, shrugging like it’s totally normal get your friends on Facebook to show up at some apartment for a religious experience. “It turns out there are a lot of people out there like us who are looking for something more.”

“Like *us*?”

“Yeah, man. People who have spent their whole lives going to see bands and treating their favorite musicians like false prophets. They end up drinking too much and having casual sex, worshipping false idols.”

“But that’s a good thing,” I say. “And *you* are a rock star. *You* drink too much and have casual sex. It’s what we’ve been doing for years.”

“Not anymore, man. Maybe it’s a good thing for someone in their twenties, but even then, I’m not so sure. These people here tonight are in their thirties and forties now, and they want something more. They’re too old to do that stuff any more and they don’t

know where to turn. I can help them find their way through Jesus. It's what I was meant to do with my life."

"No," I say, pointing at him. "That's bullshit. You're meant to be a heavy metal drummer, just like I'm meant to be a writer. Those are our callings."

He steps back so that my finger isn't in his face. "I'm sorry, Jay. I'm not meant to be a drummer any more than you are meant to be a writer – "

"I was going to write tonight before I came home to this," I say, and move forward again. "You fucked it up with your little bible camp thing."

"This is what I am supposed to do," he says again.

I try another tactic. "You do realize that you're not even an ordained preacher. You aren't qualified to do this."

He stonewalls me. "It doesn't matter. It's a calling, man."

"Have you ever heard of David Koresh? Maybe Heaven's Gate? Tell me, after all of this is over are you guys going the AK-47 route or having some applesauce instead?"

Clint shakes his head like I've hurt him and steps out into the living room, his back to me.

I follow him. "I bet this is the same way the Polyphonic Spree started," I say to his back. "And their music sucks."

Clint looks me. I don't think he's mad, just had enough. And I don't blame him. That part about the Polyphonic Spree was a bit of a stretch any way you look at it. "This is how it is for me now. There's nothing you can say to make me think different." He points to the guy who, moments ago was speaking in tongues, but had now miraculously recovered to watch Clint and I yell at each other. "Take Gus here. He spent his late teens

and early twenties following Slowdown Virginia around to bars here and in Lincoln. And when they broke up, he didn't know what to do with himself. Fifteen years later, he's got a drinking problem and no direction in his life. I'm here to save him."

"Slowdown Virginia? That's why we listen to Cursive," I say, nearly yelling at the top of my lungs. "Bands break up and we find new ones to be crazy about. That's how it's supposed to work."

"Jay," Clint says in a calm voice, "maybe you should consider joining us."

I push past him into the living room and make my way to the door. "All of these crazy people better be the fuck out of my apartment when I get back."

Clint looks around, a sheepish grin on his face. "Sorry everyone. I think Brother Jay here is a little confused. We should all pray for him."

Outside the snow is still coming down. The cold air again chills my body, and I wonder where to go. I try Sebastian, but I'm actually not disappointed to get his voicemail. For the first time in a while, a stiff drink doesn't seem like the right answer. That eliminates about half the places in the Old Market. Most of the shops are closed by now, and I don't want to sit in a restaurant by myself.

Besides, I would like to think about my writing at least for a little while even if I can't actually write. I need some place where I can look at my notes and not get harassed by a waitress who wants me to order something. Someplace where I can avoid the drunk Westies. That really leaves only one place. I pull my hood up, trying to cover my face, open the door, and walk into Starbucks.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next few weeks flew by. On New Year's, I celebrated by drinking High Life and intermittently downing shots of Wild Turkey with Sebastian – our traditional way since 2002. Of course, when Sebastian told some girls we met that he was in a band, it was all over for me. They disappeared sometime around 12:30. When I realized I was at the bar alone, I walked home and passed out on the thin carpet of my living room floor – also a tradition dating back to around the same time.

We tried to get Clint to join us, just like the bad old days, but he's been scarce around the apartment since his cult meeting and my resultant hissy fit. When I returned the next day, everything was back in its place and there was no sign of a revival ever having happened. The place had been cleaned, smelling faintly of vanilla from the stuff you sprinkle on the carpet before vacuuming. The couch, with the permanent Clint-shaped indentations, was moved back in to place in front of the television. The espresso machine, though, had disappeared from the kitchen counter. Even the neon crucifix, which I secretly hoped would remain behind as a kitschy conversation starter, was gone. For the next few weeks, I didn't see any sign of Clint, except for occasionally noticing that he had taken some clothes out of the closet. Probably staying with Sidney until this whole thing between us blows over. As far as I'm concerned, he should come back now. I'm over it.

Work at Sutton's has been more of the same. We finished our top-to-bottom makeover the first week in January. The weeding of bad books took up most of our time, especially since we had to confer with Sasha before getting rid of them. I'm not sure what standard she used to make this determination, but Ralph put her in charge so we rolled

with it. Surprisingly, *Cabbage Patch Kids: Designer Clothes* and *The First Boys' Book of Cooking* were given a reprieve and shelved in their proper section, while titles such as *Dancing Disco* – which is self-explanatory – and *Staying Hard* – which isn't a book about erectile dysfunction, but rather an 80s book about exercise – went into the remainder bin. At any rate, the place was coming together and customers starting showing up. It was no longer strange to have to actually work during my shifts instead of just talking to Sebastian about bands or shows or girls. Having customers also cut into time spent messing with Charles. But that also meant not having to defend myself against slanderous accusations such as hiding his keys in the trash or selling for \$5 to a customer the \$100 hardcover anthologies he bought for his PhD classes.

Actually, the real highlight of the past few weeks has been hanging out with Belle. Our official first date isn't until Ralph's studio show at the end of the month, but she called me on New Year's Day wondering if the message she received at 12:42 that morning was from me or from a dying walrus. She couldn't be sure between the grunts and the heavy breathing. I didn't even remember making the call, so I told her Chewbacca had stolen my phone and was dialing random numbers. Thankfully, this got a laugh I and was able to coerce her into meeting me for an after-work drink.

That date – only one beer apiece and some small talk – was enough for me to endure Wendy stopping in Sutton's with some of her book industry coworkers. They had heard that we would be hosting the downtown National Book Week event and, knowing Sutton's reputation, wanted to see if we could pull it off. Our overhaul was nearly done and they walked around in their navy blazers and grey pantsuits, admiring the transformation. They stood back, talking in hushed tones to each other, pointing here and

there with thick-rimmed glasses in hand. After about ten minutes, they filed out the door again, without ever having said a word to any of us. Wendy popped her head back in the doorframe a second later. “Jay, don’t forget to send the RSVP.”

I pretended I completely forgot about it, even though it’s on the tank of the toilet where I’d be sure to see it often. She seemed satisfied with my excuse, and I haven’t seen or heard from her since. Which is kind of a relief. When I don’t see her, I don’t have to think about how she’s getting married. And if I don’t have to think about her getting married, I don’t have to think about how badly I screwed things up between us. Plus, I’ve got Belle. Kind of.

Today, though, is a big day. It’s the beginning of National Book Week, which I’ve been told by Sasha is a big deal. All the work we’ve done over the last two months is for this. Parents driving Navigators, Escalades, and Expeditions packed with kids began pulling up in the diagonal parking spots in front of the store shortly after we opened. Since then it’s been nonstop kids squealing happily as they run around in the aisles between stacks that haven’t been passable for years.

I’ve stationed myself at the front counter, and as I survey Sutton’s, I have to admit that it actually feels like a real store. It’s not that I want to be up front at the cash register – there’s way too much interaction with customers – but I know that Belle is bringing her class in today and I want to project the appearance of working hard.

Being at the counter has some perks, like giving me the voyeuristic thrill of seeing what people are buying, although I’m sad to report brisk sales of *The Rainmaker*, and worry we might actually sell all our copies. I’ve spent the last few minutes watching a lady browse the remainder bins near the counter. She has a few of those heavy cardboard

children's books in her hand, and I guess now she's looking for something for herself. She picks up *Michael Bolton: The Passion, Secret, Soul, and Truths*. The cover picture shows him in a purple vest with nothing underneath, permed mullet and all. The fact that this lady's even seriously considering this book tells me she has to be a Westie. The crazy thing is that she doesn't even seem self-conscious about it as she thumbs through the pages.

I look past this lady and see Sebastian has managed to wrangle a large group of kids over to the middle of our new Kids section, which takes up nearly half of the store now. They sit in a half circle around Sebastian, eyes locked on him as he reads from what I think is the first *Harry Potter* book. He holds the book out in front of him with one hand, while miming the action with the other. He's doing different voices for the main characters, including a falsetto for Hermione and a deep grumble for Lord Voldemort. And during the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, not a single kid moves, frozen like statues, as Sebastian narrates Harry's attempts to catch the Snitch.

Sebastien reading *Harry Potter* works much better than Charles' earlier attempt to read *The Fellowship of the Ring* to some kids. By about the tenth page, half of them had fallen asleep. The others just looked confused. But they all jumped up and cheered when Ralph walked through the store on his way upstairs. I'm pretty sure they thought he must have been Santa, with his Uncle Jesse beard and portly figure. Regardless, his mere presence was enough to end Charles' reading before it really got started.

Now, Charles is following around a couple of academic stereotypes – gray beards, corduroy jackets with elbow patches, maybe even a smoking pipe or two – who have come into the store. The three of them make their way to the front, where one gives

Charles's hand a good shake. "Well then, Charles," he says. "We look forward to seeing you in the fall."

"The department's glad you're coming on board," the other one says.

"Thanks for coming in. Looking forward working with the both of you," Charles says, and watches as the men leave the store. He turns back and walks past the counter, not looking at me, but with a smug smile.

"Who were those guys?" I ask.

"Oh," he says, turning back like he hadn't noticed me. "Professors from the Omaha University's English Department." He doesn't say anything, that shit-eating smile growing bigger. When I don't respond, he walks closer to me and continues. "Actually, to be more precise, they are the department chair and the head of the hiring committee." This time, he doesn't wait for me to respond. He just turns and walks away before any of this can set in.

"You got a job at OU?" I say to his back.

"Yes," he says, but doesn't stop walking.

"Tenure track?"

"You got it," he says, disappearing behind the newly shelved Self Help section.

"Motherfucker," I say under my breath, and see Michael Bolton's groupie has piled her books on the counter and is waiting for me to ring up the transaction. She clears her throat in what I take as a sign that she heard what I said. I force a smile, the kind known to retail workers the world over. "Find everything you need?"

She doesn't respond to my question, instead sort of kicks at the ground and looks away. I scan the first two books, a slightly worn edition of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*

and dog-eared copy of *Beezus and Ramona*, both steals at three bucks each. It's not until I grab the last book, discreetly placed at the bottom of the pile, that I realize what's going on here. It's not the Michael Bolton book. Apparently that wasn't going to get the job done. Instead, the lady has selected *Burt Reynolds Hotline: The Letters I Get ... and Write!*

Now, just to be clear, I wasn't even aware that this book was in the store or even existed before our little housecleaning exploits over the last few weeks. But when I found this little gem, concealed in the deepest bowels of the store, I couldn't resist taking a look. What I found was shocking, to say the least. This book features letters allegedly written to Burt Reynolds in the 60s and 70s by women – and more than a few men – many of which proposition Burt, and his alleged responses to those letters. But the real kicker here is the pictures. Most of them are of Burt chomping on a cigar – sometimes alone, sometimes with women hanging all over him – but all of them involve Burt in some state of undress. As a store, we collectively decided our favorite was a picture in which Burt, wearing only a football jersey, is catching a football while looking back at the camera, his bare ass cheeks fully clenched and in plain view. I did my best to talk Sasha into letting me shelve in the in new Relationships section, figuring it might jumpstart the waning libido of some lonely housewife, but was overruled.

Turns out I was right. I can almost imagine what was going on in her head when she picked this one out: *Two books for the kids, and one Michael Bolton, no, a Burt Reynolds for Momma*. And putting it at the bottom of the pile like I somehow wouldn't notice. Shame on you. Reminds me of high school when I used to do the same thing with the condoms I bought at the corner convenient mart. A Mountain Dew, some Peanut

M&Ms, a copy of the latest *Spin Magazine*, all artfully laid on the counter as subterfuge for the blue box of Trojans hiding in their midst. Oh, how did those get there? Shoulder shrug. Guess I'll buy them since they're already here anyway. Yeah, I know this game well.

"What?" the lady says.

I vanquish the smile that has somehow made its way on to my face. "Nothing. Just lost in thought."

She points to the Burt book still in my hand. "It's not for me. It's a prank gift."

I don't even remotely believe her. A gift? Sure it is, you nasty girl. You and Burt are going to spend some quality time together while the kids are at soccer practice, aren't you?

"You know, a funny, ha-ha type gift for a friend who's getting married," she says. When I don't respond, she forgoes any other explanation. "Will you just ring it up?"

"No problem," I say. "I'm sure there's something you want to get to as soon as possible."

The lady gasps and leans back, hand to her chest as though I've just punched her.

I hear Sasha's voice near me. "Jay, what are you doing?" She comes behind the counter and takes the book from my hand. "Go clean up the Fiction section."

"What?"

Sasha looks at me, the expression on her face familiar from the moment before she decked me. Her voice is low, but has an edge. "The Fiction section. Take care of it." She turns back to the woman, her voice back to retail friendly. "Your total today is seven dollars and forty-nine cents."

I want to confront Sasha, ask her who the fuck made her boss, but she's thoughtfully engaged in a conversation about her favorite kids' books with Burt Reynolds Lady, so I head back to the Fiction section to see what needs to be cleaned up. When I get back there, though, other than a book or two lying on the ground, the section looks fine. This is bullshit. I'm sick of this and it's time to release an all-time profanity filled rant on Sasha about her not being in charge and how she lacks the authority to boss me around, especially since she's only been working here for a few months and I've been here for years. She can beat me up again for all I care. At least I'll let her know where she stands before she knocks me out.

Halfway back to the front counter, as I'm mentally preparing to launch my offensive, the front door opens and in comes Anthony, wearing a LeBron jersey, and Marcus, the kid who's always asleep during class at the community center, and a cluster of other kids, spilling into Sutton's like tiny bulls in a china shop. My anger dissolves immediately. "Hey guys. What's going on?"

Anthony's eyes light up with recognition. "Hey Jailbird Jay," he says, and runs over and jumps in that whole body little kid way in order to give me five on my outstretched hand. Marcus follows his lead.

"Hey Marcus Aurelius," I say after he's given me five. He has tell-tell creases on his face from where his head was down on his jacket, probably asleep. "Nice to see you awake today."

He giggles and shyly says, "Hi Jay."

"Who are you guys here with?"

“We came with our class,” Anthony says. “Miss Belle told us we can get two books to take.”

Miss Belle? It couldn't be. I look up in time to see Belle and another woman walk in the store. Sasha steps down from behind the counter to greet them. For a minute, all the chaos surrounding me – the kids running around and Anthony trying to get my attention – melts into the background. Belle wears a white blouse and a gray skirt, her dark hair spilling on to her shoulders. Conservative but stylish. Authoritative but not austere. I've only seen her out at bars in casual tops and jeans. Never like this. She pulls off adult quite nicely. And that smile she's got going. It's as genuine as I imagine her to be. The whole thing, taken together, is simply stunning. She must feel me looking at her, because she looks over and waves.

Anthony tugs at my arm, bringing me back. “What?”

“Can we?” he asks, but I'm already gone again.

