You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone

By Scott M. Johnson

**CHAPTER 1**

What I can tell you is only what I know, or what I knew. Only what I feel, or what I felt. Feelings and knowledge stopped, for me, at the age of seventeen. I took my life then, and with that, all capacity to know and to feel, were gone.

He’d been at my side that day, like he always seemed to be. Tanner Boudin. My best friend. That’s what I believed at the time, and in many ways I still do. In death, I think of him often. I see him. I follow his life. I’m still there: invisible, just the way he had always wanted to be.

Tanner Boudin – friend or foe? All these years later, I’m still not sure.

He’d been there at the funeral. There with the others, the few who had ever given my life much notice, much less cared for me, although Tanner Boudin stood at a distance. He wore a long, dark overcoat on a stark, sun-drenched morning a quarter-century ago – the kind of day that’s meant for celebration. Tanner had his dark hair pulled forward, barely covering his forehead. He wore oversized, black sunglasses, hiding his dark, saucer-like eyes. He didn’t look at my family, not one single time, and by the way they stood, huddled together as a unit for what might have been the final time, it was pretty clear that they weren’t opening themselves up to him, either. They ignored him, like he wasn’t even there. The kid most responsible for their middle child’s suicide, the kid who had taken an oath with me and then backed out when I’d pulled the trigger, he was invisible to them at that moment. He, too, was dead in their eyes.

The first thing you want to hear, of course, is what it’s like. *To be dead*. I, too, always wondered this. Some might say I had a sick fascination, then, before I ended it. Who am I to know? I have neither knowledge nor feelings. All I can tell you is that I’ve seen no pearly gates, no faces from the past, no angels with wings and harps and flowing locks of hair. There is only me – unknowing, unfeeling, only able to watch life happen, without being able to react or participate. I can *see* life, but I cannot *live* life. I can only watch them, the living, as if I’m cursed to do so. I cannot physically turn away. It’s a movie, and I do not have the ability to close my eyes; I have no eyelids, for I am dead.

What I thought death would be like, when I was seventeen, was a darkness, a calmness. God and heaven were not the things that intrigued me; rather, I wanted to get away from everything I knew life to be. I thought I could rid myself of all the pain and float around above those whom I wanted to torture, the ones who had tortured me. I thought I could haunt Sean Tate for all the things he represented during our high school years. I thought I could hover at the window of Amanda Kornhalther, spying all the good parts of her skin that I had imagined so many times while lying in bed and rubbing the gym sock that I had wrapped around my penis. These subtle forms of revenge, for me, would prove to be impossible. I can neither choose my subjects nor feel my loins. The dead have no loins.

Everything went black on that rainy day in the abandoned pool house where Tanner and I had spent far too many afternoons together. Tanner Boudin was not just my best friend; he was my only friend.

And after the darkness cleared and I could see him there, sitting on a folding chair with a gun in his hand, looking down at the bloody, crumpled mess of my body, I wondered if he’d been any kind of friend at all. If maybe it was all just pretend, if his friendship was something I’d just imagined.

Of course, Tanner Boudin was the one who found my body. He must have been the one to call the police and tell them that he’d heard a loud blast out in the woods and had gone to check it out. He must have told them that he’d found me lying like that, with a few teeth knocked out and a spongy, red substance splattered about what was left of my head.

What he didn’t tell them was that he was my best friend, that he knew about my plan, and that he was right there with me when it happened.

What he didn’t tell them was that he had had a gun in his mouth as well.

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Tanner Boudin, as it would be, was one of the few people to attend the funeral. My own family stood a safe distance away. They looked so connected, my family did, all four of them. My disengaged father, my devastated mother, my thick-skinned brother and my impressionable baby sister, Bailey. Seeing her was the most jarring of all, and when I think back on that day all these years later – the stringy, blond hair shining in the sun; the wondering eyes and coat-hanger shoulders and those tiny, six-year-old feet, her bare heels locked together in a child-like embrace – I wonder what her life might have been like if I’d never existed.

Behind her stood my father, hands on her shoulders while giving gentle squeezes meant to give young Bailey assurance that everything was going to be okay. His face painted a different picture, with strong jaw muscles clenched like they have all his life, only this time with the intensity of disappointment. My father’s first words, upon seeing my mother drop the telephone and drop to her knees, on that October day when I took my own life, had been: “Jesus Christ. What’s he done *now*?” -- his voice dripping with exasperation as he spoke. And then, there at the funeral, his lips were pursed and his jaw was set with military grit.

To his left, a younger and slightly thinner version of himself: my older brother Anthony. I had never noticed until that moment, there at my own funeral, how much my father’s oldest son looked just like him. They both had square faces, low hairlines, deep-set jaws and the short, squatty bodies that would define the men in our family. The women in our family were built like athletes; the men, like accountants.

They both stood with the same impatient posture, my father and brother, unable to disguise the frustration that comes with wanting to be someplace else. They both looked just as put off by my absence as they had always been by my very presence. Anthony, who had come home from his fourth year at a private college somewhere out East, stood with hands folded in front of him, his mouth askew, his face giving off the impression that he’d lost something as simple as a dog leash, not a little brother.

And then my mom. She, too, showed physical characteristics that had been passed down through the generations. Her eyes, like my grandmother’s, seemed to shine in even the most difficult of times. I also saw a sadness in my mother that would weigh her down for months and years and decades to come. I could read in her face that this weight would not soon dissipate, not even for a few minutes, not for the rest of her life.

It dawns on me as I look back on that day, as I look back on the faces of my family and the guilty body language of seventeen-year-old Tanner Boudin, that life is really nothing more than what you leave behind. This is not something I know, but something that is just there for the taking. All I have, in life and in death, are these people. This is all that life produced. Seventeen years, and this is what I have.

Twenty-five years have passed since the funeral – *my* funeral – and they’re all scattered now. My mother stands in the solitude she has come to expect, with her sparkling blue eyes gone grey and her dark skin gaunt and wrinkled and worn. Her curved body has morphed into the soft, round mass of a middle-aged woman. She is alone, like she so often seems to be, staring into the pages of a photo album. My mother drowns in loneliness, and has for so long now that she’s given up fighting and allowed herself to float below the surface. She now lives her life like I lived mine, buried under the weight of so much pain that she no long feels it. She carries it like a garbage filled with dirt: one step at a time, not really going anywhere but too scared to stay in one place for too long.

She stares at the photo of my face, taken a month or two before my death. Looking in my eyes, one could see a deadness that had already taken over inside of me. When this photo was taken, I was alive but no longer living – just waiting to die.

That photo had long been tucked away. Maybe a decade had passed since she had last pulled it out, thanks to the therapist and to her only remaining friend Gail, both of whom warned her that she was killing herself just like her youngest son had done twenty-five years earlier.

She opens a shoebox and pulls out another photo, a younger version of me, an image from one of my birthday parties in washed-out color. My sandy hair cascades from beneath a cardboard, pointed yellow hat with sparkly red strands that fall down and cover my forehead. In the stillness of this photo, my twitch is gone; I hold my head like any other adolescent would. But my face is deadly serious. My dark eyes look lost. The photo is from my seventh birthday, when I couldn’t even find it in myself to smile.

The date was November the fourth. Just like today is November the fourth.

My mother stares, the only sound the ticking of the clock above her stove. The calendar on her refrigerator reminds me that it is my 42nd birthday. It would be my 42nd birthday.

My mother drops her head and begins to weep. I am here, but I am not here, and so she weeps with the shamelessness that comes with private intimacy. She allows the tears to roll down her cheeks, the mucous to run from her nostrils, across her cracked lips, down into a puddle on the kitchen table of the apartment she now calls home. The clock on her wall has not moved in weeks, and my mother does not bother to change the battery. The telephone might as well be turned off, for its lack of action. The things that surround her now are a graveyard of inactivity, serving as simple reminders that desolation can be as suffocating as the dirt thrown on a casket.

She rises from the table, her body shaking, and picks up the telephone. I watch as she dials the numbers. In death, I can be two places at once. Both a blessing and a curse. My father, he’s on vacation and probably doesn’t even know what month it is. The thought of my father acknowledging my birthday after all these years is preposterous. He has escaped into a new life. He’s in the Caymans, snorkeling with a wife who celebrated her 37th birthday just weeks earlier. They’re out of the water now, and he’s peering into the snorkel with one eye.

“Hello?” my father says into the telephone, and there is only silence. Then a sniffle. Then the sound of a woman, a woman he used to know so well, clearing her throat and trying to find the words.

My father, he looks at the watch on his wrist. His arms are tan. His face shows impatience. He tosses the snorkel into the sand and squints in the sunlight.

“Peg?” he says into the telephone, his voice hushed as his new wife sits not more than ten feet away. He steps away from her. “Peggy, is that you?”

My mother, on the other end of the telephone, with a hand covering her a tear-soaked face, can only nod. He hears nothing. But my father, my living father, he knows things.

“Peggy, you can’t do this,” he says, walking even farther away so that his second wife and his second family won’t hear. “You can’t do this every year.” Still, my mother says nothing. Her tears come more freely, and she struggles for breath. My father knows. When you love someone for as long as he once loved her, there are things you can hear in someone’s silence. “Peg, no,” he says. “You have to get over it. Christ, it’s been – what -- twenty years?” He’s found his way to a stairwell that leads to the back entrance of a resort. “You can’t let it eat at you, Peggy. You have to let go.”

As if mustering every ounce of strength within her, my mother swallows hard and opens her mouth. Weakly, a voice trickles out.

“I,” she says. “I … can’t.”

My father, all he says now, is: “You must. Peg, you must.” He covers the phone and, with eyes closed in the sunlight, whispers: “Jesus Christ.”

My mother then says the name that helped tear the family apart. She says my name. She says it softly, probably like she did when she held me in her arms as an infant. This is all she says.

To this, my father lets out a long, frustrated sigh. He pulls the phone from his ear and looks at it, then presses it back against his clenched jaw.

“I can’t do this,” he says into the phone, to my mother and the woman who gave him his first three children. “I just can’t … do this.”

And he hangs up the hand-held cell phone by flipping it closed. Then my father flashes a smile at his new wife and gives her a wave. Everything is all right. Nothing to see here.

A continent away, my mother holds her breath into the dead silence. She closes her eyes in the dim light of the room. She cannot see the pulled shades, the half-empty carafe of white wine between her feet, the open bottle of Vicatin pills on the kitchen table, the dingy quilt on the sofa where she’s laid her head every night this week. And, of course, she cannot see me. I am here too. I cannot go away.

A sound jolts her, the telephone returning to life. Her eyes open and her ashen face stares at the ringing contraption for three full rings before a frail hand reaches out and picks up.

“Tony?” she says softly. The name of my father, her ex-husband, echoes in the room. “Tony, is that you?”

Before a voice calls out from across the line, I can see that it belongs not to my father but to another person from the past.

“Is this … *Peggy*?” the male voice says, my mother’s name fumbling awkwardly from his lips.

My mother impatiently looks at the receiver without recognition, as if she’s prepared to hang up. She holds it out in front of her.

“Hello?” the voice says.

My mother, lips pursed, handkerchief dabbing at her eyes, rests the receiver against her ear.

“Is this a salesperson?” she says. “Because if it is, I’m on a strict, no-call list. And I –“

“No, no. This is not a salesman, Mrs. D.”

*Mrs. D.*

Judging by my mother’s face, the words hit her like the closing of a coffin.

“Who is this?” she says quickly, her voice suddenly stern but filled with fear. My mother’s face turns red.

“This is Tanner Boudin,” the voice says, and my mother slams the phone down as soon as the name rolls off his lips.

Her face goes ghost white. Her eyes are the size of silver dollars. My mother, she gasps for breath. She pulls the telephone cord from the wall and throws the phone across the room.

Miles and miles away, in one of many towns to which he’s fled while trying to run from the past, Tanner Boudin sits alone in his car, parked in his garage, with a cell phone in his lap. The last number dialed belongs to my mother – the subject of his lone telephone call since last Thursday. Tanner is the one I cannot escape. By living, he is a ghost that haunts me. Whenever he remembers me, I am there. And sometimes I think he knows it.

Disheveled, his salt-and-pepper hair pulled down onto his forehead, his jaw and chin covered in a thick beard meant to disguise him from his past, Tanner Boudin is a warped version of the child I met 34 years earlier. He rests his head against the steering wheel of a car parked in a closed garage. He wears a sleeveless shirt. His skin has no tattoos, for he needs none; his markings are the scars of life.

Keys in the ignition, Tanner Boudin prepares to die. Again. This is what has become of him. Today is the day because this day is Oct. 13, the day of death. This is the day that his best friend died twenty-five years earlier, and it is also the day that Tanner was supposed to die all those years ago. His life has gone on to be like so many others – his flirtations with both greatness and disaster were brief -- and for this he is perhaps the unluckiest of them all. Who am I to know? I know nothing; I feel nothing.

Perhaps he is satisfied with the mark he’s left on this world. Perhaps Tanner Boudin regrets just two days per year. One of them was the day I died. The other, the day I was born.

He lies back in the car seat and reaches with his right hand, across the steering wheel, toward the keys. The tip of his index finger is gone, left behind in his escape from a burning building all those years earlier. Sometimes it feels like the tip of his finger is still there -- a condition called *phantom limb syndrome* that he read about in some of the medical books he keeps in his office. The condition has fascinated him so much that he typed it into his computer one day, mesmerized by the concept that a brain could convince a person that something was there when it really wasn’t.

He takes the key between his fingers. He turns it over, starts the car, and waits. The rumble of the engine kills the silence. He breathes in slowly, deeply, taking each breath as if it may be his last. His eyes are closed and his head, a head he has grown into since we were kids, rests back. He looks as peaceful as I’ve ever seen him – and Tanner Boudin was always a man of peace.

Through the whir of the engine, a chirping sound beckons, out there, in the distance. It grows, so much so that Tanner might think that the invisible gas has already taken him away and surrounded him with angels. The cicadas rumble like piercing thunder, like screeching tires that skid on and on and on. He taught me this once: the cicada is a rare social insect that finds strength in numbers. He drinks in the sound, and then his eyes open. Something on his face tells me that he has only just realized: seventeen years have passed since the last time.

Tanner turns the key into the OFF position and lets the warm sound of the chirping bugs wash over him. Every seventeen years they come. During those years in between, he forgets. And then the migration returns and he hears them again, and at these times he can do nothing but remember. A smile stretches across his face. It says that he remembers the way it was, back then, during that first summer.

It says that he remembers me. My best friend. My only friend. He is no more evil than he is angelic.

What he can’t see, sitting there in the car, is the police cruiser that’s pulled into the driveway outside of the closed garage. Tanner can’t see this now, but I can. They are coming to take him away. He no longer controls his own destiny, like I controlled mine. I was the one who pulled the trigger, the one who decided when life should end. I did this to myself. It is something that could never be undone. Tanner won’t have that same chance, not this time.

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What you want to know now, of course, is one last thing. You want to know why. The answer is not so simple. In death, nothing is simple.

**CHAPTER 2**

What I remember most about that summer, what felt like the first summer, was the smell of magnolias. Never before had I been aware of their scent, and so to me it was as if they had just sprung up from the earth for the first time. Back then, in my eighth year of a shortened life, the magnolias came to me much the way Tanner Boudin would: suddenly, surprisingly, thankfully.

He arrived from a place called Toronto, which could have just as well been another planet. I did not know then that Tanner was from the country to the north, nor that there *was* a country to the north. I do not even remember seeing him walk through a door; he was just there, standing at the front of the second-grade classroom as Mrs. Bledergast announced his arrival two weeks into the school year. He sat without so much as a wave.

I stared, not because he had an oblong head that reminded me of a sideways watermelon, with ears that stuck out like open car doors, nor because his small mouth never opened or even twitched, but because he was something different. He was, like me, an outsider in this world. The new kid. I couldn’t help thinking I knew just how he felt. That same sense of vulnerable awkwardness that had weighed on me for as long as I could remember was a part of me I could never escape. With a slight facial tick and a mild birth defect that rendered my head incapable of turning to the left, I was destined to be *different*. I knew what it was like to feel alone in a room full of people. Tanner Boudin’s small, still body and unmoving facial features gave no hint whatsoever, but I was certain that he felt the same way.

I made a point of standing near him at recess, both of us quietly watching the others play four-square or engage each other in playful teasing. None of these things appealed to me. And apparently, not to Tanner Boudin, either. We were not like the others. We could never be like the others. This was our curse but also our greatest gift.

