**EVERYONE IS A SETTING SUN: The Ballad of Jordie Mack**

**By Scott Morrow Johnson**

*You were right about the stars*

*Each one is a setting sun.*

*-Jeff Tweedy*

*How dare you come here looking for answers. The story has been told, as if you don’t know. A story like cold buffet food, force-fed to us in heaps. We don’t always know how meals are made, but we know how they taste. And this one, it doesn’t go down well.*

*Of course, you already knew that. You know how this one ends.*

*And yet here you are. Asking for answers. Asking for insight. How does this happen? Why do we ascend so high and fall so far? As if we don’t know. Every rising wave crests and falls. Back into the sea. Every breath in is followed by a breath out.*

*Well, all but one.*

*Our final one.*

*And yet, here you are. Asking for explanation. Of a story that’s been written before. Of a song that others have sung. You ask me to sing, as if I will find notes that have never been reached. Find words that have never been written. As if you expect the ending to change, an ending you already know.*

*How dare you come here. Asking me about Jordie Mack.*

*Who on earth hasn’t heard how it ends? Who hasn’t heard his ballad before?*

*It’s a story we know too well. We lose something, we want it back, and we won’t stop until we get it. Not unless we die trying.*

*It’s all of our stories.*

*Jordie Mack might be one of the most famous people of our generation, but he is just like the rest of us. He is human. Aren’t we all?*

*Even when we rise and fall, like the tide, we are all just skin and bones. Birth and death. And whatever happens in between.*

CHAPTER 1

“Sing me a song.”

That’s what she told me when she arrived on what started as an unremarkable Saturday night in the dead of a torrid Midwest winter. She was alone, and how she got there was a mystery to me. It still is. It’s as if she emerged from between the snowflakes, blowing into my life like a gentle breeze.

“Please,” she whispered. I will never forget the calmness within her voice. The calm before the storm.

Margaret McGuire, who friends and scores of lovers knew as Maggie, was nine months and four days pregnant, about 36 hours of hard labor away from giving birth to her first child, and all she wanted was a lullaby.

She took me by the hand.

“When I was a baby,” she said, “my father used to comfort me with song.” She looked up at me with fear in her eyes. They were the eyes of a child. She was a small woman, with the face of an adolescent, but her jaw was tight, her forehead moist with perspiration. “It was the only memory I have of that bastard.”

My eyes fell to her stomach. It was almost the size of the rest of her tiny body. She had red hair and green eyes. It was as if she had an enormous watermelon stuffed under her shirt.

“How far along are you?” I asked.

“Far enough,” she said, releasing my hand. “The fuck’s it to you?”

Her face changed. The frightened child morphed into something else. Something with a thirst for blood.

“I am a doctor,” I said. “That’s what it is to me.”

She reached up, took me by the collar of my white coat, and pulled me closer to her. She had surprising strength, considering her lithe frame and her current condition.

“Then get this thing out of me,” she said between gnashed teeth.

I swallowed hard and tried to say something, perhaps about hospital policy and the need to take her hands off of me, but she didn’t allow me to speak.

“Sing me a song!” she shouted, now at the top of her lungs. “And then get this fucking thing out of meeeeeee!!!!”

I chose Buddy Holly. Peggy Sue.

She pushed and screamed and cried, like they all do, but that child within her was stubborn. Watching the process, being in the profession I chose, I am always struck by one single thought as a woman battles with the forces of nature and fights through unimaginable pain as she tries to deliver the miracle of life.

I am stuck with the thought of how blessed I am to be a man.

Thirty-six hours later, come hell or highwater, despite a brief period when her heart stopped but for only a few seconds, through the sounds of a pounding wind against the windowpane from a blizzard that rose with the night, through the comings and goings of a series of nurses but not a single visitor, not even the child’s father, this tiny redhead with the heart of a lion, who called herself Maggie McGuire, delivered the miracle of life.

The child burst out of her, a mass of blood and umbilical tangle and placental fluid, and screamed with uncertainty. The most beautiful sound in the world. The sound of a healthy child.

I cut the umbilical cord, cleaned the fluid from the naked child’s skin, and held it out for her. Her red hair matted from sweat, her breath still coming out in heaves, she shook her head. I gave her a moment to compose herself, to catch her breath, and then I held the child out again.

“It’s a healthy baby boy,” I said with pride.

But she just held out her hand.

“Keep it,” she said. She could not bear to look at the boy.

“I can’t,” she said hoarsely. She closed her eyes. “I’m seventeen. I’m not …” A tear rolled down her cheek. “Take it away,” she said. “Please.”

I gave her another moment. I cannot pretend to know the female mind, despite my chosen profession, but I do know that when hormones are storming within us, we can lose touch with all rationale. I held the baby and looked up at a television in the corner. It was playing sports highlights from the previous night’s action.

“Do you like him?” Maggie McGuire asked. I would come to learn in the coming days that she was a party girl, that the name of the child’s father was a mystery to her, that one night about nine months ago she was so drunk that she let five or six strangers have their way with her, one after the other, and that any one of them could be among the dozens of possible sources of the sperm that swam inside of her and helped to make this human that I was currently holding in my arms.

“Excuse me?” I asked, holding the baby while the sports highlights played silently above us.

“Jordan,” she said. “Isn’t that his name?”

I did not understand, and the look on my face must have said as much.

“The basketball player,” she said, “up on the screen. The bald one.”

I looked back at the television screen. I was not a sports fan, but even I knew the man’s name. The year was 1995, and he was perhaps the most famous man on earth.

“Yes,” I said. “Michael Jordan.”

She stared up at the screen, then her eyes met mine. She held my gaze, then looked down at the baby in my arms. Her eyes filled with tears.

She reached out her arms.

“Bring him to me,” she whispered.

I placed the boy in her arms. I do not know what you do for a living, but I can promise you that it does not end with a moment as beautiful as this, over and over again. Placing a healthy newborn in the arms of his or her mother is the greatest gift a man could ever experience.

She held him to her chest and used her fingers to gently caress the tiny strands of hair on his fragile head.

“I promised myself I wouldn’t keep it,” she said quietly, looking down into the crying baby’s eyes. The child nuzzled against her, the purring of his cries decreasing in volume as the wind outside pounded against the walls of the hospital. “I don’t have anyone,” she said. “And besides, I fucking hate kids.” She looked up at me. “Oh, shit. Did he hear that? Can he hear me?”

I grinned and nodded. “I can assure you,” I said, “he won’t understand. Not for a few months.”

She looked back down at the boy. Her fingertip ran along his cheek, his chin. She took in a deep breath.

“Hello, Jordan,” she said softly, then pressed her lips to his forehead.

I watched with curiosity as this woman fell in love with her child. And as the child fell in love for the first time. At the time, I’d have thought it impossible that this Jordan could ever be even close to as famous as Jordan the athlete. In this profession, you tend to realize that life is never as great as it is in these first moments. Most of us struggle through life by scratching and clawing for whatever we can get. Some fall through the cracks, while a select few rise up into the stars.

“His feet,” she said, “they’re so tiny. And his eyes, they barely open.” She looked up at me, as if the child needed fixing. She took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, then smiled. She had a beautiful smile, and in that moment I could see why so many men had fallen in love with her. I wondered if she would ever find a way to love herself.

I heard a sound. A rising hum that at first I thought was coming from the swirling winds outside.

Then I recognized the tune. Her hum turned into a quiet song.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word,” Maggie McGuire sang softly. “Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.”

Her eyes opened and looked up at me.

“Fuck it,” she said. “I’m keeping him.” The beauty of her face morphed into something angry again. “What the fuck do I do now?”

And that’s how Jordan Edward McGuire came to know the world.

The world would come to know him as Jordie Mack.

CHAPTER 2

Even at a young age, the girls swooned over him. I didn’t see the attraction. Maybe it was because, as his first-grade teacher, I was more than forty years his senior. Maybe it was because he was such an odd child – aloof, maybe even on the spectrum. My generation used to use words like “special” or “retarded.” He was not retarded in what we used to call mentally retarded, but more socially and emotionally retarded. As in, slow to develop. The actual definition of the word.

Oh, my, I feel like I’ve said too much. I have a habit of such. Perhaps in this way, I am the opposite of retarded. I think things and say things too quickly. Without thought. As an elementary school teacher who deals with children of all forms of ilk, I see impulsive kids, slow kids and everything in between. I try to love them all. Try.

As educators, we find something within all of our students. There were certainly things to like about Jordan McGuire, although it’s been so many years that they escape me now. I know his mother was a piece of work, if that’s the right phrase. Maggie, I think her name was. She looked and acted nothing like him. It’s as if the stork was real, only in this case it had directions to the wrong hospital. While the mother was full of piss and vinegar, the boy seemed to be made of sludge. He was slow to answer, slow to make friends. Life seemed to move on around him, while he just lollygagged along.

But the girls, they liked him very much. Attraction is strange like that. I’ve been married 37 years now, and while my husband might not cause other women to look twice, he treats me right and works hard in his chosen career. If only young women would seek out these attributes over a strong jaw, nice hair or whatever that magical charisma it is that naughty boys seem to have, there would be significantly fewer divorces and happier families.

Family. Maybe that’s what it was. The boy did not have a father, from what I recall. As a Christian, I was raised not to judge. But it’s hard to turn a blind eye to things like broken families and unwilling parents. A colleague of mine likes to say that parents do the best with what they have, but to that I say: “If that’s all you have, go and get more.”

But I digress. You are here to talk about Jordan. He acted like an unhappy boy, a boy who needed a father but never had one. He never seemed right with his world.

I recall a day when Jordan stayed in the room while the others lined up for recess. I thought something was wrong, maybe something at home, and walked over to his desk. He did not look up. He was scratching at something on the desk, and for a moment I thought he was drawing a picture or writing something down. But as I got closer, I saw that he was just using his fingernail to scratch at the wood.

“Jordan,” I said softly. We were the only two people in the room. He did not look up. I said his name again, more loudly. “Jordan.”

He did not give me the time of day. I gently rested a hand on his shoulder, and at that time he noticed me standing there for the first time. His head came up, but he did not look me in the face. His eyes began to scan the room.

“Why did you not go out with the other kids?” I asked.

Jordan said nothing at first. He just stood up and stared at the floor.

“Jordan,” I whispered, “is something wrong?”

He made a grunting sound. Without looking up, he said, “Sorry, bro,” then he hurried out of the classroom.

Bro. As if I was a child. One of his peers.

He was the kind of child that should have a hard time making friends, and I do not recall him having any close relationships, but somehow people gravitated toward him. Not just the girls, but the boys too. He didn’t have to say much, but people always seemed to be gathered around him. It was a strange thing, how kids are drawn to such a strange child like that. I always felt uncomfortable in his presence.

You could say that I am not surprised by how things turned out. I mean, many aspects of his life were more grandiose than one might expect, but the way things ended did not come as a shock to me. He was not a child destined for greatness, from what I could tell. That he rose to that stature came as a revelation; that he fell so far did not surprise me in the least.

One more story, and this one I remember quite clearly.

The school bell had rung an hour earlier, maybe 90 minutes, and I was in my classroom tidying up and preparing for the following day. This was a Tuesday, if I recall. A colleague of mine stopped in to say goodbye, and a few minutes later I heard a sound from down the hall. I traced it to the classroom two doors down from mine. The door was locked, and it sounded like someone was trying to pull the handle. I looked around, hoping to find a janitor or someone else who might provide assistance.

The sound stopped, and I felt a little startled by the whole thing, so I went and got my things and hurried out to my car. As I looked back, I could see the classroom window was open. Wide open, as if someone had climbed out.

Just as I started to get out of my car, a child ran out into the schoolyard in the distance. I couldn’t see for sure that it was him, but my mind told me that it was Jordan McGuire. Teachers have a sense for recognizing jackets and gaits and body types that way. Parenthetically, I was once at the State Fair and saw a man from a distance and could tell by his walk that it was a boy from my class 20 years previous. Anyhoo, this child disappeared between a fence and out into the neighborhood.

Rather than to go back inside the school, I texted the janitorial staff about the open window and drove off to find the child I believed to be Jordan. I zigzagged through the streets but could not find him. I asked him about the incident the following day, and he looked at me like I had two heads.

But I am sure it was him. To this day, I know. I ask myself if he was hiding in there, if maybe he did that every day after school. If maybe he was trying to avoid something at home.

Or if maybe the school was the only place he felt safe.

When I heard what happened to Jordan, I thought of that open window. I wondered if maybe I could have done or said something that day that would have changed the course of his life.

I guess that’s what we, as humans, do. We choose a path, then we live with regret. The other path, it always seems to have been a better choice.

Maybe that’s what life is about.

CHAPTER 3

 This is something I used to brag about, but now I have mixed feelings. It’s kind of embarrassing, considering all that’s happened. But here goes.

 I was his first kiss. I was fifteen at the time, and I hate to say it but he was only twelve. Maybe even eleven. Does that make me some kind of perv or something? I mean, it was a long time ago.

 He had a young face, but he certainly didn’t look like a 12-year old. He was close to six feet already; Jordie was tall for his age for as long as I could remember. He was kind of strange, but handsome in a youthful kind of way. Even then, I could see something big in his future.

 We lived two doors down from Jordie and Ms. McGuire. My mom hated Maggie with a passion. Called her the town drunk. Said she was an embarrassment to our Irish heritage. She was as easy as fried eggs, whatever that meant. Rumor had it that she did a sexual favor for Jordie’s fourth-grade teacher, just to avoid Jordie getting held back. Her body, “what there was of it,” as my mother used to say, also paid her rent and her bill at Doyle’s Tavern.

 But who am I to judge? I was going through a period of sexual experimentation of my own back then. My dad had just left us for his best friend’s wife – that asshole blow-torched two families at once – and I was kind of finding myself. I’d grown a decent set of tits and found out how easy it was to make grown men stare. I let a few of the high school boys feel me up, and even got it on with Andrea Murray’s much-older brother in the back seat of a Nissan (hot summer vinyl … ouch!). But I would grow out of that phase soon enough. I didn’t want to grow up and become like Maggie McGuire. God, no.

 My first boyfriend’s name was Nate, and he was pretty good to me but was also pretty boring to me. He was on the JV cross-country team and the sophomore student advisory board, and he was pretty sure he was going into accounting eventually, just like his dad, and his dad’s dad. I know, right?

 I remember seeing Jordie one day and thinking: That kid’s going to break some hearts when he gets older. He had this kind of perma-sneer on his face that told people he didn’t really give a fuck and he didn’t care who knew it. I can’t explain why, but there’s something sexy about that. Especially to a 15-year-old girl.

 But he was just a kid. There wasn’t like, any kind of deep connection or anything. He was just another ball of clay worth trying to mold, just like all the other guys.

 His mom left him home alone all the time, and one day I was walking by and saw him sitting on the front stairs. He was just staring down at his feet. This was like a day after Nate had taken me to some boring movie and afterward told me for the 45th time that he was holding onto his virginity until the time was right. Hate to say it, but I took about three other guys’ virginities during the six months Nate and I were dating.