This is the perfect opportunity to impress Belle. It's literally fallen in to my lap. I know some of her students. I work with them once a week. Keep them, for a few hours once a week, out of trouble. I can show Belle that I'm great with kids and an upstanding member of the community. This is much better than the original plan.

Anthony punches my leg. “What? I say.

“Can we,” he says as more of sentence than a question.

I have no idea what he's talking about. “Not right now. Here,” I say, and look around for a kid's book. “Let me read to you guys for a minute.” The only problem is that we're in the Fiction section. The Kids section is on the other side of the store where Belle

won't be able to see us. I grab the nearest paperback off the shelf. *The Rainmaker*.

Figures.

“Here,” I say to Anthony and Marcus. “Let’s read this together.” I squat down to their level, put my arms around them, and hold the book open to the first page. “My decision to become a lawyer was irrevocably sealed when I realized my father hated the legal profession,” I read in a singsong tone that in no way reflects what’s on the page. “I was a teenager, clumsy, embarrassed by my awkwardness, frustrated with life, horrified with puberty, about to be shipped off to military school by my father for insubordination.”

I feel both kids pressing against my arms, unimpressed with either my reading abilities or Grisham’s prose. It’s hard to tell. “Hang on,” I say to the boys. “Let’s read just a little more.”

“C’mon,” Anthony says. “I want to get my books.”

I look up to see Belle and Sasha still talking. The other woman who came in with Belle is chasing around a little girl in pigtails who is crying about some injustice that has befallen her. Belle and Sasha seem to be hitting it off, and I can’t seem to get Belle to look over at me and the kids, despite my best efforts to send out a “look over here” Vibe. I release Anthony and Marcus from their internment. “Ok guys. Go pick out some books.” Anthony mumbles something like “About time,” and they run toward the Kids section.

“Hi Jay,” Belle says after I walk over to where she and Sasha are standing. She puts her arms around me and gives me a hug. This is new. Maybe she did see me reading

to Anthony and Marcus. Regardless, I could get used to this. Despite not getting laid in way too long, I let go before I can be accused of lingering.

“I see you’ve officially met Sasha,” I say.

“Yes, we had a nice little chat. My perception of her was a bit skewed.”

Sasha laughs. “Well it wasn’t a great first impression, even if it was justified.”

She looks at me and says, “You didn’t tell me Belle was a teacher.”

“I didn’t know you wanted that information,” I said.

“It would have been nice to know for this event. It would be great to partner with a local elementary school for events like this.”

“Well, we got it all worked out now,” Belle says. She looks at her watch. “We should get the kids rounded up and head back.”

“So soon?” I ask.

“Yeah, we used their lunch recess to come down here.” Belle scans the store, finding the woman she arrived with. “April,” she says, and points to her watch. “It’s time.”

Sasha, perhaps sensing that I want to be alone with Belle for a minute, says, “I’ll help out.”

“It’s nice to see you in your professional capacity,” I say after Sasha has left.

“You, too,” she says. “So, how do you know Marcus and Anthony?”

She did notice. “Oh,” I say. “I volunteer at the community center once a week, teaching creative writing. They’re in my class.” Just helping the underprivileged kids of the community. No need to make a big deal out of it. I’m no hero. Just doing my part to make Omaha a better place for everyone.

“That’s sweet,” she says, and gives me a full on smile that almost makes my knees buckle.

April and Sasha have herded the kids, each with a book or two in their hands, towards the front door. Soon, she’s leading them outside using the buddy system, with Sasha at the back making sure no stragglers are left behind. Not surprisingly, my guys are at the back of the line. Anthony holds *Tough to Tackle* and *Stealing Home*, both by Matt Christopher. Marcus has *The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr.* pressed up against his chest.

“Did you get some good books, guys?” I ask. Man, I’m just a nice guy who’s all about the kids.

“What do you say?” Belle asks.

“Thanks,” Marcus mumbles through his grin.

“Yeah, thanks, Jailbird Jay,” Anthony says.

Oh God. Please tell me Belle didn’t hear that. “No problem,” I say, trying to play it off like nothing happened. “I’ll see you guys later this week.”

“What did he call you?” Belle says.

“Huh? Nothing. I think he said Jay.”

Sasha holds the door for the boys. They are almost through it when Marcus turns back and says in a loud kid voice, “Bye Jailbird Jay!”

Sasha laughs and lets the door close behind him.

“Did he call you Jailbird Jay?” Belle asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” I say. “Weird.”

“What would he say that?”

Before I can claim ignorance and blame it on kids being kids, Sasha interjects.

“You don’t know about Jay’s criminal record and court-ordered community service?”

Shit. Damn. Fuck. Son of a bitch.

“His what?” Belle says, and turns to me for answers.

I can only look at Sasha, who realizes maybe she’s said too much. “Oh, sorry. I need to straighten up the Fiction section,” she says and walks away.

“Court-ordered community service?” Belle says.

“It’s nothing really. Just a minor incident I had a few months ago.”

The front door opens again and Anthony pokes his head in. “C’mon, Miss Belle. We gotta go.”

“You should go,” I say. Thank God for Anthony. Wait, that little jerk is the one who got me into this mess in the first place. Him and Marcus, the little ingrates. I put my hand on Belle’s back, gently moving her toward the door. “It’s really no big deal. We can talk about it later.”

Belle looks at me, her brow furrowed, the smile nowhere to be found. The day of firsts continues. First time for a hug, and now first time for an unhappy look. She stops moving toward the door. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“It really not a big deal.”

She looks at me skeptically, an eyebrow raised. “Ok.”

“Seriously, it’s not,” I say. “We’ll talk about it on our date. The art show? Remember? We’re still on for that, aren’t we?”

She relaxes a little, but I can tell she isn't sold on my trustworthiness. "Well, we'll see if you can stay out of jail between then and now." She pushes the door open all the way. "Come on, Anthony. Let's go."

"Bye Jailbird Jay," Anthony says, driving the last nail in my coffin, before the door closes behind him.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I think it’s a hand flipping us the bird,” Belle says, as we circle the granite sculpture sitting on the floor, its highest point taller than me. “It can’t be anything else, can it?”

It doesn’t look like it can be anything else. I count five digits, one of which is clearly extended higher than the rest. Still, it can’t be. Who would take the time to carve a gigantic hand flipping the bird? I’m in no real position, however, to argue with Belle. It took several unreturned phone calls and finally one short conversation where I was allowed to explain exactly why she should go out with a convicted felon – her words, not mine – before she agreed not to cancel our date. It’s probably best to play it safe and go with her on this one. “I think you’re right. Middle finger and all.”

Ralph’s art show is in a gallery just off the beaten path of the Old Market in an old brick building similar to mine but much bigger, taking up about half the block on 12<sup>th</sup> Street between Jones and Leavenworth. It used to be a grocery warehouse, I think, not too long after the turn of the last century, but since has found another calling as a gallery on the first floor and living space for artists-in-residence on the upper floors.

After Belle met me at my place, we turned our collars up against the cold and walked the three blocks from my place. The chatter from the nightlife faded and the streetlights disappeared as we walked down a small hill on uneven brick streets the city has taken to covering in cement rather than repairing. If not for the beckoning lights shining from inside the gallery, I might have thought we were walking in the wrong direction. Few of the dinner and drinks crowd make it down here to the edge of the Old

Market. Aside from some sprawling flea markets masquerading as antique shops, there isn't a whole lot going on down here.

The middle finger sculpture met us just inside the front door. We continue to circle it, trying to figure out what it is supposed to be. I find a placard on a nearby wall. "It's called 'For The Man.' Carved out of stone." I turn to see if Belle has heard me. "You were right."

"I knew it," she says, and does her best Tiger Woods fist pump.

"Guess how much it costs."

Belle steps back, extends her thumb toward the sculpture while closing one eye.

"I think that's what painters do, not sculptors," I say. "Come on, guess."

She smiles at her own goofiness. "I don't know. I would pay upwards of one hundred dollars for it."

"Are you serious? This thing must weigh a thousand pounds and it's like six feet tall. Carved out of stone."

"Hey, I'm a public school teacher," she says, and turns her palms up to plead ignorance, or perhaps poverty. "We don't often buy original art."

"Two thousand, five hundred dollars."

Her eyes go wide. "What?" She puts a hand to her head as though this information has stunned her and she needs to regroup. "We should really find Ralph's show before we break it and have to pay for it. That's a month's pay for me. Six months for you."

"Not nice," I say. "Besides, it's granite. We'd probably hurt ourselves before we hurt it."

Belle gives me a little shove on the shoulder and I stagger back a little, bumping “For the Man” with my forearm. It sways a bit and I have visions of the whole thing toppling over, the middle finger crumbling as it hit the concrete floor, forming a new piece of art I would call “The Man Strikes Back.”

“Thin bottom, heavy top. Thin bottom, heavy top,” I say, and take Belle by the hand, and walk us toward the main gallery.

“You or the sculpture?” she says, pulling away and playfully patting my belly. Her face is flushed with the full megawatt smile as though she finds her joke funnier than it really is.

I stop in my tracks, hoping “For the Man” doesn’t fall on me. “Not funny.”

The smile moves in to an exaggerated frown and her eyes follow suit. “What’s the matter, Muffin Top? Too mean?”

As long as my bookstore people don’t pick up on it, I suppose her teasing means she isn’t too mad at me for omitting my arrest, but I can’t just let it go. “We’re back to Muffin Top again?”

“Maybe,” she says, the smiling coming back. “Come on, let’s go look at some more art.”

We walk on the raw concrete floors, under twenty-foot ceilings, following the noise coming from Gallery 3 at the end of the hall. Pipes – both the matte black originals and new white PVC – and silver ventilation ducts snake between the open joists of the floor above giving the space a modern feel. The walls have been painted white and remain bare, serving as light in the otherwise darkened corridor.

As Belle and I approach Gallery 3, the light from the room and the amalgamation of voices from within spill into the passageway and guide us into the space. We walk through the entryway, an original pressed tin door held open by the weight of steel pulleys, and see that Gallery 3 is a big place. Most everything is painted white and it's large enough to have four concrete pillars in the middle to help support the high ceilings. The floor is a continuation of the walkway's concrete, but with occasional splattering of paint here and there, giving the space a lived-in vibe.

I have to say the number of people here is surprising. Despite the room's size, it feels full. Not crowded by any means, but I think a smaller gallery would have been too small. The people gather in bunches near the walls, in front of what I assume are Ralph's paintings, and appear to be engaging in life-changing discussions. Most of the men wear suits or at least sport coats, and many of the women are wearing, despite the temperature, cocktail dresses and heels. It's like the dudes from Banana Republic and J. Crew ads all have dates with women from Express and Ann Taylor Loft. I always wondered what these people did when they weren't simultaneously pretending to have a good time on a beach in Cape Cod and making the rest of us feel uninteresting and unattractive.

The people here seem to know what they are talking about. If they don't, they're doing a great job of faking it. Nearly everyone has a drink in hand, and some are using their rocks glass full of Scotch or whatever to gesture at the paintings. This is my first art opening, and I have to admit that I feel a little out of my depth here. And I feel a bit shabby in my jeans and t-shirt with Che Guevara's face – beret and all – screen printed on the front.

I feel Belle pull on my arm. “Come on,” she says, perhaps sensing my insecurity. “Let’s start with a drink.”

It feels like a whiskey night, and when I find out that it’s an open bar, it becomes a double whiskey night. The tuxedo-clad bartender serves Belle a vodka martini, and we take our drinks over to the nearest grouping of art patrons, hanging at the back of the group where no one seems to notice us.

From where I am, I can’t see Ralph’s painting, but it must be good. I lean in to hear a lady who’s wearing a pair of glasses, the kind with the thick frames that are supposed to make you look smart, say, “There’s a whimsy to this piece, despite its desperate nature.”

This observation is met with general nods of approval. A guy with model-caliber high cheekbones chimes in. “It’s as though the artist is challenging us. He wants us to see the duality in this work, and perhaps, by extension, the duality of human nature.”

The group universally regales Cheekbones’ statement. Several people turn to their neighbor wide-eyed and say, “Yes” or “He’s right” or “Marvelous” in hushed tones, and for a minute, I think they might actually break into applause.

“Well said,” says Smart Glasses.

I sneak a glance over in Belle’s direction to see if she’s buying this shit. I’m relieved to find her looking at me through the corner of her eyes, her lips trembling a bit in what must be an attempt to keep from laughing. I have to look away almost immediately, and take a drink from my whiskey to stifle a smile. I look back over and find Belle staring at something on the ceiling, which I also do before realizing that it’s the only thing she can do to keep herself from laughing.

Cheekbones and Smart Glasses, along with most of our group, move off to another painting, allowing Belle and I our first look at Ralph's work. We stare at the painting for a few moments, sometimes moving closer, sometimes moving farther away from it. After about five minutes, I can only say that it appears to me to be an orange man, painted with thick brushstrokes, surrounded by a swirl of purples and dark blues. There is nearly no detail added to the man, only dark holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth. Something white, a cigarette maybe, protrudes from the mouth hole.

Now, I don't know much about art. I've never studied it and have always thought that an English degree was the most worthless major in the world, second only to Art History. In other words, I am the anti-Cheekbones and Smart Glasses. Still, I like good literature and music, which are their own kinds of art, and I figured maybe I would know a good painting when I saw it. After all, art either works or it doesn't, regardless of the form, right? And I should mention here that I like Ralph. He's a good dude, if slightly eccentric. He puts up with me and signs my paycheck every month even though he's had countless reasons to fire me. I mean, they guy bailed me out of jail and we're not even related.

But with all due respect, I think his painting sucks.

Of course, I don't want to say that to Belle, just in case she likes it. So we stand there in silence. And the longer neither of us says anything, the more I dislike the painting. The lopsided head. The sloppy brush strokes. The lack of any emotional weight to the painting. The kids in my writing class can do this. A monkey can do this.

"What do you think?" Belle eventually whispers, her face not giving away her position on the issue.

“You know,” I say, “I like Ralph. He’s a good dude – ”

Her eyes widen and her mouth opens in surprise like I’ve just told an off-color joke. “You don’t like it, do?”

“No, it’s not that,” I say, moving on the defensive. “It’s just – ”

“Just what?”

For some reason, I can’t answer her question. She’s knocked me off my game, and I’m not sure if it’s because she knows I don’t like Ralph’s work or because she was so easily able to see through me. A smile pulls at the corners of her mouth the longer I’m silent. “OK, I hate it,” I say.

“I knew it,” she says, and laughs as though I’ve just told her my deepest, darkest secret that she knew all along.

“You like it?”

She draws her smile down to a serious face and turns back toward the painting. “Yeah, I do. It’s not the best thing I’ve ever seen, but it’s not bad. I’ll have to see the others before I make my final judgment on whether Ralph has talent.”

“What, you’re some art expert?”

“No,” she says, and gives me a playful smack on the arm. “But I spent a summer in Paris as an exchange student. I took some art history classes while I was there. It doesn’t make me an expert, but I’ve studied it a little.”

“Oh. I thought for a minute you were going to tell me that you were an Art History major in college.”

“Education major. Art History minor.”

“Jesus,” I say, and put a hand on my forehead like I have a migraine. “Art History minor? I just lost a lot of respect for you.”

“At least I’ve never been arrested,” she says in a teasing voice. “Should we keep talking about losing respect, or do you want to go look at more art?”

I choose art.