Three days passed before I made my move. I told him I knew his name was Tanner, and he never asked mine. My name rarely, if ever, passed his lips, and looking back on it I sometimes wonder whether my best friend even knew what it was. On that third day, while he stared at me after I’d called him by his name, I asked him if he liked bugs. When Tanner Boudin nodded, I led him toward the part of the playground that was farthest from the school. I picked out a few beetles, dropping them into the palms of his tiny little hands. He said nothing. His silence both intrigued and frustrated me. I felt envious of his ability to find comfort in unspoken thought.

“I used to have a hamster,” I told him quickly, eagerly filling in the silence. He said nothing in response, so I sheepishly added: “It died.” Tanner was looking directly in my eyes. I knew he was listening. He was the first person who looked at me like that, who stared back as if he had nothing else going on in the world. My own parents never looked at me that way; the other kids at school looked at me like I was a freak. Tanner and I made promises to each other with our eyes, vows that we would never let each other down. In his stare, I found trust. I finally knew what it meant to believe in someone, and to have someone believe in me.

What Tanner finally said, after several more wordless minutes of digging for bugs, was something I didn’t quite understand. “I can disappear,” he said, his voice flat and as serious as a tornado. There was a strength in his voice that I hadn’t expected. He had a daring look in his eyes, a look that said he wanted to be challenged.

“Disappear?” I said.

“Go invisible.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds. I wondered if any of the other kids were watching, but I dared not turn my head to look. I didn’t want them to expose my secret, to tell Tanner Boudin that no one else ever dared talk to me.

“Show me,” I said. I tried to block out the others, to pretend we were the only two people alive. Pretending was something that Tanner and I could do together. “Show me,” I said again. “Go invisible.”

At this, Tanner simply closed his eyes. He stood in front of me, hands in his pockets, eyes closed, and said nothing. He stayed like this for thirty, maybe sixty, seconds.

“Do it,” I said, pleading him on.

“I am,” Tanner said. His small mouth pursed into a slight smile. Tanner Boudin looked lost in a dream. After several more seconds, he opened his eyes and looked at me. “I’m back,” he said.

I smiled back. I liked him for his imagination. He would come to like me for mine.

We played with bugs every day at recess, quizzing each other whenever we found a new one. He knew that most millipedes, contrary to their names, have fewer than 50 sets of legs. That bees can be either solitary or social, much like humans, but that only the social ones can produce wax and honey. He knew that most species of butterfly have a short lifespan, and that some can spend as much as several years in the pupal stage known as a cocoon.

We’d spend lunch periods in the library, munching on sandwiches while poring over books on etomology and trying to memorize the pictures. At recess, we would venture out to an unoccupied part of the schoolyard, just Tanner and me, so that the others wouldn’t bother us. We would try to find the biggest bug or do imitations of classmates for our own entertainment. One time, maybe two or three months after he had moved into town, Tanner asked me why the other kids were always so mean to me. I made up a story about how I got in a fight with one of the bigger boys in the first grade and beat him up so badly that everyone was scared of me. The truth was that I wasn’t sure why they wouldn’t bring me into their circle. Maybe it was the way I looked; maybe it was the occasional facial tic; maybe it was the way my head could only turn one direction. Maybe it was because I preferred riding my skateboard and writing stories to whatever it was the other kids my age were doing. I didn’t tell Tanner any of this. I just hoped he hadn’t noticed any of these things. Tanner told me that everyone else in this school was really weird and that he liked me the way I was.

Tanner had this way of giggling, where his whole face would turn red and his cheeks would expand because he refused to open his mouth, that made me feel a sense of ease around him. He laughed at almost everything I said, even sometimes when I wasn’t trying to be funny, and I guess that’s part of what drew me to him. I could make him spit milk through his nostrils just by imitating a fart noise. One time, one of the girls told me I was “disgusting” and moved her tray to another table at the cafeteria, but I didn’t care as long as Tanner was laughing.

The other thing I liked about him was the way he talked. Tanner always called older people “*ah-dults*”– it rhymed with *yeah-dults* -- and he had a funny way of saying words like “oot” instead of “out” and “soory” instead of “sorry.” He even used words that no one else our age ever dared utter, words like *proper* and *suppose*.

I don’t know what it was that Tanner liked about me. Maybe it was my imagination, the stories I told him. I don’t know where they came from – somewhere deep inside me; they were just *there*. In Tanner, I had a way to release them.

The other kids mostly left us be, the way they had done to me before Tanner had arrived unexpectedly that fall. We rode the bus together, and every afternoon I cringed when the vehicle slowed to a stop outside of his house. Those were the times, when Tanner got off the bus each day, when I would feel that familiar loneliness again. I had never known friendship, and every second I was away from Tanner reminded me that I was one person away from returning to solitary confinement.

In spring, the magnolias returned and the quiet Midwestern skies were invaded by something called cicadas. The piercing sound, like a whistle through a blow horn, drowned our ears through the summer months that followed our second-grade year. The sound bored inside of us, planting itself within our minds, so that the only time we noticed it was when it wasn’t there. We didn’t know that when the sound went away, seventeen years would pass before the cicadas would return. That spring, for me, would be the only time that sound would be in my life.

We liked to go looking for them, Tanner and me, in the woods behind the school parking lot. We followed the trail of sound like it was a rainbow, with an unattainable pot of gold at its end. The cicada bugs always seemed so close, yet out of reach. Always, they were just beyond our fingers – untouchable, like life and like death.

When we weren’t chasing cicadas, we were hanging out in Tanner’s basement. I felt safe there, safe because his mother was always talking and his father was busy trying to stay out of everyone’s way. Tanner’s demeanor came from his father. Both of them were quiet, distant types, their eyes always looking like they could see places beyond the space in front of them. Their mouths were always closed. I swear, I never saw either of their teeth. They smiled mostly with their eyes, if at all. They did whatever Mrs. Boudin asked them, and I think it was because it was the only sure way to steer clear of conflict. This was the bond between Tanner and his father, perhaps the only one that existed. His father was a psychiatrist who listened to people’s problems all day and probably just wanted some blessed silence at home.

That first summer, I did not yet know why Mr. Boudin had moved from Canada or why he had brought his family to my neighborhood. I was too young to ask questions, too detached to appreciate destiny. And Tanner’s father didn’t say much. Maybe it was because Mrs. Boudin was always buzzing around like the queen bee, babbling on and on about the mettlesome neighbors or the latest rock star in rehab or the clients that had just looked at one of the houses she was trying to sell on the east side of town. It didn’t matter the subject, just as long as she was talking. The sound of her voice was soothing to my ears because she asked for nothing in return. Tanner’s parents were insanely devoid of interest in him. This is what felt safe. I liked being at Tanner’s house simply because we were invisible there, and because it wasn’t mine.

The place I lived was undeniably my parents’ domain. That was back before my sister, Bailey, had been born, and my brother Anthony often moved around like a renter. Anthony had a remarkable capacity for making his presence rare, and no one seemed to much care. It was just the four of us: my tightly-wound father, my over-reactive mother, my searching brother, and me – whatever I was. None of us even seemed related, except for maybe the dark, Italian eyes that came from both parents. From the outside, we must have looked like a scattering of strangers. From the inside, we were even more distant than that.

Except for my mother. She wrapped herself around me, her baby, and refused to let go. Our relationship was a series of question-and-answer sessions, like home-school therapy. My memories of her, all of them, involve her reaching out toward me as if I were a wounded animal. *Are you tired? Did you get enough to eat? Why don’t you ever have any friends over? Are you sure you don’t want a haircut?* Whereas my father and brother seemed to deny my very presence, my mother was consumed by it. The sound of her concerned voice defined my childhood. She was the protector; my father, the hopeless skeptic. I swear that he spent more time trying to figure out how to avoid me than he did actually interacting with me. He seemed put off by my very presence, and I felt eternally guilty for being there, in his life, in their house.

Anthony, he spent hours upon hours at neighbors’ houses or shopping for comic books that were impossible to find or practicing golf shots in the park up the street. That was the summer he took up jogging, and I think he did it just to run away.

My life, before Tanner came along, had been an imagination. I drew pictures and read more books than any 8-year-old should have to read. I wasn’t old enough to go to the library by myself, so that was one of the few things my brother and I would do together. He would flip through magazines impatiently or talk up older girls while I tried desperately to read through the never-ending pages of *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* or one of those Stephen King novels. The thickness of the books is what drew me to them, their infinite pages making me believe that I could go an entire summer without having to speak to either of my parents.

And so Tanner saved my life that summer, what felt like the first summer I’d ever known. Without him, I could have gotten lost in those pages and never found my way. Without him, I had no reason to live.

Tanner took me to parts of the town that I never knew existed, not because he had been there before but because he had revived my passion to explore. We would walk out to the part of our hometown where sidewalks disappeared. We would stare out at the wheat fields and train tracks and talk about what our lives would have been like had we been raised in the country. He would take me to the east side of town, where motel rooms had weekly rates and some people slept outside even on cold, rainy nights. My parents would have forbidden me to go to places like these, but Tanner Boudin excitedly led me there on city buses because he was eternally exploring. We wondered what it would be like to live in places like those. Tanner and I always came to the same conclusion: that any life would be better than the ones we led. We figured all kids in our part of town thought like this, even the pretty girls and the bigger boys who seemed to command so much attention. Back then, we were too young to realize just how different we really were as compared to anyone else our age.

During school hours, we were simple distractions to the others. When there were no other subjects of conversation between the other kids, they would seek us out to tease us and call us names. Mine was Dirt, a name that – I never dared tell them this -- I would grow to like. They came to calling Tanner Pumpkinhead because of his oblong skull. He never responded, and I truly couldn’t tell if it bothered him. I was too busy trying to stay in my own space. I was careful not to say much in class, even though I knew the answers to most of the teacher’s questions. I even tried to miss a few questions on tests, just so I wouldn’t stand out.

And so Tanner and I were alone together, and that was somehow better than just being alone. After knowing what it was like to have someone, I couldn’t imagine going on without.

Even by the following summer, when we’d been hanging out for a few months, there was a part of me that feared losing him. He seemed like a pretty normal kid from what I could tell, so I guess I was waiting for him to find another set of friends and leave me behind. Tanner was my best friend, my only friend, but I never really trusted him to be there in the end. I always thought that he might leave me behind one day.

**CHAPTER 3**

*(SWITCH WITH CHAPTER 5???)*

Tanner Boudin sits in the seclusion of a reading light. In these moments, he prefers to be alone; it’s always been this way. The door is closed, and I watch as he raises a syringe in front of him, inches from his face. The light cascades through the liquid, through the deadly liquid that is contained within. Tanner eyeballs the dose, holding it steady for several seconds while staring with one eyelid closed. His visible eye, which strains into the chamber-like tube, is steely blue, the deep color that I first noticed when we sat in the schoolyard staring at bugs 32 years earlier. His thick, dark hair is now speckled with gray and pulled back in a ponytail. The scar from childhood is still visible on his forehead. His mouth is still small and rarely open. He is bearded now, the dark hair sticking out from his chin and jaw and cheeks without much visible grooming. Even crouched over like this, while staring intently at the syringe and 3-inch needle, Tanner looks disproportionate, his head slightly too large for his frail body.

He turns the syringe, so that the needle is directly pointed at his eyeball, and stares into the cylinder with unbroken resolve.

“They’re waiting,” he whispers into the seclusion of his small spotlight. He holds out the syringe, stands, and uses his free hand, the one with a purplish burn, to shut off the lamp. “It’s time,” he says to himself.

His footsteps in darkness, then the bright light of an opening door. Another room. A man in a bed, with a tube in his nostrils. On one side of the bed, an oxygen tank. On the other, the man’s middle-aged wife – only 15, maybe 20 years older than Tanner himself. Both the husband and wife are staring at Tanner. Their eyes fall from his face to the needle.

“That’s it, huh?” the man says through heavy breathing, his voice weak. Tanner nods and carefully sets the syringe down on a tray at a small bedside table.

“That’s it,” Tanner says, standing over the needle. He nods and looks at the man with his large, blank eyes. “Just let me know when you’re ready.”

The woman, a thick lady with pale white skin, reddish hair and a conservative purple dress, has a serene look in her green eyes. She holds a single flower, a yellow tulip because – she told Tanner this during one of their many visits together -- that’s the kind of flower that her husband gave her on their first date forty-something years earlier. He had held it behind his back as she opened the door to her Manhattan apartment, and she’d noticed his hands were shaking when he had finally presented it to her.

It’s June now, two weeks after Tanner’s 40th birthday, and he’s only known this couple for three months. The woman called him in March, introducing herself as Priscilla Gonchar and blurting out: “My husband is dying.” And then, just as quickly: “He wants to speed up the process.” In the weeks that followed, Tanner, Priscilla and her husband, Thomas, met face-to-face 10 times. On each occasion, Thomas looked worse than the previous time. He had ALS, as Priscilla had explained during that first phone conversation. “Like the baseball player,” Thomas had announced somewhat proudly during that first face-to-face visit. Thomas Gonchar presented himself as more of a connoisseur of art and wine, but he’d become fascinated with the story of baseball player Lou Gehrig after contracting his disease.

In the first of those those face-to-face meetings, Tanner explained to the Gonchars that Thomas was dying of an irreversible and incurable disease. Thomas only had another year or two, and they would be the most painful years of his life. Thomas patiently told Tanner that he knew all this. “That’s why we called you,” Priscilla had said. “It took six weeks to track you down. You’d think it would be … you know, *easier*.” She had looked down at the floor. Tanner stared at her. “To find someone to help you die?” he had said, then looked at her husband. “Dying isn’t easy,” Tanner had said during that first meeting. “Nor should it be.”

Here, in this room that looks like a hospital room but is really just an annex to Tanner’s small house in the country, the sentiment is written on all three of their faces. *Dying isn’t easy.*

“You can still back out,” Tanner says flatly, not a hint of hopefulness or daring in his voice. He sits next to the table that holds the tray that holds the syringe that holds the liquid that will kill Thomas Gonchar in a matter of minutes. “I won’t be mad if you back out,” Tanner says. “*We* would understand,” he says, nodding toward Priscilla. He rests a gloved hand on the sheet covering Thomas’s legs. “I’ve never given this dosage to someone who’s 99.9 percent certain,” Tanner says. “It’s 100 percent, or we all go our own way. That’s the deal.” He rubs his hands together in a wiping motion, kind of like a praying mantis. “Close the book, pretend these meetings never happened.”

Thomas, with tube in his nostrils and his labored breaths echoing in the otherwise silent room, stares at Tanner’s mangled hand and then at the syringe and then at his wife.

“I’m ready,” he says softly, taking her hand. “I don’t know much, but I know I’m ready.” She returns his grin.

“*We’re* ready,” she says. There is no sadness in her face, nor is there any hint of eagerness in the relief that might come after feeding and bathing and wiping and holding this shell of a man since the disease started taking away all his capabilities day by day, week by week, month by month. She has gone from being his lover to being his caretaker. To Priscilla’s right, her husband’s empty wheelchair rests, folded and leaning against an open window. This is where all the wheelchairs rest, here in Tanner’s room of death at the country house he owns outside of town. Only four people in the world – three of them in this very room -- know that this is taking place, that the Gonchars have been meeting with this man in the countryside to plan a death in dignity. The fourth, Abigail Sutton, is the Gonchars’ only child and has already told her children – Thomas and Priscilla’s grandchildren – that grandpa died peacefully in a hospital bed last week. Priscilla will return home and tell friends a similar story: that the ALS simply took him down in the end.

Thomas Gonchar pats his wife’s hand rhythmically, like the ticking of a clock. The sound of his breathing continues to fill the room. Tanner reaches for the needle. The Gonchars stare into each others’ eyes.

“You ever been married, Doc?” Thomas says suddenly. Tanner looks up. He answers to the name, even though he’s not a doctor, not technically. Despite the diplomas on the wall, all of which have a different name than his own, Tanner prefers that they call him Doc. It’s the only name they need to know, under these circumstances.

“No,” Tanner says without any hint of regret in his voice. “I’ve never been in love.” He shrugs.

Thomas Gonchar works up what strength he has to reach out and touch Tanner’s knee. His hand is shaking violently.

“You need to,” the dying man says. He smiles at his wife of 40 years. “It’s the best thing in the world. Makes life worth all the other stuff.” His gaze returns to Tanner. He has a serious look in his eye. “You afraid of commitment or something?” he asks.

Tanner forces a slight grin.