 So I go up to Jordie, and I walk up to him and say hi, but he doesn’t say anything. He looks up at me, and his hair is hanging down over one eye. He is all slumped over like adolescent kids who aren’t quite comfortable with their bodies. He’s silently staring at me with an air of mystery. I could only see one of his piercing brown eyes, but in it I thought I saw something deep and complex. Like he was thinking in the sixth dimension. I would come to realize that he probably wasn’t thinking about anything, that he was just a simpleton who happened to be good-looking.

 But I didn’t know that at the time. I just saw this kid who had a youthful, handsome face, and I asked if he wanted to share a cigarette. We ended up smoking in the alley behind his house, and after he coughed through a few puffs, I asked if he’d ever kissed a girl. He just shook his head, and I said: “Here, I’ll show you how.”

 I tried to use my tongue, which I thought might freak out a kid his age out, but he didn’t flinch. We found some symmetry for a few seconds, then I just stepped back and told him to give me a call when he got a little older. He never did, unfortunately.

 It wasn’t the greatest kiss I’ve ever had. No fireworks or anything. In fact, the best thing about kissing Jordan McGuire is that I’d get to spend my entire adult life telling people I’d kissed Jordie Mack.

 A blessing and a curse.

 I saw him a couple of days later, and he looked at me but then coolly looked away. Those dark eyes just moved on past me, which I didn’t mind because I knew it meant he’d never tell Nate. Or anyone else.

 But it also told me that Jordan had a lot more lady killing to do in his life. He was just that kind of guy.

 A couple of years later, I heard a story about a female middle school teacher who had apparently seduced a few eighth-grade boys. I knew without knowing that Jordan was one of them. He seemed like the type to be down for whatever.

 Now, I’ve got a 12-year-old son of my own, and the thought of him kissing a teenager, much less a teacher, makes me laugh out loud. But my son’s your normal 12-year-old boy, into baseball and Fortnight and riding bikes.

 Jordie McGuire was not your average kid. He was always destined to live a life different from the rest of us. I like to think that’s what I saw in him, all those years ago.

CHAPTER 4:

My name’s Stephen Gomez, and I guess there was a time you could have said I was Jordie Mack’s best friend. He was Jordan back then, Jordan McGuire. I might have been his only friend, although we weren’t even that close. I was more like his ride to the parties and stuff.

He was 15, and I was 16, during that year we spent together. Jordan was a weird dude, but the girls all seemed to like him. He was a good-looking guy, I guess, but I’m not an expert or anything. I don’t go that way, you know? People always seem to think I do, but whatever. Used to piss me off, but now I just think it’s their own insecurities.

But we’re not here to talk about me, huh? We’re here to talk about Jordan. Or Jordie, as people like to call him.

I was with him the day that weirdo talent manager “discovered” him, if that’s what you want to call it. I thought the guy was a homo, if we’re being honest. Some grown man talking up a couple of teenage boys at the mall. Who does that?

We went there during a Saturday afternoon. I wanted to get some new clothes for a party that night, and Jordan tagged along. He wasn’t interested in buying clothes. I can’t remember a single time the dude ever wore new clothes. He wore baggy basketball shorts and sweatshirts, like, every day. Never washed or combed his hair. It’s like he wasn’t even trying. Or maybe he was too good-looking for his own good, and wanted to dumb it down a little bit. I don’t know. Like I said, I don’t go that way.

So we’re chilling in the Food Court or some shit, and this dude walks up to us. He was probably in his thirties, but to us he looked like someone’s dad. He starts chatting us up.

“You guys go to Southwest High?” Some shit like that.

I’m all creeped out by it, but Jordan didn’t seem to care. He could be like that. Socially unaware. He was a quiet guy, for the most part, but if someone asked him a question, he answered it. Like there was nothing weird about a grown man coming up and talking to a couple kids at the mall. I got to be honest: I thought the guy had the hots for us or was a serial killer, maybe both. Like that dude in Wisconsin back in the day who picked up gay dudes, then killed them, chopped them up into pieces and ate them. I was getting that kind of vibe off the guy. But Jordan, he just shrugged like we were talking to a kid at a party.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m a year younger than Stevie here.”

Like, who does that? Who just talks to a stranger? Maybe it’s because Jordan didn’t really have parents. He never knew his dad, and his mom … don’t even get me started.

I made some excuse, like we had to be going, but Jordan didn’t pick up on it. He just stood there, talking to the guy. He was a serial killer’s dream.

“School sucks, huh?” this guy, the full-grown adult, says. Jordan agrees with him. I’m looking around for an escape, and I remember seeing this chick in a denim miniskirt who caught my eye. “Listen,” this weirdo guy says. He’s looking up at Jordan, who by this time is about 6-foot-2. The basketball coach tried to get him to come out, but Jordan wasn’t interested – despite his propensity to dress the part. The guy at the Food Court is barely up to Jordan’s chin. No basketball coach, ever, looked twice at him, I can assure you. “I am trying to find some strong, healthy guys for this work opportunity I’ve got,” the guy says. “Might even lead to a career and get you out of school, you know?”

“Oh yeah?” Jordan says. All gullible-like. And I’m thinking this old dude is going to offer us each a C-note to blow him or something. That’s the career. But then I notice that the guy isn’t even looking at me. He’s just looking at Jordan. And, in a weird way, I feel disappointed. Like, how come the guy doesn’t want me to blow him? I mean, I wouldn’t. Hell no. But at least he could ask. I would love to be loved, you know?

Then the guy pulls a card out of his wallet. He looks at me for the first time, then pulls out another card. Like he owes it to me or something. I’ve got on designer jeans, a $200 sweater and a $100 chain, and I spent a good hour on my hair. Jordan rolls out of bed, throws on basketball shorts and a hoodie, and this dude is spending all his time on him. The girls were like that too, but you have to know the girls at our high school to understand. They were all fucked in the head that way. I mean, I did alright with the ladies. But Jordan, they all seemed more interested in him. There was a bad-boy quality to him, a mystery or some shit. Girls like that. Don’t let them tell you they don’t.

Anyway, this dude holds out the business cards, but before Jordan or I can take them, he asks: “Can you sing?”

Jordan looks at me. I speak for the first time.

“I don’t want to brag,” I say, “but I can carry a tune.”

“Yeah?” the guy says without looking at me. He’s still staring at Jordan. “What about you?” he asks.

“Hell no, I can’t sing,” Jordan says. But the guy gives us his cards anyway.

I can’t remember his name, but he said he worked for a guy named E-Dub. Everett Washington. A music producer.

“We can work with that,” he tells Jordan.

I scoff at that. I’m still convinced the guy has a fetish for teenage boys who dress like homeless people.

“You work for a music producer,” I say, “and you don’t care if we can sing?”

The guy looks Jordan up and down.

“E-Dub can work with anything,” he says. “I find the talent, and he makes miracles.”

The guy points to a line on the bottom of the card: WE MAKE MIRACLES.

Wouldn’t you know it? The dude was right.

CHAPTER 5

I have been in the music business for 30 years, and let me tell you something. I have never heard someone who sang as badly as Jordie Mack. At the beginning, I mean. Obviously, we turned him into a superstar. But at the beginning? He couldn’t sing his way out of a poker game.

But I knew as soon as he showed up at that Midwest talent search that he would be in the band. He had the look. The sneer. That charisma that made girls swoon. E-Dub, my mentor, used to like to use the phrase: “Some guys have the instant-panty-remover look.” Our job titles said we were in the music business, but let’s be real. We were in the business of making teenage girls want to take off their panties.

Jordie was one of about 75 guys that showed up that day, and he stood out above the crowd. He was tall, had wide shoulders but also had this kind of slump that said I don’t give a shit about none of this. All the other boys were trying to impress us, and Jordie could have cared less. That’s what caught my eye.

We gave him the lyrics to some pop song – I think it was Justin Bieber or Maroon 5 or whatever was topping the charts back on that day – and the kid couldn’t hit a note to save humanity. He sounded like a dying walrus getting a colonoscopy. Tore paint off the walls, I tell you. But that didn’t matter. There was plenty of voice-altering software around. We weren’t looking for the next Frank Sinatra; we were looking for the next Arthur Fonzarelli.

We narrowed it down to 12 or 15, brought them to L.A., and that’s where E-Dub met Jordie for the first time.

Now, I probably don’t need to tell you this, but Everett Washington was the biggest producer going at the time. Whereas Quincy Jones, Rick Rubin and Nile Rodgers might have an ear for the sound, E-Dub had the eye for what girls really want. He could probably grab five guys out of an Abercrombie and Fitch catalog and teach them to squeeze gold records out of their asses.

I will never forget what E-Dub told me the first time he saw Jordan McGuire in-person. He pulled me aside and said: “The tall one looks like he smells like shit, but he’s going to smell like lots of pussy by the time we get done with him.”

That’s the way Everett Washington talked. Take him or leave him.

He asked me how old Jordan was and if I’d seen him with his shirt off. You know what E-Dub didn’t ask me? If he could sing. That was irrelevant. That was E-Dub’s genius.

A day later, when we were looking at the photos of the candidates for what would become the band BroTown, the biggest boy band in maybe the history of boy bands, E-Dub held up Jordie’s photo and said: “Something about that face makes me want to be a teenage girl again. You know what I mean?”

I didn’t know what he meant, but I knew what he meant.

You know what I mean?

CHAPTER 6

You probably don’t know me, but I was an original member of BroTown. I was supposed to be the shy one, but apparently the test marketing showed that I didn’t come off as shy and likeable. Or something.

I was in the band for the first couple of months, and I would like to say it was the best experience of my life, except that it wasn’t. It seemed like this amazing opportunity at the time, but it was really just a canned attempt at making chicken salad out of chicken shit. Truth be told, I was the only one with any musical training. Jordie, he had a voice like flatulence. After two rehearsals, I swore he would be the one who got cut.

But apparently, he fit the role of the “rebel.” Every boy band has to have one. I know they hate to be called that – E-Dub especially loathed the term – but who are we kidding? Everett Washington, aka E-Dub, wasn’t re-inventing the wheel. The guy was just building formulaic pop and taking advantage of the wallets of naïve teenage girls. You know?

 Even the names were ridiculous. My real name is Ivan Karl Rubinski. E-Dub wanted to call me Evan Sweet. How stupid is that? And Jordie’s real name, if I recall, was actually Jordan. E-Dub came in that first time we met and started renaming us. Jordie was the easiest. His last name was Mac-something. McGuire, I think. So Jordan McGuire became Jordie Mack.

 It’s been awhile since I even thought about those days. I mean, even when I heard about what happened to Jordie Mack, I barely thought of our time together. I think I talked to the guy once, maybe twice. He was a man of few words. I found him to be mysterious at first, but it turns out there wasn’t much behind the eyes. He was a hollowed-out mansion. A dried-out lake. The only mystery was how he made it through the rigorous process of auditions and landed a spot in the band that would become BroTown.

 But who am I to say? Considering how big they got, E-Dub must have known what he was doing.

 I wasn’t a big fan of E-Dub, either. The toupee. The designer glasses. The oversized shirts. The pinky ring. The sandals he always wore under designer jeans. Even the nickname, E-Dub, seemed kind of ridiculous. He was a grown man. How old do you have to be before you start calling yourself Everett?

 Everett seemed to have a thing for Jordie. Not in a sexual way, but in the way a father has for a favorite child. Jordie could do no wrong.

 One time, I heard them talking in E-Dub’s office. Actually, E-Dub was doing all the talking. I’d gone up there to meet with E-Dub – this was a few days before he told me I’d no longer be in the band – and I heard his raspy voice through the door.

 “You don’t gotta worry about none of that,” he was telling Jordie. “You just be you, ya’ hear me? Jordie Mack. You ain’t here to be Freddie Mercury, just Jordie Mack.” E-Dub had this way of taking long pauses, where you thought he was done speaking but he was just pausing for effect. “You understand me, son?”

 “Yes, sir.”

 “Let’s drop the sir shit, whatayasay?” Pause. “Just call me E-Dub. Just be you. Don’t worry about signing off key or forgetting the lyrics. We can fix all that crap.” Pause. “I’ve been doing this a long time, you hear me?” Pause. “And what that means is, I know what people want. A certain demographic of people.” Pause. “What they’re gonna want, son, is Jordie Mack.” Pause. “Just the way he is.”

 I spent a lot of time with resentment, knowing a no-talent hack like that made the band over me. But once I started seeing videos and watched how the five of them performed together, I understood. Jordie Mack certainly wasn’t Freddie Mercury. Or even Justin Timberlake. He wasn’t necessarily an entertainer; he was a personality.

 He was a 6-foot-5 panty remover. That’s all E-Dub needed him to be. E-Dub was a lot of things, but he wasn’t stupid.

 He knew Jordie Mack had that indescribable something that could make BroTown the biggest act going.

 He knew BroTown was about to take the world by storm.

CHAPTER 7

 The best way to describe it was being in the eye of a hurricane. The first single, “The Best of My Heart (Is Only 4U),” had hit No. 4 on the TRL Countdown before the group performed their first live show. Not my cup of tea, that song, but I was a few decades and a vagina away from being in their target demographic.

 As my crew started rolling crates out of the trucks before the first show – I think it was Philly, maybe The Meadowlands – you could already feel the electricity. This was two days before the show, and already dozens of girls were lined up along the fence, screaming their names.

 “Jordie!”

 “CB!”

 “Kevin!”

 “Talyn!”

 “Rico!”

 I’d never seen anything like it. I’d been in the business more than a quarter century, and had the long, grey ponytail to prove it, and let me tell you that this was a first.

 And trust me, I’d seen a lot. You ask anyone in the music business about Pedro Arbusto, and they’ll all tell you the same thing: *Best tour manager in the business*. Not bragging here, just facts. I’ve been on tour with The Boss, The Stones, The Who, you name it. Pearl Jam. Beyonce. Kanye.

 And I’m here to tell you: None of them got the treatment BroTown got on that first tour. Those teenage girls went mental. A hurricane of estrogen, I tell you.

 I know you want to hear about Jordie Mack, but I’m going to be honest with you. The guy never said two words to me. To say we were friends would be like saying I was married to a toaster. The guy pretty much kept to himself. He barely made eye contact. I’ve met some freakazoids on the road over the years – ask me about that bassist for the heavy-metal glam band and the burnt scrotum that led to an ER visit, and I’ll deny I ever heard of him – but Jordie may well have been the strangest. Even weirder because he wasn’t on drugs. That would explain it, but no. Word on the street was that he didn’t touch the stuff. He was just a kid. As naïve as a newborn cub trying to suck honey out of a doorbell. Y’know?

 But, whoa, the chicks. They started out screaming all their names when the tour began, but by Indianapolis, his name was the one you heard the loudest. “I love you, Jordie!” “Marry me, Jordie!” “Take my hymen, Big Jordie!” I mean, they didn’t say that last one. Probably too young to know what a hymen was. But not too young to let him pop it.

 I’m telling you, he could have put the X in statutory. Except he wasn’t even eighteen yet, you feel me? Free game, right?

 For us old guys, fifteen will get you twenty. Or so they say. You have to be careful, you know? I mean, we got our share of teenage tail, don’t get me wrong. But at my age, you had to pick the right ones. Not the ones who’d go and brag about it.

 Not that I was into that. I mean, I was a non-discriminatory tour manager. Some out there, they just chase the young tail. I slept with two three women who were in their 60s. Hundreds of others who were … let’s just say, younger than I was. As Pedro Arbusto always liked to say: If there are strings on the guitar, strum away.