We make our way around the gallery, looking at the rest of Ralph’s paintings. Most of them are similar to the first. A shapeless object – person or bird or otherwise unidentifiable blob – in the foreground. A contrasting churning of colors in the background. Thick strokes that remind me of how a three year old grabs a paint brush in his fist and goes to town on the living room wall. About halfway around the room, we catch up with Cheekbones and Smart Glasses, and she informs the small crowd that the thick brushstrokes tell her about the artist’s inner turmoil and anger towards the world. This, of course, is not true and I feel the need to defend Ralph, if not as an artist, as a person. But when I step forward to argue, Belle grabs me by my arm and leads me away.

We order another round of drinks at the bar, but even my third double Jack and Coke can’t shake me out of this bizarre scene. I figure people could walk the halls at Belle’s elementary school and see basically the same thing as what Ralph has done here. He’s a beginner, at best, learning how to paint. But Belle seems to like most of them, and by the time we’ve seen them all, she determines that Ralph is a talented painter.

As people start to clear out of Gallery 3, we spot Ralph talking with Sebastian, Sasha, and Renee between the temporary bar and the Orangeman painting we looked at. As we move towards the group, Ralph smiles and extends his arms. “Hey guys. Glad you could make it.”

I think he wants a hug, which would be a first for us, so I grab his hand in mine, give it a firm shake. “Wouldn’t miss it,” I say, forcing a smile. “I love your work.” I don’t know what it is, maybe my whiskey buzz, but I find the lies sliding effortlessly from my mouth. “This is all really great.”

We stand around and make small talk for a while. I try to avoid having to talk to Ralph about his paintings, figuring that while the lies and drinks are both flowing, the truth will eventually spill out – learned that one from Wendy – and listen in on Belle’s conversation with Sasha and Renee. The problem is, Renee won’t acknowledge me. When I greeted her, she simply stirred her drink and looked off in a different direction. I’m a little surprised she’s still mad at me. I mean, Sasha seems like she’s over it. Then again, Renee didn’t have the catharsis of dropping my ass with a roundhouse.

At any rate, their conversation doesn’t get much beyond talking about the bookstore and how Belle’s kids really loved getting books the other week. A blaze of jealousy hits me when Sasha mentions that the three of them should hang out sometime, but I decide I’m having a Ross Gellar moment and anything that happened on *Friends* is unlikely to happen in real life. I fight the urge to say something that would, most likely, be viewed as ignorant or uncalled for, and decide to join Ralph and Sebastian’s conversation.

I learn from Sebastian that he hasn’t seen Clint either. “Had to replace him. New album and shows coming up. No other choice.” Sebastian tells me how happy he is with the new songs, and I pretend to be excited for him, assuming that it’s the usual ECVS crap. At least you can’t knock his enthusiasm, even if it means disappointment later.

We seem to be the only people left in the gallery, and I see a guy slowly approach us. He wears tight dark jeans and a dark brown v-neck t-shirt, with all the profile of one of those golf pencils. He sort of slinks along like an insect, stopping every now and then to check around him for danger. I think if I suddenly yelled, he would scurry back into some hole along the baseboards. He finally makes it, almost bowing, when he reaches us as if not wanting to disturb our conversation. The v-neck reveals an unruly patch of chest hair, and I see he's got those earrings that stretch the lobe so that you can see through them. "Uh, excuse me. Mr. Sutton, sir, can I talk to you for a minute," he says in a low, halting voice.

"Sure," Ralph says. "What is it?"

The guy steps away a little as if forced back the volume of Ralph's voice. "Just thought you would, uh, like to know that all your paintings have sold."

"All of them?"

"Yes, sir," he says, head still low and giving Ralph a crooked smile, like Igor to Dr. Frankenstein. "Your show has sold out." And with that, he scurries toward the gallery entrance and disappears in the darkness of the hall.

Everyone moves in and congratulates Ralph. The women hug him and tell him how proud they are of him. Sebastian gives his hand a sturdy shake while clapping Ralph on the shoulder with his other hand. Ralph stands there, the biggest Christmas morning smile you can imagine frozen on his face, and accepts the accolades. His eyes, though, seem off somewhere else, the kind of distance accompanied by the disbelief of improbably good news.

My eyes probably look the same, but for a different reason. I have no idea how this could have happened. Why bother with writing when I could just slop some paint on a canvas, call it art, and have people like Cheekbones and Smart Glasses buy it to hang in their West-O McMansions. They probably haven't read a non-Oprah book since high school. Un-fucking-believable.

The feeling of eyes on me brings me back, and I realize I'm the only who hasn't said anything to Ralph yet. And so does everyone else. Sebastian looks at me with a raised eyebrow. Sasha and Renee both have hands on hips, looking like the mirror image of each other if not for Renee's squint-eyed death gaze. Belle is next to them, her eyes darting from me to Ralph and back. A swell of dizziness runs through my head. Maybe it's adrenaline, maybe it's the whiskey, I'm not sure. "Hey, great news," I hear myself say. "Great news."

"Thanks, Jay," Ralph says, unbothered by my initial silence. "It is great news." Everyone relaxes a little, my faux-pas dead and buried by Ralph's graciousness.

"Let's all have another drink," I say, and walk to the bar where the bartender is packing up. I put my empty glass on the bar, a portable one with a black tablecloth thrown over it to make it seem more elegant. "Hey, how about another round for the artist and his friends," I say to the bartender.

"I'm closed," he says and waves a hand in the direction of the boxes of glasses and liquor he's begun to pack. He doesn't wait for my response, taking my empty glass and putting it in a plastic rack on the floor.

I turn back to the group. "Well, then, let's go out. Celebrate Ralph's big success as a real artist."

But everyone turns me down, mumbling about being tired or work the next morning. Even Sebastian, my go-to drinking buddy, tells me he has to open Sutton's tomorrow and just wants to get home.

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Belle and I shiver as we stand outside my building. The full force of winter wind, gathering strength as it's funneled by the buildings, slams in to us, penetrating our coats and tearing at our faces. Most people talk about the dog days of summer. In Omaha, we have the dog days of winter, a period lasting from late January through February where it doesn't always snow much, but the sun refuses to come out from behind low-hanging gray clouds, replaced by a north wind intent on driving out the notion of an early spring.

Belle's face reddens as the wind streaks by. Her lower lip trembles. "So," she says between chattering teeth. "Tonight was fun."

"Yeah," I say, and blow into my hands to warm them. Besides the whole Ralph becoming a shooting star in the art world, I did have a good time. I like this girl. I want to see her again. And I don't want the night to end just yet, and not because I want to sleep with her, which I do, but because I like hanging out with her and don't want to wait until our next date. I'm unsure what to say here in order to get the outcome I want. Without being able to test them, I go for the blunt approach. "Why don't we go upstairs," I say, hoping that she won't take the suggestion as a come-on, even though that's unlikely.

"Why?" she says, looking at me intently as though trying to uncover any ulterior motives.

“Because we’re freezing out here,” I say. Of course, she could just as easily get in her car and drive home, so I say the one thing I’m pretty sure she wants to hear. “I mean, we could talk about the whole arrest thing if you wanted.”

Belle looks at me for a minute and then to the door for my building, as if trying to anticipate what might happen on the other side. The wind gusts again and I feel it gnawing at my legs through my jeans. I hope this gust will impel her to come inside with me. She looks back at me and then past me. “Let’s go in there,” she says with a nod of the head. Towards Starbucks.

Shit. Now in addition to telling her about my arrest, I’m going to have to come up with some reasonable explanation for the Penis Game. The problem being, of course, that there is no reasonable explanation. Come to think of it, there isn’t a reasonable explanation for much of what I do. Resigned to an embarrassing next hour or so, I pull on Starbucks’ door. It doesn’t open. And right on cue, the inside lights go out. I’ve never loved Starbucks more than I do right now. Call it what you want – coincidence, *deus ex machina*, Cupid wanting to get me laid – but today is my day. Somebody is looking out for me. Of course, I have to play it cool here, not let on that I think our timing is a good thing. “Guess they’re closed. I didn’t realize it was so late,” I say, and look at my wrist even though I don’t have a watch. “Upstairs seems to be our only option.”

Belle considers this for a moment, then her eyes narrow like she’s deciphered an ancient code. “I think you want me to come upstairs so that we can make out.”

I put my hands up to show my innocence. “But only as a reward for telling you about my minor run-in with the law.”

I'm relieved when this brings a smile to her face. She punches my shoulder playfully, but the cold makes it feel like my shoulder has shattered to pieces. I try to restrain a wince.

"I'm not making out with you," she says, her voice suddenly serious. "Besides, Clint's up there. What, is he just going to watch us?"

"I haven't seen him for weeks."

She tilts her head in apparent disbelief, giving me a sideways glance. "Jay, don't make things up."

"No, I'm serious –"

"It's kind of pathetic," she says. She smiles when she says this, but she also holds a hand out like a stop sign.

We stand there for a few minutes, letting the wind whip around us. Soon we both begin trembling as the cold steals the vitality of our exchange.

"So what do you want to do now," I say finally.

"Well, I think I'll head home."

"Look," I say, and take her hand. It feels small and cold in mine and I cup it with my other hand to warm it. "I had a good time tonight, and I would really like to go out again. Soon."

She smiles, not the usual megawatt one, but warmly, and allows me to draw her in closer to me.

"And," I say, "we can talk about the arrest. I promise."

"Deal," she says. "It's a good thing I like you. I'm not usually into guys who've done jail time." She leans in and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Talk to you soon."

In my apartment, I'm so excited about Belle's kiss, even if more a peck than a real kiss, and the knowledge that she likes me, that it takes all of my energy not to call and profess my undying love for her. At this point, I'm used to women pitying me or hating me. Please see, respectively, Exhibits A (Wendy) and B (Renee), your Honor. But Belle actually likes me. What a strange, strange feeling.

I shiver and realize the cold still has me in its grasp, so I turn up the heat on the thermostat, and sit on the couch to recount tonight's successes. Two letters with my name on them sit on the coffee table. I grab them and see one has my name scribbled in Clint's untidy handwriting on the front. The other has my full name and address typed on it and the letterhead for "Preston Reality" where the return address goes. My landlord. Bastards are probably raising the rent again.

I toss the Preston letter aside and see what Clint has to say. It's a short note, the words liltng up to the right as they cross the page. My name is at the top and it reads:

*I've thought about what you said the other night and I've decided to take my ministry more serious. I need to move somewhere where I can be serious about it, so I have. Hope you aren't mad at me and I hope you keep writing, as it is what you are meant to do, just as I am meant to bring the Lords word to everyone. God bless.*

He signed it and added a postscript asking me to tell Sebastian that he was quitting the band, and a second postscript telling me he found the letter from Preston tapped to the door when he got here to gather the last of his things.

A sustained gust from outside rattles the windowpanes and I feel a draft move across the room towards the door. The wind subsides for a moment and the place is quiet

save for the refrigerator clicking on. It's been years since I've been alone in the apartment. Despite Clint being a good guy, I've dreamed of the day that I would have my place to myself again. Now that day has come, and I don't like it.

I pick up the Preston letter from the coffee table and tear it open. Tossing the envelope aside, I unfold the letter and my eyes immediately focus near the top of the page on the words: **Notice to Vacate Premises.**

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

My state-mandated stint as a writing teacher to young minds was going well. Although I realized quickly I didn't have any prodigies who might need me to mentor them through the pitfalls of an award-winning career, I was seeing some wonderful stories. They were just being kids, imaginations running wild, and I did my best to point them in the right direction and get out of the way. We had somehow moved on from writing about snow on the first day into a more surreal frame of mind. Princes were morphing into dragons in order to save fair maidens from elementary school principals, and bullies with pig faces spoke in made-up languages. Sometimes I felt my class had been secretly been reading *100 Years of Solitude* behind my back, but I figured if I couldn't understand what Marquez was doing, who was I to judge?

We normally end class with a few of the kids reading their stories out loud. I found a wood box for them to stand on, sort of an "O Captain! My Captain!" empowerment thing straight out of *Dead Poets Society*. It's cheesy and I know I could never pull it off with the college students I used to teach, but these kids love it, and I always have more volunteers than time to let them all read. I have to admit their stories are more original than the "My first deer hunt" and "My Grandpa was great but he died" stories I saw in the Intro to Fiction classes I used to teach juniors in college. But after last week's stories – all of them strangely about flying dogs looking to eat mean cat-looking people – I decided we had a serious case of group think happening. Maybe they watched the same thing on Saturday morning cartoons, or whatever kids watch these days. At any rate, now is as good a time as any to step in and provide some guidance and change things up a bit.

“Today, let’s write true stories,” I say, as I stand in front of the class. “Tell a story that really happened to you.”

“Like what?” Anthony asks right on cue. He and I have become buddies over the last few weeks, especially after hanging out at Sutton’s. And even though he has trouble focusing on writing for more than two minutes at a time, the other kids sort of look up to him. I can always count on him to set an example by paying attention and asking questions. Anthony, unwittingly, has given me some credibility with the rest of the class. If he’s on board, I know the rest of them are as well.

“Something that has really happened to you in your life,” I say. “It can be some time you were happy or some time when you were sad. It can really be about anything. It just has to be true.”

A classroom full of blank stares.

“What’s wrong, guys?”

“Anything?” Anthony asks on behalf of his classmates.

“That’s right. As long as it’s true.”

Still no movement. “Would it help if I gave you the first line?” I move to the chalkboard and write: *running for your life*. “Does that help?”

Pencils move immediately and the room fills with a quiet, concentrated energy. I sit on one of the little person chairs at the head of the room and watch. When I asked LaDonna about the chances of getting a regulation size chair in here for me, she just rolled her eyes and walked away, grumbling something about crazy white boys and hell freezing over. My self-esteem is low enough without being the guy who needs two smaller chairs, so I’ve adjusted to folding myself in one.

As I sit here and watch the kids work, I don't really feel the top of the chair digging in my lower back like I normally do. There is something to watching these kids take to writing like they were meant to be storytellers. I remember when I was like that, when writing was fun and I could sit down anywhere with a pencil and just go for hours. I wrote my first story at the corner of my dad's desk when I was about the same age as Anthony and the other kids. It was an ingenious piece about the first Thanksgiving where Harold, one of the Pilgrims, accidentally set his pants on fire to the amusement of the other Pilgrims and their Indian friends.

After a few minutes, pencils slow and a few kids stare out the windows, watching snow blow around the parking lot. I know this as an indication that it's time to start reading their stories out loud. It's their favorite part of class, and I have to admit, it's mine, too. I'm excited to hear about dance recitals and winning baseball games, maybe a family vacation to a national park or even the zoo. All the good stuff that goes into being a kid.

I ask for volunteers, and Marcus, the kid who seems to sleep through most of the class, is the first to raise his hand. He steps up on the wood box and holds his paper out in front of him. His mouth opens and I hear a short inhalation, but then it closes again. He does this for a minute or two while shifting his weight back and forth, but he doesn't say anything. I hear a giggle or two from the class and tell them to keep quiet. Marcus stares at his paper like he's never seen it before, and finally he looks at me as if wanting my permission for him to start.

I'm a little confused by this, first, because, when he's awake, Marcus always has something to say. Of course, it's usually repeating something Anthony said or agreeing

that Anthony is, in fact, pretty cool. Second, as far as a little kid goes, he's pretty self-assured. He's already got the tough guy, "What's up?" head tilt down pat. Hell, he gives it to me each week when I walk in the room. Marcus isn't afraid to be heard when he wants to be heard. To see him up there, nervous and needing my approval is unexpected. Still, I'm learning even the bravest ones sometimes need a little encouragement. "All right, Marcus," I say after shushing the class for a second time. "Just take a deep breath, and start when you are ready."