“You could say I’m terrified of letting someone down,” he says. He looks across the room, and I swear he’s looking at me. But Tanner’s among the living, and I am dead. He sees nothing.

“If a man like me can find love,” Thomas Gonchar says, struggling for every breath, “he can die happy.” Husband and wife stare at each other, while Tanner patiently holds the needle in the air.

“Can I tell you all a story?” Thomas says, smiling. “Is that okay?”

Tanner sets the syringe on the tray and nods. “Take however much time you need,” he says. The patience in his face seems to set Thomas at ease. But there is something else deep in Tanner’s eyes; it might be compassion, but it looks more like regret.

“It’s a parable,” Thomas Gonchar says, then coughs so violently that his wife has to re-adjust the tube. Her hand returns to his arm, then she interlocks her fingers with his. Thomas Gonchar’s only movement is in his hands. He’s looking down at her skin. His words begin to spill out slowly, like the drip of a faucet.

“It’s a parable I heard once,” he says, “one that seems appropriate now.” He struggles for breath between sentences. “There’s a ferret and a mountain lion,” he says. “They’re in a forest – oh, and there’s a mouse there too.” He pauses. His eyes are moist and red, but he looks more relieved than sad. “The ferret’s got this mouse cornered, and the mountain lion has the ferret cornered. The mountain lion, he says to the ferret; ‘I’ll give you one last meal, I’ll give you that.’” Thomas Gonchar’s reddened eyes, the only thing other than his shaking hands that are moving, bounce from Tanner to Priscilla and back again. “The ferret is cornered, and the mouse is too. ‘I’ll give you that,’ the mountain lion says. ‘Enjoy your last meal, take your time, soak it in.’ And the ferret, he just shakes his head. ‘The inevitable is evitable,’ he says. ‘Why should more than one suffer? Take me now,’ the ferret says. And he lets the mouse go.”

Thomas Gonchar, exhausted from all that talking, leans back on his pillow and closes his eyes. “That’s how I feel right now,” he says softly, confidently. He’s nodding, as if he’s still convincing himself of his own feelings. “Why should others suffer for my inevitable ending?” His eyes flicker open. “If I die now,” he says, “only one life ends – not two. If I die now,” he looks at Priscilla, “she can live her life again.”

Tanner has a look on his face like he wants to say something, like he wants to respond, but he says nothing. He just plucks at some fuzz that’s caught on the bed post.

“You’re not a burden,” Priscilla whispers after a long silence. Then, as if catching herself, as if realizing that she might make her husband second-guess himself after all this, she says, “I’m ready. You’re ready. It’s time.”

Thomas and Priscilla are now looking at each other with loving eyes.

“Yes,” Thomas says weakly. “It’s time.” Priscilla is looking back at him, nodding. “It’s time,” he repeats.

Priscilla nods and closes her eyes. “Yes,” she says. “We both know that.” She squeezes her husband’s hand. “I can’t watch him suffer like this,” she says to Tanner. “It’s killing us both.”

Thomas watches her face. His eyes well up. There aren’t any more words to be said.

He looks at Tanner with child-like wonder. He coughs. He swallows hard.

“Can I get something?” Tanner says.

Thomas Gonchar smiles. “Grape juice,” he says.

Tanner tilts his head.

“When I was a boy,” Thomas says, “this is a long time ago, my Mammy would always give me grape juice when I was down – if I skinned my knee or had a bad day at school or …” He coughs again. “It comforted me,” he says. Priscilla is smiling and nodding knowingly.

“You want grape juice?” Tanner says. Thomas Gonchar nods.

Tanner Boudin stands and exits to a small kitchen in the next room. He returns with a glass of purple liquid, holding it in the discolored hand that only serves as a painful reminder. Priscilla holds the glass to her husband’s mouth. He slurps, spilling most of it on his hospital gown, like an infant.

The tears well up again.

“Maybe I’ll see her,” he says. He looks at Tanner. “My mother,” Thomas Gonchar says. “Maybe I’ll see her soon.”

Tanner gives him a patient grin but says nothing in return. His face says that Tanner is not an expert on the afterlife. Thomas is staring at him.

“What do you think happens, Doc?” he says. “Next, I mean. What’s gonna happen to me?”

“They call me Doc,” Tanner says, his mouth grinning slightly, “not God.”

The three of them get a laugh out off that, then fall into a long silence. The Gonchars are still staring at him, wanting more.

“All I can say,” Tanner offers, “is that just because a man disappears, he’s not gone forever. He’s still with us. That’s what I believe, anyway.” This time, Tanner’s not looking in my direction. But the way his eyes have glazed over signals that he’s probably lost in the past. “I imagine that your suffering will be over,” Tanner adds, and this allows both Gonchars to look at each other with relief in their eyes.

“I’m ready,” says Thomas Gonchar. Tanner’s eyes move from the dying man to Priscilla’s face. The creases around her eyes and mouth expose her age, and yet there is a youth in her smile. She nods, her gaze locked on her husband’s stare. As Tanner lifts the needle, holding it like a pistol, Priscilla leans forward and rests her palms upon her husband’s cheeks.

“Good night, Sweetie,” she says softly. “Find peace. Find the peace, and the innocence, you had as a child.” She holds his face two inches from her own as they stare into each other’s eyes. Thomas still has grape juice on his chin. A light shines on his face from the open window. He’s smiling.

Because Thomas Gonchar does not know what I know about death, he is smiling.

Tanner Boudin takes the man’s limp arm and slowly, patiently, punctures Thomas Gonchar’s skin. As the needle slides in and the potion is released, Thomas and Priscilla continue to stare into each other’s eyes.

“Good-bye,” a voice says, “for now.”

###

It usually takes about a week. That’s what a doctor told Tanner way back when he started this work, a doctor who wouldn’t give Tanner – or anyone – his name. He told Tanner that not all of them are like that doctor in Michigan, the one who called himself Dr. Death. Not all of them were in it for the notoriety. Most of them, in fact, would prefer not to be known at all. Tanner is among those who don’t even get paid; he doesn’t ask for a dime in return. “What we do is, at best, illegal,” the doctor told Tanner a few years earlier. “Some call it immoral. Call it what you will, but I can sleep peacefully at night. But it takes a week or so before I can.”

The work was worth it, that doctor explained, and God would reward them for it in the end. “But for now,” he had said, “it takes a week to get over it -- every time.”

Tanner had found this to be true. He will dispose of the body – he has an inside connection at the morgue who will cremate the cadavers for him without submitting it for the required autopsy – and then Tanner will lock himself inside his country home, his own personal coffin, with windows and doors closed, just lying there in the darkness and praying to whatever God might be out there. Tanner will reach out and say, in a barely audible voice: “I’m not out to hurt anybody, I’m not out to *save* anybody.” He will tell Whoever is out there that he is just doing what he thinks is right. He does this every time.

Some of the families left behind have called him a savior or a saint, an angel sent from God to help their loved one end his suffering. Tanner has patiently explained to each of them that he is none of these things, that he is only trying to provide some relief society will not allow them to find legally.

And so a week has passed since Thomas Gonchar closed his eyes and squeezed his wife Priscilla’s hand and said goodbye to this world. Priscilla had dabbed the juice on the man’s chin with a handkerchief wet with her own saliva, then she’d quietly thanked my best friend without ever knowing his name. It’s amazing the things living people can share with one another without ever knowing each others’ names.

Tanner arises on the seventh day, opens all the shades and lets the sunshine in. His face is haggard, his eyes bloodshot. He tugs at his beard. He has disappeared for an entire week, and now he is reborn. Thomas Gonchar is in a better place, just like the rest of them – he knows this without any hint of reservation.

Tanner Boudin fires up his computer and finds thirty messages from his secretary. Two of them are inquiries from dying people. He scribbles down their phone numbers and picks up the telephone.

**CHAPTER 4**

During that ninth summer, the second with Tanner Boudin by my side, my father was gone a lot – spending some weekends on the road and wandering off to unknown places at least one night a week. For awhile, my mom ignored it. She just turned her focus on her two sons, pestering Anthony and coddling me. It was as if she took all the love she used to give to my father and dumped it on us, like a second helping of a meal you couldn’t much stomach. But after awhile, I could see her shell start to crack. I could hear them fighting, my mother and my father, and he never seemed to give her a good reason for staying out late.

That was the summer when the cicadas had gone into hibernation, when my brother Anthony got his first girlfriend, and when Tanner got bitten by the dog.

By then, Tanner and I had become the way I heard brothers were supposed to be. My own brother, Anthony, hardly talked to me at all. My mother was concerned that maybe Tanner and I were spending too much time together. My father was typically unaffected by any of it.

The first time my father met Tanner, he said nothing. My father just nodded his head and left the room. My father was a very uncomfortable man whenever I saw him, and I wondered how he had been able to go through life with such absence of connection. His life outside of the walls of his house was a mystery to me. I knew only that my father was part of a corporate management team. I could not imagine him working well with others, but then again, I saw only one side of him. As I would later find out, after death, there was more to my father than the rest of us ever saw. He was, in our life, just a piece of mysterious artwork that we passed every so often and eventually stopped trying to search for meaning.

About Anthony I knew only slightly more. I knew that he had become infatuated with running. He would disappear for hours in the morning and hours at night. In between, he would be at school or hanging out with friends. I wondered if he had a Tanner Boudin, if he had his own best friend. He never spoke of one person, just of “my boys,” none of whom seemed to have a name. My brother took pride in the mystery of his life outside the house.

In July of that year, Anthony began seeing a girl. He never spoke of her, at least in my presence, but my mother talked of her often. My mother did not seem to like her. She called her names when she spoke of her. Things like “hussy” and “tramp.” The girl’s real name was Rachel, although, living with my mother, you’d have thought it was “That Skank Rachel.” At 15, Rachel was two years older than Anthony. But I’m not sure if she was old enough to be a skank or a hussy or a tramp. My mother told me to steer clear of girls until I was out of college. She told me they were always after something. She looked at me in such a way that I knew what she was thinking: that I probably wouldn’t have to worry about it. She looked at my unkempt hair and my stick-figure body – I was almost as tall as Anthony but probably weighed 70 pounds less than he did – and reached out her arms to take me in. She told me I didn’t need any women because I would always have her. “I’ll always love you,” she said, hugging me as I squirmed. “You know that?” When I didn’t answer, she asked again: “You know that, *right*?” I wondered what Tanner’s mother was doing at that moment. I assumed she was babbling on about something worthless, to no one in particular. I wanted nothing more than to be over there, to be away from my own mother. I just nodded my head, hoping that would end the conversation for the time being.

The first time I saw Anthony’s girlfriend was in August, just before school started. I was coming home from Tanner’s place, and she was sitting in front of our house on her bike. She was alone. She was staring up at the house, her hands gripping the bars of the bike. Her hair was pulled to one side in a ponytail. She had on tight shorts and a shirt that showed her belly button. Her stomach was tan. I could see that she had boobs, like my mom and Tanner’s mom and all the older women I saw on television. She looked like all the things my mom had called her. “Hi,” I said when she looked at me. She blew a pink bubble and let it snap all over her face. As she peeled the gum off, I could see that she was wearing lipstick. “I’m waiting for Tony,” she said. I had never heard anyone call him by that name. “He’s my brother,” I said. All she said was, “Oh.” Then she blew another bubble. She popped the bubble with her hand, pulled the gum out of her mouth and held it in front of one eye like a scope. That’s when Anthony came out and shooed me away with his eyes. I watched from the porch as they rode their bikes up the street and around a corner. I wondered if Rachel was his Tanner Boudin.

###

On a summer afternoon when school was out, my mother called down to the basement and told me we were going shopping. She needed to get some things for a dinner she was hosting for one of my father’s clients. The three of us – Mom, Tanner and me – piled into the station wagon and headed for the store. My mom tried to ask us questions, but neither Tanner nor I felt much like talking. We had plenty to say to each other, but felt awkward talking when my mom – or anyone else – was around.

So she turned on the radio to one of the rock stations and began signing along. Tanner and I snickered as she did it, and pretty soon we joined in. The three of us sang songs by Bad Company, Led Zeppelin, The Eagles – songs Tanner and I would never sing on our own. We sang all the way to the grocery store and all the way back.

When we got home late that afternoon, the house was empty. My father was still at work, and my brother Anthony was out with friends. My mother scurried through the house trying to clean up. Through it all, she hummed tunes and giggled, still beaming from the car ride with her middle son and his best friend.

Tanner and I stirred a pot of Spaghetti-O’s while my mother changed into a blue evening dress. She came into the kitchen trying to keep one strap falling off her shoulder and served us our food before pouring a glass of wine as she prepared dinner for the adults. My mother only seemed to drink when hosting my father’s business associates. She baked chicken with asparagus and tossed a summer salad. She turned up the music on a clock radio near the phone as she put the salad together.

My mother was on her third glass of white wine by the time Tanner and I finished our Spaghetti-O’s, and before we could scurry off to the basement to play videogames, she pulled me in close and began dancing to the concerto music on the radio. Tanner stood nearby and giggled, and for some reason I didn’t feel the least bit awkward. For once, it felt like my facial tic was gone, and my stiff posture from the spinal condition didn’t make me feel awkward at all. We danced, my mother and me, and she twirled me around and dipped me and laughed like a woman half her age – more like a girl than a woman. Our fingers interlocked as I moved around her, the apron around her waist floating as her body moved. The air filled with the smell of cooked parsley and garlic.

“You know,” my mother said to me, and I could tell that she’d probably had too much to drink already, “we’re going to dance like this at your wedding.”

“Sure,” I said weakly as we continued to spin around the room.

“Promise I’ll have the first dance,” my mother said. She poked my shoulder. “*Promise.*”

“I promise.”

The stereo gained volume as Tanner slowly turned a knob. We danced like that for what felt like ten minutes, both of us giggling and gasping for breath, until the sound of my father and his two guests entering the house ended our ruckus.

“Peg!” he called out, and my mother pulled her hand from mine. Our eyes met. She was smiling as if we’d shared a secret. She turned down the music. She hugged me. “Thank you,” she whispered in my ear. And then she said: “You and Tanner head downstairs now.” As I turned to go, she grabbed my arm. “And don’t forget the promise.” She smiled and mussed my hair.

As Tanner and I left the room, I heard her pull out three more glasses and fill them with wine. The last thing I saw was my mother, peering into an empty wine bottle with one eye.

###

When school started again, Tanner and I fell back into our world of shared loneliness. We were surrounded by others, but it felt like we were invisible to them, like Tanner had done that trick of closing his eyes and making everything go away. The ones that had tormented us for most of the previous year had found other targets. It was as if the others had secret meetings to discuss their tactics of dealing with us and the new plan was to render us insignificant. And so Tanner and I were left again to each other, which wasn’t such a bad way to be. We spent most of our time playing video games or chasing bugs in his backyard. Since the cicadas were gone, we had to settle for more conventional insects like grasshoppers and ladybugs. We could tell the difference between a seven-spotted ladybird and a convergent lady beetle, what separates a simple meadow grasshopper from a cricket. These bugs were easier to find, and to catch. Tanner would hold them gently between his thumb and forefinger. He would watch them squirm and kick their legs. But he’d always let them go in the end.

Sometimes he would watch me ride my skateboard, although there weren’t many places to do it. I’d skate in the parking lot of a restaurant or in a cul de sac near our houses. He’d ask me if I knew any tricks. I’d shrug and keep riding in circles.

One morning when it was too wet to skate, we wandered out into the woods near the church where my parents occasionally took us on Sundays. We walked along the wet leaves and plucked at the damp branches, making raindrops shutter off the leaves and onto each other’s heads until we were both so wet that drops hung from our ears and noses. Tanner found a clump of wet leaves and mud and fired them at my legs before taking off into the woods. I chased him, and we played an impromptu game of hide and seek through the rest of the morning, digging deeper and deeper into the woods without any worry about how – of if – we would find our way back.

We just kept going, deeper and deeper until we came upon a small clearing. The rain had let up. There was a hole there, a big one gutted out and bordered with cement. As we moved closer, I could see light blue coloring and faded numbers on the side.

“Looks like a pool,” Tanner said. “Or used to be.”

There was a shed not far away, with an aluminum roof that had rusted and was covered with wet leaves. Tanner pulled on deformed door but could not pull it open. “C’mere,” he said, and the two of us pulled together. He put one of his feet on the pool house, and eventually the lock cracked and broke off. Inside, there was what appeared to have once been a pool house, with rotted pool cleaners and an empty bottle that probably used to have chlorine inside. It smelled like animal shit, although I’m not sure how anything could have gotten in there.