 But this isn’t about me. I’m not even sure Jordie Mack knew who I was. You ask him about Pedro Arbusto, he’ll probably cock his head like he’s deaf. Or dumb.

 Personally, I wouldn’t be surprised if the guy was both.

 It was pretty well-known on the tour bus that he was tone deaf. Couldn’t sing a lick. On tours, his mic wasn’t even on. I can say that now; I think it’s pretty common knowledge. If that’s not already out there, if the public doesn’t already know, please don’t print that. And maybe take out that stuff about the teenage girls too, will you? Pedro Arbusto has a reputation to uphold, you know?

 I will say this. I’ve never seen a human with so little talent become so famous. It’s almost beyond explanation. Except he had that charisma. That bad-boy thing. You can’t teach it, you just know it when you see it.

 Jordie Mack had that star quality.

 It doesn’t surprise me much that it went to his head. Or that the other four guys got jealous.

 The first tour started out as BroTown, but within a year or two, the band might as well have been called Jordie Mack and the Dipshits.

 By the end of that tour, I was getting the sense that BroTown might not be long for this business.

 I saw that one coming a mile away.

CHAPTER 8

 I remember the first time I heard of BroTown. I went next door to Kaley Hawkinson’s house, like I’d been doing since we were toddlers, and she had “The Best of My Heart (Is Only 4U)” was playing on the stereo while she made up a dance in front of the mirror. We were 8 years old, separated by six days.

 “What’s this junk?” I asked. I was into Blackeyes Peas, Katy Perry and Chris Brown in those years, as a lot of kids my age were. This was when I just started putting on weight, before the kids started calling me Thick Rick. I went by Richard. At 8 years old, kids were mostly kind to each other. Within a few years, all of them turned against me. Everyone but Kaley. The prettiest girl in town.

 “BroTown, duh,” she said. “Do you, like, live under a rock?”

 “I live next door, Kaley. You should know that.”

 “It’s a saying, Richard,” she said, starting the song over. “Now, stop interrupting. Either shut up and watch, or dance with me.”

 I chose the latter. Again, I was 8 years old. I was at my best friend’s house, the best friend I’d had since birth. Our mothers had been pregnant together and pretty much decided we’d be best friends long before we were born. Little did they know that I’d grow into a chubby, clumsy kid, while the other would grow into the most beautiful girl to ever come from Jefferson County.

 That’s not one man’s opinion. Google it.

 Back then, she had all the signs of a future beauty queen. The shiny blond hair. The olive skin. The almond eyes. My crush on Kaley Hawkinson started around that time, although I would keep it a secret until one night in high school, after I’d had too much to drink. That would become one of the biggest regrets of my life, maybe the biggest.

 But this was before all that, when she was introducing me to BroTown. Their debut album was called “2 Hot 4 School,” and to me it sounded like every boy-band crap ever created. But I danced nonetheless. If Kaley Hawkinson had told me to stand on my head and cluck like a chicken, I probably would have done that too.

 “Right leg out, elbow, spin, then kick!” Kaley said. I followed her lead. She had a natural rhythm and could move her body in ways I’d only seen in music videos. At the time, I figured all girls could dance like that. In the years that followed, I would realize how special Kaley Hawkinson was.

 She would go on to perform The Spice Girls’ “Be My Lover” at the sixth-grade talent show a few years later, not only winning first prize but also a standing ovation. By fourteen years old, she would land the lead role in the city production of “Annie,” beating out a bunch of 20-something actresses because Kaley’s voice was so incredible.

 By seventeen, she would finish as one of the four finalists on American Idol, after the angry judge with the British accent would tell her she wasn’t unique enough to ever reach stardom, while that weird host with the frosted tips and the horrible underbite would throw his hands up in frustration.

 A year after that, she would become a pop sensation. Kaley Hawk. The Teen Queen of Magazines. A Rolling Stone cover the week of our eighteenth birthdays. Two gold records before we turned 20.

 As 8-year-old Kaley choreographed a dance for me in the bedroom of her childhood home, all I knew was that the more I starting to like her in new ways, the less I liked her choice in music.

 “Talyn! Rico! Jordie! Kevin! CB!” she called out. The names meant nothing to me. “I love these guys!”

 But that love, unlike my blossoming love for Kaley Hawkinson, would die out by the time she turned 10. Taylor Swift and Ed Shearan and Meghan Trainor would take over her stereo, and her boy-band phase would, thankfully, fade out like the end of a crappy pop song.

 But most of America wasn’t so lucky. For three years, BroTown was putting out No. 1 hits and making teenage girls scream with joy – from Seattle to Tallahassee, Los Angeles to Bangor, and all points in between.

 In the years that followed, I would go through a country stage, a grunge stage, and even a classic rock stage. I’d balloon up to a peak weight of 375 pounds by my sophomore year of high school, but Kaley stayed my best friend.

 At least until that drunken night when I’d open my mouth and ruin it all. Just because you love someone, that doesn’t mean you have to tell them.

 She would go on to tour the world, much like BroTown had a few years before her, while I’d be destined to stay in this one-story town. Forgotten, like a one-hit wonder.

 Wishing I could have been there for her. Wishing she had never met Jordie Mack.

CHAPTER 9

Jordie Mack didn’t know this at the time, or maybe he did. I was only fifteen at the time. Jordie was seventeen, at least that’s what his Wikipedia page said.

It wasn’t my first time, and it certainly wasn’t Jordie’s. This was in the midst of the Back4More tour, the bigger-and-better follow-up after BroTown put out their second album. Let me start by saying this: as great as 2Hot4School was, Back4More was better. BroTown was as big as it got in pop music, and all five members could have any girl they wanted. Any girl.

And Jordie was the crown jewel. Everyone wanted a piece of him. He was mysterious and untouchable and almost godlike. A mythical figure.

So why me?

Well, it certainly wasn’t by accident. There’s a science to hooking up with the band, one that my older sister Becky taught me. At every show, there’s a guy behind the guy. In this case, Pedro was the guy to see. That was the word. You do a favor for Pedro, and he would get you backstage.

But that was only the beginning. There were door guys who basically looked you up and down, decided whether you were hot enough to turn on the band. I got past them too. If you saw what I look like, even what I looked like back then, you probably wouldn’t be surprised. “Legs you could wrap around a football stadium,” a guy once told me. Lips like passionfruit. All the stuff you shallow-minded guys fall for. It’s not rocket science.

 The backstage area was a zoo, as you might expect. They were all there: CB, Rico, Kevin, Talyn and Jordie. Well, four of them that I could see right away. CB, Rico, Kevin and Talyn were wiping themselves off with towels. I remember CB had his shirt off, and the glistening sweat on his flat stomach led me to consider making a play at him. He was surrounded by girls, more than anyone else in the band.

 And then I saw Jordie. He was sitting by himself, just lounging on a coach over in a dark corner, looking at his phone. No one seemed to notice him. Trust me, if they did, he’d be swarmed by girls. Like I said, Jordie was the crown jewel.

 I hiked up my skirt, applied another coat of lipstick, and casually headed that way. If he noticed me, Jordie wasn’t letting on. He didn’t even look up from his phone.

 I took a seat next to him and turned my body. I was wearing lacy underwear. He didn’t seem to care.

 “Great party, huh?” I asked. Jordie shrugged. “Not your scene?”

 “I’m not a housecat,” he said, still looking at his phone.

 I moved closer. “You guys were great tonight,” I said.

 While I sat there, a couple of other girls came by and tried to move in, but I just saddled up to Jordie and wrapped an arm through his. He was all mine that night.

 The hard work eventually paid off when Jordie asked me if I wanted to get out of there.

 “I’d love to go lie down underneath the stars,” I said.

 He just stood up, and I took his hand and followed.

 I wish I could say it was the greatest sex I’ve ever had. Even at the time, it seemed pretty ordinary. We were in the hot tub outside the hotel. He seemed disinterested. Trust me, I have never had a guy seem disinterested before. I thought maybe he was one of those guys who didn’t like girls but had to pretend like he did. For his image.

 I tried everything. But he just dutifully finished up, grabbed his towel, and disappeared into the night. I don’t even know if I told him my name.

 The tour moved out of town early the next morning, off to another city and another flock of screaming girls. Jordie probably treated some poor teenager the same way, the next night, and the night after that. Who knows?

 But I wouldn’t call it a disappointment. I was the one he chose. Jordie Mack could have any girl in the world, and on that night, he chose me.

 I slept with a few more rock stars over the years, even a few actors. But for some reason, Jordie was the one I remember the most. His detached demeanor and unceremonious exit just made him that much more sexy, that much more mysterious, that much more *bad*.

 Back4More went on to become the highest-selling album of the year. Even all these years later, as a full-grown adult, I still consider it a triumph of pop music.

 It was also the last album BroTown would ever put out.

CHAPTER 10

“What happened?”

The question I’ve heard most often over the past 10 years. A question I have grown to hate.

 The easy answer is that the music business changed. Boy bands – I always hated that label, but now I see its usefulness – all seem to have a pretty short shelf life. The higher you rise, the more they want to see you fall. The second Saturday Night Live appearance didn’t go that well, and E-Dub was getting frustrated with Pablo and some of the behind-the-scenes stuff with the tour.

 But I think it all started to fall apart in Orlando.

 That was during the final month or two of the Back4More tour, and for some reason, Jordie was in a surly mood. Nobody knew why. He could be like that. None of us knew him that well, despite the time we all spent together. The guy kept to himself, mostly. There was a period when a couple of us thought maybe he was doing drugs or something, but it was nothing like that.

 I do know that his mom got sick for awhile there, and he considered going home for. He also kind of became obsessed with finding out who his father was, all of a sudden. One night, I thought I heard him crying backstage. Another, he was flipping out and throwing shit.

 Again, I don’t know much about Jordie. He never let me in. I think there was a period of time when people kind of considered me the so-called leader of BroTown, and maybe that ticked him off or something. I don’t know. He was always pretty cold to me, especially near the end there.

 So there were a lot of things going on.

 The father thing I heard about from Kevin. They shared a room on the road sometimes – another thing that pissed Jordie off during that second tour – and Kevin got to know him a little bit. I guess Jordie never knew his father, and when his mom got sick it inspired him to start making phone calls about how one finds a father. Must have brought some emotions or something, because Jordie started acting out of character. While he used to be quiet and brooding, he started going through these emotional mood swings. He trashed the backstage spread after a show in Dallas. Refused to perform on “When I Say Forever” in New Orleans. I guess one of the roadies found him sitting on the edge of the roof of a high-rise motel in Atlanta, looking out at the night sky.

 Then came Orlando. He was late to rehearsal, which didn’t seem that out of the ordinary for Jordie, but we could tell something was wrong. Now, E-Dub hated it when you were late to rehearsal. Especially when Jordie was late. He needed it more than any of us. E-Dub would bitch about it to us, but hardly said a word to Jordie. It was like E-Dub was scared of him. Or scared of losing him.

 When Jordie finally showed up, he was drinking a Big Gulp and carrying a bag of fast food. We were already in the rehearsal space, clearly waiting for him to join us, but he just plopped down in a seat in the mixing room and started laying out his food.

 Talyn and I looked at each other. E-Dub wasn’t there yet. I nodded and went in to talk to Jordie.

 “’Sup?” I said as he unwrapped a burger.

 “Sup,” he said back, without looking up.

 “I mean, what are you doing?” I asked.

 He had a smirk on his face, but he always had a smirk on his face. He took the burger out and took a bite. He started chewing, looked up at me, but didn’t say anything.

 “We’ve been waiting for you,” I said. “Look through that glass, and there are a bunch of people who were here 45 minutes ago. When we were supposed to be here.”

 He just chewed slowly, looking through the glass at the others. He swallowed, then took another bite.

 “We all have the same rules, Jordie,” I said. And before I could say another word, he threw what was left of his burger at my chest. Not hard, just enough to make a point. Whatever his point was.

 Staring at me, he crumpled up the wrapper and dropped it on the floor.

 “Get that for me, will ya?” he said, then sauntered through a doorway and headed to the other side of the glass.

 Fuming, I picked up the pieces of the burger and the wrapper, and I tossed them in a trash bucket. I wiped the remnants of ketchup, mustard, pickles and lettuce off my shirt and left the control room.

 “So what do we need to do?” Jordie said theatrically, addressing the others. Kevin, Talyn and Rico were all there too, along with two dance instructors and a security guy. E-Dub still wasn’t there. “Let’s do this,” Jordie added, sneering.

 “What’s your fucking problem?” I asked.

 Jordie turned his whole body to look at me.

 “Oh, y’all need to shut up now,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “The boss is talking.” He took a step toward me. “Is that it? You’re the boss? Is that your role here? Some kind of leader or some shit?” It was more than I’d ever heard Jordie say in one day. It’s like someone flipped an ‘on’ switch inside of him.

 “Chill, Jordie,” said Talyn, the shy one. Even when confrontational, he sounded passive.

 “Step down, Talyn,” Jordie said, still staring at me.

 “Can we just practice?” said Kevin, the jock type. Rico, the cute one, stood next to Kevin, nodding his head.

 “I don’t know, CB, can we?” Jordie said, still being theatric. As bad as he was at singing, he might have been worse at acting. “I mean, you’re the boss, right?”

 “What’s this about?” I said, trying to keep my voice level.

 That sneer again. I have never been a violent guy, but in that moment I was overcome by the desire to punch Jordie in his cocky face.

 “I think we all know what this is about,” he said. “This is about a band that used to be five equal parts. Right?” He rubbed his knuckles along his chin. “But what I see here now is a band that’s got one leader” – he slowly pointed a thumb toward his chest – “and one person who’s trying like hell to be a leader.” He pointed at me.

 “You’re delusional, man,” I said. “Are you high or something?”

 Jordie’s jaw tightened, then he walked over to a poster on the wall. It was for the Cleveland show.

 “What do you see here?” he asked. On the poster was a photo of the BroTown members. We were standing in a V shape. Talyn and Kevin were on one side. Rico and I were on the other side. Jordie was front and center. His point was crystal clear.

 “Seriously, can we *please* practice?” Talyn said.

 “C’mon, homies,” Jordie said. “Don’t play like that.” He shook his head. “I’ll tell you what I see,” he added. “No, I’ll tell you what I hear. Read. See everywhere I look.” He turned to face us. “Whenever someone is talking about BroTown, they are talking about Jordie Mack. You hear me? When people come out to see BroTown, they are coming out to see Jordie Mack. Facts.”

 “We need to get rolling,” one of the dance instructors said. “Whatever this is about, Jordie, can it wait?”

 Jordie held up a hand.

 “It can’t wait,” he said. “It’s been waiting long enough, okay?”

 “Nobody knows what the hell you’re talking about, Jordie,” I said.

 He shook his head and clucked his tongue. “No?” he said. “Nobody sees this?”

 “Sees what, Jordie?” Rico asked.

 “Quit playin’, fools,” Jordie said. He pulled a hoodie up over his head and stuffed his hands in the pockets. “It’s simple, okay. We all get paid the same, right? So how come I don’t get treated the same?”

 I was about to say something else, I don’t remember what, but before I could speak, Jordie ripped the poster down. He pounded his fist into the wall. With his back to us, he screamed. Then he just stood there, breathing hard. We all looked at each other, not sure what to do.