He nods his head and takes a breath that catches a few times, and then begins: "My Dad by Marcus Washington. My Dad isn't around no more. I miss him. He used to take me and my sister to the park where we would play basketball and on the swings. He tucked me in to bed every night and sing church songs to wake me in the morning. Then he and Mom started arguing and he was gone. I seen him on the weekends though. Then Mom told me bad men shoot him and he was gone forever. I miss him. Sometimes it makes me tired. The end."

Marcus steps down from the box and returns to his seat amidst a few scattered claps, but most kids aren't paying attention. They already have their hands up, volunteering to read next as though they weren't listening to what Marcus had just read.

I look past them and see Marcus in his chair, his head buried among the folds of his oversized sweatshirt. I fee like I should say something, but I don't know where to begin. Besides, it feels like there are rocks in my throat, and it's taking all I have not to cry.

"Mr. Jay," Tasha, the girl with beaded hair, says. "Can I go next?"

"No, it's *my* turn," Anthony says.

“Hang on, guys,” I say. “Marcus?”

He lifts his head. His eyes are red and swollen.

“Thanks for reading your story. That was very brave of you.”

He smiles a little, but still doesn’t say anything.

“Do you feel ok?”

He nods his head.

“Jailbird Jay, it’s my turn!” Anthony says. “We’re going to run out of time if I don’t go *now*.”

“Hang on, Anthony,” I say. The words are a little more forceful than I intended them, and raised hands slowly retreat. “Sorry guys. I didn’t mean to yell. It’s just that Marcus has just told us about his dad getting killed and no one seems to think it’s a big deal.”

“It ain’t,” says Corey, the one kid in the class who I can’t seem to get interested in anything. In fact, this is the first time he’s talked to me since I started. “Dads is never around for most of us.”

“Really?” I ask, feeling a little dumb for assuming everyone had the same upbringing as I did.

We spend the rest of class talking about their families, and I learn about these kids’ chaotic lives. Dads disappearing through violence, incarceration, or seemingly just out of the blue. I learn about treacherous walks home after school, avoiding certain kids and entire blocks. About armed security guards in the schools and being home before dark. Older brothers and sisters getting caught up in drugs and gangs, eventually getting shot or put in the Youth Detention Center. In other words, losing someone – family

member or friend – to violence is no new thing to these kids. The adult nature of what they tell me is incongruous with their stature, so small as they sit here in the community center.

I ask question after question, trying to get to the bottom of it all, a white guy from the suburbs trying to make some sense out of it, until Anthony finally says, “Jailbird Jay, it’s hard to understand if it hasn’t happened to you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You probably got a Mamma and a Dad.”

“Yeah, and you ain’t from here,” Corey says, face crumpled in disgust. “Probably stay somewhere out west.”

“Hey,” I say, perhaps a bit defensively. “We’re all from the same city.”

“Nope.” Corey’s defiance draws some head nods from some, giggles from others.

And there it is. I’m merely a day-tripper into their reality. Silence prevails, the kids staring at me, waiting for my next move. I look back at their faces, not sure what to do or say. Whatever measure of their acceptance I had is now slipping away. I look toward Anthony, but he doesn’t do anything other than look back at me, eyebrows raised as if to tell me that I had better right this ship before it goes all Titanic on me.

Having been called out and not knowing what else to do, I go with the truth.

“That’s right, Corey. I didn’t grow up in this part of town. I grew up in a place with nice houses and yards. And I didn’t have to worry about the stuff you guys do.”

“Told you all,” Corey says, his face screwed in a dismissive smirk.

I hear more giggles. “But, that doesn’t mean I can’t teach you anything.”

“Like what?”

“Like how my dad died, too.”

The old standby stops them right in their tracks. They don't say anything. And they don't move, except to steal glances at each other. The problem is that I don't know what to say from here now that I have their attention.

Anthony bails me out with one simple question. “How?”

And I tell them the whole story about my dad. Every detail from diagnosis to death, with a few stops for chemotherapy in between. They listen so intently that they forget about reading their stories, and barely move a muscle when LaDonna knocks on the door to tell us class is over.

As they gather their bags and file out of the room, Anthony comes up to where I'm sitting.

“What's going on, Anthony?”

“Do you ever write true stories like the ones we did tonight?” he asks.

“Not really. I like to write stories that I make up.”

“Oh,” he says with a puzzled look on his face.

“Why?”

“I liked it when you told us your story about your dad. You should write about that.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I'm trying.”

As I pack my things, I hear feet shuffling behind me. I turn and find Corey standing behind me. He's got his tough guy scowl on, and he lingers silently in front of me for a few seconds, trying to figure me out. He looks me up and down, while I stare dumbly back at him. “What's going on, Corey?”

He looks me over once more, extends his fist toward me. “You all right, man.”

“Thanks. You’re not too bad yourself,” I say, and give him a fist bump.

He turns away without saying anything else and I watch him swagger out of the classroom like a guy who’s got life all figured out. A few seconds later, I look out the window and see him run from the door to a woman standing outside her car. He gives her a hug and she bends down to kiss him on the head.

I’m not sure why I’m suddenly ok by Corey’s standards – maybe it was having lost a parent, maybe it was just an adult being honest with him – but I’m glad I got my credibility back. Before tonight, I’ve never understood why some people like teaching so much. I preferred to view it like the old adage: Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach. But if I can reach an already-jaded ten year old like Corey, maybe I can have a real positive impact on these kids. In fact, with both Anthony and Corey on my side, I can do some real teaching.

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“You did what?” Belle stares at me, eyes wide.

“What? Nothing,” I reply. “I just opened up. Shared a little with them, so that we had some common ground.”

We’re at Mr. Toad’s for our date. The one where I am supposed to explain my arrest to her. Now, in an attempt to connect to her, teacher to fake-teacher, by sharing with her how I brought my class back from the edge and created a bond with one of the kids, I seemed to have pissed her off.

“Jay, you can’t just dump your personal problems on students like that,” she says.

When she puts it that way, it does seem a little wrong. But I'm not going to let Ms. Know-It-All take my greatest teaching moment from me. "Why not?"

Belle shakes her head and looks up for some divine guidance before she focuses on me again. Her blue eyes have clouded over. "Because they are kids, Jay. They have their own problems. Especially those kids. They don't need you adding to it."

I can't believe she's killing my buzz like this. I stare into my half empty glass of scotch, wishing I hadn't blown twelve bucks on a drink I wasn't going to enjoy. "It's just that they're all good kids. I mean, Anthony is--"

"Anthony is a *great* kid," she says. "And he doesn't need you dumping on him. Especially about your dad. He's been through a lot for a kid his age. For any age."

My face burns, and I must look pitiful because she softens. "He sees a school therapist once a week. He's that fragile right now. I just want things to be as easy on him as possible."

"I thought I had really connected with them, especially this kid, Corey. And the only thing we have in common is our dads."

"That's true, and I'm sure you're a great teacher," she says, and grabs my hand across the table. "Just be careful. They listen. And they will do whatever you say. And remember, your loss is not the same as theirs."

I take a drink of my scotch, taste the malted barley and oak, but decide not to say anything.

"Listen," she says, "they like you because you are honest. And you can be very persuasive. You should have been a lawyer."

"Have you been talking to my mom?"

Belle smiles. “No. But it’s a gift,” she says. “Seriously, it’s why I keep agreeing to go out with you, despite everything pointing to it being a bad idea.”

I look up from my drink and see she’s only giving me a hard time. “Thanks. That makes me feel better.”

“You know, if you like doing this so much, you should consider volunteering even after your community service is over.”

“Maybe,” I say. I have to admit it’s a good idea that I hadn’t considered.

We sit next to each other in Toad’s wooden chairs, worn down by so many like us before. The noise of the bar disappears as I look at Belle, holding her gaze for a moment. She smiles that smile and looks away, but leaves her hand in mine. I give it a light squeeze and she looks down.

“So,” she says, and takes her hand back. “I think you were going to explain a little legal matter to me tonight? Something about an arrest that was no big deal and isn’t anything I need to be worried about?”

“Oh. You wanted to talk about that now?” I say. “Because I thought we were having a moment there.”

“Moment’s over. Now talk.”

I lean back in my chair and look around the bar for something, anything to intervene and save me from having to tell her about my arrest. I’ve been dreading this since the last time we saw each other, and, after what we’ve just talked about, this isn’t going to go well. I see our waitress is a few tables over, and wave her over.

“What are you doing?” Belle asks.

“Ordering another round.”

“No, you’re not. The agreement was one drink and your story.”

The waitress stands between our chairs. “What can I get you guys?”

“I’ll have another-”

“I’m sorry,” Belle says to the woman. “I don’t think we’re ready just yet.”

The waitress walks away and Belle looks at me with an arched eyebrow.

“Fine,” I say. “But it’s really not a big deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she says.

I tell her about that night. The whole thing, Wendy stuff and all. I don’t know why. I could have left that part out of the story. But once I started talking, it just felt like I needed Belle to know it all. I even told her about my relationship with Wendy and how it ended. After admitting so much, I should have felt like the miserable bastard I am. When I finish, I half expect her to throw a drink at me and storm out. But I’m glad I told her.

But she doesn’t do any of those things. Instead, she simply says, “Wow, that’s quite a story, Jay.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“Well, the girlfriend stuff doesn’t make you look too good, but it was a while ago. The arrest is just sort of sad and pathetic. You know that by the time you hit your 30s, getting that drunk is ridiculous, right?”

This flies in the face of my current lifestyle, but I think I’m about to be let off the hook, so I go with it. “Yeah. It was just one night where things went bad. I don’t drink like that anymore.”

She looks at me for a moment like she's trying to tell if I'm lying. "I'm banking on you not being either of those guys any more." After a few moments, she sits back in her chair and lifts her beer to her lips.

"You know," I say, "I was thinking about something – something about my dad – after Ralph's show the other night." I take a sip of my drink, gathering my thoughts. "Everything worked out for Ralph, and it must be rare to have that kind of creative success."

"I'm sure it is," Belle says.

"I remember the night my dad quit. The night he gave up on writing. He was in his study, working just like any other night. By then, I was in high school and couldn't be bothered to spend time with him in there anymore. Anyway, I was in the living room when I heard him shout 'God damn it' just sort of out of nowhere. My dad wasn't the kind of guy to yell. Ever. Even when I was in trouble or he was really angry. He just didn't do it. So I got up and kind of looked around the doorframe into his office to see what was going on."

My face feels warm. Flickers of heat travel from my ears to my forehead, and this reaction catches me off guard. I set my drink down and sort of stare at it there on the table. Belle moves forward, takes my hand again, and I feel better almost immediately. "What did you see?" she asks softly.

I force another drink down my throat. "He was just standing there behind his desk with a piece of paper in his hand. I asked him what was wrong, and he looked startled like he hadn't noticed me. He just said that he'd tried and there wasn't any more for him to do. Then he crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it in the wastebasket. He opened

a desk drawer and threw some more papers out. After that, he put the cover on his typewriter, moved it off his desk, and then put the huge stack of papers, like a few reams, in the desk drawers, locked it, walked out of his study, closed the door behind him.”

“And he never wrote again?”

I shake my head. “Not that I’m aware of. In fact, he rarely went back in to his study except for when he needed to get something, a binder or a pamphlet, for work. Occasionally, during high school, one of his paperbacks would find its way its way on to my bed. *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Middlemarch*, some Chekov. Things like that.”

“His way of passing along his love of literature to you.”

“Yeah, but I hated reading that stuff at the time. I just did it for his sake. I couldn’t stand *My Antonia* when I first read it as a fifteen year old. Just a bunch of people out running around in the middle of Nebraska.”

Belle smiles. “Does anybody like Cather at that age?”

“But the thing is,” I say, “when I read it again in college, I loved it. The scene near the end when the dilapidated old plow is sitting out in the field with the sun setting behind it? It was a revelation to me about what writing could be.”

“And your dad probably played a huge role in that.”

“Definitely,” I say, and finish my drink.

“But you’ve left out an important detail. What was on the piece of paper your dad threw out?”

I think about how I snuck back in to his study later that night after he and my mom had gone to bed. I left all the lights off, feeling my way down the hall, and slowly opened the door. Inside his office, I fished around the wastebasket until I found the

crumpled piece of paper. “It was a rejection letter from a publishing house. One of the big ones in New York.”

“He quit after being rejected once?”

“No. All of the papers he threw out that night were rejection letters. From a bunch of different publishers for a bunch of different projects. All of them rejected. There had to be a hundred letters in the trash.”

We sit there in silence for a while, until Belle finally speaks. “No wonder you have such a difficult time writing anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about the pressure you’ve put on yourself by taking up your dad’s fight.”

More silence. I hadn’t thought of it this way. I finger the creased edges of his list, folded in to the pocket of my jeans. “I don’t know if that was when I decided I wanted to be a writer. But I can remember the look on my dad’s face when I told my parents I was going to do it. He gave me the same smile that he used to give me when we were working together in his study. The same smile he had when he was working on his own stuff. A total and genuine happiness.”

“You know,” Belle says, “maybe it wasn’t the writing that made him happy. Maybe it was just spending time with you.”

“Maybe. I think writing made him happy, too.” I pull the list out of my pocket, unfold it, and put it between us on the table. “He left me this list when he died.”

Belle looks it over. “What is it?”

“It’s what I’m trying to write.”

“I bet he would be happy that his son has taken this on for him.”

The waitress returns and we settle our bill because Belle has work in the morning. I grab a copy of *For Rent* from the stand near the door as we walk out on to the street.

“What do you need that for?” Bell asks.

I could tell her it’s for a friend or that I just like checking out the various apartments around town. But I’ve told Belle so much tonight that only the truth feels right. “I’m being kicked out my apartment and need to find a new place.”

She sighs and rolls her eyes. “See what I mean? Everything points to you and me being a bad idea.”

I wait for her to break and give me that smile, but she doesn’t, and I don’t know if she’s being serious or not.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'm only ten minutes late today, but as soon as I cross Sutton's threshold, there is Sasha, brow furrowed, eyes like slits, corners of her mouth turned down. She somehow gives me this look while simultaneously ringing up the order of a man dressed in a dark suit and red power tie. What she doesn't know is that I feel good, having sat at my computer for an hour or so this morning. Sure, I didn't write anything beyond another haiku – *testing of outcomes/need an engaging first line/the cursor mocks me* – but it's progress, just sitting there and thinking about my work. Besides, a few more days like this and I will have enough haikus for a chapbook that I'll title, *Really Bad Haikus: My Life in Five-Seven-Five*.

Regardless, showing up late for work at Sutton's is becoming a problem for several reasons. First, I've been on the receiving end of dirty looks from my coworkers, who have been burdened due to Sutton's meteoric rise in popularity as of late, and my not being on time makes their jobs more difficult. I can handle these dirty looks because I'm used to getting them. Besides, the only time Sasha isn't giving me the stink eye is when she momentarily forgets that I propositioned her and her girlfriend. Actually, I would be concerned if she didn't give me a shitty look when I walked through Sutton's doors. And Sebastian's anger towards me can be doused by buying a round after work. The dirty looks may not be the best way to start a shift, but I consider them an occupational hazard, or at least a hazard of my particular personality type.

I return her look with my best "What, me?" smile, which causes her to tighten the corners of her eyes even further. I'm not sure, but I think that look means either "I'm going to cut off your balls" or "Renee and I have reconsidered your previous offer."