We stepped back and smiled at each other.

“This is our place,” he said.

I nodded and looked out at the empty pool. “This is our place,” I echoed.

We spent most of that next week clearing out the weeds and vines and moss from the dried-out pool. I started skateboarding on the shallow end, while Tanner sat in a lawn chair and drew pictures. He was into dragons and snakes and spiders, and he could draw for hours, without saying a word. Some days I’d sit next to him and write stories. We talked about writing a comic book together, but we never got around to doing it.

No one could find us there. The area was surrounded by woods on all sides. We could wile away the summer days without ever worrying about coming into contact with anyone.

Some days, we’d venture into the woods and look for bugs, frogs or cool rocks. Tanner produced a green shield bug one day, and I found a glow-worm on another. We were doing that one damp afternoon in September when I heard a growling sound from behind a clump of bushes. I couldn’t see Tanner, but I could hear his short breaths. Gingerly, I took a step in the leaves. The growling got louder. After another step, I could see the mangy fur of an animal. It barked once, then continued growling. Upon taking another step, I could see a brown-and-black mix-breed, crumpled in a marsh with a damaged leg. Its fur was dark and matted with mud. It was staring at Tanner, who was just a few feet away, his eyes tightly shut. The dog watched him with suspicious eyes, its growl settling into a gurgling sound.

“Tanner,” I whispered through the humid air, turning to him with my whole body because of the spinal condition that prevented me from looking to one side. He didn’t respond. He didn’t even open his eyes. Right then, I knew that Tanner Boudin was trying to do that thing where he could disappear. He was trying to pretend he wasn’t there. Behind those closed eyes, he undoubtedly – mistakenly – believed he had become invisible again. “Tanner,” I said again, but still no response. “Tanner!” I was frozen. “Tanner, look out! Move!”

Tanner’s eyes flickered open. A few feet away, the dog began to pull and jerk, trying to free itself from the mud. The crease between his eyebrows told me that he was just as scared as I felt inside.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said softly. “Tanner, *c’mon*.”

Tanner held an arm out in front of me, as if to quiet me. I wanted to say more, but Tanner was no longer listening. “Don’t move,” he whispered. “He’s scared. He’s probably lost. Don’t scare him any more.” The dog looked more angry than scared, but this was no time to argue. I just wanted to get the heck out of there as quickly as possible.

“I think he’s hurt,” Tanner whispered, taking a small step forward with his hand out, palm up – a peace offering. His Ked shoe cracked through a dry piece of wood and slid into mud. The dog’s ears shot up. It raised its head, and I could see that its lead paw was mangled and bleeding. “We should leave it,” I said. But Tanner just stared at the dog. I felt a bug crawl across the back of my neck – maybe even a wood tick, but I was too scared to move.

Tanner pulled his back foot out of the mud and tried to take another step. When he did this, his foot must have caught on a root because the ground started to move between them.

Moments brand themselves on our memories. The visions and sights and sounds and smells become a part of us, like that split second did. I remember seeing Tanner Boudin’s face, his wide head with calm eyes and unblemished skin. The familiar smell of magnolias had been replaced by a musk-like odor. More than anything, I can hear the sounds. The root split through the earth, and the sound startled the dog, which lunged, using its back legs to propel itself onto Tanner. The growling sound stopped me in my tracks. I couldn’t move. I was helpless, of no use to my best friend. And then there was just gnashing teeth and a guttural sound that I thought only a rabid animal could make. Those were the only sounds I heard. Tanner was silent.

His arms covered his face, and just as suddenly the dog stopped and looked at me. I felt piss run down my leg. I tried to close my eyes but couldn’t. And right then, the sound of thunder cracked overhead. The dog turned and shot into the woods, leaving Tanner alone with me.

Tanner’s skin was covered in red. I moved in cautiously, angry at myself for letting it happen. I wasn’t sure how long the dog had been on him because time broke away from me. It was as if I had been watching the whole thing from above – looking back, it wasn’t much different than how I witness things now, in death. I was as helpless as I had ever been. Nine years old, watching my best friend almost get killed.

When I went to him, I thought he was dead. His eyes were closed, his body motionless. He was curled up in a fetal position, with blood on his cheek and arm. The dog had scurried off on its wounded leg. Only when I whispered Tanner’s name did his lips move.

“Is he gone?” he said, a trickle of blood dripping from his forehead and into his left eye.

“He’s gone,” I said. I could tell that most of the damage had been done to his arms. The cut on Tanner’s forehead was smaller than I’d thought, about the size of a dime; the right side of his face was covered in blood. I wiped my mouth and noticed that I was bleeding, too, from a small cut on the back of my head that I must have gotten scurrying through branches to get him.

Tanner sat up but did not open his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked. He nodded. Even as I reached out for him, his eyes were still closed. A single tear ran down his face.

“I’m not here,” he whispered, probably to himself, as I helped him to his feet. “I’m not here, I’m not here, I’m not here!” He refused to let the tears flow. He was shaking. I ripped off a piece of my shirt and used it to clear the blood and dirt from his face. He put his arm around me, and we walked like that, all the way back to his parents’ house.

When I got him to the back door, he promised he would be fine. “Go home,” he said, his eyes looking at me for the first time. They were red and swollen. He had streaks of dried blood on his cheeks. “You can go,” he said. He nodded toward a red car in the driveway, his mother’s car. “My mom’s home,” he said. “Go on.” I wanted to ask him if I had let him down, but I didn’t know how. “Go on,” he said, reaching for the door handle while still looking at me. “I’ll be fine, promise.” I watched him, but all he did was stare back at me with one hand on the handle. We said nothing for several seconds before I realized that this stare-down was going to go on for as long as I was prepared to let it; Tanner was not going to turn away. And so I left Tanner like that, his arms bleeding and mud caked to his round face, standing on the steps of his parents’ house.

When I got home, my mother screamed as soon as she saw me. I told her I was fine, that I ripped my shirt when it got caught on a tree branch.

“Where are you hurt?! Where are you hurt?!”

I told her I wasn’t hurt, that I just needed a bath. She began sobbing.

“My baby,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. “Oh, my baby.”

I shrugged her off and went to clean up. I couldn’t stop thinking about the dog, wondering what would become of it. Something about that dog reminded me of both Tanner and myself. The dog was just lost and scared. It didn’t have anyone it could trust.

The next time I saw Tanner, his arms were covered in stitches and bandages. He had a small cut under his hairline. He said the doctor told him that another couple of inches and he would’ve been blind. He was sitting on the front porch of his house, eating an orange. I started to tell him that I was sorry, but he put up a hand in protest. It was covered in gauze. “I know,” he said. He ripped off a piece of the orange and held it out for me. “Thanks,” he said, “for helping me get home.”

I took the orange but didn’t eat it right away.

We didn’t talk of that day again. The scar on his forehead never went away. Unlike the pain inside of all of us, it was there for everyone to see.

**CHAPTER 5**

On my 38th birthday, they all get together for the first time in six years. Tanner is not there, of course, but the others are. My mother, my father, my brother Anthony and my sister Bailey. The discomfort of the moment is all over their faces. Really, what do all of them have left to tie them together as a family? This is their only bond, this ghost of a memory.

They hold hands, but nobody speaks. My mother opens her mouth but appears too distraught to find words. My father looks at the clock above the mantle. His new wife is waiting for his call, killing the time with the kids at a nearby pizza parlor. Bailey, her hair cut shorter than I can remember, is fighting off the demons of another hangover. She smoked the last of her dime bag on the drive over.

And so it is Anthony, who knew less about me than any of the others, who speaks first.

“He would have liked this,” Anthony says, the words coming out like a type-written page. “To see us together like this, that’s what he would have wanted.”

My father nods his head. He is tapping his left foot. The seconds tick by. His new family waits. My father had been against this reunion from the start, but he came out of guilt. His face shows that he’s already decided that this will be the last time, that he’ll never return.

They’re all looking around the room, all but my mother. Her hands cover her face; coldly, Anthony rubs a dutiful hand across her back.

Bailey, who’s smoking a cigarette, looks at her brother.

“How the *fuck* would you know what *he* would’ve liked?” she says suddenly. My father – *our* father – holds up a hand as if to cut her off, but Bailey keeps going. “Did you even *know* him?” she says.

“Jesus Christ,” my father whispers, his eyes closing. “I knew this was a bad idea.”

My mother’s sobbing builds. Anthony finds a spot on the wall in which to direct his focus.

“I mean, seriously,” Bailey continues, one arm across her midriff to balance the elbow of the other as she holds what’s left of the cigarette next to her head. “Seriously, Anthony,” my 27-year-old sister says. “Look at me, for Chrissakes.”

He doesn’t. Bailey rolls her eyes and takes a long drag. After exhaling, she says: “Ridiculous.”

“I guess you knew him real well,” Anthony says softly, sarcastically. “Those first six years of your life.” He smirks.

“Fuck you,” Bailey says, and she flicks the cigarette toward his designer tie. Anthony does not flinch as it ricochets onto the floor.

“Please,” my mother whispers through her sobs. “*Please!*” She looks up, and all at once the others are silent. A photo of my 17-year-old face sits on a mantle before them. All four stare at it in wonder. Their faces say, *What the hell happened?*

“I want to say something,” Bailey says with the suddenness of a cough. “It’s good to see all of you in a room like this.” It has been six years since they’ve all been together. The last time was at her second intervention. “It’s good to see the family as one.”

My father all but rolls his eyes at this. He is an impatient man. My mother looks at him, but he refuses to meet her eyes.

There is a knock on the door. Anthony’s wife enters. She has the baby in her arms, their third child. It is a girl, just like Bailey.

“I’m sorry,” she says softly. “But, Anthony, we’ve got to pick up the boys at soccer practice. How much longer?”

“Just another minute or two,” he responds, looking at his watch. He nods toward Danica, his wife. My father looks relieved for the interruption.

When Anthony’s wife closes the door, my mother speaks.

“He is here,” she says, looking around. “I can feel him. He is with us.”

Why can’t she know that I am always there, with all of them? This is another confounding truth of death. There are so many things that I should know. There are fewer answers in death than there were in life.

“Our Father,” my mother says. Together, they say the Lord’s prayer. When they get to the line “on earth as it is in heaven,” my mother breaks into tears again. She knows heaven has not found me. She knows I am as lost as ever.

After a round of Amens, my father releases both his hands and claps them together. No one knows what else to say. Awkward hugs follow, and then my mother is left alone.

With only me, she is alone again.

###

A shriveled man, with thick, meaty hands, has Tanner Boudin pinned up against a wall. His fingers are wrapped around Tanner’s throat, his face red with anger. Behind him, a frail older woman who has long since lost use of her limbs pleads with her eyes. Her wheelchair shakes as she musters all her strength to say something, to *do* something. She is drooling.

“Who the fuck you think you are?” the man is saying to Tanner. He is a shriveled shell of a man, and it appears that the only reason Tanner refuses to fight back is that he’s afraid for the man’s health. “Huh? You think you know what kind of pain I’m in?” The man has snot coming out of his nose and dripping onto his shirt. “You want me to show you *pain*?” His wife continues to shake in her wheelchair.

Tanner Boudin is two weeks shy of his 38th birthday. By my own count, he’s assisted in nine suicides; he’s refused three others. He hasn’t made a penny off any of them. This time, when the elderly man named Sheldon DuPont arrived with his quadriplegic, dying wife Nancy, Tanner has encountered violent protest for the first time.

“You’re telling me you’re not going to let me *die* by my beloved wife’s side,” Sheldon DuPont is saying, “and all because you didn’t think pancreatic cancer is *serious* enough?!”

“I didn’t say –“

Sheldon uses more force, slamming Tanner into the wall again with as much power as the frail man can muster.

“You ever had cancer, Doc?” Sheldon says. There’s that word again – *Doc*, something Tanner is not. “You know what it’s like? You know what it’s like to open your eyes every morning and know – and *know* – that this day is gonna be worse than the last? That it’s just going to keep getting harder? That the pain’s gonna get more painful, and the weakness in my body’s only gonna get weaker?”

His wife lets out a whimper. A single tear rolls down her cheek.

“I can’t help you, Mr. DuPont,” Tanner says. “I’m sorry. I’m *really* sorry. But … I can’t.”

Sheldon DuPont releases his grip, and Tanner falls into his chair. The elderly man re-gains his balance on a weak leg and stands over him.

“I come here looking for the one last bit of hope I got,” he says, “and you just sit there and tell me you can’t do diddly.” Sheldon runs the back of his hand across the moisture that’s gathered under his nostrils. “You know what I say to you?” he says. “I say *fuck you*!”

His wife’s eyes grow big, as if she’s never heard him talk like this, and Sheldon wheels around to slam the wall next to an open window that looks out on a clear day. He falls into his chair and heaves oxygen from his mouthpiece, extending his injured hand as he does. His eyes are staring at Tanner.

“Mr. DuPont,” Tanner says patiently. “It’s not terminal. Not by definition. And as I explained, if it’s not terminal, I can’t in good conscience –“

“All cancer’s terminal,” Sheldon says through the oxygen mask. His eyes are burning through Tanner. He takes in another deep breath, then pulls it away. “Especially at my age,” he says. “You think I ain’t dyin’, you ain’t much of a doctor.”

Tanner nods patiently. “They could find a cure,” he says, and Sheldon DuPont lets out a laugh. He covers his mouth with the mask and takes in a deep breath.

“A cure for cancer,” he mutters when he’s finished with the mask. “In my lifetime.” He laughs again. He rubs his own leg, then reaches over and rubs his wife’s.

“Could happen,” Tanner says, his small mouth steady.

“Yeah,” Sheldon says with a sneer, “and my wife here *could* stand up, walk out of here and play for the San Francisco Giants.”

Tanner looks at the invalid woman. Her eyes are dark, hinting that she once had beauty, but her hair has since fallen out and her skin is ghostly and gaunt. This woman is just like most of the people that seek Tanner’s help; had she come alone, her wish would have been granted.

She is like so many. But she doesn’t want to die alone.

Sheldon takes another hit of oxygen and rubs his aching hand. It’s turned purple, like he broke a bone or two. He stands up, shuffles behind his wife’s wheelchair, and takes the handles.

“Let me help you with that,” Tanner says, standing.

“You’ve done enough,” Sheldon DuPont shoots back. He pulls his wife’s chair backward, steadying himself, nearly falling over. Tanner stands a few feet away, helpless. “God wouldn’t do this,” Sheldon says without looking at him. “He wouldn’t make me live like this – alone, without her.” He rubs his wife’s head. His hands are shaking. His head is down. “You’re all I got, Doc.”

“I wish I could help. I really do.”

Sheldon still won’t look at him. He continues to rub his wife’s scalp with a trembling hand. “We just want to be together – me and Nance,” he says softly. “Fifty-six years. That’s a long time. Fifty-six …” He begins pushing his wife’s chair toward the door. With the back of his discolored hand, he wipes his mouth. “I’ll do it myself,” he tells her as they move away from Tanner, toward the door. “We don’t need him. I’ll do it myself.”

Sheldon DuPont whirls and looks at Tanner.

“That what you want?” he says loudly. “Huh? For me to get my .22 out of the cellar –“ he points an index finger at the back of his wife’s head, in the darkened area where there used to be hair – “and put one in her.” He raises his hand, the index finger still pointed like a gun, to his own temple. “Then put another in mine?”

Sheldon lowers his hand, just for a second, then slowly brings it back up and points a finger right between Tanner’s eyes. “That what you want, Doc?”

Tanner lowers his head, hands folded, and sits back down.

“I can’t help you,” he whispers helplessly. His head is still down when the DuPonts wheel out of the room. His eyelids are pressed tightly, as if he’s trying to wish himself to another place, perhaps another time. Maybe he just wants to disappear, much like he did when we were kids.

His eyes open a few minutes later, at the sound of a car engine and the squeal of tires peeling out on gravel. He waits, for what I do not know. Thirty minutes pass, maybe forty.

Finally, he rises from his chair and walks out of the house, out into the sunlight. There is a red spray-paint can at his feet, one that he used on a shed he builds on weekends. He turns around, and there on the side of his country house, a message is scrawled with paint dripping down the wood.

“Your not GOD,” it reads. Tanner stares at it, his mouth closed and his face showing no emotion. He bends over, picks up the can of spray paint, and makes a couple adjustments. He sprays onto his own house, then drops the paint can and steps back.

“You’re not GOOD,” it now reads.