 “I’m fucking sick and tired of being dragged around by my dick,” he said slowly. “I’m not nobody’s chimp. Just clap your damn hands, and watch the monkey dance. You hear me?”

 “Jordie, c’mon,” Kevin said. Always the peacemaker. “We’re all in this together. We’re all under a lot of pressure, man.”

 Jordie slammed his fist against the wall again, then turned around.

 “No, we’re not,” he said. “Everyone here is trying to be something I don’t want to be. Not anymore. I’m the face of this band, like it or not. And that needs to change.”

 “Jordie, seriously,” I said, “we’re here for you. Don’t do this.”

 He stared at me, then zipped up his hoodie and shook his head. He didn’t say another word, just walked out of the studio and out into the day. As he left, I saw E-Dub for the first time. He was standing in the doorway, where Jordie had just exited, just silently watching him go.

 The next time we saw him was 10 minutes before the Orlando show was set to begin.

 So let me just say this. Whatever happened to Jordie Mack, he had it coming. He did this to himself. Don’t shed a tear for Jordie Fucking Mack.

CHAPTER 11

 I’m going to tell you this one time, so I need you to listen. I am what they call an economist of language, you understand me? I don’t like to waste words, I don’t like to waste time, and I don’t like to waste money. E-Dub doesn’t play like that. Understand?

 Okay. We’ll go over this one time. There have been a lot of things written and said about that period of my life, things people have no clue about. So let’s dispel some of the myths.

 I loved those boys. You understand me? Each one of them. You don’t let anyone tell you this was about the money, or the fame, or even the music. This was about the boys. The dreams boys have. Helping them reach for the stars. That’s what this was about. And I did that. We did that. Together.

 What happens when you reach the stars? Where does a person go from there? These are the questions only a fortunate few get to ask. The top one percent of one percent. Sometimes you make it, and then you look down and the view is scary as hell. Know what I’m saying?

 Did Jordie Mack get too big for BroTown? This is what you’re here to ask. This is the working hypothesis.

 Let me answer that by telling you this. I’ve seen hundreds of Jordan McGuires in my day, and only a precious few of them who’ve turned into Jordie Mack. That’s the dream, okay? Take it or leave it, but that’s the dream.

 I got in this business thirty years ago. Think about that. The music scene was like a music wake back then, you feel me? Grunge. Shoe-gaze. Hip-hop. Every song was about putting a gun to your head or killing cops or diving into deep waters and hoping you never come up. Depressing shit. Dark shit. Shit that would even make Richard fucking Simmons want to slit his throat, you know?

 You could say I saved music. And you could also say I saved humanity. You wouldn’t be wrong. Five good-looking white kids on a stage, dancing and singing songs about kissing up on pretty girls. What’s better than that? Puts a smile on your face just thinking about it, am I wrong?

 Look, I don’t make the rules here. I just put together what sells, and what makes people happy. You think it’s an accident there’s no black kids in these bands? I’m here to tell you it’s not. Black kids make people uncomfortable. You see a black kid, you make sure your wallet is secure. You see a white kid? Can’t help but smile. It’s straight analytics, Marketing 101. Like I said, I didn’t make the rules. I just abide by them. Consumers ask me to. I work for the people, not for what’s right. You feel me?

 You know what else the analytics tell me? Everyone loves a bad boy. A white kid who looks like that dude from your Geometry class who gave the teacher the finger. Who flicked a cigarette in the cop’s face. We find him fascinating. Magnetic. All of us do.

And the girls? They find him irresistible.

 I knew the moment Jordie first walked into my studio that America was going to love him. Well, the America that matters. Daddies all hate the Jordie Macks of the world. But they also give their little princesses a handful of cash and tell them to buy whatever they want. What they want is Jordie Mack. And so they buy the records. The posters. The T-shirts. You with me? The Jordie Macks of the world, they’re the easiest money out there. You gamble on them, you’ll sleep under cashmere sheets.

 But here’s the kicker. And I’m going to lean in close and speak slowly to make sure you get the message:

 The bad boys, they always come with an unhappy ending. That’s why Daddies hate them. They don’t turn into Prince Charming in the end. They turn into Tommy Trainwreck.

 So, yes, I knew all along how this was going to end. I write the characters; the stories write themselves.

One might argue that I created a monster, but all I did was create a character. And all those screaming girls, the ones who are as predictable as a fat man with a plate of French fries, they did the rest. They’re the ones that made the monster, not me. They gave him claws. And teeth.

And then they cried when he roared. When he turned into the nightmare we all fear.

So, no. The answer is: No, Jordie Mack didn’t get too big for BroTown. Jordie Mack got as big as he needed to get. He played the part, he sold the records and the concert tickets, and then he burned the castle down.

Isn’t that the way the story is supposed to go?

I will leave you with this.

Fame, it’s a fickle creature. You need to feed it to keep it alive; but when you feed it, it grows into something terrifying.

Seeking fame is like bringing home a grizzly cub. You’ll love it for awhile, but eventually it’s going to maul you.

Don’t think for a second that it won’t.

CHAPTER 12

 The day I heard about the breakup of BroTown, I had just wrapped up a programming meeting at Star 93 radio station. I was one of only two DJs left on staff, as we’d gone almost entirely digital. The music business was stepping to a death march, and I knew my days were numbered.

 And then I learned about BroTown, and it felt like the end of an era. Not that they were around that long – they only put out two records – but they represented something much bigger than that.

 This was a few years before the pandemic, and by most accounts, the music business was changing. At 38 years old, I was already a fossil of the old days, when CDs and full-length albums and actual lyrics were standards. BroTown was by no means the first boy band to hit the scene, but they came at a time when the world needed them, and they represented an era of innocence. When pop music was predictable, unpretentious. Meant to entertain, not to beat you over the head with some message.

 I’d met the guys twice when they stopped by the studio for interviews, during the first tour and the Back4More tour. They were kids, really. Jordie didn’t say a whole lot, and he seemed pretty bored – not only by the interview, but also by the whole idea of being in a band. I’m not overly surprised that he eventually left the band, just by the way it went down.

 From what I heard, and I know a lot of people in this business, Jordie got his own agent during the final few weeks of the Back4More tour. This was an absolute no-no, of course, but Everett Washington agreed to renegotiate the contract, provided Jordie give him 100 percent of his share of future BroTown royalties. A terrible contract, from Jordie’s perspective, and one he would never in a million years sign … unless he was that desperate to get out.

 And let’s be real: The name Jordie Mack, at that point, was worth a lot more than the name BroTown. Jordie cold have recorded a 45-minute fart, slapped his name on the front of the album, and he’d have sold 70 million copies. He was that popular.

 It was a pretty messy divorce, from what I heard. Everett Washington had some pretty choice words for Jordie’s agent on the way out, and none of the other members of the band said goodbye.

 BroTown had a song on “Back4More” that said it best. The lyrics were a foreshadow, really.

 The song ends the album, what would be BroTown’s final album, and is called “Don’t Leave Me Like This.”

 *We were better*

 *When we were together*

 *One plus one*

 *Was greater than two*

 *Don’t walk away*

 *What’s there to say?*

 *Except I can’t be me*

 *When I’m not with you*

 *That final kiss*

 *I beg you*

 *Don’t leave me like this.*

 That song sounded a lot different after I heard about their breakup. But I guess every cluster of stars eventually bursts into the atmosphere, huh?

 The word was that the four remaining members of BroTown would tour together again, maybe even find someone to replace Jordie. Everett Washington personally called me and a few other DJs around the country to let us know it would happen.

 But it never did.

 CB ended up cutting a solo record right before the pandemic, under the pseudonym I Love You Alien. It was a great record, but by that time most of the screaming girls had grown up and gone off to college or started listening to artists like Taylor Swift and Kaley Hawk.

 Talyn got into acting. Rico went into music production. Records by mostly obscure but critically acclaimed acts like One Hour Naps. Last I heard, Kevin was at the University of Oklahoma.

 And then there’s Jordie. We all know where he ended up, huh?

 A lot has happened since then. But when he left BroTown, he had just turned 18 years old.

CHAPTER 13

 Say what you will now, but getting Jordie Mack to sign as a client, at that time, was an absolute coup. Everyone wanted him, don’t let them tell you any different.

 And we had to move mountains. Private planes. International trips. No matter the cost, we knew the payoff would be hundredfold on the other side.

 I’ll tell you right out of the gates: Everett Washington hated me. He made this clear on several occasions.

 We had had a business relationship in the past – the music business is pretty small, really, especially up in the rarified air where we tended to fly – but from the moment Jordie signed on the dotted line with Robert Stinson Talent, LLC, the relationship changed. Everett immediately turned on me.

 “I know why you’re here, Stinson,” he said the first time I flew out to see Jordie when we were trying to sign him. “You’re here to take my franchise.”

 “Your franchise?”

 “Don’t play coy, Stinson,” he said. “You’re here to build Jordie Mack’s brand, then take him to greener pastures.”

 I snickered.

 “If greener pastures were on a ranch,” I said, “Jordie put on his hat and chaps months ago. He’s not long for a boy band, Everett. He’s outgrown that.”

 Everett twisted his pinky ring and narrowed his already beady eyes.

 “How dare you,” he said. “You’re coming into my house, and basically telling me you’re going to fuck my wife.”

 I put my hands out, the international sign of surrender.

 “I’ll be gentle with her,” I said. “And I won’t empty your liquor cabinet.”

 I was with Jordie when BroTown made its second SNL appearance. He was the only band member who got to appear in a skit, and his one line, “Did somebody order scalloped potatoes au sex symbol?” brought down the house. I arranged that.

 When he stormed out of a live television appearance on Good Morning America, right in the middle of BroTown’s performance of their latest hit, “We Come Alive at Night,” that was set up by me too.

 When he announced his solo project by posting on Instagram that he was “looking forward to recording real music without 4 backup singers,” that was me, too.

 And when Jordie appeared on the cover of his first solo album, “Messiah,” shirtless, while wearing a barbed-wire crown and standing on the cross … well, that was my doing as well.

 Controversy sells. Rule No. 1 of Hollywood marketing. All of these decisions were painstakingly planned, for the purpose of gaining publicity. As I told Jordie, and will continue to tell all of my clients: “Fame is a baby. You gotta feed it, or it will die.”

Jordie wasn’t one to formulate many ideas of his own, at least at that point in his career. He was barely an adult. All he wanted was to keep getting bigger, which was no small task when you’re already one of the biggest stars on Planet Earth.

*“I would ask for your attention*

*If that’s my only pension*

*Please forgive the suspension*

*But it’s time for me to mention*

*I am bigger than God*

*Bigger than life*

*Bigger than anything you can see.*

*… Now, do I have your attention?”*

Those were the opening lines to the first song on the album “Messiah.” Grandiose? Perhaps. But the bullseye was pierced. We had everyone’s attention.

“Messiah” sold 11 million copies in its first week of sales. Almost as important, the Vatican and others protested the cover and the lyrics, which bought free worldwide advertising to keep feeding that baby. “Know U Wanna Grind on This,” the first single, and “Party Girls Only,” both hit No. 1 on the charts.

We had the best damn producers, musicians and technicians in the business. The best songwriters, too. Whatever vocal deficiencies Jordie may have had, and they were significant, we knew exactly what to do to cover that up.

When “Messiah” won Album of the Year at the Grammys, Jordie shouted his speech into the microphone and called the entire music industry “a bunch of scared little pussy bitches!”

That, too, was planned by yours truly. Robert Stinson. Agent to the stars.

Feed the baby. Or the baby will die.

One thing I loved about Jordie, back then, was his simplicity. He wanted zero creative license in those days. He really wanted only two things.

“I want to be rich,” he told me, “as fuck. And I want to be famous. As fuck.”

I told him no problem. Just follow my directions, and he’ll get both.

And he did. He was as big as they get back then. Bigger than Taylor Swift. Bigger than Kanye. Bigger than Kaley Hawk would get.

Maybe I shouldn’t mention Kaley Hawk. Can we strike that from the record? That was an unfortunate comparison, all things considered.

What I’m trying to say is, we took Jordie Mack to the mountaintop. People seem to forget that. He was, like the song said, bigger than God. This was not that long ago. What, half a decade?

All we had to do was keeping feeding the baby. All he had to do was get out of his own way.

Goddamn, that’s all he had to do.

Get out of your own goddamn way, Jordie.

CHAPTER 14

My name is Heathrow Gibbons, although that don’t mean shit to you. It don’t mean shit to no one.

Until a few years ago, it certainly didn’t mean shit to Jordie Mack.

Jordan McGuire, I guess his mama named him. I don’t know what kind of mother names a boy Jordan, but whatever. I didn’t get a say in the decision.

Apparently, I am Jordan’s biological father. Whoopie. Could have gone my whole life not knowing that, except the kid shows up on my stoop one rainy afternoon dressed like some kind of gangbanger. Out here in the sticks of Northern California, he stuck out like a sore thumb. Saw him and thought for sure he was coming to steal my catalytic converter. But, no, he just came to steal a few minutes and carry on his way.

I had heard the name Jordie Mack, of course. Don’t know why. I’m not into all that dance crap they listen to these days. But you don’t have to listen to that shit to know the name. Never gave two shits about it until he came a calling one day, telling me he’d spent a bunch of money taking some kind of find-your-father test.

I let the kid in but told him he only had 10 minutes. Say your peace, then get out.

“I can’t believe I found you,” he said, which is a hell of a way to start a conversation. There was a long pause after that, where he was just staring at me like I was some kind of 6-foot-3 slab of meat. He was wearing some kind of velvet bucket hat on his head, and when he took off his coat, he had on a tank top that showed pretty much everything underneath. He had a stupid sun tattoo on his shoulder and some kind of fish on his forearm. His pants were baggy, so much so that I could see his underwear.

“You got 14 minutes and 23 seconds,” I said. “That all you got to say?”

“I don’t really …” he stammered. He dropped his head. I offered him a beer, but he said he didn’t drink. He said his mama had a problem with it, so he swore never to touch the stuff. “That stuff is poison,” he said.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said, and went to the fridge to grab myself a cold one.

When I came back, he still didn’t have shit to say.

“This mama of yours,” I said, then took a swig. “She got a name?”

“Maggie McGuire,” he said eagerly. The name didn’t ring a bell. He told me the name of his hometown, and that narrowed it down to roughly 125,000 women. Seeing as my drinking was at an all-time high in those years, I can’t say for sure that I didn’t sleep with all of them.

“So you came out of this Margie woman’s –“

“Maggie,” he said.

“Maggie. You came out of her, what, 12 years ago, and then all that time later you decide I’m your father?” I asked.

“Nineteen,” he said. “I’m 19 now.” He looked around my place. I took a swig off my beer.

“I’d have tidied up, had I known you were coming,” I said. He reminded me that he called ahead. “Okay,” I said. “I’d have tidied up if you were a 19-year-old girl. That wasn’t my kin, of course.”

He winced at that, which I thought was funny. I love making young bucks uncomfortable. They walk around this damn earth like they own the place.

“They tell me you’re rich and famous, huh?” I asked.

“Something like that,” the kid said. He sure didn’t look like anything special to me. Have to admit, though, he did have my eyes and build. Back when I was his age, anyway.