Probably the former. The Suit waits to sign the credit slip, seemingly unaware of our one-act play. It's a real talent of hers, giving me eye daggers while tending to a patron, and if I was the type of guy who gave a shit about employees showing up on time and keeping customers happy, I might be inclined to figure out how she does it.

I walk past them at the counter, thinking I've made it without any additional trouble when I hear Sasha's voice. "Jay, I need you to shelve the carts in the back. When you're done, work on the floor and let Sebastian know that he can take over for me up here."

"Ma'am, yes Ma'am," I yell, and snap a salute in her direction. But she doesn't look up at me, clearly having lost interest in our exchange, and I walk to the back of the store.

I don't know who she thinks she is, giving me these orders. A talk with Ralph is long overdue. This crap has got to stop. I mean, I'm barely late and it wasn't even my fault this time. I was involved in a heated discussion regarding my impending eviction from my apartment. I called the property management company to get to the bottom of the problem and, hopefully, work something out so that I won't have to move. I mean, if I'm going to get kicked out, I should at least have done something to deserve it. But when I finally got the right person on the phone, I was told the owner wanted to "redevelop" his building, whatever that means.

"It means, sir," said a woman on the phone with a flat affect, "that he wants to renovate the apartments."

"Great," I said. "My place could use some sprucing up. My shower leaks and the fridge has got to go. Also, I wouldn't mind having –"

“Sir?”

“– the whole kitchen done.”

“Sir.”

“Maybe some granite countertops, but it shouldn’t be too yuppie.”

“*Sir*,” she says, her voice strained like she wanted to yell, but knew she couldn’t.

“What?”

“They’re turning them in to condos.”

I should have known. My place is basically the only residential building left in the Old Market that isn’t condos, and, besides me, there’s only two or three other tenants in the whole building. This day has been coming for a few years, although I’ve always pretended it would never happen to my building.

“Sir?” she says, her voice controlled again.

I’m not sure where to go from here. There’s nothing I can really do. No deal to be made. I’ve going to have to move. “And so your company is like the muscle that just kicks people out?” I ask. “Like some mob enforcer? I don’t move out, I end up at the bottom of the Missouri River, wearing cement shoes?”

She made a dismissive snorting sound I probably wasn’t supposed to hear. “Sir, I have no idea what you are talking about. We just work for the owner. Now, he was nice enough to give everyone ninety days’ notice when the law only requires thirty days.”

Something about how she said *now*, like she was talking to a kid, really pissed me off. “Oh, well how considerate of him. Be sure to thank him for me and on behalf of a whole building full of people who are going to have their lives ruined by this.”

“Sir, you and two other people are the only tenants,” she said.

“Never mind, I’ll give him the message myself when sue his ass in court.” I couldn’t believe the words when they came out, but, in the absence of anything intelligent to say, I pressed on. “I’ve got a good lawyer who won’t let this stand.”

“Sir you are more than welcome to use any legal remedy at your disposal, but, sir, you won’t win. We have attorneys on staff and they assure us that this is all perfectly legal.”

“Stop calling me sir, goddamnit!”

“What would you like me to call you, sir?”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“I’m not sure, sir.”

“Isn’t there any way we can work out some sort of agreement for me and my apartment?” I’m surprised by the whine in my voice. If I were this lady, I would be openly mocking me by now.

“You could buy one of the condos, sir.”

“Really? Well that’s helpful. And just how much will that cost?”

“They will start at \$250,000 for a one bed, one bath, sir.”

“A quarter of a million dollars?”

“That includes all the amenities, sir.”

I think she’s messing with me at this point, but I’m not sure. “Great, I’ll take two. Just let me move some money around in my Swiss accounts.”

She lets out a loud sigh like a hurricane blowing through our phone connection, like she’s passed caring whether or not I know that she thinks I’m an idiot. “What apartment did you say you live in, sir?”

“2A. Why?”

“Sir, we’ve had some complaints from the tenant on the ground level, the Starbucks, about someone yelling obscenities inside their store.”

The Penis Game. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, sir, the manager says the perpetrator runs into your building after yelling the obscenity.”

“It’s not me.”

“I’m sure it’s not, sir.”

Now, I weave through the stacks, avoiding the people browsing through books at Sutton’s. It’s difficult getting used to having people in the store, especially at times like these, minutes after we’ve opened for the day. Customers are pretty much steady all day and the place is actually busy during lunch and in the early evening when the nine to fivers get off work. Some people just come to see what they can find, others get in and out, while still others will grab a book or two and actually hang out for a while, sit in a corner and read.

It’s also difficult to have to, you know, work while I’m here. One of the perks of working at Sutton’s is that it was never a *real* bookstore. Now, Sasha, Sebastian, and I have had to come up with a rotation, usually one at the register, one shelving, and the other on the floor helping customers. For once, the books that I’m supposed to shelve aren’t still on the carts due to laziness or indifference, it’s just that we didn’t get to them yesterday. I suppose if I had shown up on time, I would have finished shelving.

So aside from the dirty looks from Sasha and Sebastian, the second reason why showing up late is becoming a problem has recently made itself apparent: my paychecks

have begun reflecting my tardiness. This brings me to Reason Number Two, Subpart A: At the risk of seeming obvious, less money in my paychecks isn't good. I'll admit that losing fifteen minutes here or twenty minutes there when you're only getting \$8 an hour isn't a lot of money. But I'm not getting monthly checks from my mom anymore, and fifteen minutes a day starts to add up over a few weeks. We're talking about going from one less beer at the bar per night to one less *night* at the bar. Unless I break out my credit card, which I have been forced to do as of late, I can't properly drink with Sebastian. Thus, showing up late to work means I've learned the hard way that being the sober guy amidst a group of drunken assholes is a drag.

Reason Number Two, Subpart B is that this pay cut means someone has been paying attention to my leisurely arrival at Sutton's. I guess they've always noticed, but now suddenly there are consequences. This means Ralph is no longer handling the payroll. He never checked when we punched in or out, preferring instead to pay us for when we were supposed to work rather than trying to track down the number of hours we actually put in. The fact that he's not running the show anymore can't be a good thing and makes me wonder who is actually in charge of this place.

Sebastian emerges from the back, a stack of books in his arms.

"What'd I miss?" I ask.

"Strange things are afoot at the Circle-K," he says in his best Keanu Reeves.

"Seriously?" Reason Number Three showing up late is becoming a problem is these stupid team meetings. Until recently, they were held infrequently at best, and when we did have them, they merely served as a way to capture an audience for Charles' sermons on why some dead writer no one has ever read is better, in his opinion, than

some other dead writer no one has ever read. Consequently, I made it a habit to miss the meetings altogether. Of course, Charles is now busying brownnosing his way to tenure and hasn't worked here for a few months. What's more, we apparently now need to have actual team meetings on a daily basis, again due to Sutton's growing popularity. We've been so busy that we genuinely need to plan out who is going to do what for the day, what promotions we're running, and other business-type strategies.

I discovered the importance of information gleaned at these meetings, when, last Wednesday, I failed to honor our new Buy Three, Get One Free program for a customer who called me on it when I had the audacity to charge him for four used books at \$5 a piece instead of only charging him for three books. To make things worse, when he wanted to join our mailing list, I asked for his home address rather than his email address. After rushing over and apologizing to the customer – something she does often – Sasha glared at me and told me I would know about these things if I bothered to come to the meetings. I tried to explain to her that alienating customers was part of my charm, but she said she didn't care about my charm and that I had better show up to the next meeting. I missed the next four out of spite.

“Yeah,” Sebastian puts his stack of books on the ground between us. “We're getting a computer that is a register and an inventory look-up system. And handheld devices to scan books to see where they go. Like a science fiction movie around here.”

“Next thing you know we'll have a coffee shop in here and start selling Carly Simon CDs,” I say.

“Not even the biggest thing from this morning's meeting.”

“What could be bigger than Sutton's entering the computer age?”

“Ralph’s leaving.”

“What?”

“And like soon. He’s got to be in New York for a show or something.” Sebastian picks up his books again. “Gotta get these out.”

“Ok,” I say. I’m not really sure what to make of Sebastian just told me. I start up the back stairs, but have to sit down as my vision begins to tunnel and my head feels light. Ten minutes late to work and everything changes. I never would have imagined Ralph leaving Omaha. I figured he would just die one day in his studio upstairs and we would know when the smell of his decomposing corpse finally wafted down to the store and customers started complaining.

Though, maybe this isn’t a bad thing. Maybe this is an opening for me. He’s going to need someone to run Sutton’s while he’s gone. I could totally do that. We knew someday Charles was going to leave for the stuffy ivory towers of academia, and he’s done just that. Sasha’s too young and inexperienced to run the place. And while Sebastian does have seniority on me, he’s always going on tour for a few months at a time, and I think he hopes to one day make a living off of ECVS. An unlikely pipedream, but it lets him keep one foot out Sutton’s door.

That leaves me. I’m always here – albeit a little late sometimes – but here nonetheless. And I have nowhere to be and nothing to take me away from the job, now and for the foreseeable future. I’m the perfect guy. I can see myself making a career out of this. You can’t be late if you’re the boss, and, eventually, I can hire my own minions who will run the store while I spend my time writing up in Ralph’s studio. This thought clears my vision and my senses return. I stand again and make my way up the stairs.

I knock on the open door and walk into Ralph's studio like a kid on Christmas morning. I've never been in here before. No one has, as far as I know. The room opens up in front of me. Scratched wood floors undulate beneath paint drips, and make their way to the exposed brick of the far wall. A table runs along the length of the brick and has a few boxes stacked on it. What I guess are Ralph's paintings lean against a leg of the table, sealed in wood frames and enveloped with bubble wrap. The walls to either side are white and bare except in a few spots where paintings which must have been hung for decades have left lighter rectangular cutouts, like shadows in reverse. A door on the wall to my right is open a crack. It's not as great as the Christmas I got a Nintendo or the one when I got my first BMX dirt bike, but it's still pretty damn cool to finally have made it into Ralph's inner sanctum. It definitely beats the Christmas of my senior year in high school when my parents gave me luggage, a not-so-subtle hint about my future standing in our home.

Ralph waves me over to the table where he's putting some binders in a box. His long, scruffy beard has been trimmed close to his face, showing the angles of his jaw, surprisingly sharp for someone so round. "Ah, the prodigal son has finally made it into work," he says with something less than a smile.

"Yeah, sorry Ralph," I say. "I got caught up on the phone working on an important real estate transaction."

He doesn't respond other than to nod his head like he didn't hear me or wasn't interested in what I said. With an elbow holding the box's flaps, he grabs a nearby roll of tape and picks at the end.

“So, I hear you’re moving to New York.” I walk over and hold the box closed as he continues to fumble with the tape. I look out the open windows above the desk and see tulips blooming on the trellis over the outdoor tables at Vivace, their blossoms dancing in the almost-warm breeze, reaching towards the condos on the second level in the buildings across the street. They seem to have new windows, though I don’t remember those apartments being recently redeveloped. In between the two buildings, I hear people talking on the sidewalks below, a small din interrupted by the rumbling, splashing cars on the brick streets as they maneuver through the snowmelt.

“Yeah,” Ralph says, and smooths the newly-adhered tape on the box with his hand. “There’s a gallery that wants to give me a show next month.” He lifts the box off the table, carries it across the room, and puts it down near the door. “Figured it’s time to move out there and give this whole art thing a shot. I found some studio space in Brooklyn and, well, it’s now or never.”

“That’s great,” I say. I lean closer to the window and look as far as I can to the left. From here, I think I can see the Starbucks logo at the bottom of my apartment building. I could walk here everyday, just like I do now. Except after checking in on the store, I could come up here and write my book. Hallway. Outcome. Life. Wrecking ball.

“Need something, Jay?” Ralph asks. He stands in the doorway, boxes at his feet. “I should take these downstairs to my truck.”

“I was wondering what your plans were for the bookstore,” I say, like the thought just popped into my mind. “You know, I could take it over for you, just while you’re gone, make sure it doesn’t burn down while you’re in New York.”

He steps back in the room, considers me for a minute with a look that sees right through me, taps my inner thoughts. “Jay, I’m sorry,” he says in a soft voice, “but I’ve already put Sasha in charge. I’m taking her on as a business partner in Sutton’s.”

“But she’s too young to run this place. Any place. I’ve been here for a long time, I know how it – ”

Ralph raises a hand, shakes his head. “I know you’ve worked here for a while, and I appreciate that.”

“She’s still in *school*, Ralph,” I say. I’m not sure if I’m more embarrassed by whining during a losing argument for a second time today, or by the fact that I’m arguing with a man who has given me so much and owes me so little.

“Business school, Jay,” he says, his voice stern. “We’ve made a profit over the last three months, ever since our community outreach program launched. It’s been years since we’ve made any money. And you know whose idea the program was?”

I know, but I just stand there and remain silent.

Ralph must know he has me because his voice loses some of its edge. “Sasha came up with the idea. And it was her idea to clean the store up in the first place.”

“Are the computers her idea, too?”

“Yes,” he says, and walks over to me, puts his hands on my shoulders like he’s done so many times before. “Jay, I have to be honest. You’ve never really seemed this interested in Sutton’s, or so motivated to do anything like this before. I had no idea you wanted this.”

“Would it have made a difference?” I ask, knowing the answer before he replies.

“Not even a little bit,” he says, and we both laugh a little. “That girl’s a spitfire. And I know you know that from firsthand experience.”

We carry what’s left in the room over to the door, making small piles to carry down to his truck. After we move everything, Ralph looks around the room. “Should check to make sure I didn’t leave anything in the bathroom.”

“There’s a bathroom up here?” I ask, watching Ralph move toward the door.

He opens the door, his head disappearing for a moment and then reappearing. “Yeah. Shower, too. Had it put in when I really started spending a lot of time up here painting.” He closes the door behind him. “Also helpful for when the wife wasn’t happy with me.”

“You know, Ralph,” I say, again trying to sound as casual as possible, “I’m having some landlord issues. What do think about me moving in up here?”

Again, he considers me in silence for a moment before saying, “An important real estate transaction?”

“I’ll pay rent.”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, but I already told Sasha this could be her office.” He picks up a stack of boxes. “Grab those paintings and help me carry this stuff.”

It’s pretty quiet back downstairs. A few people are milling around, but there’s not much action. I find Sasha and Sebastian standing at the front counter. Sasha actually smiles at me when I approach. It’s a sort of pitying half-smile, as though she’s figured out that I know about her new arrangement with Ralph.

“Congratulations, Sasha,” I say. “Ralph tells me you are running the place now.”

“Thanks, Jay. I’m excited about it. I hope you will stay on.”

“Don’t have anything else better to do, I guess.”

“Good,” she says. “I’m going to shelve some of those carts.” She walks off in the direction of the carts I was supposed to shelve when I first came in. I’m surprised she didn’t tell me to take care of it, but I’m glad to see that she’s willing to do my work, if only because she can sense my disappointment.

“I feel like I just got run over by an eighteen-wheeler,” I say to Sebastian. “Let’s go get a drink.”

He looks at his watch. “Dude, it’s like 10:30 in the morning.”

“How about after work?”

“Can’t,” he says while shaking his head. “Practice tonight. Still breaking in the new drummer.”

“Oh.”

He looks at me incredulously. “CD release party? Next weekend?”

“Shit. Already?”

“Gonna be there?”

“Of course,” I say. “Belle and I were planning on it.”