Tanner turns and looks in my direction. I would swear he’s looking at me.

“I’m not good,” he whispers. And we stay like that, looking at each other.

###

He can’t stop. No matter how many times Tanner Boudin checks the boxes of the emails from his secretary and lets the cursor hover over DELETE, he just can’t do it. Something makes him keep going.

And so three weeks after the DuPonts leave his house, having avoided newspapers and the television news for fear of hearing about a murder-suicide at an elderly couple’s home in Colorado Springs, Tanner dials the number of a new patient and takes a deep breath. Below the number, he has printed the words CHARLES and AIDS and IOWA.

The man picks up on the sixth ring. He explains that he is completely alone – not all of them have a Priscilla Gonchar or a Sheldon DuPont; in fact, most of them have no one – that he is without family. Midway through the conversation, the man asks the doctor’s name.

“That’s not important,” Tanner says. “Just call me Doc. Doc is fine.”

“You sound like someone I once knew,” the man says. “Someone from the New Beginnings Foster Home.” The words seem to hit Tanner with icy impact. “Have you ever worked at New Beginnings?” the man asks.

“I want to hear more about you,” Tanner says. “About your disease.”

“You sound like a man I knew named Bill Tanner,” the man says, and there is a long silence on the line.

“I don’t know who that is,” Tanner says after several seconds. But he does. It’s one of many names Tanner Boudin used in his adult years. Bill Tanner *is* Tanner Boudin.

“Oh, let me tell you about him,” the man says. “He saved us – a lot of us. There was this fire, and …”

Tanner looks down at the hand that’s missing fingers.

“He saved us all,” the man says.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” says Tanner Boudin, who used to be Bill Tanner. And the pain in his voice is evident.

“Tanner,” the man says, and nothing else.

“I can’t …” Tanner’s voice goes weak.

“Tanner, it’s you,” the man with AIDS says. “Tanner, I’ve been waiting so long to talk to you again. To thank you – from all of us – for what you did.” Tanner is silent. His head is down. He’s rubbing the purple scar on his left arm. “Tanner, please. Just tell me it’s you. Just tell me you’re okay.”

Tanner opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“You’re a hero, Tanner. Did you know that?”

Silence.

“You saved us – all of us.”

Tanner holds out the receiver and looks at it, as if he’s considering hanging up. His line has a Caller-ID block, so this man would never be able to find him. He can disappear again, right here and now, and all he has to do is hang up the phone.

“You saved a lot of people, Tanner,” the man says, and Tanner returns the receiver to his ear.

“I saved him, too,” Tanner Boudin says softly. “Goddammit, I saved that piece of shit, too.”

The man pauses for a moment, then speaks softly.

“Wanderling?” he says into the phone. “You mean Wanderling Muldoon?”

Tanner is nodding but not saying anything.

“Tanner, that wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known. Wanderling Muldoon …”

“I saved him, too,” Tanner says softly. He looks down at his right hand, with three fingers missing. “He shouldn’t have lived,” he says. “Some people,” says my friend Tanner Boudin, who some people once knew to be Bill Tanner and others knew only by face, “are meant to die young. I know that now.” He closes his eyes, his thoughts possibly lost in a boy known as Wanderling Muldoon but just as likely lost in the childhood friend he lost 20 years earlier. Tanner says: “I must go now. I’m sorry.”

He hangs up the telephone and looks out into the sunlight. He is lost in thought, just like he was for the week that followed Thomas Gonchar’s death and all the deaths that preceded it.

Tanner Boudin is lost again.

**CHAPTER 6**

On the last day of my tenth summer, my mother took us to Six Flags. My brother Anthony said he would go, but he backed out at the last minute, just like I knew he would. My dad was on a business trip, so it was just my mom, me and Tanner.

I got to see the child in my mother that day. She screamed and leaped as the three of us rode the roller coaster. The three of us raised our hands toward the sky and sucked in the humid air as we dropped hundreds of feet, then we laughed and giggled and hugged when we got off – only to get right back on and do it again. And again. And again.

After we dropped Tanner off, my mom told me that she liked him. Then she rubbed my cheek with the back of her finger and looked at me funny – this glance that seemed to show something like pity, as if she wondered why it had taken me so long to find a single friend. Anthony had been coming and going with different kids all summer long, and all I had was Tanner.

###

My mother drove Tanner and me to school for most of the fourth grade. I had made the mistake of telling her that the kids on the bus threw spit balls and erasers at me, and her solution was to start driving us to school. (We had an agreement not to tell my father because his stock answer would have been to tell his wife that her son needed to “be a man and stick up for himself sometimes.”) The three of us would drive in silence to the schoolhouse, where the others grouped outside like prison gangs. We knew their names, and they knew ours, but rarely were they exchanged in conversation. Both sides held them like a secret, used only as blackmail when the time was right. Tanner and I felt invisible at times, lost among the swarms of perfect-fitting jigsaw pieces.

At home, things were only slightly more tolerable for the four of us. My brother had become a star cross-country runner at the middle school, my father was busy after a new promotion, and my mother continued to suffocate herself with the project that would be her younger son. Together we had become dancers of sorts: her attempting to lead, me desperately trying to create my own moves. She had become convinced that I was spending far too much time with Tanner and not enough with any of my other peers. One day, I told her that her only friend was Dad, and she tried to explain that it was different.

“Besides,” she said, “he’s not my *only* friend.”

And yet I never saw my mother with other people. She was cordial to the women in our neighborhood, but none of them came by our house or called to ask her out for tea. My mother spent hours alone during the day, and the free time only fueled her smothering curiosity in my life. Her questions were less conversational and more accusatory, as if she were trying to carve out a so-called “normal” existence for her youngest child. It was as if Anthony had forged the path toward normality, and my mother’s goal for me was to follow at all costs. My failures to be like my older brother – or anyone else, for that matter – seemed to imply the failures of her as a mother.

She was driving Tanner and me home from school one day when she broke the silence by asking a series of meaningless questions about girls.

“Are there any cute ones in your class?” she said. “Do you sit next to any girls at lunch? Who was the girl with the pretty yellow dress I saw waiting near you?”

I fended her off by making up a story about how I had started spending recesses with Amanda Kornhalther. That seemed to set her mind at ease, and it temporarily ended the discussion until later that night, when my mother came into my room with an open yearbook turned to the previous year’s photo of my third-grade class.

“Well, she’s *cute*!” my mother exclaimed, pointing to Amanda’s face in the photograph. I felt a rash-like heat building in my neck and head. The truth was that I had never spoken to Amanda Kornhalther, nor would I ever have the courage to. Hers’ was the first name that came to mind during that drive-home conversation, and that was just because Amanda had the prettiest blond hair and bluest eyes of any girl at our school. Such things seemed to matter only because my mother told me they should, and so I noticed in passing. Not until years later, when Amanda would develop breasts and long, tan legs, would I truly appreciate her beauty.

“When do I get to meet her?” my mother asked while closing the yearbook. I immediately regretted the lie and silently promised to never bring up Amanda’s name in my mother’s presence again.

“We’re not getting married,” I said, “if that’s what you mean.” My mother smiled at this, her lips pursed and her eyes staring so strongly into mine that if felt as if she were trying to see my insides. I could swear that she saw something in there, something that told her I had been caught in a fib. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to be like Tanner right then, to close my eyes and feel like the world could not find me.

“Marriage is a long way away,” my mother said with a gentle smile. Something in her eyes changed, as if she had left my inner world and entered her own. “You’ll find the right person some day,” she said, and her blank stare told me that she was trying to convince herself more than she was talking to me.

###

I couldn’t find Tanner one day at recess, and the thought of spending an hour without him terrified me. He had been sitting at his desk all day, and when I saw him wander down a vacant hallway, I had assumed he was just going to take a leak. And yet I waited for five, 10, maybe even 20 minutes at our usual spot without seeing him walk out the door that led to the schoolyard.

While I waited, alone again, my eyes surveyed the grounds, as if for the first time in years. It was a cool, overcast day, one of those fall afternoons when you could almost smell first snow in the air. The others were all wrapped up in games and conversations and joyful teasing. They all seemed to be as one. They seemed to have common traits and ways of speaking. I couldn’t find anyone with a twitch or a messed-up spinal cord that prevented his head from turning to one side. They were nothing like me, and it was a bit of a miracle that we were even of the same species. Girls pranced around trying to be the center of attention. Boys shouted at each other and ran in circles. I felt so far from them, so detached, that I wanted to go invisible. I closed my eyes, hoping it would work, but I could still hear their voices and their laughter, and I felt even more guilty for not being one of them. With closed eyes, all I could feel were the facial twitching and that familiar neck stiffness that prevented me from turning my head to one side.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Tanner Boudin, across the schoolyard, pushing open the school door as if it were a boulder. I felt the same kind of relief that a small child must feel upon the sight of his mother. I had felt naked, and Tanner shielded me from the outside world. He pranced through the crowd, ignoring the others on his way to me.

“What’s up, dirty pup,” he said, his face as blank as ever.

“Where *were* you?” My voice sounded more desperate than I expected. He sat down in front of me, and all the other kids were suddenly gone.

“Setting up some sticks of dynamite,” he said while staring at my face. He still had that small scar on his forehead. Tanner shrugged as he said it, then picked up a pebble from the dirt.

I looked toward the school, waiting for the explosion. I thought he was kidding, but nothing about the way Tanner said it gave any hint of humor. The thought of my schoolhouse blowing up felt dangerous and comforting at the same time.

“Dynamite?” I said, exasperated. The brick building, void of the students and the usual bustle, looked so peaceful from 100 yards away. I could almost hear it ticking. I stood up. I felt my heart beating against my rib cage. “You’re really gonna blow it up?”

Tanner’s blank face broke into a small grin. He looked at me the same way my mother had when asking me about Amanda Kornhalter.

“Sticks of dynamite,” he said, leaning closer. “As in *poo*.” He giggled. “I was taking a shit, dummy.”

We laughed together. I sat down. I felt relieved, but the sound of ticking continued in my head.

###

The only times they pulled the two of us out of our imaginary box came when the inadequacies of their own lives caught up with them. The others found some kind of common bond in their hatred of Tanner and me, although no one ever explained to us why they felt like they did. We must have been deformed in their eyes – and it seemed to go deeper than my unturning neck and my occasional face twitches. They looked at us like we spoke a language they did not understand, even when we weren’t talking.

On one the first sunny days of the spring that year, Tanner and I sat in our normal schoolyard spot and searched for species of bugs that we had still yet to name. My gaze fell to a butterfly, its wings fluttering as it hovered between us. I thought of something we’d learned in school a few weeks earlier, about how butterflies started their lives as caterpillars. I recalled learning that there were 700 different species of butterfly in North America alone. A boy’s voice startled us out of examination.

“Hey, dickheads.” The voice was followed by a chorus of laughter, and when we turned around we discovered six kids standing over us, one of them carrying a football under his arm. “You diggin’ to China?” There was more laughter, although the jokes really didn’t seem that funny to me. I looked down at my hands, my dirty fingernails. Because of my neck, I had to turn at the waist to be able to see Tanner, whose unchanged face brought comfort. He was down on one knee, his hand still in the dirt. There was a calmness in him then to which I clung like a life preserver.

“I’m talking to you,” the leading boy, a kid we knew to be Sandy Jacobs, said with a sneer. Without responding, Tanner went back to what he was doing, and as much I tried to ignore them, I found it nearly impossible. “Yeah, keep diggin’,” Sandy Jacobs said. “Maybe you’ll find the guy who pulled off Pearl Harbor.” More laughter, although I could tell none of them got the joke.

Without looking up, Tanner said: “That’s Japan.”

Sandy Jacobs stood over him. “Huh?” he said.

Tanner looked up. “Japan,” he said. “They did Pearl Harbor, not China.” He went back to digging. “Besides,” he added without taking his eyes off the dirt, “it’s Australia that’s on the other side of the world.”

Sandy Jacobs scoffed, then laughed uncomfortably. “Dork,” he said. And then: “Anyone ever tell you what losers you are?” I wanted so badly to say something hurtful to him, to tell him that his parents named him after a girl, but was too afraid to open my mouth. I wasn’t scared of the inevitable beating as much as I was the words coming out jumbled. Speaking to anyone other than Tanner had become a terrifying prospect for me.

“How ‘bout I kick your asses,” Sandy said, his shadow moving over us, “just for the hell of it? Maybe I’ll start with the freak.” He was looking directly at me.

I felt something inside me move, as if an organ had come loose. Tanner kept digging, his face showing no sign of fear. He stayed like that for several seconds, and I was absolutely certain that the next thing he’d hear was a fist hitting my nose. I could feel tears welling up, the twitch acting up on my face, and it’s all I could do not to break down and cry. My face felt the way a stomach does when a guy’s got to go Number Two real bad.

“Start with me,” Tanner said softly, breaking the silence. “But I’m required to tell you I’m a black belt.”

Sandy pushed breath out of his nose, as if he were forcing some kind of a laugh.

“Yeah, right,” he said.

Tanner stood up and stared into Sandy’s eyes. As he stepped closer to our tormentor, Tanner stood a good five inches below Sandy.

“I’m required,” Tanner said, looking up at him, “for legal reasons.” His face showed no emotion. His eyes were neither scared nor daring. “If you die, I won’t go to jail as long as I warn you.” I watched his face, looking for something I couldn’t find. “That’s your one warning,” Tanner said.

Sandy snorted again, only this time with less fervor.

“Black belt, my ass,” he said, his voice weak. My insides continued to cave in, one by one. If I tried to say something, the dam of tears would burst. So I kept quiet.

“Try me,” Tanner said matter-of-factly, standing forehead to Sandy’s chin.

“Try him,” one of the others said, causing Sandy to look back. “Do it, Sandy. *Mess him up.*” Sandy forced a smile, then resumed facing Tanner. I noticed Sandy look away.

“I would,” Sandy said, “but I don’t want to be the one getting charged with murder.” Sandy walked off after that, and the others followed. My shoulders felt as if they’d been freed of a 50-pound backpack.

Tanner knelt down in the dirt without looking at me. I looked down at my shaking hands.

“Lousy watchman beetle,” he said, holding up a bug as its legs writhed in the air. “They eat shit and garbage.” I stared at him and I found myself wondering, for the first time, whether he was going to crush the bug between his fingers. All he did was set it down in the dirt and watch the beetle skitter away. I kicked at the dirt and rubbed my palms together. I couldn’t tell whether my heart was beating.

“What’s a black belt?” I said.

Tanner looked up at me, one eye closed as he blocked out the sun. He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “All that matters is that I don’t have one.” He smirked, stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. I couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re not the only one who’s good at stories,” he added. Tanner was grinning. He didn’t grin very often. He didn’t even look like himself.

**CHAPTER 7:**

On what is supposed to be my thirty-seventh birthday, he is with his family. They are the picture of a beautiful, happy unit. The glow of the television flickers as they sit in a dark room, my father on the couch with an arm around his second wife, their beautiful children on the floor a few feet away. The girl, a red-headed child of eight, clutches a doll in one arm while using the other to pick at her freshly-painted toenails. Her 5-year-old brother clicks away at a hand-held video game, *Indiana Jones*, as the images of a prime-time, family-friendly sit-com play out a foot or two from his face.

Their mother is laughing at a wise-cracking sportswriter/husband on the television while her own husband – my father – stifles a yawn. He’s still wearing his suit and necktie, although the tie is undone and the top button of his shirt is open. As the lead character gets set up for another predictable punchline, the network blinks and switches over to a middle-aged man who’s sitting at a desk in a network studio, his hair perfect and his face somber with concern.

“This is Brad Douglas, CBS News, with breaking news from the Midwest,” he says, and my father’s eyes only flicker and narrow as he stares at the television. His wife blinks in the dark, her face lit only by the TV’s glow. The little girl looks back at her, as if to say *What happened to the funny man?*, while the boy continues to get lost in the electronic Temple of Doom between his little fingers. Brad Douglas continues. “We’re getting word that, just a few short minutes ago, tragedy struck the center of our country when an explosion took place at a mall 90 miles from Chicago,” the television anchor continues. My father leans forward, eyes wide and elbows on knees; he’s more attentive than I’ve ever seen him. His wife’s eyes are already filled with tears, her mouth agape. The name of my hometown pops up on the screen.

“Oh, my God, Tony,” my father’s wife says, “that’s where we –“

“Shhhh!”

The anchorman disappears and is replaced by a view from above, a wide shot of a mall surrounded by dozens of firetrucks, ambulances and SWAT vans.