“So what’s in it for me?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

I took another swig of beer, set it on the table, then lit a cigarette.

“You got all this money,” I said, fanning out the match. “You come to give Daddy his cut?”

“I came to get to know you,” he said. His voice quivered. Like he was getting his panties in a bind. Doesn’t take much to rattle these kids today, turns out.

“What do you want to know?” I asked. “I’m handsome as the dickens, smarter than hell and don’t put up with no one’s bullshit. That’s about it.” The kid looked at me, then looked away. He seemed disappointed by something.

“You don’t remember Mom at all?” he asked. His voice was quieter. He looked more like a hood rat than some big star.

“Told you already, I never heard that name in my life,” I said. “Unless I was drunk. What’d she look like? Might’ve been my type.”

“I didn’t bring a photo, if that’s what you mean,” he said.

“Don’t need one,” I told him. “Look, I didn’t keep a running log of the women I slept with, okay? If this test you took says I’m the father, then I’m the father. So, what now? Wanna go for a burger and some fries? Maybe spend some of your hard-earned cash at a strip club?”

I laughed at that, but he didn’t seem to find it funny. I don’t know what they paid this guy so much money to do, but it sure wasn’t for his sense of humor.

“How long have you lived here?” I asked.

“Dunno,” I said, then finished off my beer. I went to the fridge to grab another one. “I seem to move from town to town. Keeps the feds and pregnant ladies from findin’ me.” It was one of my old stand-by lines, but maybe this wasn’t the time or place. “I mean, most of the time. I guess you found me, so … I must not be as good at hiding as I used to be.” Once again, I was the only one laughing. I was beginning to get the feeling that this guy could have seen George Carlin in his prime and not so much as cracked a smile.

“Do you have any other kids?” he asked. I took a swig.

“Probably,” I said. “What about you? You got a dick and the handsome genes from your Daddy’s side. You must clean up with the ladies.”

“I do alright,” he said. He looked around the place again. I was beginning to feel a bit self-conscious, although I can’t say why. You ever feel judged by someone you just met? Yeah, like that.

“Listen, I’m up for whatever,” I said. “You want a hug, I’ll give you a hug. You want to call for some fatherly advice, I’m game. But let’s cut the bullshit and get to brass tax. This fatherhood stuff, it don’t come free. You hear me?”

“Excuse me?” he said, his voice rising. I sized him up and wondered if maybe I’d make the national news for whipping a celebrity’s ass. Or get arrested for assaulting my kid.

“I’m not trying to be a dick here, kid,” I said. “Really, I’m not. But you see those bills over there? They’re not going to pay themselves.”

“Is that why you agreed to meet with me?” he asked, his voice cracking. Sure didn’t sound like no singing voice to me. I was starting to think maybe this imposter wasn’t who he said he was. “For money?”

“It certainly wasn’t for your conversational skills,” I cracked. “Look, how about we do this. You buy me a new place, maybe down a ways on Lake Tahoe, I’ll let you come visit whenever you want. I’ll even let you smoke my weed. What do you say?” Seemed like a perfectly good offer to me, but this little punk got all aggressive on me.

“Go fuck yourself!” he shouted. I took a swig and didn’t flinch. When you’ve seen as much as I have in this world, it takes a lot more than some skinny kid in a velvet hat to make you flinch.

“Now, now,” I said. “That’s no way to speak to your father.” I chuckled to myself, but he just turned and grabbed his coat.

“This was a mistake,” he said. “I knew I shouldn’t have …” He put on his coat and turned back toward me. “Just goes to show you,” he said. “No matter how hard to wish something to be the way you want it to be, things still are the way they are.”

I nodded my head and watched him turn away. Kid had a gift. Sounded like a damn poet or something.

“Hey, kid,” I said as he threw the door open. He stopped but didn’t look back.

“Tell your mama hi for me,” I said. “Maybe put in a good word for me, will ya?”

He slammed the door so hard that my rifle fell off its rack.

CHAPTER 15:

 Heh heh. I knew we’d get to that. It always does, hey. I produced more than 400 records in my career, but that’s the only one anybody wants to talk about.

 You mention the name Wauwatosa Brown, boss, and they all ask the same question. “Wasn’t he the one who produced …?”

 Heh heh. Yeah, that was me. Can’t hide from it no more.

 But you know what’s the shit? You ask my boy Jordie Mack about that record, he’ll tell you this. He’ll tell you it turned out exactly like he wanted.

 Yeah. I turned the dials. But he produced it, boss. First track to last. That’s his fingerprints, boss, not mine.

 Tell you one thing. When that white boy called me up and said he wanted me to help him make a record, I ‘bout choked on my Blowpop. Yes, siree. No joke.

 I told him: “Damn, kid, I make blues records.” I told him: “You sure this is Jordie Mack? The boy band dude? So-called Messiah?” Heh heh. Believe that shit?

 He tells me, “Yeah. I wanna make a folk record.” Folk.

 I’m like, “What part of blues do you not get? Bo Diddly, motherfucker. BB King. Ain’t no John Denver coming out of this soul.” Heh heh.

 But the kid wouldn’t let it go. Said he wanted a folk record, but he was feeling the blues.

 I said: “You sold 11 million copies of your debut album, motherfucker, and you get more tail than an ocean filled with lobsters. The fuck you got to be blue about?”

 All he told me was what he would pay, and I stopped asking questions and started making travel plans. I may be dumb, but I ain’t that dumb.

 He shows up with a brand new acoustic guitar. He can play three chords, barely. Self-taught. If that’s what you call it. Learned off the internet or some shit. And when he opens his mouth to sing, wooo-eeee, it sounds like somebody put his balls in a coffee grinder. I’ve heard brain-damaged owls sing better. Heh heh.

 But that wasn’t the worst part. No siree. The worst part? That boy wrote his own songs. Said he’d never written a song in his life, and when I heard him sing that first line, I’m like, “No shit, you never wrote a song. Sounds like you never listened to one, neither.” He played the whole damn song for me, and I just said: “Well.” All I said. All I could say.

 Did I mention he was paying me a lot of money? So I said: “Well, kid, you still haven’t wrote no song. Gimme that guitar.”

 A few hours later, we knocked out the revamped version of “Nobody’s Son.” He wrote most of the words, or at least put the ideas on paper, and it sounded like nothing I’ve ever heard the kid sing before. Wasn’t a single word about dancing or breaking girls’ hearts. It had more blues than pop, about a lonely boy who’s got no one. Shit so sad, I wanted a damn blankie.

 I taught him another riff, and he turned that into “Got to Find My Own Way.”

 I didn’t see it at the time, but all these tunes were like pieces to a puzzle only he could see. In fact, he insisted on what order they went on the record. Said he had a vision or some shit.

 Stevie Wonder had more vision than this fool.

 And Stevie could sing. This kid, he damn near shattered glass in the studio.

 “101 at Night.” “Who Will Be There in the End?” “Broken Like Rubble.” The songs kept coming.

 I’ll tell you what: They sure sound like blues titles. But he made sure they sounded like folk.

 Say what you will about the album, but I wouldn’t trade the experience for a one-night stand with Tina Turner in her prime. I brought in four of the finest session musicians in Memphis, even scraped together a brass section for two or three of the tunes, and we went and turned that pile of turd into something like chocolate cake.

 Was it a perfect record? Hell, no.

 Was it a good record? Not even close. But it’s what Jordie Mack wanted. It’s the record he asked Wauwatosa Brown to make.

 I’ll tell you what I remember most about making that record. Jordie, he didn’t say much, and he seemed to be sad all the time. I tried to introduce the kid to ganja, maybe brighten his mood for an hour or two, but he said he didn’t do no drugs and didn’t drink no alcohol because they got his mom all twisted or something. Whatever, more for me. You want to be sad all the time, be sad. Wauwatosa Brown ain’t nothing if he ain’t happy.

 One night, near the end of the sessions, I was out smoking a blunt with the drummer, when we hear something from inside the studio. Now, it’s late at night. Ain’t nobody else around. But we hear something inside. I look at the blunt, thinking: Damn, this is some good shit. Making me hear things.

 Then we see someone over round the corner, looks like he’s climbing out the window. I can see in the moonlight that it’s Jordie. He’s buck-ass naked. He runs out into the woods, and I think he’s going to take a piss. He doesn’t know we’re there. About 15 minutes pass, and I think maybe it’s not just a piss he’s taking. The drummer and I kill the blunt, and he bids me goodnight. Now I’m getting worried about Jordie. I start toward the woods, thinking: I don’t care how famous this mofo is, I sure as hell don’t want to see all of his white ass. I can’t see him anywhere, then I start thinking maybe that weed was so good that I imagined the whole thing. I start walking back toward where my car is parked, then all of a sudden I hear this singing. Real quiet and far away. But I’ve listened to enough takes that I recognize it. Either Jordie, or someone’s taking a pocket knife to a squirrel out there in the woods.

I creep back into the woods, following the sound. I recognize the song, but it’s not from the album. When I finally see him from a distance, I can hear the words.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word/Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.”

I can see him between the trees, curled up in a ball. I can see his tattoos and skin from the side. He doesn’t seem to see me.

 As I creep back out of the woods, all I can think is: “That’s one crazy white boy.”

 The next thing I think is: “Man, I got to stop smoking all that bud.”

CHAPTER 16:

 “101 at Night” was a travesty of a record. An embarrassment to modern music. I wrote as much in Pitchfork at the time, and I stand by it.

 The title track, “101 at Night,” was some kind of meditation about driving up the coast at night.

*“All you can see are the bright lights*

*You think they make you shine*

*But they just make you blind.*

 *There is nothing in front of you*

 *When you have no sight*

 *When you’re driving*

 *On the 101 at night.”*

 You get kicked out of eighth-grade Creative Writing class for crap like that. But it got worse.

 The final track, “Who Will Be There in the End?” was some kind of meditative chant.

 *“Mama wasn’t there*

 *Papa wasn’t there*

 *No true friends*

 *Who will be there in the end?*

 *Mama wasn’t there*

 *Papa wasn’t there*

 *No true friends*

 *Who will be there in the end?*

*Mama wasn’t there*

 *Papa wasn’t there*

 *No true friends*

 *Who will be there in the end?*

*Mama wasn’t there*

 *Papa wasn’t there*

 *No true friends*

 *Who will be there in the end?”*

 Over and over. For the final 13 minutes and 46 seconds. Horns come in. Some kind of weird mariachi band. Percussion that sounds like it’s from a drumline. I remember writing some line in my review that tried to answer the title’s question: No one. No one made it to the end. Not of that song. Not of that record.

 There was a pretty well-known story about how Jordie’s agent, Robert Stinson, begged him not to put out that record. Or, at least, to put one dance track at the beginning or end. He was Jordie Mack; he owed it to his millions of fans. RCA said the same thing. They refused to release the record at first, but Stinson smelled opportunity there, leaked that news to we-the-press, and pretty soon enough buzz was generated that RCA gave in.

 Turns out RCA was right. “101 at Night” sold a lot of records, more than 1.5 million, but let’s be honest. This was Jordie fucking Mack. BroTown. Messiah. He was going to sell more than a million records even if he just played the tuba and shook his ass a little. But he sang with that awful voice of his, and, worse, he tried to write songs. So the sales were a massive disappointment.

 “101 at Night” was among my Worst Albums of 2018 list. And I wasn’t the only one. Rolling Stone. Billboard. Entertainment Weekly.

 “A total trainwreck,” the Village Voice wrote.

 “Worst follow-up … ever?” asked GQ.

 “A sad album that will make you laugh hysterically,” opined the LA Times.

 Interesting the way the music world works. When one star falls, another rises. While Jordie Mack was plummeting from the highest stars, a new artist named Kaley Hawk, barely 18 years old, was bursting onto the scene.

 She was Pitchfork’s Breakout Artist of the Year. All of her bright lights were just starting to shine.

 She had never met Jordie Mack. Not yet.

CHAPTER 17

We took the 101 at night a few weeks after the album came out. I didn’t much care for the album, but I was dating Jordan at the time, so I tried to be supportive. But as we drove along just north of the stretch they call Ventura Freeway, along the coast, the sun setting out past the water, it started to make sense to me.

“Can we listen to it?” I asked him.

He sat behind the wheel with a pair of oversized, gold-rimmed sunglasses. His hair was dyed dirty blonde, and his tattoos glowed orange in the fading light.

“Listen to what?” he asked, his eyes on the road in front of us and one arm hanging outside the window. Jordan had this detached way of speaking that probably should put people off, but somehow it drew me in.

In many ways, we were birds of a feather. I played part of the evil crew in a few high school-themed films back in the day. I kind of found a niche as the rich black bitch who talks shit to the sad lead character. “Good luck finding a date for prom with THAT sweater!” “Maybe you didn’t make the guest list to the party because HORSES WEREN’T INVITED!” “Don’t feel bad. I had tits that small once too. WHEN I WAS IN THIRD GRADE!” Trash lines like that. Lines that made all the other mean girls laugh and the audience want to punch me in the face.

My movie career was over by the time I met Jordan. A big-screen mean girl meets a real-life bad-boy: a match made in heaven.

The tabloids had a few weeks of fun with us, but they backed off eventually. In fact, after his second solo album, Jordan was able to slip out of the limelight. I could tell he liked the reprieve, but I also knew he’d need the bright lights again one day.

“101 at Night,” I said as he navigated the winding freeway. “I want to listen to it as we drive.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, looking out at the reflection on the water. We were just north of Santa Barbara, where Highway 101 turns into Highway 1 along the coast.

From the very first notes, I felt symbiotic with my surroundings. For an album that was recorded in Memphis, “101 at Night” seemed to capture the California coastline with near perfection. It was as if the only way to listen to the record was to do it while making this drive.

The opening track, “Harmony,” was about feeling the pull of the big city. Leaving the coast behind. Jordan’s voice was way off key, but that seemed to work on a record like this.

The next song, “101 at Night,” brought a sense of serendipity as Jordan sang about darkness and being blinded by bright lights. I felt like I was moving in a music video, somewhere inside MTV.

With each track, the album made sense.

“This album,” I said after about 20 minutes of silently listening to the music, “it’s about feeling alone, huh?”

“Something like that.”

I listened to an upbeat song that had horns and hand-claps.

“How can someone who’s known by everyone on Planet Earth ever feel alone?” I asked.

He looked at me. Pulled his sunglasses up onto his head.

“Think about it,” he said.

“What do you mean? Everyone loves you. You have the world at your fingertips.”

He smirked. That famous smirk of his. It hooked me so much that I wanted to marry him, but he didn’t believe in marriage. Not after being raised by a single mother. In fact, three months later we would break up and never speak again.

“What’s on the outside and what’s on the inside don’t always match, Terra,” he said. “I feel less alone here, in a car with you and no one else around, then I ever did on stage or surrounded by screaming girls.”

The song faded out.

“Well, after the way the critics beat this album into the ground,” I said, “maybe you won’t have to worry about screaming fans anymore.”

He pulled his sunglasses back on. Shook his head.

“I’m kidding,” I said. “In fact, now that I listen to it out here, with the darkening sky and the ocean alongside of us, it makes sense. It’s actually a very beautiful record.”

“That’s one for,” he said, “and seven thousand against.”