“Cool,” he says, and then grins. “We got some big news to announce.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We closed down Sutton's early on the day of the ECVS show and agreed to meet up later at Toads for a pre-show drink. Sebastian asked for the day off and Sasha figured there was no reason to stay late on a Friday, especially tonight. Besides, who hangs out in a bookstore on a Friday night, anyway?

Turns out, at least at the new and improved Sutton's, more people than you would think. Sasha and I begin herding people toward the front door around five, most of whom are not pleased about it. We hear some grumbling about how we normally stay open until nine, and one lady informs us that Barnes & Noble would never kick people out their stores. I tell her that we never claimed to be soul sucking corporate vampires.

This draws one of Sasha's infamous glares, which, since she took over, have become nearly permanently etched on her face as it relates to me. I have taken to counting the number of scowls per shift. If I don't get at least one every half hour, I'm just not trying my hardest. This particular scowl, however, is important to me because it is number twelve of the day, a personal best. I must have smiled when I figured this out because number thirteen immediately follows.

"I think there's some people still in the back, by the Travel Section," Sasha says. "Why don't you see what they're up to and move them toward the front."

Travel Section. Great. Despite our best efforts to bring Sutton's and its books in to the Twenty-first Century, the Travel Section is still a problem. Travel guides, by their very nature, go out of date as quickly as the places they describe change. It's similar to how cars lose something like 20% of their value as soon as they are driven off the lot, except that travel books lose nearly all their value and wind up selling for a dollar at

Sutton's. And of course, it's easy for a used bookstore to have stacks and stacks of outdated travel guides because no one wants to buy *The Authoritative Travel Guide to Zaire*, when Zaire is now the Congo. Then end result is that these books stack up, hidden away in the depths of the store, even though Sasha told us to stop buying them.

I don't really care that we have two copies of *The Apartheid Handbook: A Guide to South Africa's Everyday Racial Policies*. But I do care about the general pileup in the Travel Section because, as it's still near the back of the store, people still go back there to make out. Sure, it's an improvement over couples having sex, but on a Friday evening like this, I won't be surprised to see two book nerds going at it with their NPR Telethon tote bags casually thrown aside, moleskin journals tumbling out across the floor for everyone to see.

As I walk back there tonight, I purposely make a lot of noise, like you would do in bear country – let them know you are on the trail so as not to frighten them. I walk slowly, do a lot of throat clearing, and even hum the “Facts of Life” theme song as I make my way back. And when I get there, just as I suspected, I find some book nerds, a young guy and a girl who couldn't have been too far out of high school. But, to my eternal relief, they aren't making out. They are actually looking for a travel guide. Something about traveling around the world for the first time.

“Well guys,” I say. “If you aren't finding it out here, we probably don't have it.” This may or may not be true, but I'm not looking in the back right before we close for the night. Nothing Sasha can do about me retaining that aspect of Sutton's customer service.

“Do you realize there are some guides from the Eighties in here,” the kid says.

I look at his pimpled baby face for a minute in order to see if he really thinks I care about how old the books are. His face remains serious, so I say, “Doesn’t surprise me. This is a used bookstore.”

“We also found this,” the girl says, and hands me a tattered mass-market copy of *The Rainmaker*.

“I wonder how it got back here,” I say, taking it from her and fanning the pages as though I can’t believe my eyes. “That’s strange.”

“So you don’t have the book we’re looking for,” the kid says, probably noting my sarcasm.

“Sorry guys, I don’t think so. And we’re actually closing, so we should probably head toward the front of the store now.”

They walk together out of the Travel Section and back toward civilization. I hang back a bit, and, when I’m sure they won’t notice, blindly toss *The Rainmaker* over my head, waiting to hear the satisfying *thump*.

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Despite needing the day off so that he could “get ready,” Sebastian joins Belle, Sasha, Renee and I for some pre-show drinks outside at Mr. Toads later that night. And Sebastian’s in full CD release show regalia – hair looking like he stuck a fork in an electric socket, and everything else black. From his not-buttoned button-down shirt, to his too-tight leather pants that must have at least two socks stuffed down there, to the delicate eyeliner, it’s all black and it’s all in the name of rock and roll.

It’s also sort of comical taken out of place as we sit on Toad’s patio, cordoned off by a waist-high wrought iron fence from the general population walking along the

sidewalk. Tonight has given Omaha our first hint of the possibilities of summer. A southerly breeze prevails over winter's northern winds, and the trees surrounding the patio are budding. As in any city that sits low and dormant under winter's bluster, this whisper of warmth has beckoned most of the city's residents to come out of their hibernation and gawk at Sebastian.

I see women nearly rolling their strollers into oncoming pedestrians because they are staring at Sebastian. Westies, traveling in packs of three to five guys, all with hats turned backwards, see him and make comments that get the whole group laughing too hard at what I'm sure are lowest common denominator jokes about Sebastian's sexual preferences. To make things worse, not only is the foot traffic in the Old Market high tonight, but cars are stacked up a few feet away from our table at the 10<sup>th</sup> and Howard light. Dudes in their restored muscle cars – Matador Red GTOs, Daytona Yellow Chevelles – look at Sebastian over the tops of their sunglasses to be sure they are actually seeing what they're seeing. They all gaze at him like he's from another planet. Or at least Hollywood.

I'm used to the attention, the good and the bad, that Sebastian gets when he's in rock star mode. And, to his credit, Sebastian doesn't seem to notice any of it, even when the waitress does a double take as she asks us for our drink order. He just downs whiskey after whiskey like it's all in a day's work, and, I guess, for him, it is. The women at our table seem a little tense at first, but when they see Sebastian is fine, we all sort of relax and slip into conversation.

At Belle's suggestion, I tell everyone some community service stories. I share with them how Corey thinks I'm "all right," confirmed with a fist-bump. This has

everyone at the table smiling, and I realize tonight is the first time all of us, even Sasha and Renee, have been together and actually enjoyed each other's company.

Our table is quiet for a moment before Renee says, "It seems like you are doing good work with the kids, Jay."

"He really is," Belle says. "They talk about how much fun it is when I see them in class." She looks at me, her eyes bright. "I think you already know Anthony and Marcus like you, but all my kids in your class say it's fun. That's hard to do with kids who've had too much adult in their lives already."

"You might think about doing it full time, Jay," Sasha says. "Sounds like you're a natural."

"I don't know," I say. "I mean, how would Sutton's function without its best employee?"

"Well, I don't know who we could hire to not do any work, but I'm sure we could find someone," Sasha responds, a Cheshire grin on her face.

"It's not a bad idea," Belle says.

I don't respond, even though they're both right. I'm busy noticing that everyone here is actually interested in me and what I'm doing. Hell, even Renee seems less interested in punching me, than in discussing my wellbeing. I'm not sure when the last time I felt this accepted was, but it feels good. It feels like maybe, just maybe, things are coming together.

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The Slowdown is packed when we get there. Sebastian left Toad's after downing another whiskey, but the rest of us stayed for a few more drinks. I guess we missed the

first band, but Noah's Ark Was a Spaceship was on stage when we got there. They're a little mellow to be opening up for ECVS, more Sonic Youth than Slayer, but I really dig these guys. They look about twelve years old, sort of like the younger brothers of the real band, like they just walked in off the street and right on to the stage. But they sell it during their live shows with full-on rocker poses, heads banging, arms flailing rhythmically around guitars and drums.

We push our way down to the main floor and take up a position in front of the soundboard. This is where I find myself at most shows these days. Down on the floor to acknowledge the youthfulness of being close to stage, but with a nod to the aging part of "aging hipster," far enough back so I don't lose my hearing for the next few days.

Despite playing to a crowd ready to have their faces blistered by songs about ancient witchcraft, wandering gnomes, or whatever the hell ECVS sings about, the guys in Noah's Ark win over the crowd after a song or two. The crowd's cheers seem to embolden the band and they continue rocking hard, which the crowd eats up. Classic case of the opener coming into their own as a band right before our eyes. We rock along with the rest of the crowd, and, at one point, Belle looks at me with one eyebrow raised in approval.

After Noah's Ark's set, I make my way up to the bar to buy a round of drinks. And, of course, there's Hank. He's got a camouflage MGD trucker hat on that hides his eyes, a collection of PBR cans in front of him, and a hottie stroking the tiger tattoo on his arm while whispering in his ear. Right on cue, he looks up and nods in my direction as the bartender sets down four tallboys in front of me. I return his salutation, grab the beers, and begin pushing my way through the throng of metal heads waiting for their drinks.

I'm a study in concentration as I walk back down the steps to the floor with four open PBRs in my hands. In fact, I'm so focused on not spilling that I don't immediately realize our group has grown by two until I nearly dump twenty ounces of beer on Paul while distributing the beers to their rightful owners. When I recognize him and see Wendy standing to his side, talking to Sasha, I regret my efforts to save the beer.

"Hi, Jay," Wendy says. "I see you've left the skinny jeans at home tonight."

Everyone laughs and I wonder if my goodwill towards the group was too easily given earlier tonight. I look at Wendy and Paul, who are both dressed like they've just come from work or are going to a funeral. They stand out here as much Sebastian did earlier, so I'm not sure how Wendy thinks she has enough credibility to joke about my skinny jeans while wearing a navy blue suit to an ECVS show.

"Well, I can't say this is a pleasant surprise," I say, and feel Belle shoot me a surprised look that I don't acknowledge. "What are you guys doing here? I thought the Coldplay show was at the Qwest Center."

This time, Belle elbows me in the side, causing a sharp pain to reverberate through my gut, but I still don't look at her.

Sasha, perhaps made uncomfortable by the awkwardness, says, "I was just talking to Wendy about hosting an event for her publishing house at the bookstore."

"Sebastian told me you guys are doing some good things over at Sutton's," Wendy says. "He had me come down to the store and meet Sasha and we just happened to run in to each other here tonight. Small world, right?"

"Sure is," I say. "Really, really small."

The six of us just stand there in a small circle saying nothing, occasionally sipping beer, for a painfully long time. I feel pinpricks rising on the back of my neck and am pretty sure my brow is sweating. I know my fat retains heat, but I think they've decided to turn on the heater in here for some reason.

Wendy finally breaks the silence. "Jay, are you going to introduce us to your friend?"

I'm so intent on my obstinance that it takes me a minute to realize she's talking about Belle. And in the next instance, I'm annoyed by Wendy's use of "friend" to describe Belle.

"Oh," I say. "This is my *girlfriend*, Belle. Belle, this is Wendy and her *friend*, Paul."

"Fiancé, actually," Wendy says.

"When is the big day?" Belle asks Wendy.

"A little over a month," Wendy says, and glances in my direction for a moment before looking back at Belle. "I hope you and Jay can make it."

"That would be wonderful. I'm sure we will."

My current girlfriend has now committed us to attending the wedding of my ex. The ex of all exes. The wedding of all weddings. The thing I want to do least in this world. The thought of seeing Wendy get married raises the temperature even more and I feel droplets of sweat trickling down the side of my face. Before I can make an excuse for us not attending – participating in a yacht race on the Missouri River? Buying matching Volvos for Belle and I? – a cheer goes up in the crowd as the men of the hour walk on

stage, and everyone turns to face them. I take the opportunity to shoot a glare in Belle's direction.

“What?” she says.

“Nothing.” I say. It's not her fault. She was just trying to be nice.

On stage, Sebastian has taken his place at the front. The laidback Gap poster boy we know from Sutton's has disappeared. His work is right here in this moment. A metallic black guitar dangles on its strap in front of him and he grabs his microphone with both hands, leans in close and says, in a deep-throated voice, “We are. East. Coast. Vagina. Slang.”

He steps back, looks at the new drummer, a fierce-looking dude with a buzz cut and goatee, who smashes the ride cymbal three times before ECVS explodes, all four guys simultaneously leaning into their instruments. Their music comes barreling out towards us, and the crowd surges forward to meet it. Somewhere in the middle, chaos ensues.

It hits me like a ton of bricks, forcing me to take a step back before I embrace it. I literally feel the music detonating inside me like hand grenades. And I have to admit, they sound better than ever. Instead of the mindless drivel of most shitty metal bands, ECVS has managed to give their new songs something more comprehensible. And while I'm too much of an indie snob to really get into it, it's clear that, after years of being mediocre, these guys have found their sound. It's actually damn good.

The band rips through three songs, all of them played at breakneck speed. The crowd, for its part, is in a head-banging, mosh-pit frenzy, calling for more, when the band takes a minute to catch its breath and take long pulls from their drinks. By now

Sebastian's electroshock hair has lost its hold and is reduced to a stringy mess hanging down on his shoulders. Even the crowd, it seems, is sweating as profusely as the band, and a general musk of bodies has taken over. Hell, I've even pitted out my shirt and I've just been standing back, taking it all in.

Sebastian puts his bottle of beer down on the drum kit riser and approaches his mic again. "So," he says, "we've got some news to share with everyone here tonight. Everyone know this is our CD release party, right?"

The crowd responds with cheers and fist pumps.

"All right, good," Sebastian says, smiling at the response. "So the real news is that after tonight's show we are going to be joining up with Mastodon to open for them on their tour. After that, we're packing up shop and moving our shit to Buffalo, New York. This will be our last show in Omaha for a while."

The crowd lets out a disappointed groan, mixed with a few shouts of "fuck you" and "you guys suck." Typical heavy metal show banter, but I barely hear anything after that. Sebastian continues talking into the mic, the crowd continues shouting back at him, but it all sounds suddenly distant and removed, filtered through gauze.

Sebastian is leaving. Gone. The only person at Sutton's I like hanging out with, and, more importantly, who actually liked hanging out with me. First Clint disappears, then Ralph leaves, and now Sebastian.

I open my mouth to scream something up at the stage. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it doesn't matter because nothing comes out. Before I can analyze this bout of muteness, my head swirls and I feel my legs begin to go. ECVS starts playing again, but I still can't hear anything – no ear-shredding guitar solos, arrhythmia-inducing drumbeat,

not even the howl of Sebastian's vocals – just four guys on stage pantomiming a band in front of a stack of amps.

I feel a hand grab my arm and steady me. I look to my right and see it's Paul, and he appears to be talking to me. Everything snaps back. ECVS is playing a slow, sludgy grinder of song that builds with every verse towards the inevitable crescendo of full-on rock. The crowd is back on the band's side again. They slam into each other, fist pump and head bang as though ECVS had never said anything about leaving.

"Thought you were going to pass out there for a minute," I hear Paul say.

I look from him to his hand on my arm and then jerk my arm out of his grasp.

"Get the fuck off me."

"Hey, sorry. It's just that you looked unsteady and –"

"Unsteady," I say, and square up on him, nose to nose. "I'm fine and don't need your fucking help. Why don't you stay away from me?"

Wendy pushes her way in between us. "Jay! What are you doing? He was trying to help."

To our left I hear some one say, "Kick his ass, man!"

I glance over to see that a scrawny guy with a handlebar moustache and a Motorhead t-shirt has his back to the stage and is giving us our full attention. I look down at Wendy. "I don't want his fucking help. Why are you guys even here? Sebastian is my friend, not yours."

"Hey," I hear Motorhead say to someone. "Check it out. The fat guy's going to kick the preppy guy's ass."

"Awesome," another voice says. "Fuck him up, fat boy!"

“Paul and I can go wherever we want and do whatever we want,” Wendy says.

“Just stop doing it around me,” I say.

“Oh grow up, Jay.”

“And quit yelling at me. You’re not my girlfriend any more. Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“I’m sorry,” Belle says. Truth be told, I had forgotten she was standing on my other side. “This is *that* ex-girlfriend?”

““Yes.”