“As many as thirty people are feared dead, and dozens more hurt,” the anchorman’s voice continues, “after an explosion in a crowded food court during the heart of the dinner rush.” The camera angle changes again, showing people fleeing the mall in a state of panic and a screaming woman being loaded into an ambulance. In darkness, my father’s new family stares at the small television screen like it’s a loaded gun.

“Oh, dear Lord,” my father’s wife whispers through the hand that’s now covering her mouth.

“Mommy?” the little girl says, staring at the screen as panic invades the lines of her face. My father flips on a lamp next to the sofa. The girl begins to cry and scrambles onto her mother’s lap. The girl stares at her father’s – *my*  father’s – face.

Over the next thirty minutes, the images and reports and witness accounts unfold before them. Teenagers with bloody foreheads are led from the mall and into waiting aid cars. A child with his arm torn off at the elbow sobs while his shoeless mother, her dress torn and her skin covered in ash, tries to provide comfort. Panicked parents run and scream and slam their fists against policemen’s shoulders. During a live interview, one witness drops an F-bomb – “Who the *fuck* would do –“ – before the network censors mute out the rest of the rant.

A few minutes later, the anchorman returns with an update that more than thirty people are reported dead or wounded. The facts are beginning to trickle in, facts about a lone attacker being responsible for the explosion.

“It’s being treated as a terrorist attack,” the anchorman says, his face deadly serious.

And without looking up from his video game, young Max asks: “Daddy, what’s a *terrors attack*?”

“Don’t worry about it, son,” my father says dismissively, his eyes transfixed on the images unfolding on the TV screen.

A fireman carries two lifeless bodies, both of them small and covered in blood, from the mall. A crying mother, red stains covering her face and yellow tank top, holds what’s left of the plastic Ronald McDonald toy from her child’s Happy Meal. Two bodies, dressed in baggy pants and basketball jerseys, are dragged from the wreckage by the ankles above their unlaced sneakers. A beautiful blond girl, her arm in a sling, weeps as she clutches a charred lettermen’s jacket.

Another network update. Seventy dead, forty-two wounded; no, forty-two dead, seventy wounded; death toll up to forty-six; more than 100 people wounded.

Eventually, as my father’s new family sits in the light of a small lamp and soaks in the television coverage, a surveillance video surfaces. In grainy, black-and-white footage, a crowded food court is shown from above, from hours earlier, when life was simpler. The scene is familiar, 21st Century Americana, a picture of families and teenage cliques and lonesome elderly women packed together like cattle. Almost all of the seats are taken, while dozens of other people stand in lines or wander with trays. The network coverage shadows the scene, except for a small lit circle in the corner that puts the focus on a lone figure who strides through the crowd with a backpack thrown over one shoulder. He wears sunglasses and a hood, although a mess of curly hair peeks out. The circular illumination follows the figure into the center of the mass of people, where, with only a slight tug, he detonates an explosion that wipes out everything in his immediate path. The surveillance video flickers but does not burn out. There is no sound. Silent chaos is breaking out. Bodies, those that are able, scatter. People are trampling one another. A charred circle is surrounded by body parts and dead people. The only calm is in the camera itself.

“These are extremely disturbing images,” the anchorman’s shallow voice says over the footage, breaking two, maybe three, minutes of silence.

My father’s 8-year-old girl is still buried in her mother’s arms on the couch in my father’s new house, seven states away. The boy, Max, has stopped playing the game and is staring intently at the television, his shocked face aglow. Their mother repeats again that the children should not be exposed to this type of violence, to which my father replies: “Monica, you can’t keep them in a bubble their whole lives. This is *history*.” He runs his fingers through thinning, dyed hair. “Maybe they’ll learn something,” he says bluntly.

What unfolds over the next thirty minutes are more eyewitness accounts – “the last words were a man yelling: ‘I HATE EVERYONE,’ and then a huge explosion … oh god, oh god, oh GOD.” And, finally, a possible suspect.

“Police are now confirming that this is *not* believed to be an international terrorist attack but the work of one person,” the anchorman is saying as the image of a disheveled, bearded young man with pitch-black pupils and unruly black curls flashes across the screen, an image that appears to be from a driver’s license photo. “According to several sources within the FBI and the local police, this man is believed to be one Wanderling Christian Muldoon, a 19-year-old loner whose last known residence was outside of Madison. While his motives are still unclear, Muldoon was reported to have strapped himself with fifty pounds of homemade explosives, with another twenty pounds loaded in a backpack, when he walked into the Southland Mall and detonated the device in a large, crowded food court.”

He got the idea for a suicide bombing, a network terrorism expert concludes, based on Sept. 11 and the Oklahoma City bombings. “Strikingly similar,” the expert says, “and blueprints for copycat mass murderers are easily available all over the internet.”

After several more minutes of cross-talk debate about the lack of security in public places, the network returns to the subject of Wanderling Muldoon, telling of how he was raised by several Foster families without ever finding a home. He spent most of his teenage years, they are saying, inside the New Beginnings Foster Home, where the authorities had to be called on several occasions because of threatening remarks made by the young man. “Attempts to reach a director, or any kind of adult figure at the facility,” the anchorman says, “were unsuccessful.” Somewhere in Colorado, Tanner Boudin’s cell phone, which he bought under another man’s name, rings incessantly. He no longer works at the foster home. He’s currently in a meeting with a nameless doctor who’s teaching him the right combination of chemicals to kill a man without pain. He has run far away from that Foster home, where he worked long ago, and toward a new life – again.

My father’s wife, watching the television in horror, gasps.

“Oh, that poor, poor boy,” she says. For a brief second, their son Max glances at her face, his expression one of curiosity, before his eyes go back to the television. “Oh, that *poor* child,” my father’s wife repeats, softly. “No parents. No …”

My father’s glare cuts her off.

“*That* poor *child*?” he says. “What about the forty-whatever dead people?” He turns back toward the images on the television screen, his jaw clenching and unclenching. “The guy’s a kook.” He stares at the face, a small flicker of recognition emerging in my father’s eyes as if he’s seen a lost youth before, perhaps in a previous life – what he’s tried to make a previous life. My father’s gaze goes to his son Max’s face, then back to the face on the television screen as the cross-talk debates argue about the holes in the country’s Foster system. The name of Wanderling Muldoon is being tossed around so often that his posthumous celebrity swells with each syllable. In death, his name has come to the mind of every living American, only a couple dozen of which even knew of his existence in life.

“Max,” my father says, “don’t you ever be like that kook.” My father sighs. Wanderling Muldoon’s driver’s license photo, the one with the piercing black eyes and the dark, bearded face, stares out from the television screen. My father glares at the face the way he used to look at me. He grabs Max by the arm. “Do you hear me? He’s a bad, *bad* man.”

Max, my father’s youngest son, with a face shaped a little like mine was at that age, looks back at his father. His glazed glare says nothing, simply staring blankly after hours and hours of television and computer games. His face is expressionless; his mouth is closed. When he turns back toward the television, his mother picks up the remote control and clicks it off.

“He looks tired,” she whispers. Then: “C’mon, kids, time for bed.”

**###**

My mother is wrapped in a blanket as the lamp near her sofa illuminates the left side of her face. The television is a few feet away, on it an overhead shot of the mall two miles away. It’s two weeks before she will begin compiling the names of the deceased, three weeks before she will start calling their parents to offer herself as a friend in grief, and a month before one of these parents will meet her for coffee and abruptly end the session by standing up and shouting: “Your son *killed himself*? I’m sorry, but you didn’t *lose* your child, Ma’am – not like I did. I pray for your loss, but at least he wasn’t taken by the hand of the *devil*!”

Now, before any of that happens, my mother watches the coverage of the mall bombing with a detached stare. She sips tea. Only when the television cameras provide the first glimpse of a bloody arm extending from beneath the sheet of a stretcher does my mother react. She covers her mouth, drops the blanket and scurries to find the remote control. She turns off the television and stays like that, in the silence and loneliness of her dimly-lit apartment, until she can see the sun rising through a crack in the curtain and knows she can’t fight off sleep any longer.

###

Tanner is riding in a taxicab on his way to the airport after meeting with a doctor who would not call him by name. His beard is trim, and he hasn’t yet begun assisting people with suicides. He’s rubbing his hand, the one with the discolored burn mark. The radio is on, and Tanner hears the buzz of yesterday’s top story.

“Can you turn it up?” he says, and then he hears the name of our hometown. The taxi driver tries to say something, but Tanner, who’s leaning forward now, shushes him with the wave of a hand.

When Tanner hears the name of the main suspect, when he hears the station say the words “Wanderling Muldoon,” he leans back into the vinyl seat and lets out a gasp.

“Stop the car,” he says.

And when the driver does, Tanner Boudin scampers to the side of the road and throws up the ham and over-easy egg he’d eaten at the hotel restaurant.

**CHAPTER 8:**

On one of those summer days when the Midwest heat felt like a strait-jacket across your chest, I stretched out across an inflated floatee chair at the bottom of the dried-out pool, shirtless, and stared up at the blue sky. The glow forced me to squint in the sunlight, the droplets of sweat above my upper lip tickling my nostrils. A swarm of gnats passed through my view. I was alone, lost in my thoughts, wondering when Tanner would finally arrive. He’d become that way between our 10th and 11th summers: less predictable, less dependable, more mysterious. Instead of running alongside each other every step of the way, our friendship was becoming a sort of chase, with me always one step behind.

My notebook of stories lay next to my floatee, open, its pages resting on the dry pavement of what used to be a public pool. Above me, a faded marking showed that I was 8 feet deep. My skateboard was turned over, wheels up, a few feet away. I was taking a break from scribbling in my notebook.

My story ideas had come to me like feasts, filling me on some days and leaving me famished on others. On the latter days, I would just sit and think. And wait. I wondered what Tanner was doing. My life felt so transparent; his, full of mystery.

I had closed my eyes when a shadow moved above me. Upon opening them, I saw an eclipsed figure in the sunlight, leaning over me while standing alongside the pool.

“Where ya’ been?” I asked, using my forearm to shade the sunlight from my eyes. What I saw was an unfamiliar shadow – not Tanner, not a child, not a human at all. I sat up in my chair, my imagination running wild. I heard a sniffing sound and expected to see some kind of a hairy beast breathing fire down on me. Its shape came into focus, and I noticed at once that it was a dog. Staring down at me were the eyes of the very dog that had bitten Tanner two summers earlier. I knew this right away. I knew this because now the dog had only three legs. The leg that had been hurt was gone now. Hopping around above me, the dog let out a bark. It startled me to my feet.

The dog’s mouth curled into the shape of an upside-down Q. It growled, staring down at me. I stood instinctively. My heart was beating so hard that I could feel my skin pumping across my chest. I glanced around and realized there was no exit, that I was a sitting duck, even to a dog with just three legs.

Our eyes met again, and the dog let out another bark. I stumbled backward, stepped onto the inflated chair, and fell, hitting the back of my head on the pavement of the dried-out pool. I willed myself to stay conscious, knowing that the dog could do whatever to me if I passed out.

I heard a clicking sound: the dog’s clawed feet hopping on the cement above. I could see it move in the sunlight, toward the shallow end. Tanner couldn’t get there fast enough. Silently, I cursed his tardiness. If Tanner had been here, he could’ve scared the dog off. Without him, I couldn’t. Without Tanner, I could not do much of anything.

The dog began to hop from one direction to the next, from the deep end to shallow end, all the while staring down at me. I laid on the pavement, helpless. Where the hell was Tanner? A cloud passed over the sun, and I could see the animal more clearly: the dark eyes, the panting tongue, the muscles that flexed with each hop. I could see something else, too, something I had not expected. I could see a wagging tail.

The dog barked again, but its wagging tail told me that the sound was an offering of friendship. The dog hopped to the shallow end and nodded its head up and down eagerly. I stepped toward it, up the slant of the pool bottom, with my hand extended. I crept closer, close enough that it could have snapped off a finger. But it did no such thing. Instead, the three-legged dog stretched its head forward, sniffed and licked my hand. I watched its wagging tail as it did.

And then I heard something in the distance, something that couldn’t have had worse timing. My best friend Tanner was coming through the woods.

“Here, boy,” I whispered, trying to coax the dog into the abandoned pool, where it would be by my side when Tanner saw it for the first time. I was afraid of how they might greet each other, regardless of if either of them remembered the other. The meeting of a scared, broken dog and a scared, broken child could only be borne of fear. “Here, boy, it’s okay,” I whispered again. Just then, the dog looked up, its ears shooting toward the sky. I couldn’t see Tanner, but I knew the dog could.

“Tanner,” I called out, just loud enough not to startle the dog. “Tanner, it’s okay.” There was no movement. I stood on my tiptoes and could see the top of Tanner’s head a few feet away. I knew without looking what he was doing. “Tanner,” I said again. “Don’t scare it. Whatever you do, don’t scare it.”

He said nothing. He didn’t even ask if I was okay. I knew he had gone invisible.

“Here, boy,” I said, trying to regain the dog’s attention. But before Tanner and I could move, the dog barked once and hopped off in the other direction, deeper into the woods and away from us.

As it turned out, the hurt dog was more scared of Tanner than he was of it.

# # #

The next few times it came around, I was alone. It was as if this three-legged dog sensed when Tanner was away. It always greeted me at the edge of the pool. I approached with less and less apprehension each time we met, first letting it lick my hand, then scratching its ears, and then feeding it from the bag of Doritos in my backpack. On a cloudy, humid day, as the dog licked the orange powder from my fingers, the sound of Tanner’s footsteps in the woods scared it away. Its body hopped off on three legs without so much as a glance back in my direction.

“What’s up, Dumptruck?” Tanner greeted me on that day, the dog having safely escaped into the trees. He still had the dime-sized scar on his forehead.

I didn’t tell him about the dog, not because I was intentionally hiding something from my best friend but because I was afraid of what he might do to the dog if he knew about it coming around. The three-legged dog had snapped at Tanner Boudin out of fear and loneliness, and Tanner Boudin was capable of doing the same in return. I hated feeling like that about my best friend, but I just couldn’t know what to expect out of him in certain situations. What became clear on that day, that humid, hazy summer day, was that it was okay to keep secrets, even from your best friend. Best friends didn’t have to know everything.

“Nothing,” I said in response, then kicked a pinecone down the slope toward my inflatable chair. Tanner carried an aluminum folding chair under one arm, as usual.

“Hot,” he said, looking up into the gray sky behind a large pair of blue-rimmed sunglasses. “Hot as a crab’s ass in a Red Lobster restaurant.” He descended the slope to the bottom of the pool and unfolded his chair next to my inflatable pool raft.

“Crabs have asses?” I asked.

“They gotta shit.” He took off his sunglasses, then his shirt. His skin was white, his chest sunken. “Good thing they live in water,” he added. “I’d hate to have to wipe my butt with those claws.” He stuck out his back end and playfully clipped his fingers together, using both hands as I laughed hysterically. Then Tanner dropped dramatically into his folding chair and put his sunglasses back on. I looked up at the blanket of haze above us, the sun hidden behind a patch of thin clouds.

“You’re planning on catching a tan?” I said.

“It’s called cooling off,” Tanner said, using his wadded-up T-shirt to wipe down his armpits. He tossed the shirt onto the pavement of the dried-up pool and leaned back. “Heat exhaustion or drowning?” he said.

I dropped onto the inflatable seat next to him. “Say what?”

“Heat exhaustion or drowning. Which way would you rather die?”

I thought for a few seconds while squinting up at the haze. I wondered if the three-legged dog had a home or a family.

“Neither,” I said, flicking a mosquito off my forearm.

“That’s not an answer.”

I looked at Tanner. I couldn’t see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

“Drowning,” I said at last. When he didn’t respond, I added: “Is that right?”

He shook his head from side to side. “No right answer. No wrong answer.” He turned away from me and spit. “I’ll tell you one thing, though,” he said. “You’re not going to die of drowning spending your life in a waterless pool.”

I laughed. “Might die of heat exhaustion, though.”

Tanner smiled, a small, quarter-circle grin with mouth closed. We sat in silence, looking up at the sky for thirty or forty more seconds, me still thinking about the dog and Tanner thinking of God-knows-what. I noticed a tube-like cloud, its opening staring back at me like a chamber.

“Bleeding to death,” he said, finally breaking the silence, “or getting sat on by a 300-pound woman?”

“Neither,” I said, only this time I laughed when I said it.