We drove along the coast to “Nobody’s Son,” “Got to Find My Own Way,” “Broken Like Rubble,” and “Who Will Be There in the End?,” the final four songs on the album. The final track morphed into something like a chant, continuing on and on as we drove beneath the stars, with only the glow of the headlights and an occasional passing car breaking the darkness. Even with my once-A-lister boyfriend alongside me, I felt the crush of being alone at night. I closed my eyes and thought of my family, wondering what my life would have been like without them.

When “Who Will Be There in the End?” faded out, we drove in silence for a few minutes before I queued up Kaley Hawk’s new album. Something lighter. More innocent. I sang along, and Jordan just tapped his fingers in rhythm on the steering wheel.

We ended up on Highway 1, south of Monterey. We rented a motel room and made love without sheets. Afterward, I pressed my ear to his chest and listened to his heartbeat. I asked him about his tattoos as I ran my finger along the patterns. He said he hated them now, that he wished he’d never defiled his skin like that. He talked about the girls he wished he had never allowed to have him. He talked about how he should have stood up to E-Dub, how he should have tried to turn BroTown into a legitimate band.

My finger rested on a tattoo just beneath his collarbone.

NO REGRETS, it said.

Three months later, Jordie Mack and I would break up. I don’t want to get into the details, and I bet he doesn’t either. He would go on to make another record, but no one seems to remember, and a lot of people never knew.

I don’t have a lot of bad things to say about Jordie. Or, as I called him, Jordan. He was good to me, but not great to me. The allure of dating one of the biggest stars of my teen years wore off quickly, especially as his star began to fade like a setting sun. Jordan seemed to enjoy being somewhat out of the limelight, but I could also sense an emptiness within him. Like something was missing.

When you spend your young life chasing validation from the world, finding it, and then losing it, life doesn’t feel the same.

When the world turned its back on Jordie Mack, he just couldn’t walk away.

CHAPTER 18

 Jordie came into the Santa Monica café wearing a beanie and a Kobe Bryant jersey. I figured that was a Robert Stinson idea, as he was the one who set up the interview.

 “Dave Lowery,” I said, “Rolling Stone.”

 “Jordie,” he said, nodding. He didn’t make eye contact and seemed nervous. We both wore masks and avoided getting too close. The pandemic was in full swing. We had to take our coffee outside, but we had plenty of privacy because the world had shut down. “Oh,” he added, as if being struck with a taser. “Before I forget,” he said robotically. “Thanks for giving me a chance to explain.”

 That was how the interview started, almost three years ago. He barely remained on the public lexicon of pop culture at that point, and this interview was clearly an attempt to keep himself relevant. As Stinson had explained to me as he was setting up the interview, Jordie needed to “feed the baby,” or something like that, if he was going to avoid falling off the horizon.

 This was three months after the 2020 Grammy Awards, which marked the final awards show before the pandemic shut the world down, and also occurred on the night of Kobe Bryant’s death. Kobe was a big part of the celebration, but if not for a well-timed commercial break, Jordie may have stolen the show.

 This was a couple of weeks after Jordie put out what would be his third and final solo album. The record was called “Jordie’s Back!” and the cover featured a shirtless Jordie Mack turned away from the camera. Get it? Showing off his back. With “Jordie’s Back!” tattooed between the shoulder blades. Had that been the only cringe-worthy part of the album, maybe it wouldn’t have been such a massive bust. But the album also contained off-key dance songs with forgettable titles like “(Don’t Care if It’s Right or Wrong) I’m Gonna Tap That All Night Long,” and, “Born Sexy,” and, “The Club Closes When I’m Done Dancin’.” Jordie had fallen so far from the limelight that the album sold less than 1,000 copies in its first week. None of the songs were even close to good enough for radio play. The club of Jordie Mack’s career was clearly closed, whether he liked it or not.

 When he showed up at the Grammys three months earlier, he clearly had an agenda. Trying to steal a tactic from Kanye West, he waited until Billie Eilish and her brother took the stage to accept the Album of the Year award, then made his move. He took off his shirt, the “Jordie’s Back” tattoo visible, and made a beeline for the stage. Security intercepted him, and the cameras only caught a scuffle before going to commercial abruptly.

 Jordie would get kicked out of Staples Center and would later send out a series of tweets claiming he had been unceremoniously beaten up on the way out. Hardly anyone read the tweets, all of which contained the hashtag #jordiesback.

 But he would get the world’s attention a few hours later. Like it, or not.

 “Tell me about that night,” I said to Jordie as we sat outside the café. The thing about LA is that you can meet with a celebrity on the streets of Santa Monica, even when the world is wide open, and hardly anyone notices. During the pandemic, we might as well have been alone on a desert island. Someone had spray-painted “Defund the Police!!!” on a storefront across the way. A Black Lives Matter poster hung in the window behind where Jordie said.

 “Yeah, Robert’s still pretty pissed about that night,” Jordie said, his avoidance of eye contact beginning to distract me. “But I swear, it was an honest mistake.”

 The way he describes it, he was back at his house lying in bed as the Grammys wound down. The final performance included a memorial for Kobe, which moved Jordie to the point that he cried. After it was over, he posted a photo of Lil Nas X Kobe and typed: “What a night.”

 Except instead of typing the final “t,” Jordie claims he accidently hit the backspace button. And then hit the send button without thinking twice about it.

 His tweet included a photo of Lil Nas X and the words “What a …” followed by a three-letter racial slur.

 “I swear to you,” he told me as we sat outside that Santa Monica café, “I would never … That’s not a word I use. I love Nas X. I love Kobe. Check out the jersey, right?” He held it out for me. Although it looked brand new.

 Except this was all coming too late. The initial tweet was all over the news, and the story of the Grammys went from Kobe and Billie Eilish to the faded star who tried to rush the stage and later sent out a racist tweet. Enough time had passed that the world had already pushed him through the meat grinder and moved on. This interview, clearly, was Jordie’s attempt to get back on the front page. This time, for the right reasons.

 “I can’t say how sorry I am,” Jordie told me. “I don’t necessarily need forgiveness; I just need people to understand. It’s not what it seemed.”
 The interview continued like that. I’m not in the private investigation field, so I will leave it to others to decide how genuine Jordie Mack was. All I know was that I was going to write a story as balanced as possible.

 He told me the story of meeting his father, of his mother’s battle with alcoholism, of his regrets over breaking up BroTown. He said he was having financial issues, due to the contract he signed with Everett Washington when Jordie got his own agent. It was all pretty good stuff, to be honest, and he seemed very well-prepared for what his agent undoubtedly hoped would be an image-saving interview.

 After about an hour, we were about to say our goodbyes when I was struck with the need to ask one final question. The George Floyd murder was only about 48 hours old, and with all of the social justice protests happening around the country, it seemed wrong to not at least ask a question about what was going on around us.

 “By the way,” I said, and that was exactly how I started the question. As if this would be an afterthought, some brief conversation that wouldn’t even make the profile piece. “What do you think about all this George Floyd stuff?”

 “Who?” Jordie asked, as if he’d been living under a rock.

 “The man in Minneapolis,” I said. “The one who was killed by the police.”

 “Oh, yeah,” he said. “That’s what all these protests are about, huh?” Jordie tugged at the mask on his face and shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t give much thought to all that stuff,” he said. “I mean, Black Lives Matters doesn’t make any sense to me. Why can’t we all just move on, y’know?”

 And with that, I had an entirely different profile piece.

 And Jordie Mack was about to find out what it meant to be canceled.

CHAPTER 19

I recognized his face from posters my daughter had on her wall when she was younger. She’s in college now, more into Kaley Hawk, Harry Styles and Rhianna than those ridiculous boy bands. (Parenthetically, Rhianna shares a birthday with my daughter. All the beautiful people were born on Feb. 20.)

By the time he came to me, Jordan McGuire barely looked like the kid who sang and danced his way to millions of dollars. He looked homeless and years beyond his chronological age of 29. His hair was long and greasy, and he had facial hair coming down from his chin. He wore a hoodie pulled up over his head and baggy pants.

“You used to go by the name Jordie Mack, huh?” I asked. He nodded. His head was down. He looked like he didn’t want to be there.

Of course not. No one wants to be in a police interrogation room.

As I read him his Miranda rights, I did a quick Google search on my phone. In addition to being in boy bands, he apparently had some dust-up at the Grammy Awards three years ago. There were a bunch of posts calling him “racist” and “anti-BLM.” The social justice warriors didn’t seem to like the guy at all.

“Just wanted you to know you have the right to an attorney,” I said.

“No need,” Jordan said. “I am guilty. Everyone knows it.”

I tapped my pen against my phone.

“Come again?” I said.

He looked up at me. He had a music-note tattoo under his left eye. His eyes were like crystal, coming at me like a laser. He sneered, then his mouth went into something like a pout. His cuffed hands were between his legs.

“You heard me,” he said.

I nodded. Cases were never this easy.

“This is a pretty severe charge,” I said. “Kidnapping, at the least. Probable sexual assault.” Jordan looked away. He just nodded his head.

He didn’t look like a bad guy. His face tattoo and whatever other ink was underneath that hoodie were likely fronts. I’d seen guys like him before. The hard exterior is meant to cover up the weakness beneath. Like one of those animals that can puff up at the sign of danger but is about as harmless as a plastic spoon.

“Was there a previous relationship?” I asked. “With the victim, I mean.”

He shook his head. “Never met her,” he said. He pulled back his hood. His hair was a mess. As if he hadn’t showered in weeks. Maybe years. “Obviously,” he said, “I knew who she was, though.”

I nodded. I stood up from the table between us and started pacing. Interrogations were rarely this easy.

“It’s strange to me,” I said.

He stared at his hands. After a long silence, he looked up at me again. “How so?” he asked.

“A guy like you,” I said. “You could probably have any woman in the world, huh?” I wondered if maybe he had lice or some other form of insect crawling in that mange of hair atop his head. “I mean, if you cleaned up and all.” Probably unnecessary to clarify, but the words streamed out of me.

“I appreciate the compliment,” Jordan said, “but you’re not a psychologist or anything, right? Maybe you wouldn’t understand.”

“Fair enough.” I placed my hands on the table and leaned forward.

“Why her?” I asked. “Of all the people in this world …”

“Do you need to ask?” Jordan said. He took in a deep breath. The weight of everything seemed to be wearing on him. His eyes looked tired and old.

“Sexual assault isn’t always about attraction,” I offered. “Besides, not many women in this country have that kind of security around them.”

“Not enough,” he said quietly. “Apparently.”

I turned back toward the doorway through which we entered. The scene was surreal, as if I was in some kind of dream. This celebrity who had disappeared from the face of the earth, sitting here in the interrogation room, having kidnapped and admitted to assaulting one of the most famous women in the world.

“Motive is a key element to case like this, Mr. McGuire,” I said. “So, please. As best you can. Answer the question. Why Ms. Hawkinson?” He looked up at me and tilted his head. I realized my mistake. “Apologies,” I said. “Why Kaley Hawk?”

When the name came out of my mouth, Jordan McGuire just leaned back in his chair and stared at me. I stared back. We remained like that, in communicative stalemate, for what must have been a minute. Maybe two.

“The world will want to know, Mr. McGuire,” I said. “Why Kaley Hawk? Of all the women in this world, why did you choose her?”

Then Jordan McGuire did something I wouldn’t have expected. He smiled.

CHAPTER 20

 There must have been something I could have done. I am, after all, the boy’s mother.

 I almost didn’t keep him. Did they tell you that? After what happened recently, I think …

 I think …

 I just need to stop thinking. That’s what gets me in trouble. If I could just turn off my damn mind, things would be so much different.

 Forty-six years old, and the bottle just won’t let me go. Forty-six years, and I’ve laid my head down sober – what, a couple dozen times?

 There I go again, polluting my mind. Polluting it with regret. Shame. Guilt. The past.

 If regret were a liquid, I’d have damn near drank up Lake Superior by now.

 I didn’t know how to be a mom. What 16-year-old does? I was more a friend than a parent at times, if we’re being honest. If we’re not being honest, what’s the point of being human? You get what I’m saying?

 People describe their kids as mischievous. Precarious. Curious. Jordan was none of these. He was just … *there*. Like a robot some days, like a pet on others. Teachers couldn’t figure him out. They’d ask me: “What do I do with him?” And I’d say: “The hell if I know. *You’re* the damn expert.”

 He was the kind of kid who seemed sad a lot, but wouldn’t say why. Sure, he didn’t have a father. And I wasn’t around as much as I should have been. He spent a lot of time alone, and who knows what that does to a child? But that doesn’t make a person bad. Does it?

 Another thing about his childhood: He never once did anything musical. I’d have thought he would walk on the moon sooner than be in a band. Not sure how that happened. Maybe his biological daddy was in a band or something. I always had a thing for musicians.

 There, I said it. I never knew who his father was. Not sure it mattered. Jordan asked questions all the time, but I didn’t have any answers.

 I certainly could have been a better mother. I dragged him along to the bar a few times, even set him up in the pack-and-play once while having relations with my boss. Jordan was under a year old; he was none the wiser. There was another time I woke up from a bender, and a woman I didn’t know was standing there holding him, saying he had a soiled diaper and she changed it. She asked me what kind of a mother passes out drunk while her kid is crying, and what I told her is: A mother who didn’t ask to be a mother, that’s who.

 I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised when he up and moved out when he was fifteen years old. I got pregnant when I was fifteen, so maybe us McGuires are just destined to become adults sooner than most. I didn’t have any words of wisdom for the boy on his way out. At that time, all I was thinking about was the money. How much my life was about to change. And it did, in ways. I just drank finer liquor, in more expensive glasses, in a bigger house.

 I tried to teach Jordan to respect women, but I guess when you’re a woman who is letting men walk all over you – not to mention breathe all over it – that tends to send a different message. Jordan saw his mother with a lot of boyfriends. And with a lot of men who weren’t her boyfriends.

 Is that why this happened?

 I can’t say for sure. I don’t know a whole lot. For a woman who thinks all the time, I sure don’t know very often.

 I was drunk when I watched the news report of his arrest, which probably doesn’t come as a surprise. If I could not be a drunk, I would choose that path. But it seems I have no choice in the matter.

 Jordan was pretty much out of public view after that whole Black Lives Matter comment to the Rolling Stone, so it shocked me when I was sitting at the bar at Rudy’s Tavern, talking up some new guy who was buying me drinks, when I saw Jordan’s face on the television screen.

 “Turn it up!” I shouted. “Turn that shit up!”

 Apparently, the bartender didn’t hear me. Or, more likely, he ignored me. I was always yelling and screaming about something, I must admit, so can’t say that I blame him. I climbed up on the bar and tried to reach the TV but couldn’t. The bartender, Lenny was his name, started yelling at me to get down, but I was determined. I grabbed a bottle from behind the bar, which extended my reach just enough to turn up the volume. But with that, I came tumbling down.

 And so there I was, lying on the sticky floor behind the bar of Rudy’s Tavern, finishing off what was left in the bottle I borrowed before Lenny tossed me out, when I heard the report. The headlines said he was being charged with raping some singer. Kaley What’s Her Name, the all-American one who looks like a virgin but sings like an axe murderer. I can’t keep up with the names of these rock stars anymore. Give me Van Halen or Bon Jovi’s “Slippery When Wet,” and I’m as happy as a necrophiliac in a morgue.