“I thought you told me you didn’t talk to her any more.”

“I didn’t know she was going to be here!”

“Are you sure? Because it seems like she is expecting you at her wedding.”

“Why are starting in on me?”

“Why weren’t you honest with me?”

“You know what? I don’t need this. I’m fucking out of here,” I say, and push past them towards the door.

From behind me, I hear Motorhead saying, “What no fight? Come on, fat boy, you would’ve kicked his ass. You could’ve taken him.”

Outside the Slowdown, the night’s earlier warm breeze now gives me goose bumps as it gusts across my sweaty shirt. I move quickly to the parking lot to find Black Beauty so I can get the hell out of here and away from all these crazy people.

“Jay!” I hear Belle shout from behind me. “Wait up.”

This is not a conversation I want to have even a little bit, but I stop to wait anyway. As she approaches, I can see she’s not happy. Her eyes have lost any trace of

blue, like the last time I pissed her off. “Do you want to tell me what that was all about?” she asks.

“It wasn’t anything,” I say, and paw at a cigarette butt on the ground with my foot.

“It sure seemed like it was something.”

I don’t really want to talk about what just happened, mainly because I don’t really know what just happened. But also because I’m embarrassed by it all. I mean, I’m relatively sure I could have taken Paul based on sheer size. And it would have made Motorhead happy, but I’m too old to get into fights over girls. Hell, I don’t even know if was about a girl in the first place. Besides, I probably would have hurt myself in an embarrassingly old man way, like slipping a disc in my back, or, you know, having a massive heart attack.

“Come on, Jay,” Belle says, switching her approach with a soft voice and taking my hands in hers. She looks up at me with those sweet blues. “Talk to me.”

I try to avoid her eyes, but I can’t, and I give in. “It’s just that everything is so messed up right now. Everything is changing all around me. Clint, Ralph, Sebastian, they’re all off to better things. Wendy’s getting married. I’m losing my apartment to a developer.”

“So?”

“So? Everyone is moving on and I’m, I’m just standing still.”

“No you’re not,” she says, and pushes closer to me.

“I’m exactly where I was five years ago when my dad died. Nothing’s changed for me. It’s the same dark hallway.”

“That’s not true, Jay. You have things going on. You’ve changed even since we first met.” She smiles a little. “Even if you can’t see it.”

“I’m in my thirties, I don’t have a real job, and I’m about to be homeless. It’s not supposed to be like this. I should have a career and be married by now.”

She drops my hands and steps back. “Like Wendy?”

I look over her, upward to the city’s skyline, trying to find the right thing to say, the right answer to give her. “Yes, it’s been bothering me since I found out.”

“Why does it matter that *she’s* getting married? Why does she matter at all?”

“I don’t know, it just does.”

“Are you upset that she’s getting married, or that she is marrying someone else?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you obsessed with your ex?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, if she,” Belle says, and looks around for something before pointing to a PT Cruiser parked a few spots down from my car, “if Wendy went out and bought a car like that, would you?”

“No. That’s crazy,” I say. “I’m not obsessed with her. I mean, I haven’t used the Wendy Scale in months.”

“The what?”

“Nothing. Never mind. This doesn’t have to do with her.” I look at Belle, shrug, and, in a low voice, say, “I just feel stuck, like nothing is happening for me.”

She steps closer again. “But things are happening,” she says, raising her voice in frustration. “If you would quit thinking your life so bad, you would realize there are good things going on in it. Just take a second to look at it. Look at me.”

“I think you’re missing the point here.”

“No, you are,” she says. “You’ve been chasing this woman as some sort of ideal who will give you the ideal life and ignoring ways you could be moving forward. You’re missing your real life. It’s right here in front of you, Jay.”

“With all the changes, it just feels like someone has taken a wrecking —”

“Are you listening to yourself? Hallways? Wrecking balls? You’re just repeating things from your dad’s list, Jay.”

I hadn’t realized I was doing this, and the revelation surprises me. “It’s not just a list though. My dad —”

“They’re a list on a piece of paper, Jay. Yes, they’re in your dad’s handwriting, but they’re just words. Nothing more.”

“That’s not true,” I say.

“Yes it is. Once you’re ready to see that, call me,” she says, and walking away.

In my mind, I know I don’t want to marry Wendy, and want to be with Belle. These are probably the truest things I’ve thought in a long time, but even though I’ve been drinking, I don’t say anything. She wouldn’t believe me anyway.

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A few minutes later, I’m confused as to why the door for The Waiting Room won’t open. They always have shows on the weekends, but as I press my face against a window, I see most of the lights are off. The few lights remaining reveal what looks like

a construction site. I see scaffolding, toolboxes, even a hardhat or two, but definitely no people. And the bar looks like it's stock has been emptied. I step back out to the sidewalk and look up at the marquee, which reads, "CLOSED For Renovations."

I sit on the stairs leading to The Waiting Room's front door and look out across Maple Street. Renovations? There wasn't anything wrong with the place to begin with. I can't believe they would shut it down to remodel. Isn't there anyplace left in this city that's original, that isn't going anywhere, that isn't going to become something else?

Across the street from The Waiting Room, I see the Barley Street Tavern, a newer place I haven't check out yet, and decide this is the night. To be honest, from the outside, it doesn't look like much more than two double-wide trailers shoved together with a sign hung on the outside to let thirsty people know about the beer inside.

The inside, however, redeems Barley Street as the kind of place that the real people of Omaha would find themselves. It's a narrow place. The bar runs the length of the right side and takes up half the width of the first room, with a line of tables shoved against the left side. Beer signs hang on nearly every inch of the walls, hiding most of the wood paneling behind it, and Christmas lights sag from the ceiling around the room's perimeter. The standard jukebox and pinball machine round out the room. A few regulars sit at the bar, staring into cans while the bartenders keep busy moving back and forth.

Drawn by the sounds of an acoustic guitar, I walk to the end of the bar and peer through the door of another room off to the side. A three-piece folk band is playing softly on a makeshift stage that rises only about six inches from the floor. The crowd of about twenty sits at tables extending to the soundboard in the back of the room.

The guys on stage play a mellow track. Gentle strumming on the guitar and easy brushes on the drums accompany a bearded singer who wears a stocking cap. Normally the kind of folk band I would ceaselessly mock. But I like the earnestness with which these guys are playing. Aside from the wearing the wool cap on a warm night, there is no pretense coming from the stage, just an honest night's work – the kind that attaches you to a place, makes you a part of something larger. For these guys, there's no tour with Mastodon, no art show in Manhattan, no religious wandering. I could come back here in a year or five and watch these guys play the same songs just as authentically as they are tonight.

The crowd gives the band warm applause when the song ends, and I'm overtaken by what I've seen. Maybe it's because of what happened early tonight, or maybe it's simply because I actually like this band, but I lean farther into the room and yell, "That's keeping it real!" I don't know what that means or why I'm yelling, but it seems to cause the applause to slow a bit as most of the people in the audience look my way.

"Shut up, asshole," I hear a voice from the crowd tell me.

"Alright. Thanks," I say back to no one in particular, and backtrack into the first room.

I've almost decided to call it a night when I spot none other than Hank sitting at the far end of the bar by the entrance. It hasn't even been half an hour since I left Slowdown. ECVS can't be off the stage yet, and yet, here Hank sits, empty PBR cans in front of him, like he's been here all night.

I take a seat in the high-backed barstool next to him and order us a round. Seeing him up close for the first time, I notice the bags beneath his eyes and the sallow complexion. We tap cans and each take a pull.

“Mighty kind of you, Jay,” he says quietly, and wipes his corners of his mouth with his hand. “How come you aren’t still watching them head bangers downtown?”

“Woman trouble,” I reply.

He chuckles. “Tell me about it.”

“Right,” I say, and then realize I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Wait. Every time I see you, you’re surrounded by women talking to you, or buying you drinks. It can’t be all that bad.”

“Don’t mean they want to make a life with me.” He stares straight ahead like he’s thinking about the one that got away.

“Yeah, but you have a good life, right? People tell me you used to be an exec at Union Pacific before you retired. You have to have a nice pension. That can’t be all bad.”

He chuckles again, considers his beer can for a moment. “Is that what they’re saying? I thought I had escaped from the loony bin.”

“What do you do?” I ask.

“Oh I worked for U.P., all right. But in the shops, not in one of them fancy office buildings. Hurt my back when I was in my thirties, got disability and early retirement.”

“So, what, you just hang out now? Go see bands play?”

“More or less,” he says. “Always wanted to be in a band. Played the guitar for a while before giving it up.”

“That’s not so bad.”

“Yes it is.” He turns in his chair towards me so I have to look at him. “It’s like working at music store instead of playing an instrument.” Hank turns back in his chair and we sit there in silence for a little while. He knocks back the rest of his beer and signals the bartender for another drink.

I don’t know what the right thing to say is in this situation, so I try to lighten the mood. “At least you get to see a lot of great bands play.”

He grunts and nods his head in agreement, then takes a long pull of his fresh beer.

“I wouldn’t mind having that for the rest of my life,” I say.

He stands up, tilts his head back as he finishes the beer in one large gulp. “You know, sometimes I still believe I got time to pick up the guitar again and make something of myself,” he says, and sets the empty can back on the bar, “and it’s sad, when I think about it.”

He grabs his jacket off the back of his stool, grunting as he pulls it on. I notice a large beer gut protruding from his midsection, and realize how stout he is. “Them girls at the bar is about as likely to go home with me as I am to play a show at Slowdown, the Qwest Center, or any other damn place. I’m nothing but a novelty act, and I know it.”

He hobbles toward the door, not waiting for a response, and walks out into the night.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I wake up earlier than expected the next morning. It's a rare day off from Sutton's, and I'm looking forward to doing nothing today. A look at my phone tells me Belle hasn't responded to any of my messages or texts, so I decide the best thing to do is to get on with my day. I check the kitchen for anything that can serve as breakfast and find an open box of Cheerios in the cupboard above the sink. I check the refrigerator for milk, but when I open the door, the fridge releases a sepulcheric stench, and I decide to forgo the luxury of milk on my cereal. I even decide against the bowl and spoon I just washed for this special occasion, and grab the box off the counter, carrying it with me to the living room.

I dig out handfuls of cereal and shove them into my mouth. The Cheerios are a little stale, but otherwise not a bad breakfast. Not exactly like Mom used to make – or Clint, for that matter – but it gets the job done. I wander around my place for a bit, taking a mental inventory of what stuff I'll leave behind when I'm forced to move in a few weeks. Turns out, all of my shit is pretty much worthless. Most of it is second- and third-hand, saved from dumpsters or inherited from people who have long since upgraded their furniture. The whole place basically looks like the apartment of a college kid: the thrift store couch, a wobbly coffee table stained dark by spilled beer, a mismatch of working and non-working lamps, and a kitchen devoid of fresh food and matching cookware.

I slump down on the flower-power couch in the spot worn down by Clint's many years of camping out, and turn on the TV in order to distract myself from my crappy apartment. And then I remember about my television not working.

“Great,” I say aloud, and scoop another handful of Cheerios out of the box and into my mouth. Thankfully, the God Network is on a commercial break, something about a compilation of the best Christian rock songs now on one CD for the mere price of \$28.95, plus shipping and handling. I fool around with the remote, pressing all the buttons to no avail, hoping that one of them will actually change the channel.

I’m still messing around with the remote when the Preacher Goodspeed Show comes back from break. His studio audience applauds, and a full gospel band plays in the background. The camera cuts to the band’s drummer, causing me to do a double take. There on a riser, playing his heart out with a goofy smile on his face is Clint. He’s all cleaned up, hair short and slicked back, wearing an ill-fitting suit and tie. He sort of looks like the guys from Nirvana in the “In Bloom” video where they spoof an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. On guitar and bass, I see the Old Indie Twins swaying in time to the music. The camera pulls back and I see Sydney there too, tucked in between two other background singers.

I don’t believe my eyes, but then Preacher Goodspeed, sitting behind a desk like a late-night talk show host, thanks his band, and the camera cuts to Clint again who does a rim-shot back to acknowledge the good preacher. I watch the rest of the show, looking for more shots of Clint, wishing I had a DVR for the first time in my life so I could show this to anyone who comes over to my place.

After the show ends, I click off the TV and just sit there, amazed at what I’ve seen. Clint, regardless of how misguided I think he might be, is doing what he wants to do. He’s moving his life forward. Sebastian is now officially a real heavy metal rock star.

Ralph, an up-and-coming artist. Charles, a professor of English. Hell, Sasha manages a bookstore before she's even twenty-five.

"Ok," I say aloud, again talking to no one in particular. "I get it." I set the box of Cheerios on my decrepit coffee table and walk into my room. The computer comes to life when I nudge the mouse, and I open "Great American Novel." I look around my room, trying to determine if there is anything I need before I get to work, and decide to just sit down. No music. No cigarettes or alcohol. No artificial muses.

But I can't do it. I stare at my dad's list and my two haikus. They're all I have to show for the last five years of my life. Maybe I'm not that good of a writer. My dad's legacy going to waste in my hands. In talented hands, they should easily form the basis of at least a short story, but in my hands, they just aren't enough. Maybe if I could just see something of my dad's work, it could give me some direction. I could understand what those things are supposed to mean.

It hits me, and I spring up from the chair like I've been struck by lightning. The night my dad quit writing. Stacks of paper showed in his desk drawer. His office. Our house.

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When I walked out the door on the day my dad died, I swore I would never come back again to this suburban outpost, a bastardized notion of a neighborhood, a mockery of the vitality of a real community. I was so sure I wasn't coming back that, before getting into my mom's car for our appointment at the funeral home, I left the house key on the kitchen counter. I've kept that promise for over ten years, never stepping foot inside that house, so I haven't needed the key or regretted my decision.

Until now. I stand on our front porch and try the handle, finding I'm locked out. This is nearly enough for me to get into Black Beauty and head back downtown, but at this point, I don't what I would be coming back to. I can't keep floundering through life. I need answers. I need my dad.

I knock on the door, then ring the doorbell. Before it stops chiming, I grab the handle and violently rattling it, hoping the deadbolt will give way. It doesn't, so I pound on the fiberglass door until my mom finally opens it. "Jay. What are you doing here? Is everything ok?"

Nothing's ok. My life is crashing down around me. I'm on probation. My friends have all left me. Kicked out of my apartment. My girlfriend – or perhaps my ex-girlfriend – thinks I'm a loser, incapable of getting out of my own way. And writing, the one single, solitary thing that still connects me to my dad, just isn't happening. "I'm fine, mom. I just need to look for something."

"You look tired, sweetie," my mom says, and lets me in. "Have you been eating?"

"I'm not hungry. I just need to look for something in dad's study." This breaks our normal routine, the utilitarian nature of what our relationship has become.

"Oh. Ok," my mom says, her eyes searching my face for some answer. "I'll make you something to eat." She walks toward the kitchen, leaving me in the foyer.

Instead of following her, I walk down the short hall to my left, flipping on the light switch. Light flickers on from only the first of the two wall sconces, and I notice mine are the only footprints left behind in a sea of vacuum cleaner lines on the Berber carpet.

I open the door to the study. The blinds are drawn closed, forcing the afternoon sun down to the floor, backlighting my dad's desk. The chair sits perfectly aligned with the desk, having been pushed in by someone and apparently untouched since soon after my dad died. My chair has been moved from its position straddling a corner of the desk back to the proper place across from my dad's chair. Likewise, the desk lamp and pictures have assumed their rightful places, covering the magic market and X-acto imperfections I left behind. The rest of the study is dark, the red walls devouring any stray light so completely that the farthest reaches of the room are pitch black.