“And the fat woman is naked and sweating,” Tanner said, and we both started laughing harder, so hard that we fell off our chairs and onto the pool bottom. We laughed for what felt like 10 minutes, well after we even remembered what had been so funny in the first place.

When Tanner finally made it back into his chair, I said: “Piranha or rattlesnake?”

And we kept playing that game until the hazy sky turned dark and we knew it was time to get on before we couldn’t find our way out of the woods.

# # #

By the time we’d reached the fifth grade, Tanner Boudin and I were so secluded from the rest of the school that we might as well have been dried gum under the desk. We had both, in a sense, found a way to become invisible. Instead of calling us Freak or Pumpkinhead, the other kids needed no name for us because we didn’t really exist.

For me, the seclusion was peaceful. I was able to move through the halls of the school without fear, as if a large target had been removed from my back. I was just fine with being left alone.

And, besides, I always had Tanner.

Two or three months into the school year, around the time that the cool air began knocking dry leaves from the trees, we settled into our seats in Mrs. Gray’s classroom and were surprised by the face of a new boy near the back of the room. Mrs. Gray introduced him as Sean Tate, and the way his eyes went immediately toward the window told me that Sean Tate was a lot like me – like *us*. He stared out at the world, his face hinting that he wished he could be out there somewhere – anywherebut crammed in this classroom with all these glaring eyes.

I watched him for most of the next two hours. I stared at his red hair, his green eyes, his square face and freckles. All the while, he kept his head down and doodled on a piece of paper. At recess, he sat alone, still doodling. Tanner and I looked at each other and nodded without words.

I introduced myself first. “And this is Tanner,” I added, because my friend was even more shy than me in those situations. Sean Tate looked up at us and grinned.

“Sean,” he said.

“I know. I heard Mrs. Gray say it.” He was looking at me with hopeful eyes, as if maybe Tanner and I could rescue him from his loneliness. “You like bugs?” I said.

Sean shrugged, stood up and followed as we led him past the other kids and toward a part of the playground where no one else ventured. Tanner and I exchanged another glance, this time acknowledging that our partnership was about to become a corporation. We introduced him to driver ants and flat-backed millipedes and burrowing mayflies.

Sean Tate was a perfect match: quiet, comfortable, more willing to follow than lead. Back then, there was no need for a leader. We were equals then, at an age when ego and testosterone and competition were still foreign words to our ears.

Sean Tate told us that he had just moved to town from Pennsylvania, where his dad worked at a chain of hotels that had expanded to our part of the country, and that’s how Sean ended up at school with us. He didn’t seem too excited about the move, telling us that he missed his friends back home. To leave someone behind was a foreign concept to me. I knew what it meant to be lonely, I knew what it meant to have a friend, and I knew I preferred the latter. I didn’t let myself look at Tanner right then, because the thought of losing him to another school in another town would have been too much to bear.

“What’s fun around here?” Sean Tate asked. His conversation consisted mainly of questions. Having him around brought a rare sense of authority to both Tanner and me. I like that about him.

One day, about a week after Sean Tate had arrived from Pennsylvania and wedged his way into our friendship, he asked how come none of the other kids talked to us.

“They seem okay,” he said with a shrug.

The question came at both Tanner and me like an exposed secret. Until that moment, I’d thought maybe he hadn’t noticed our differences, that maybe – like Tanner had done for me three years earlier – he’d accepted us for who we were.

Before I could answer – I had no answer; even in life, I rarely had answers – Tanner spoke up.

“Because they’re *assholes*,” he said, and that was the first time I’d heard him swear. “*Fucking assholes.*”

Sean and I both giggled when he said this. Tanner just sat there, his mouth closed and his face giving no indication of what might be going on in his pumpkin-like head.

“Yeah?” Sean said after his giggling faded out. He nodded and looked out at the other kids. “Yeah.”

He’d come to know our secrets – even about my love for Amanda Kornhalter, a subject Tanner and I never mentioned. He hung out with us at lunch and recess. He told us what it was like in Pennsylvania, and I found myself thinking maybe it was the kind of place where there were more people like me – more people like *us*.

Sean’s favorite practical joke was to pour soda into Tanner’s milk carton because Tanner *hated* soda. One time, he accidentally poured the soda in my milk, and it burned so bad that my eyes started to water. Sean started giggling, then I started giggling, then Tanner started laughing and the three of us couldn’t stop. One of teachers walked by and looked at us, and that just made us laugh harder. I liked that feeling, the feeling of being a part of something. I thought maybe Sean would be one of us forever.

But then the next day, I saw him talking to someone else, to one of the guys in our class. They were laughing just like we had been laughing, and I knew right then that he wasn’t really one of us. He had betrayed us by being accepted by others. This was an unacknowledged rule in our gang, one that none of us even knew.

Within the following days and weeks, there were other kids who talked to him, too. He found another group to eat with him at lunch and, even when we did hang out with him, I didn’t have much to say. I hated him for being like the others, for wanting to be like the others, and not like us.

I wanted to tell him this, to tell him that he had just used us when he didn’t have anyone, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I couldn’t even look at him.

I didn’t realize until we got back from Christmas vacation that Sean had eventually started talking about us to the others. It happened one day when I was walking down the hallway staring into a hollow pen cap and some kid who’d never spoken to me, a square-faced kid named Pete Perry, grabbed me by the arm.

“Hey, Amanda,” he said, calling out to the girl for whom I’d secretly pined since as far back as I could remember. “This kid likes you!” He started howling, and a blushing Amanda curled one side of her upper lip, like I was cripple or something. “What,” Pete Perry called out to her, releasing my elbow, “you don’t like *weirdos*?” This drew a laugh from everyone in the hallway, even Amanda herself. Tanner appeared out of nowhere and said something that nobody heard, and I just stood there dumbfounded.

After everyone went their separate ways, Tanner Boudin said to me: “What an *asshole*.” It had become his favorite word.

“Yeah,” I said, quietly so that no one else would hear us. “Peter Perry is a hairy peter.” I forced a laugh at my own joke, but Tanner’s face remained deadly serious.

“Not Peter,” he said. “Sean Tate.”

I looked at him, unsure of how Tanner had come to accuse Sean of exposing our secrets, or even how Tanner knew this was a secret. Amanda Kornhalter was something that only Sean and I shared, and thinking back, I wonder if it was because I felt bad for loving her in a way I never could have loved Tanner. My feelings for her outweighed the way I felt about him, or could ever feel about him, and so I’d kept the secret of her from him. I loved someone I didn’t know, and yet I could never love him.

And so Sean Tate had been a lesson to us. We didn’t need anyone else, and to bring another person in would only make us weaker.

I held the same philosophy at home, where I pretty much tried to avoid everyone. Anthony had continued to wrap himself up in jogging and the pursuit of teen-age girls. My mom and dad spending more and more time together, and it made me feel like even more of an outsider.

And then one cold, snowy night in February, I overheard them arguing in the next room. I was sitting on my bed, recording a mix tape of songs by The Talking Heads, Blondie and The Velvet Underground, when I felt a loud thump against the wall that separated me from my parents’ bedroom. I turned down the music and pressed my head to the wall.

“He’s just a kid,” my father was saying in a raised voice. “Peg, you’ve got to let go.”

“He’s my *son*! I’ll never give up on my son!”

“You know what I mean,” my father said, and then he used my name for the first time in as long as I could remember. He said I was “just a little different.” It hit me like cold water. Their words felt like daggers. “Peg,” my father said, “we had kids like that in my school. They grew up, found their niche, and moved on.”

My mother slammed something down.

“Tony, you’re fucking blind!” she screamed. “He’s not just *different*. He’s *lonely*. He doesn’t have any friends.” There were a few seconds of silence before she added: “Except that Tanner.” Her voice got muffled. “Is that healthy, Tony? A friend like that?”

I didn’t know what she meant by this, not right then. I had felt like Tanner was one of the few things *good* about me, and yet somehow his presence brought shame to my mother.

“Our poor boy,” she said to my father. “He’s never going to …” Her voice trailed off, and I couldn’t hear my father say anything.

Eves-dropping on them talking about me made me feel as if I’d broken some kind of trust, the same way Sean Tate had broken my trust by telling people about Amanda Kornhalter. I stepped away from the wall and tried to cover my ears, but I could feel the slam of a door in the hallway. I could also feel the strings of our family start to fray. And I knew that I was somehow responsible.

# # #

In late February, two weeks after the blow-up in my parents’ room, I came home to find my mother and father together – *holding hands.* My mother looked like she was bursting with good news, while the forced smile on my father’s face told me that he might be somewhat torn about what was about to be said.

“Anthony!” my mother called up the stairs, and after a few seconds my older brother joined us. The four of us were together for the first time in as long as I could remember, and it felt more weird than joyous. I looked around, wondering how four such people could possibly be related.

“Okay, I wanted to wait until we were all here,” my mother said excitedly, squeezing my father’s hand. “Oh, I just can’t wait.” She looked at my father. “*We’re pregnant*!” she shouted, and the three male members of the family just looked at each other with one of those how-should-we-react exchanges.

My father was the next to speak. “This wasn’t planned,” he said, and my mother elbowed him in the ribs. “What?” he said. “It wasn’t.”

She released his hand, but my father pulled her in and planted a kiss on her cheek. It was strange seeing him do that. I would come to get used to it, as the pregnancy would bring out a side of them I hadn’t much seen. But right then, seeing my mother and father in the same room – and *touching each other,* for Christ sakes – was about all I could take. And the fact that they were adding another kid despite not being able to figure out the two they had – that made me suddenly furious. My mom had no idea what went on inside me, and my dad didn’t seem to care. They knew as much about being parents as I knew about walking on the moon. I couldn’t believe my own ears. I thought about running out of the house and over to Tanner’s. I thought about hiding in the park across the street and crying in the shade of a tree. I thought about screaming at my parents, asking them how dare they add another kid to this messed-up family.

But I did none of these things. I just stood there, obediently, and waited for someone to speak next. It was Anthony.

“Well,” my 14-year-old brother said, “we’re happy for you.” The insincerity dripped from his voice, but he said what needed to be said, freeing us to get on with our day, and our lives. He started to ascend the stairs again, while I moved toward the kitchen to make myself some cereal. We both took three steps when my mother called out.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” she asked. I turned and looked at Anthony, who stood on the first step without turning his head. “It’s a *girl*!” she shouted, and with that my parents exchanged another kiss, this time on the lips.

I made myself a glass of grape juice. I wasn’t hungry anymore.

**CHAPTER 9:**

He wakes from slumber with a start. He is coughing. There is no air. He is dying. *Dying.* Black clouds have filled a dark room, wrapping Tanner Boudin in smoke, suffocating him. He does not wait.

Tanner is on his feet in a single motion, standing and running while wearing only polka-dot boxers and a thin T-shirt, which he has pulled up over his face to protect it from the smoke. He runs past his lab coat, his stethoscope, past the table where he checks the ears and nose and breathing of the boys he helps oversee at the New Beginnings Foster Home.

“Move!” he screams. “Everyone out – now! NOW!” He sprints through the hallway, poking his head in each room. “Willie, let’s go! Fire! Move!” Two of them now: Tanner and Willie. “Douglas, Randy, Glenn! Let’s move! Everyone out!”

Tanner is directing with one arm and waving his other for them to pass. He coughs. His boys follow him, then run past when he points a finger toward the stairs that lead to the fire exit. “You know the drill, guys! Jordan, drop the pillow! LEAVE THE FUCKING PILLOW!” They’re moving in a line, down the stairs ahead of him, and out a doorway, out of the burning building. They leave Tanner behind.

“Ricky, let’s go!” Tanner coughs again, pauses and falls to one knee. Two more boys run past him. “Doctor, what’s going on?” one of them shouts, but the boy keeps moving. Tanner struggles to his feet. A cylindrical cloud of smoke spins in front of him like a tunnel of death. A piercing alarm goes off – much too late. “Wanderling! Kevin! Paul!”

With whatever oxygen he can heave into his lungs, he shouts at them. Small bodies file out like a colony of ants, until Tanner has checked every bedroom – twice – and stumbles, breathless, toward the stairway. He trips, choking clouds of smoke, falls to the floor.

Flames billow up in front of him; they snap him back into action. He struggles down the stairway, his fingers grasping the handrail. The door is open, the smoke rushing out toward the waiting boys.

Tanner falls onto the grass at their feet, gasping. They stare in wonder, wearing pajamas, and one of them head-locking a stuffed bear. Their eyes are big. Some cry. Others scream. They’re all paralyzed by fear.

Beneath them, Tanner heaves, desperate for oxygen. He rolls onto his back. I stare at him, convinced that he will join me soon, that he will join me in this state called death.

“There’s still …” one of the boys from the New Beginnings Foster Home says softly. Tanner opens his eyes. He looks up at them. Tonight, he is in charge of them; he is the only adult on duty. He is 34 years old.

Inside, a loud crash. The group of boys steps back as one. Tanner’s eyes move from one to the next to the next. “Kevin,” he whispers, pointing. “Randy. Glenn. Jordan.Willie.” His hand rises. “Ricky,” he says. “Paul.” His eyes get wide. He turns and looks at the foster home. Flames are trying to escape from a downstairs window. He counts the boys again. Nine of them. There should be ten.

“Wanderling,” Tanner says softly, with panic in his face. “Wanderling!” He looks back toward the house on the hill, the foster home where he’s taken up residence for three years now. “Fuck!” Tanner yells. “He’s still in there! Wanderling Muldoon is still in there!”

He tries to get to his feet, but falls over. Two of the boys go to him, steadying him, but he pushes them away.

“Everyone get back!” he screams, then breaks into a coughing fit. He’s still trying to get to his feet. The boys retreat, except for one. A small boy with a round head and sandy hair parted down the middle stands over him.

“Doctor,” the boy whispers. Tanner coughs again and looks up at him.

“Randy,” he says weakly. “Get back. I’m not going to tell you again.” He looks back at the house. He manages to get onto one knee. He’s going back in.

“Doctor,” the boy says again. “Doctor, Doctor … Wanderling is the one that did this.” His small eyes stare fiercely. “I *know* it,” he says. “I saw him. It was Wanderling. He started the fire.”  
 Tanner looks at the boy, then back at the house. He breathes deeply and gets his other foot under him. He’s standing. He places a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” Tanner says, and then turns and heads back into the home. He’s going to get Wanderling Muldoon, the oldest of the boys at the home. Wanderling Muldoon, 17 years old and still lost, like he has been for as long as Tanner has known him.

“He *did* this!” the boy shouts behind him. Tanner chooses not hear him. He’s bursting through the flames into the back entrance, into the house and down the hallway.

“Wanderling!” he screams through the T-shirt that he uses to cover his mouth and nose. “Wanderling, where are you?”

He starts upstairs, then moves back to the first floor, where the flames are so close that his face glows. “Wanderling!” he shouts, the word lost in the sound of cackling flames and cracking wood. “Wanderling!” He moves through the living room to the front hall to the kitchen. The walls are black. Through the glow of the burning flames, he sees the lump of a body. It wears black clothes: a Joy Division T-shirt, sweatpants and black Chuck Taylor high-tops. “Wanderling!” Tanner screams. He kicks through a burning beam between them and hovers over the body. Wanderling’s eyes are closed, but his chest heaves slightly. He appears to be smiling. Tanner hoists his limp body onto a shoulder and flips around, back toward the exit. A flame catches his right arm, and he slams his body against a wall to put out the flame. Tanner is screaming in pain, but he moves on, like a trained soldier at war.

With Wanderling Muldoon on his back, Tanner bursts through the fire exit again and collapses. Wanderling’s limp body falls onto grass.

A siren in the distance. Tanner rolls onto his back, his face black with soot and ash, his right hand mangled and charred. He lies next to the body of Wanderling Muldoon, and together they look like a pair of corpses. The other boys stand fifty yards away, watching. The sirens get louder.

“I know he did this,” one of the boys says. The others give him a knowing look. When they turn back toward the burning home, Tanner is still on his back, his chest heaving. The area next to him, the patch of dirt where Wanderling Muldoon lied, is unoccupied now. In the darkness, out past the lights of the approaching aid cars, there is a figure that stumbles off into the woods and away from the New Beginnings Foster Home, out into the world and away from Tanner Boudin forever.

The next time Tanner Boudin will see him, Wanderling Muldoon’s face will be all over the television.

###

As I’ve said before, death takes me places where I would rather not be. My existence is stricken with the inability to choose. Places find me; I do not find them. Places like these.