 I know my Jordan well enough to say that he would never do that to a woman. He saw how men treated me, and while we’ve never spoken of it, he would know better than to violate a girl like that. He would never …

 But then, who am I to say? I’m his mother. I do know that I am deeply proud of that boy, no matter where he ended up. To be raised by a drunk who was a pretty lousy mother, and to still come out of it as one of the most successful entertainers of his generation? That is nothing short of amazing.

 If you ask me how often I told that boy how proud I was of him, the answer would be: all the goddamn time.

 But I’m not sure he believed it.

 Or I’m not sure he just didn’t care.

 Know this. Whatever happened is not Jordan’s fault. He did the best he could with what he had.

 Like I said, not everyone is cut out to be a mother.

CHAPTER 21

 Word first came out over the police scanner. I’ve got one of those, along with cell phone numbers of pretty much every cop on duty, from Redondo Beach up to the San Fernando Valley. When you work in this business, you’ve got to be first.

 And we were, of course. As soon as I heard the name Jordan McGuire on the scanner, I broke the biggest news the entertainment beat has seen since OJ. “Jordan McGuire,” I said to myself. “Wasn’t that the boy-band guy?”

 The news would only get bigger, of course, when I drove up to the address and immediately recognized Kaley Hawk. This was at like 3:30 in the morning or something, when all my competition was sleeping, and damned if my heart didn’t skip a beat when I realized what gold I was sitting on. Her hair was frazzled, her face was smudged with mascara, and two cops led her out with a coat over her shoulders and the lights of dozens of cop cars illuminating her. They moved quickly, and one of them told me to get the hell out of there. He had that look on his face that said, Oh, shit, if Pressly Evans is here, the news is probably already out.

 And it was. Not to brag. I have a gift.

 The details trickled in over the next 24 to 48 hours. I didn’t get a wink of sleep. When a man is called to duty, he never rests. Some people fear the devil, Pressly Evans fears getting scooped. By People Magazine. Us Weekly. Entertainment Tonight. TM fucking Z. Fuck them. They have to pay for their information. I get mine just by being Pressly Evans, man of the people.

 Regardless, I had the news first. On my Bringing the Stars to You blog. #BSYU on Twitter. Don’t let anyone tell you different. I was the one who first reported that Jordie Mack, the fallen star and former teen idol, was being charged with rape. I was the one who first reported that Kaley Hawk was the victim. I was the one with the first photo of Jordie getting booked, or Jordie standing in front of the judge. It was all me. Twenty-four years old, and already the Woodward and Bernstein of Hollywood.

 My sources told me that this was how it all went down:

 3:06 a.m. Approximately three hours after Kaley Hawk disappeared from backstage of her show at the Greek, a 9-1-1 call is made from an unlisted residence in Pacific Palisades.

 3:14 a.m. The first responder shows up to find pop singer Kaley Hawk tied to a chair in a large, otherwise-empty room upstairs. She is the one who made the distress call.

 3:15 a.m. Two more cars arrive, and they find Jordan McGuire, aka Jordie Mack, brushing his teeth with no shirt on in a bathroom upstairs.

 3:18 a.m. Jordie Mack is cuffed and placed in the backseat of a police unit. He is taken to LA County two minutes before I arrive on the scene.

 3:40 a.m. Kaley Hawk is taken in for questioning but refuses medical services.

 I had a lot of questions, and apparently I wasn’t the only one. (I had the story to myself for almost 90 minutes, but none of the cops were talking. Ninety minutes. Maybe the most tragic part is that none of the larger outlets credited me with the scoop.) The cops didn’t seem to have many answers.

 Why didn’t Jordie Mack try to flee? How did Kaley Hawk make the call? Whose house was it? Why did she refuse medical services?

 All of this, of course, would come out in the trial. But at the time, none of it made any sense.

 A lot of it still doesn’t.

 All I know is, by the time of his trial, nobody seemed to remember Pressly Evans. When you do something good, like get the scoop, or become one of the biggest pop acts and then fall from grace, and everyone forgets you.

But when you mess up, no one will let you forget it.

CHAPTER 22

 Sorry I’m late. I stopped at the coffee shop for a grande iced sugar-free Vanilla latte with soy milk and a shot of wheatgrass, and some scrub with knockoff Bentley Platinum sunglasses and a $12 haircut tried to chat me up. I couldn’t get rid of the guy. Happens every time I wear the leather yellow mini, but what can you do? When you’ve got legs like these, are you supposed to cover them up with sweatpants?

And don’t even get me started about what happens when I wear yoga pants. I’d tell you about how those suckers affect the men of Southern California, but you would never look at a pair of racquetballs the same.

Anyhoo. Jordie. Jordan McGuire, aka Jordie Mack. Let’s talk about him, shall we?

I’ve been his attorney for only about a year, but he’s certainly kept me busy.

Why did he choose me? I already mentioned the leather yellow mini, did I not? That’s better than Magna Cum Laude at Princeton Law School, when it comes to building male clientele. He signed on the dotted line in less than an hour.

In many ways, we’re birds of a feather. Swans, really. In a world of ducks. What some people would call double-takers. As in, people look twice when people like Jordie Mack, former pop star, and Alyssa Quinlan, attorney for the stars, walk by.

I mean, he’s seen better days, certainly. The long hair and goatee thing were horrible decisions, while the face tattoo is bordering on a fashion felony. (I’m a lawyer; I should know.) It’s like defacing a Picasso painting. Me, I’ve got not a single tattoo on this body, not that you’d ever know. Why defile perfection? Orange Theory three times a week, tanning booth twice, and Crossfit on the weekends. Some of us take care of ourselves.

Not Jordie. He looked like he rolled out from under a sleeping herd of cattle most days. But somehow, that man still had that animal attraction.

What he has in natural looks, though, he’s missing upstairs. It’s like the Good Lord spent so much time sculpting him from the feet up that He forgot to finish the brain.

Some people are like that. Me, I’ve got brains and looks. Clearly. It takes them by surprise. They expect a blond bimbo, and what they get is Queen of the Ivy League. Never see it coming.

But this is supposed to be about Jordie, right? Mr. Boy Band. The so-called messiah? Let me tell you, he ain’t all that. He’s a lost little puppy dog, is what he is. A sheep in wolf’s clothing. That whole bad-boy image fits him like me in a pair of mom-jeans, you understand?

So when I got the call that he did *this*, I was as shocked as anyone. *If* he did this. Just because he pled guilty to a lesser charge, that doesn’t make him guilty. You make sure that’s understood. This is America, not one of these third-world countries. Like India. Or Africa. Or Louisiana.

That was a joke, by the way. I know Louisiana is a state. Remember: blonde, but not a bimbo.

And speaking of American rights, I don’t know how they coerced him into making that statement at the police station, but that wasn’t okay. That’s not even admissible, or shouldn’t have been.

Let me make this abundantly clear. Jordie Mack did not do this. At least, that’s not what was proven in court. You probably watched the proceedings on Court TV. You probably saw all the news stories.

This was, pure and simple, a case of a squeaky-clean pop star at the top of her game, versus a fallen teen idol. Pretty girl wins every time. Trust me, I should know.

The undisputable truth is, Jordie Mack was the defendant in this case, so the burden of truth wasn’t on him. If I had to guess, this Kaley Hawk girl isn’t as prude as she lets on. That’s just her image. But chances are, she met a good-looking bad boy after her show, couldn’t help herself, and then she regretted it and cried rape. I’m not saying that’s what happened. I’m just saying that’s probably what happened. But you didn’t hear it from me.

Whatever. We actually won the case, in principle. Yeah, Jordie’s in jail. But the sexual assault charge didn’t stick – saw that coming, huh? – due to lack of evidence. And even the kidnapping charge got downgraded because Jordie wasn’t asking for ransom; his sentence of 54 months is likely to result in parole after less than three years.

So maybe Jordie chose me because of the blond hair, the white teeth and the body that makes yoga pants sing. But what he got was the best young attorney is Southern California. You can print that.

Anyway, I have to be going. One of the guys I’m dating, this surfer-slash-volleyball-pro named Sebastian, he’s taking me out for tapas and clubbing in West Hollywood tonight, so I’ve got to look my best.

And trust me, those standards are as high as they get.

CHAPTER 23

A weirdo, okay? That’s the best way to describe the guy. And when you’ve done as much hard time as I have over the years, you’ve seen plenty of whackos. But this guy, he takes the cake.

 Dude cries at least once a day. I mean, who does that in jail? Either he’s crazy, or I’m crazy. Dude told me once it’s normal to cry. “It’s a part of life. And besides, I’ve lived a hard life.”

 Dude made millions of dollars a year back in the day. The fuck’s so hard about that?

 “You wouldn’t understand,” he tells me.

 Damn right, I wouldn’t. First right thing he ever said to me.

 “Being rich brings its own problems,” he tells me. “Being famous just sets you up for a fall.”

 Yeah, so does riding in a private plane with $100,000 bottles of champagne. You gotta come down sometime, right? But enjoy the damn ride.

 I ask him what the hell kind of problems does being rich bring? Which car to drive? Silk or cashmere bed sheets?

 I tell him, I grew up hard. Daddy smacked Mommy around all the time. Damn near killed her. Spent a year living in a car with Mom and my baby sister. Dropped out of school when I was 12 and fell into a street gang. You live that life, you’re destined to think life ain’t fair. Destined to sleep in cells like these.

 I ask him: You? Coming from where you were? Up there in the damn penthouse? Takes a whole different level of dumb for you to end up sleeping in a bunk below me.

 “All problems don’t look the same,” he says. “But they’re still problems.”

He hums himself to sleep nights. Even asked me, his cellmate, one time to sing him a lullaby. I shit you not. Said he couldn’t sleep.

I said, How much they pay you to sing those songs of yours back in the day? Give me twice that, and I’ll think about it.

Not that I know his songs. He was in one of those dancing-kid clubs. Mouseketeers minus the damn mouse. Wouldn’t even be right to call them a band, you feel me? Whatever. He became famous, somehow, and I remembered him only when someone else in the block told me his name.

Oh, yeah, I said at the time, the Black Lives Don’t Matter guy.

I ask him about it later, and he says: “It wasn’t like that.” And he tries to explain. But I just hold up my hand. My white hand. Even though I grew up in a black neighborhood, I’m as white as this fool. So I get it. We ain’t all down with the cause.

I say, look. I know two things about you. You’re rich as fuck. And you’re racist as more fuck.

Then he asks me what “more fuck” means, and I laugh at that. But he doesn’t. Because he’s weird. As more fuck.

As I said, I grew up around black people, but I ain’t black. So I was worried that not only was this Black Lives Don’t Matter motherfucker gonna get jumped, but I was gonna get jumped along with him. For being his cellmate. For being white. For not jumping the dude myself.

But get this. The brothers, they love that fool. Dancin’ King, they called him. They sang his songs and did his dance moves. And he loved them back. Whatever he said to that reporter back in the day, it wasn’t the same person I slept above.

I tell him one day, Maybe I was wrong about you.

And you know what he tells me?

“I was wrong about myself.” Then he rolls over and starts humming and I have to put my pillow over my ears to catch some sleep.

And I lie there, up above this dude who use to be more famous than anyone on earth, and I ask myself one question. What’s it like to lose it all?

I lean over the bed and look down at him. And he must feel me there or something, because he turns and looks up at me in the darkness.

“What?” he asks me.

And I just say it. What it’s feel like? Being in here, when you used to be way up there?

Dude just rolls onto his back, puts his hands behind his head, and shrugs. Like I asked him what it was liked to stub your damn toe.

“It’s temporary,” he says.

The fuck is that supposed to mean? I ask him.

He’s looking up at me, and because it’s dark I can barely see him. I know he’s got that weird face tattoo and that weird sneer that always makes him look smug, but here in the darkness I can feel him smiling.

“I’ll get it back,” he says. “Mark my words, I will get it back.”

I think he’s going to say more, so I wait. But he just sits like that, his hands behind his head, his elbows out, his movie-star teeth smiling in the night.

I count to thirty, then I roll over, shake my head, and tell myself that what else is temporary is sleeping above this goddamn lunatic. I cannot wait until he gets out of here and I get a new cellmate.

One who’s not weird as fuck.

CHAPTER 24

So this is all about me, huh?

No, this isn’t about me. This is about everyone else. Don’t get that twisted.

But all anyone wants to know is …

Yes, I did it. Is that what you wanted to hear? Because it’s the truth. I kidnapped Kaley Hawk. Good enough?

Maybe you want to know why, but that’s not such a simple answer. It wasn’t a sexual thing, if that’s what you’re thinking. The psychologist at the jail thinks it was about control or something. Maybe he’s right. Everyone else has controlled my entire life. My life of indulgence. My life of celebrity. Even when I was on top of the world, I never had control.

 I’ve been around enough celebrities in my life to know we’re mostly the same. We like the spotlight, but it also makes us uncomfortable. We don’t like to talk about ourselves. We’d rather dress up and play a character. Put on a mask. Play the part. Do the dance. Take on the persona of someone who isn’t us. To get away from what we really are. That’s how we try to gain control.

 Or maybe that’s just me.

 I’m going to be straight here. I’ve never been comfortable being around people. When I’m among them, I mean. When I’m out in front of them, that’s when I’ve got them where I need them. That’s what I liked about the idea of celebrity.

 But that’s not how celebrity works. The further you push them away, the more they want to get inside of you. The more they want to know you. The more they want to own you.

 And here’s the strange part. Once you walk away from them, you never want to walk alone.

 I’ve trusted very few people in my life. My mom. E-Dub. My agent, Robert Stinson. I even trusted that jerk from Rolling Stone, the one who twisted my words and made me some kind of pariah. They’ve all burned me. Every damned one of them. Sent me skyward, then left me to burn with the stars.

 Alone.

 So it makes no sense that this is all about me. Just me. I am here, alone.

But I didn’t get here by myself. I didn’t fly among the stars on my own, and I didn’t end up in this 12-by-12 cell on my own.

 Who put me here?

 America put me here. Yes, you. You’re the one who shackled me in chains and hoisted me skyward. You’re the one who anointed me some kind of bad boy, and then did everything you could to make me play the part.

 It was you that put Kaley Hawk there, too. In that empty house. It wasn’t an accident that I chose her. It was because of you. Because you took from me everything, and you gave it to her.

 I try not to think of that night, but it won’t go away. I’d fallen so far off the front pages of Entertainment Weekly that no one recognized me when I showed up outside her trailer. I’d been to enough shows that I knew how to navigate the system. I knew the routine. I knew when she’d be alone. When she broke away, I followed.

 No one ever heard her screams. That’s why we live in the neighborhoods we do. Complete privacy.

 I took her to a house I knew was on the market. A house that would be empty. She looked scared. Terrified. She asked me what I was going to do to her. She said she had a lot of money and would write a blank check if I let her go.

 The truth is, this wasn’t about money, either. And it wasn’t about her. I see that now. Just like Jordie Mack wasn’t about me. My name is Jordan McGuire. E-Dub created Jordie Mack to help E-Dub. Robert Stinson represented Jordie Mack to help Robert Stinson. That Rolling Stone reporter tweeted my stupid throwaway quote about Black Lives Matter to help Rolling Stone. The producers, the songwriters, the tour managers and choreographers and rock critics … they all got more out of Jordie Mack than Jordan McGuire ever did.