The air hangs heavy in the room, a musky combination of years of disuse and the yellowing of the pages in my dad's old paperbacks, the odor permeated slightly by the acrid tang of deteriorating book glue. I walk behind the desk and open the blinds. Light finds its way in the room, and I watch a swell of dust rise and then slowly settle. I move the chair away from the desk, and begin pulling on its drawers. Like the last time I was here, only the middle drawer gives, with the others remain locked. I paw around in the open drawer, hoping once again to find the key, but my luck is the same as last time.

"God damn it," I say aloud, and slam the open drawer shut. But I'm not ready to give up yet, this close to the answers I need, and I begin yanking on the locked drawers. The left one first, and then the right. Each budes slightly as if to open, but then stops, tightly holding on to its lock, refusing to move any farther. Still, I keep pulling harder and harder, trying to wrench them open. Sweat beads form on my forehead, my breathing picks up, and my fingers begin to purple under to strain of my insistence. I don't stop until I notice the overhead light in the study has been switched on.

“Jay,” my mom says. She’s standing in the doorway, holding a plate with a sandwich on it. “What are you doing?”

I fall back into my dad’s chair and notice that I’ve moved the desk a good foot from its original spot, exposing deep crevasses in the carpet from where it’s sat all these years. “I need to get into dad’s desk, but it’s locked.”

“You don’t have the key?”

I can feel my throat tightening and tears making their way to the edges of my eyes. I shake my head at my mom, and try to control my breathing.

“Hang on a minute,” my mom says, and disappears down the hall.

I stand up and put my leg against the askew side of the desk and try to push it back into place. The first few times the desk doesn’t move at all, and I begin to wonder if I actually moved it, or if it was already like this. Not until I really put all my weight against it does the desk reluctantly slide back to its original position.

My mom reappears in the doorway, arm outstretched towards me. “Here, sweetie, try this.”

I walk over to the doorway and take a small key, like the kind used on a luggage lock, from her. “Where did you find this?”

“Well, I guess it was the mortician who gave me the stuff your dad had in his pockets when he died. Basically, his wallet and keys. And this was on his key ring, the only key I didn’t know what it was for.”

“And you kept it?”

She nods her head as her eyes well up. “I’ve kept it on my key ring, even though I had no idea what it was for. I guess I figured it would fit into something someday.” She shrugs her shoulders as if admitting she didn’t know why she had kept it.

I go back to the desk, and sure enough the key fits and the lock groans as it turns. I sit in the chair again, nervous like a little kid, aware I’m going through his private stuff, like a kid looking through his dad’s sock drawer for a stack of *Playboys*. I extend each arm and take hold of a drawer in each of my hands. I pull them open.

Empty. Both of them.

“Did you find what you’re looking for?” my mom asks.

“A dimly-lit hallway,” I say softly.

“What?”

I close my eyes, rub my temples. “Testing of outcomes. Running for your life. The promise of the wrecking ball.”

“Jay? What are you saying?”

“I don’t know.” I put my elbows on the desk, head in hands. “I don’t know. That’s what I was trying to find out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Where are all of his stories and novels?”

“What do you mean?”

“His writing. Where is it?”

“Jay, I don’t know what you are taking about.”

“I spend an entire childhood sitting right there,” I say, and point to the desk lamp that marks my former spot at the corner. “I watched him fill up sheet after sheet of paper

with stories and books he was working on. I watched the stacks of paper grow so high, piling up next to his typewriter, that I could barely see him sitting here. And then I watched him shove everything he had ever written, thousands of pages, into these drawers, on that night when he gave up on it all.”

My mom shrinks back, halfway hiding behind the frame of the door, and I realize that I’ve been yelling at her. But I’m beyond caring. I need those pages. I need those answers. He was trying to say something with that list he left for me. It’s the only thing he left behind. I raise my voice even louder. “Where are they?”

Her voice shakes and pleads. “Jay, I don’t know. I’ve never seen them.”

I slam the drawers shut so hard that they bounce back open. “Damn it,” I yell. They’ve got to be here somewhere. He would never have just gotten rid of it all. How could he just give up? I shove the chair out of the way so that I can open the credenza drawers. I yank them with such force that their hinges creak, the screws threatening to pull out of the wood. Binders full of insurance forms are the only things on the credenza shelves, and I slam the doors shut again.

“Where the fuck is it?” I yell, and grab the closest thing I can get my hands on and throw it to the ground.

When my dad’s typewriter hits the ground, it crashes and clatters as the cover comes off and the individual parts spill out like entrails. I think I hear my mom yelling my name, asking me what have I done, but I all can do is focus on the parts scattered on the floor, my dad’s once fine machine that he loved reduced to its smallest parts. Individual letters are scrambled about. The ribbon comes off the reel and unravels. The

paper-feed knobs come off and roll away. Half of the type levers are at awkward angles, some pushing against the typebar, forming unspeakable words.

I stand there over the destroyed typewriter, not sure if I should be embarrassed by my childish tantrum, or if I should be angry because my dad's writing, the one single thing that connected us and the thing I've held so near, has disappeared. Perhaps taking advantage of my indecision, tears begin plunging down my cheeks, and those tears become sobs, and rushing out unencumbered in those sobs is everything, the last five years of my life, the whole mess.

My mom comes over to me, and she's crying too. She pauses, unsure of what to do next, before I move in close to her and feel my mom's arms around me.

"I'm sorry, mom," I say.

She squeezes me tighter, runs her hand up and down my back and says, "Jay, I'm so sorry, too."

I'm not sure what we're apologizing for.

## EPILOGUE

Belle waits for me, talking to Sasha at the front counter of Sutton's, when I get downstairs. They're probably planning one of the next community outreach events that have become such a large part of our mission at the bookstore. Yes, Sutton's Used Books now has an official mission statement. My whole life up to this point has basically been about avoiding jobs where my employer has a mission statement. Aside from no boss breathing down my neck and the lack of health insurance, not having a mission statement is one of the reasons I started working here in the first place.

As it turns out, though, our mission statement isn't so bad as those things go. Aside from the usual crap about selling high quality used books and treating customers well, we've also made it our job to help out the local kids with after-school literacy programs. And if I can brag on myself for a second, the idea was mine. Well, maybe it was both Belle's and my idea, but I took it to Sasha and she ran with it. Anyway, it's basically an extension of what I was doing as part of my probation. When that ended last month, I decided, with a push from Belle, to keep teaching. I figured with all the changes around Sutton's, I could offer writing classes here. So in addition to the new coffee bar we added over the summer, what was once the Travel Section is now a small classroom in the back of the store. And I'm thinking about taking some classes at Omaha U again, learning to set up and run a non-profit I'm thinking about starting as the official organization for my classes. I can't say more school seems like a lot of fun, but I think I'm onto something here, and if it calls for more school, then so be it.

“Ready for our date?” Belle asks. She’s giving me that light-up-the-room-smile, one of my favorite things about her. Hell, one of my favorite things about life. She kisses me and gives me a hug, two of my other favorite things about life.

“Absolutely,” I say. I would like to claim to have won Belle back by standing outside her apartment holding a boombox playing “In Your Eyes,” but stuff like that never happens in real life. It actually took a couple of weeks of phone conversations and the occasional not-on-a-date drink for me to convince her that I wasn’t still hung up on Wendy, and that I didn’t think my life really sucked – even though I sort of did think it sucked at the time. But what really did it was when I showed Belle what I had written that morning after my meltdown. I had written about my dad and how he used to take me to the slides downtown. Of course, I dressed it up as fiction. You know, it was my novel’s protagonist remembering a scene about his dad from when he was young, but Belle understood what I was doing. The writing’s not great stuff, but it’s an honest start, and I think it showed her that I actually listened to what she had to say. I’m sure Wendy and others can probably attest to it being the first time in my life that I’ve ever listened, like actually really *listened*, to a girlfriend. Those pages sit in a desk drawer in Ralph’s old studio, waiting for me to return to them. I’m not sure I will, though. I’ve realized I don’t have to do it, but they’re there if I want to.

“What are you guys going to do?” Sasha asks. She’s been nice enough to let me use part of Ralph’s old studio as an office for my burgeoning career as a teacher. She’s also hired three new people to ease the workload. They’re your typical young bookseller types – the guys wears skinny jeans, and all of them obsess about indie music, giving way too much credibility to bands like The Decemberists. As a group, they lack the book-

selling panache of Charles, Sebastian, and I, but they seem pretty motivated and are doing a good job so far. Of course, I've yet to learn any of their names, and have taken to calling them "the kids" as though they are a collective unit.

"The usual," I say. "Probably dinner. Then we're going to see Criteria play at the Waiting Room."

"What are you doing tonight?" Belle asks Sasha.

Sasha hesitates for a moment, looking back and forth between Belle and me like a deer in headlights. "Um," she says. "I'm going to a wedding."

"Shit," I say. "I totally forgot. Wendy and Paul." And it's true. Up until right now, I had forgotten. Wendy and I haven't spoken since that night at the Slowdown. It's probably for the best, and I doubt I'll be missed too much at her wedding.

"Yeah," Sasha says quickly, probably to avoid things becoming too awkward, "so I'm going to send the kids home early and close up here in a bit."

"All right," I say, and put an arm around Belle. "We'll see you later."

I'm actually fine with Wendy's wedding – it's not just putting on a brave face for Belle. I can't say for sure why, but it just doesn't bother me any more. And it doesn't bother me that I'm not getting married before her, either. I think that's where Belle and I are heading, but I don't know for sure, and I'm fine with that, too. Maybe it's because I'm not chasing someone else's dreams or idealizing a woman who was never right for me in the first place. I see now that I don't have to fight my dad's battles, do the things in my life that he never did in his. I've figured out a way to make a contribution to this world, and maybe even fulfill some of my potential. I finally see what I have right in front of me, instead of what's not there or what I think should be there. What I can say is

this: When Belle and I walk out Sutton's door, the rest of the night and our lives are out there, and I have everything I need to meet it head on.

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I haven't been to the Waiting Room since it reopened last month after undergoing a massive renovation. And when Belle and I pay our eight bucks at the door and walk in, I'm impressed by what I see. Instead of a cramped space, the two rooms have been opened into one spacious area with good sightlines to the stage from nearly everywhere. The twenty-foot ceilings expose metal ductwork and banks of stage lights, and the walls and flooring are black, giving a cool industrial feel to the place. A new, full-sized soundboard sits in the center and flat screens over the bar run a live feed from the stage so that if you are getting a drink, you won't miss any of the show. But the Waiting Room hasn't changed entirely. The old pool table is still there, and there is plenty of seating at tables near the back of the room. And, despite an updated façade, the bar still serves PBR tallboys, much to my relief.

Belle and I get our drinks and sit at a high table that runs across most of the room behind the soundboard. I've never heard of the opening band before, and they sound, well, like an opening band: all sloppy guitars and off-key singing. Despite a good crowd tonight, most people hang back by the bar, leaving the band to play in front of about ten people who are, presumably, their girlfriends and buddies.

Despite this, the band seems to play louder with each song, compensating up for a lack of talent with volume, making it impossible for Belle and I to carry on a conversation. We're left to smile at each other occasionally between drinks of PBR, and I try to organize my snarky comments about the opening band in a way that will let me

remember them to tell her after their set. But when I laugh to myself about “these guys make Fall Out Boy look talented,” I realize I can’t remember the other two lines I had come up with – something about the lead singer being like Jim Morrison minus the onstage charisma and ability to write interesting lyrics – so I decide to give it up and just enjoy being here with Belle.

I scan the room and notice another change has taken place. The crowd seems different tonight than the usual show-going hipsters. The hipsters are still here, I’ve seen a few scampering around, but they seem scattered about and are definitely in the minority. Dudes wearing skin-tight Affliction t-shirts and NikeGolf caps have replaced skinny jeans and snap-button western shirts. Women wearing short summer dresses, their hair looking like they came directly from the salon, have replaced women wearing Goodwill dresses, castoffs from a 1980s bridesmaid dress catalog. I don’t see long hair on most of the guys or women whose heads are shaved. And no one has facial piercings.

Taking all this in, I can’t help but wonder if the Omaha music scene is over. The people here tonight look less like they are coming out to a show and more like they are attending an event. Like going to show has become a weekend destination for the upwardly mobile instead of a place to the city’s refugees and rejects – the short, the ugly, the uncool – to gather and rock out against the cookie cutter, nine-to-five lifestyle.

The opening band finally wraps up their set and the house lights come on. Belle takes another drink of her PBR and shakes her empty can in my direction. “Do want another one?”

I pick up my can and feel the weight of about half a beer remaining. “No, I’m still working on this one.”

Belle gives me a sideways glance, one brow arched in my direction. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I say, and give her a forced grin. “I’m fine.” The truth is that I’m tired, my PBR doesn’t taste good, and I really want to drink a bottle of water. My eyes feel heavy and I wouldn’t mind turning in early and getting a good night’s sleep before work tomorrow. Maybe it’s the weird crowd, or the crappy opening band, but I want to go back to her duplex in Dundee, or my apartment just down the street from her’s. I have to admit that sitting on the couch at Belle’s place and watching a movie sounds really great right now.

“Are you sure?” Belle asks.

“I’m a little tired,” I say. “Maybe we should get out of here.”

Belle looks at me for a moment, perhaps trying to tell if I’m being serious. “But Criteria hasn’t even gone on stage yet.”

“You’re right,” I say. “I was just joking anyway.”

I choke down another sip of my beer, unable to believe I just suggested we leave. It’s both sacrilege and ridiculous to have said that out loud. I’ve survived shitty opening bands before. Most opening bands suck. And I’ve also navigated bad crowds. It’s just something that happens when your favorite local band starts getting famous. But something does feel off tonight. Yes, I’m getting a little old to be hanging out at shows, but I’m not even thirty-two until next month. A young pup by most standards. But if I’m being honest with myself, I have to wonder if I fit in here anymore. It’s possible that, maybe, going to shows and hanging out until the bars close has finally passed me by.

I shake off those nasty thoughts and finish my PBR like the champ I know I can be. I've had this Criteria show circled on my calendar for a while, and am excited to see them play. With their big hooks and stadium rock sound, they stand out in the local indie scene, and their shows, as evidenced by the big crowd tonight, aren't to be missed.

A second wave of energy crests through me and I stand up. "Ok, let's get another round."

She stands up as well. "You sure?"

"Yup. Let's do this."

But as we make our way through the crowd, I stop in my tracks when I see Hank sitting at the far end of the bar. He sits there with his normal array of empty cans in front of him and two indistinguishable twentysomethings on either side. They both wear formfitting sleeveless blouses and large hoop earrings dangle from their ears. As they draw themselves in closer to Hank, pushing against him, I see one give the other a knowing smirk, to which the other responds by rolling her eyes. Hank seems oblivious to this nonverbal communication, and looks straight ahead, eyes low beneath his trucker's cap.

Belle, realizing that I'm no longer right behind her, makes her way back to me. "What's wrong?"

I look at her for a moment before glancing again at Hank. His friends, perhaps bored by their little game, have walked off, leaving him alone. He just sits there, having barely moved the entire time, and I wonder if he even knows the girls are gone.

Belle looks over in the same direction for a second, perhaps seeing what I'm looking at. She turns back to me and is silent before taking my hand and pulling me close to her, forcing me to look at her again. "Ok," she says. "Let's go home."