 No one ever really loved Jordie Mack. They just lifted me up so they could watch me fall.

This isn’t on me. It’s on you. Go look at your browsing history. Your favorite websites. Your social media follows.

Yes, America. You did this. Not me. I was something you created. Something you fed.

You fed that baby, didn’t you? Suckers.

I gave you everything, but you were dumb enough to take it.

So I decided I was going to take something from Kaley Hawk. Something very few have to give. If I can’t be an A-list celebrity anymore, I was going to find someone who was.

The court case focused on how she was able to make the phone call. Or why I didn’t run.

Those are good questions. Had I run, maybe I wouldn’t be here right now. In this 12-by-12 cell.

But here I am.

*Fame, fame, fickle fame*

*No one loves you when you’ve got no game*

*You don’t know me but you know my name*

*There was a time we were the same*

I wrote that this morning. I still have a comeback in me. I might call the album “Resurrection.” Or “Back Again.”

Or I might make an album and not let anyone listen to it. An album for me, not for you. Something that stays mine, that you cannot take away.

It’s true: the thing I am the most proud of, my solo album “101 at Night,” is the thing people hated the most. That album wasn’t the mistake. That album came out just the way I wanted it. The mistake was letting people listen to it.

Creating Jordie Mack wasn’t a mistake. Giving him to the public, that was the mistake.

You tried to destroy me. For being the bad boy you used to love.

Well, here’s the best part. I might be in a dark cell now, but I’m coming out. And I’m going to get what I had back.

Just watch me.

You know you will. You can’t look away.

CHAPTER 25

“If the whole world's singing your songs
And all of your paintings have been hung
Just remember what was yours
Is everyone's from now on.”

-Jeff Tweedy

 *And so you have come to me. Looking for answers. How dare you. Look in the damn mirror. Look around you. Look at society. The television. Social media. Look anywhere.*

 *Anywhere but here. Don’t ask me to explain.*

 *Is it because I also rose to celebrity at a young age, just like Jordie Mack? Is it because I’m a pop star, just like Jordie Mack? Is it because I understand the music business? Hollywood? What it’s like to be a celebrity?*

 *Or is it because I’m the one he kidnapped?*

 *Yes. Me.*

 *I don’t even like to think about that day, much less talk about it. But here you are, asking me what happened on that horrible night. Asking me what happened to Jordie Mack, what possessed him to do that. As if I have all the answers.*

 *How dare you.*

 *I just remember it was an hour or two after a show at the Hollywood Bowl. A local show. I’m not much for the afterparties, so I went for a walk. I felt like I was being followed and, obviously, it turns out I was. Lance, the head of security, still hasn’t let me forget that.*

 *“You’re the most famous person on the planet,” he said. “You can’t just wander off and try to live among the common people.” He liked to say: “That brightness that surrounds your star doesn’t turn off just because you want it to.”*

 *He was right, of course, but there’s no use looking back. No regrets, right?*

 *But I certainly regret ever meeting Jordie Mack. Especially the way I did. To my knowledge, I had only been in the same room with him once before. That was at the 2020 Grammys, when he took off his shirt and tried to rush the stage. I was sitting in the next section, looking back at all the commotion. I read all the articles a few weeks later about how he disparaged Black Lives Matter or whatever, and I said to myself, What a jerk. And then I never gave the guy another thought.*

 *I didn’t know it was him, there in the darkness. Not at first. He was older, of course, and looked a lot different. A lot different. Like, the difference between a pop star and a homeless person.*

 *At one point, I turned around, and he was just there. Breathing hard. He had a hood pulled up over his head, and I couldn’t see his face. He tried to say something to me, but I guess he saw the fear in my face and thought I might scream, because he grabbed me suddenly. Had a hand over my mouth, the other wrapped around my waist. A woman’s worst nightmare. I tried to scream. Tried to bite his hand. Kick him. Anything. I imagined Lance coming out of the darkness, saving me. But we were alone.*

 *He got me in the back of some van. Duct-taped my mouth and wrists and ankles. Blindfolded me …*

 *Sorry, but it’s awful to relive this. I’ve been working through it with my therapist, but my therapist is a guy, and they don’t understand. Most guy therapists are idiots, to be honest. Everyone knows that.*

 *Anyway, I didn’t know where he took me. Or why. I assumed I would be sexually assaulted. Or held for ransom. Or worse.*

*But …*

 *I didn’t know what was happening, okay? I might have blacked out. All I remember is coming to in a chair. Tied to the chair. He’d removed the tape from my mouth but not from my wrists and ankles. We were in a large room, like one of those rooms where people with money host balls. He was sitting in a chair across from me, about 20 feet away. He no longer had his hoodie on. He was shirtless. That’s when I recognized him, but I couldn’t think of his name.*

 *I asked what he wanted. My voice echoed in the emptiness of the large room.*

 *“What you have,” he said. It really creeped me out, but he didn’t mean it like that. “I want to be like you,” he said, “again.”*

 *He pulled out a phone. A phone I now know was some kind of burner phone. He was wearing gloves. No fingerprints, I’m guessing. He walked the phone over to me slowly. Set it down between my feet.*

 *“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “I promise.” He looked down at the phone. “You’re going to call for help,” he said.*

 *“What?” The guy sounded crazy as heck.*

 *“I’m not going to touch you,” he said. “I’m not going to sexually assault you.” He stood over me and stared at me, his bare chest and tattoos nearly touching my forehead. “But you’re going to tell them I did,” he added.*

 *It didn’t make sense. I couldn’t even figure out what he was saying. There were ulterior motives. With men, there always are.*

 *He picked up the phone.*

 *“Just tell them to come help you,” he said. “That’s all you need to do.”*

 *“I don’t understand …” But he was already dialing.*

 *“Trust me,” he whispered as he placed the phone against my ear. It was a strange thing for a man who’d tied me to a chair to say.*

 *I screamed into the phone. Shouted that I needed help. They said they were sending someone. When I handed the phone back to him, I expected him to run. But he just sat back down in the chair across from me.*

 *“Fame is a funny thing,” he said, crossing his legs calmly. I listened for sirens in the distance but didn’t hear anything. “I’ve never done drugs, but I bet I know what it’s like.”*

 *“How so?” I asked, my voice shaking. I wanted to keep the conversation going. Until someone came to save me. I listened to the world outside. I heard something that sounded like a police siren. Or a bird chirping in the wind.*

 *“It feels so good, you can’t stop,” he said. He smiled. That sneer of his. Jordie Mack. The name came to be then. “My agent,” he continued, “he liked to say, ‘You’ve got to feed that baby.’ As in, the baby will die without it.” He leaned forward. “I’m the baby, Kaley,” he said. “I would die without it. That’s what it felt like. The baby needed to be fed, or I would no longer be alive.” His smirk faded. He stood up. I could definitely hear a siren then. My heartbeat quickened. I was certain he could hear it too. I actually found myself trusting him, if only for a moment, as if maybe he really wasn’t going to hurt me. “You love it,” he said. “You feel like you can’t live without it.” He slammed a gloved fist into his palm, startling me. “But then,” he said, “then you hate it. Fame, I mean. That drug called fame. You stop craving it. But you can’t escape its grip.”*

 *He pulled something from his pocket. My whole body tensed up. The sirens were louder now. Almost here. But still not close enough. Too far away to stop whatever he might be about to do.*

 *I saw then that it was not a knife or a weapon, but rather a toothbrush. Which is a darned strange thing to have at a time like that.*

 *“When it’s gone,” he said, “it’s all you can think about. You need that rush. To keep you alive.”*

 *At that moment, when my fame was at its peak, I tried to imagine my life without it. Without all the lights and cameras and screaming fans. And, I have to be honest, it sounded like bliss.*

*To be free. To be totally independent. To have your sense of self back. That thing that was stolen from you years ago.*

*“How do you get it back?” I asked. “Fame.”*

*At this, he smiled. Not that sneer that made him look like a petulant teenager, but an actual smile. The whiteness of his teeth exposed the truth of his past, that he was once Hollywood’s brightest star. That was such a long time ago. When I was just a kid.*

*The sirens closed in, sounding like they were wrapping around us.*

*Like a blanket. Or a noose.*

*“They’re here,” Jordie Mack said softly. And then he went to brush his teeth.*

*There are two definitions of rape. One is that you force someone into a sexual act. Despite what I told the police, what I said in court, that did not happen.*

*The other definition is to spoil or destroy something. So, yes, Jordie Mack is guilty of rape.*

*…*

*I’m sorry. Actually, I take that back. My therapist tells me I apologize too much for things I don’t regret. He also tells me I search too much for things that aren’t there. Like a diamond inside of a plain, old rock. Like meaning in the meaningless.*

*So, no. I can’t explain why Jordie did what he did. Like I said earlier, he was destined to fall. The story that has been told for as long as humans have existed. That will continue to be told.*

*The most human story ever.*

*We rise.*

*We fall.*

*We have something, we lose it, and all we ever want is to get it back. As I said earlier, the most human story ever told.*

*The diamond in the rock is this. He didn’t want me. He wanted fame.*

*He got what he wanted. That’s what this was about, as best I can tell.*

CHAPTER 26

The cameras are ready. As soon as he gets out, we will be there. Robert Stinson made sure of it.

It’s brilliant, really. Stinson floated the idea a day or two after the verdict.

“Look, Rex,” he told me, “I gotta feed that baby here. You’re one of the best directors in Hollywood. Do me this, and I’ll owe you a solid.” Robert Stinson already owes me about six solids, but what the hell. The idea was so epic, it’ll feed me pretty well too.

A reality series, based on Jordie Mack’s assimilation.

Rex Reynolds Productions presents … Mack: The Life.

We’ll be there every step of the way. The parole-board hearing. The opening of the gate. Jordie smelling freedom again for the first time in three years. And everything that comes after.

Can’t miss. It’s a regular Truman Show.

If we do this right – and Rex Reynolds does nothing that’s not right – Jordie Mack will be back on top by the time the fall ratings come out.

Get this. We’re orchestrating the resurrection of Jordie Mack, so we can film the resurrection of Jordie Mack.

“Feeding the hand that feeds the baby!” Stinson exclaimed on a Zoom call.

Someone once sang that every star is a setting sun. Or something like that. And Jordie Mack’s sun dropped well beyond the horizon years ago. But here’s the thing about suns setting. They always rise again. Always.

It’s the great American story. The hero is wounded but gets up and finds redemption. Even a hack writer who posts fiction on social media could recycle that narrative.

I usually prefer a story with more depth, myself. But this one’s too good to pass up.

The public’s going to eat this one up. The viewers, I mean. They’re as predictable as Southern California sun. Give them five good-looking white kids singing and dancing in tandem, and the consumers go apeshit. Every time. Give them a story of a comeback, they write you a blank check.

Feed the baby?

More like taking candy from a baby.

Jordie Mack is going to be back among the most-searched topics on Google before America knows what hit her. The racist-turned-rapist, rehabilitated. America loves a second chance. Cry uncle, and we’ll un-cancel you.

It will all start when the gates of the jail open. When the fallen hero returns.

Turn on the cameras.

Let the magic happen.

Yes, it’s as simple as that.

CHAPTER 27

*“It was a good, good night on the radio.”*

-Roadside Graves

I will drive at night, with the radio on. Windshield wipers flapping. The music will fill my car with the sounds of nostalgia. A boy-band from my younger years, when I was into such things, and the music will take my mind off the pain for a few minutes.

I will be alone, but I won’t be alone. My child will be inside of me. Ready to come out.

The music will soothe me. My pulsing stomach will rest against the steering wheel. If I had anyone else, anyone at all, I would not be driving myself.

“The Best of My Heart (Is Only 4U),” will be playing. I will remember seeing BroTown perform this one at the Rose Garden – what, 10, maybe 15 years ago? Hazel Pendergraft, who died in a car accident not long after, was singing alongside me. We knew all the words. I was staring dreamily at CB, and Hazel would talk about Jordie the whole car ride home.

Driving alone in my car, all these years later, the contractions coming 20 to 30 seconds apart, I will think of Jordie Mack and how he won’t go away. How he keeps reinventing himself. I will be thinking of the binge-watch session I had of Netflix’s “Mack: The Life.” (Although I will deny watching it if anyone ever asks.) I will have watched Jordie Mack being interviewed by Jimmy Fallon and will have asked myself if Hazel was right, if Jordie was actually the hottest BroTown member all those years earlier. And then I will get lost in a thought, there in my car, wondering whatever happened to CB, my first crush. He’s probably living on the East Coast now, with a wife and two kids, and a shaggy grey beard, probably writing his own songs now, about grown-up shit like impermanence and persistence and people who come and go, and since I am alone I will privately wish he could join a BroTown reunion tour. My grin will fade when the reality sets in that it would never happen.

I will feel another contraction, which will snap me out of my trip down memory lane.

A few minutes later, I will see the H-in-a-circle sign a half-mile from the exit ramp, and by the time I pull my car to the curb in front of the ER, I will swear that the baby is already coming out of me.

They will help me into a wheelchair, and I will look up at the clear night sky and find myself wondering why I’ve never realized there were so many stars up there. I will look up at them, as if they are snowflakes, all the same from a distance but so unique if you can get up close. I will ponder the night sky, thinking that many of the stars have fallen or faded but nobody ever miss them. The medical team will roll me into the hospital and I will hear the soft tunes of Kaley Hawk singing about how good girls are stronger, how strong girls are good, playing through the speakers as they wheel me through the hallways and into the elevator. The doors will open on the delivery floor. The anesthesiologist will inject me with relief, and a group of medical types will gather around me as the room goes blurry and their voices melt into radio static.

Despite the injection, I will feel a pain so blinding that I will expect my eyeballs and eardrums and rectum to simultaneously pop out of me, and I will push like I have never pushed before, and I will want like I have never wanted before, and I will need this more than anything I have ever needed in my life.

And then I will feel an incredible release, and will wait for the sounds of screaming, and as they cut the umbilical cord and lay him in my arms, but I will hear nothing. As the baby squirms in strange silence, I will be overcome with a thought so pure that it could never be questioned.

I will never be alone again. Now, I will never be alone again.

And I will look down at this beautiful being in my arms, and I will promise to love him and to protect him from harm and to never let the world take advantage of him.

I will want for him nothing but happiness. Hope that he dreams without nightmares.

He will look up at me, with those searching eyes, and I will realize for the first time that he is not crying. This strikes me as odd, and I look to the nurse who is standing before me. She just smiles, with joy in her eyes.

I will touch his forehead, his soft cheek, his tiny ear. I will find myself not wishing for happiness, but for sadness. All humans start out crying, don’t they?

I will pray for him, pray that he will never feel alone. It’s a big world out there. Please, God, don’t ever let him feel alone.

And then I will lean in, press my lips against the softness of his ear, the ear of this newborn baby who has never shed a tear, and I will whisper to him.

“One day,” I will say, “you are going to be a star.”

And I’ll be damned if I won’t hear something come from inside of him. A sound like singing. The hum of angels.

I will press the child against my breast and feel the beating of his heart.

THE END