We are riding along Geary Street, my brother Anthony and me, because he does business sometimes on the east side of town. I can tell by the way he sags in his seat and continually checks to make certain the door is locked that he is not comfortable in these parts, especially this late at night. Anthony works in wine distribution, which means his hours can vary from week to week. He’s working a Friday night, driving from one liquor store to another before taking in a seedy bar called The Breeze Inn because his boss wanted him to look into possible expansion there. Cheap wine, sold in volumes, is its own golden egg, sometimes worth more than the fine stuff if you make the right connections.

He’s got a book of addresses on the seat next to him, right where I sit watching. The cab light is on. Anthony’s eyes drift from the book to the road to the dimly-lit scenery. His eyes catch something, and just as I look that direction, he hits the brakes. A car horn blares as a pickup truck passes on his left. Anthony and I are staring out into the parking lot of a cheap motel, where we see her.

She is standing alone, although a man is approaching from the darkness from about 30 feet away. Anthony veers his company car into the lot and lets his headlights illuminate her. She wears a halter top, a short, denim skirt and stiletto heels. She squints in the headlights. The approaching man has frozen to our left.

“The fuck?” my sister Bailey says, her hand gesturing in the air as she squints in the spotlight. Anthony turns off the car but does not get out, not right away. He keeps the lights on, watching the man, with a thick waist and sunken shoulders. The spotlight renders Anthony invisible to them. “Already got a date,” Bailey says, waving her arm at us before pointing at the thick-waisted man. Her arms are rail thin, and in the spotlight I can see tracks along the veins of her forearm. Her left leg is bent ad curled inward so that all of her weight is on her right leg. “The fuck outta here,” she calls out to us. And then, “Oh, fuck. Cop?” The waiting man turns and retreats into darkness. Bailey watches him, then turns back to the car. “You got nothin’ on me,” she says, waving her arms. “I’m just standin’. Ain’t illegal. No law against standin’, y’know.” When Anthony says nothing, she calls out: “You *better* be a cop, motherfucker. Because that was one of my ...” Her voice trails off. She runs a fingernail across her lips and takes a step toward the car. Anthony kills the lights.

“Bailey,” he says through the open window. She squints her eyes but still can’t see him. “What the hell are you doing?” he says.

“Name’s Angel,” she said weakly.

“Bailey, get in the car.” His voice is firm. He sounds like our father. Bailey’s face changes, from anger to fear to shame. And then back to anger. “Bailey,” he says, opening the door and getting out so that she can see him. “Get in the goddamned car.”

She rests a thin arm on her hip and leans on her left leg. “You ain’t my pimp.”

“Bailey,” he says again. “Don’t do this. Just get in the –“

“*That was* *my best john*,” she says, pointing toward the darkness where the thick-waisted man disappeared. “You kiddin’ me with this? Chasin’ off three-hundred bucks?”

He slams the door and stands there. “Is this what you’ve done with your life?” he says.

“Christ,” Bailey says, pulling up the strap of her halter top. She turns away. “I ain’t got time for this shit.”

“*Get in the fucking car*,” he says. Anthony can’t see it now, but there’s a shirtless man standing above them on a balcony, a dark man with a small, brown cigarette in his mouth. He’s come out of a motel room and is watching us. “I swear to God, Bailey …,” Anthony says. He rushes at her and grabs her by the arm. She winces.

Above them, the man flicks his cigarette into the air and heads for the stairs. Bailey and Anthony are wrestling each other, and her lithe frame is holding up surprisingly well against his compact strength.

“*The fuck off me*,” she’s saying.

And then the man from the balcony is on Anthony, he’s got my brother around the neck and is landing blows to his head. Bailey pulls free.

“Fuckin’ hit a woman like that. Not in *my* motel,” the guy is saying as he connects with Anthony’s jaw. “You want a fight, motherfucker? I’ll give you a fight.” He lands another clean shot to Anthony’s ribs, causing my brother to crumble and fall to the pavement.

“Stop!” Bailey is screaming. “Stop! He’s my brother! STOP!”

The guy gives a kick to the kidney. He spits on Anthony. Bailey collapses and wraps her arms around her brother, her only living brother. “You goon!” she yells at the shirtless guy. “The fuck off him already! He’s my *brother*!” The guy stops kicking. He’s got spittle on the corners of his lips and a madman’s glare in his eyes.

“Shut the fuck up, ho,” the guy says, turning to her. “Two-cent whore comin’ around here dirtin’ this place up, and *you’re* tellin’ *me* what to do?”

“He’s my brother,” she says, softer now, standing.

“You fuckin’ crazy, bitch.”

Anthony crawls toward the car, climbs in and locks the door. The guy spits again, this time toward Bailey’s high-heeled shoes, then stomps off, up the stairs and back to his room. He slams the door behind him.

Bailey gets in the car silently.

Anthony is wiping blood from his lip. He has a welt on his forehead.

“Look at you,” he whispers. “Christ. What would Mom think?” Their mother – *our* mother – is so far from them now, having gone through years of therapy and finally finding peace with the tragedy that was my untimely death. Anthony and Bailey, independent of each other, have checked in on her occasionally – once a month, every couple months, then twice a year for Thanksgiving and Christmas – but they rarely visit. She is only a loose string between them now, and they know little of how far she’s come along in her grief.

Bailey begins to cry. She pulls her skirt hem down, her long, white legs splaying apart. She waves a hand in front of her face as if to chase away the tears.

“Holy shit,” Anthony mutters to himself as he runs his hands through his dark hair and looks into the rearview mirror to assess the damage on his face. He puts the car in reverse, pulls out onto Geary, and heads south. He will not make his scheduled stop at the convenience store, nor will be make it to the Breeze Inn. He will lose his job for the first time in his life, but he’ll land on his feet with a new one in less than a month.

“I’m sorry,” Bailey says as she stares out at the lights of a all-night video store and a Gas N Sip. Anthony looks at her. Her pupils are darker than I remember them to be. She is shaking. Anthony looks like he might lean in and hug her, but that would be so unlike him. Instead, he stares at her with a familiar look of offsetting disapproval – a look perfected by my father.

“It’s not your fault,” he whispers, glancing at her legs and her dress and the makeup that’s now running down her face. They drive in silence as my baby sister pulls at her short dress self-consciously. My brother turns a corner, and without looking at her, says: “This is our little secret.”

They drive in silence for almost a minute, stopping and starting along Geary while the liquor stores and hourly motels surround them.

“I just can’t believe-“ my brother says into the silence, but she cuts him off.

“Don’t start. Please. Don’t even start.” She shifts her hips and adjusts her long, bare legs while staring out the side window of his car. “Don’t even start with your shit about how much better than me you are,” she says. “Like you’re life’s perfect.”

“My life’s not –“ he inserts weakly, but she doesn’t stop to listen.

“You think your life is so much better than everybody else,” she says. “Such a great little life you lead.” She makes a scoffing gesture, her hand waving in the air. She looks at him. Her gaze assaults his face like fisted blows. “Tell me,” she says, “what the fuck have you done, anyway? With life. What’s happened? Huh? What will people remember, Mr. Perfect?”

“Bailey, relax.”

“Don’t fucking *tell* me to relax,” she hisses. “Just tell me one goddamned thing you’ve done. Something *different*.”

He flashes that arrogant look of off-put impatience that seems to have been perfected by the males in my family. At this moment, he couldn’t possibly look any more like my father – like *our* father.

“Everyone in this world isn’t trying to be the center of the universe,” he says softly, carefully. He’s allowing himself to reach into a fish tank, ready to pull back at first bite. Bailey groans but says nothing, and so he ventures on. “Life,” my brother Anthony says, with slightly more confidence in his voice, “is not always about what you *do*, but what you resist doing.”

“Please,” Bailey grumbles. They come to a red light.

“You don’t think I could have filled myself with drinks and drugs and fallen safely between the cracks,” he says.

She chuckles at this. “No,” she says, looking at him. “Quite frankly, I don’t.”

“Well, I could have. Anybody could. Anyone can fuck their life up and wait for everyone else to pick up the pieces.”

“Christ, I don’t have time for this,” she says, rubbing her temple with a thumb.

“Anyone can give up,” he continues. The light turns green. He hits the gas too hard, and the tires squeal. “Giving up,” he says, “is easy.” She’s looking out the side window now, with a hand on her chin, rolling her eyes and flapping her lips silently in a mocking gesture. “You think your life’s hard, Bailey. That’s what you think, that you’ve gone and gotten yourself out of some real shit, huh? Well, let me tell you, that ain’t hard. You know what’s hard? Hard is putting one foot in front of the other. Moving on when you don’t think you could possibly take another step. *Facing* life. That’s hard. That’s what strong people do.”

“Let me out of this fucking car,” Bailey says, reaching for the door handle on the passenger side. “I can’t take another *second* of this bullshit.”

With a click of an automatic button to his left, he locks the doors. He doesn’t say anything, but the look on his face is one of vindication, as if her desperate need to escape has somehow proven his point for the world to see. They drive on, two more blocks in painful silence, a left turn toward the highway.

“I fell in love,” he says softly. “I watched the birth of my child. I share life with people I love. That’s life.” He looks at her. “That’s life, Bailey.”

She yawns. “Bo-ring,” she says. “And how the fuck do you know what life is?”

“I know what makes me happy. You’d think by now you’d be the same.”

She groans and tries the door handle again, half-heartedly. “Christ, Anthony. What makes you happy is whatever’s on the inside of a greeting card.”

They pass a highway sign. He’s taking her to the house where his wife and two kids will be sleeping. He’ll let her sleep in the basement, hoping she’ll be gone before the kids get up.

“You know what I don’t get,” Anthony says. “I don’t get how we can come from the same parents and look at life so goddamn different. I mean, we were *raised* by the same people.”

Bailey looks at him and turns up one side of her mouth.

“No, we weren’t,” she says. She looks out at the dark sky in front of them. She says it again: “No, we weren’t.” He’s staring at her. Without looking back, she says: “They weren’t even close to the same people.”

**CHAPTER 10:**

Bailey changed everything for them. That first year of my sister’s life, for my mother and father, brought the kind of happiness I hadn’t seen in them – not ever. It was as if they had a brand new start at something.

That was the summer before sixth grade, when Anthony was heading off to high school, my parents were falling back in love, and the Boudins were confronting their own fears.

My house had become like a honeymoon retreat, and it often felt as if Anthony and I were towel boys trying to stay out of the way. That was our only bond, my brother and me, and the difference was that he had plenty of places to go while I had nowhere. Tanner had suddenly stopped answering my calls during that first week of summer, and no one was coming to the door when I rang the bell at the Boudin house. Both his parents’ cars were in the driveway, and the phone was busy whenever I called, so I knew they hadn’t gone out of town – or moved back to Canada as suddenly as they had arrived.

I couldn’t figure why Tanner had turned on me, and so I spent countless hours replaying our last conversations in search of something I might have said or done. I feared that not telling him about my secret love for Amanda Kornhalter may have pushed him away, and I promised myself that if I ever fell in love again, he would be the first to know. I thought maybe somehow Sean Tate had pulled us apart, and I wondered if perhaps Tanner and Sean were hanging out now, maybe with some other kids. Maybe Tanner had gotten normal and left me behind. I kept calling and calling. No answer.

I spent most of my free time writing stories, one of which was about a family – two parents and an 11-year-old son -- who got murdered inside their own house. While they rotted away in the basement, none of the neighbors really noticed that they were missing. The family was so invisible in social circles that a full year passed without a single inquiry about where they’d been. The murderer set up shop inside the house and started living a normal life there, even buying groceries and driving the family car, until a burglar broke in one day and, startled to find someone there, shot the murderer. The burglar dragged his body to the cellar where, upon finding three skeletons, he went into cardiac arrest and also died.

I wrote another one about a flesh-eating bug that terrorizes a high school. It eats everyone, then starts in on the cafeteria food – and immediately dies.

I wrote other stories, too, some that were more hopeful than that one but most that weren’t.

Mostly, I was forced to sit in a large, cold house and listen to a howling baby girl and two parents who couldn’t stop gushing about her cute features. My mother and father had become love-struck teenagers that year, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of what they might have been like as newlyweds. My mother’s life was wrapped around that baby, while my father appeared to thrive on his unexpected third chance at becoming a father. On the rare occasions when they had people over, I’d overhear my parents saying that they’d always wanted a girl, which I, of course, took to mean that my gender had somehow disappointed them eleven years earlier. Now they had their healthy girl, a healthy boy and a mistake that had been caught somewhere in between.

I asked my mother about this once during that summer before sixth grade. I had never been much for confrontation, and so I surprised even myself when I brought it up, and even more when I lashed out at her.

It was a weekday afternoon, and my brother was off jogging or desperately trying to earn his place with the popular crowd, and I’d been sitting out in the backyard writing a short story about a spaceship that comes to earth and takes away all the adults -- in my head, I could hear Tanner calling them “aaaah-dults” -- and brings them to another planet. My mother came outside with her blond bundle of joy, going on and on about how beautiful little Bailey was.

“Big brother,” my mother said cheerfully, because she’d taken to calling me that and I didn’t have the heart to tell her I hated it, “Bailey wants to say hi.” She was waving the baby’s arm. “*Can you say hi to your big brother? Can you? Yeah, baby.* Isn’t she precious?”

I shrugged and went back to my writing. My mom turned like she was going to go back into the house, but then she flipped back around and looked at me.

“It wouldn’t kill you to smile once in awhile,” she said, gently rocking my 9-month-old sister in her arms. “A happy baby comes from a happy home. I wish you wouldn’t drag her down – drag us *all* down – with your constant moping.”

I stared at her for a couple of seconds, then went back to my notebook. Her shadow moved across my writing space. I could hear her breathe out, as if trying to push the anger away.

“Hon,” she said softly, caressing my hair, “what’s bothering you?”

“*Nothing.*” I didn’t look up; I was afraid at what she might find if she studied my face.

The shadow didn’t move, except for the gentle rocking of the lump in her arms.

“Can we talk about it?” she said. I resumed writing. She said my name, firmly, as if I were a child. Sometimes I felt like she was the only one who knew my name at all. I resented her for being the only one who seemed to care. “Talk to me,” she said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I stopped writing but didn’t look up. “*Leave … me … alone.*”

At that moment, with her free hand, she reached for my notebook, grabbing it with two fingers. I yanked it away so quickly that the pages fluttered into the yard and my mom had to steady herself or she would have dropped the baby. Bailey started to sob.

“What in the *world* is wrong with you?” my mother shouted at me, caressing the baby’s head in a way that would’ve driven me nuts had I been the infant in her arms. Pages were floating in the wind not far away.

I stood up then, still a few inches shorter than my mother but catching her little by little each year. I must have had fire in my eyes because she took a step back.

“Nothing’s *wrong* with me,” I said. “It’s like Dad says: I’m just a typical *boy*. Maybe you wouldn’t get that because you’re not one and because …” I felt tears running down my cheeks, but I was more angry than sad. “*I’m sorry I wasn’t a girl*,” I blurted out unexpectedly. “Okay?” And with that, I ran into the house.

From my bedroom window, I watched the pages of my notebook float across the yard, aided by a gentle breeze. All my secrets were being carried to other places. Fifteen minutes passed before my mother gently tapped on the door.

“Baby,” she said, calling me a name that no longer applied. When she gently opened the door without invitation, I noticed that she was no longer holding Bailey. Her hands were folded. “Baby, I’m sorry.”

“*I* am NOT*,*” I shouted, letting the words hang in the air for emphasis, “*your baby*!”

I fell backward onto my bed and held a pillow over my face, wishing her away. If I could have anything at that moment, it would have been for a spaceship to come down and carry my entire family away -- even the baby that was sleeping in the next room. I thought maybe I could suffocate myself if I pressed the pillow down hard enough, but that didn’t work. My mother didn’t retreat the war zone. I felt her sit on the mattress beside me.

“I know you can hear me,” she said, “so I’ll say my piece and go.” I held the pillow tighter to my face. She cleared her throat, like some shifty politician preparing to deliver an election speech. “I know you’ve been sad for awhile now,” she said, “and I hope it’s not because of anything me or your father have done. We both love you very much. We love who you are – whether you’re a boy or a girl. We love the way our family is, and we love the way you are.” She took a deep breath. “You’re our little caterpillar, and one day you’ll be the one who becomes a butterfly.” She was rubbing my leg. “You know that?” My mother squeezed my calf muscle. Under the pillow, I rolled my eyes.

I felt the mattress lighten when she stood, and I heard her take a step toward the door. “And one more thing,” she said. “I don’t know when you’ve ever heard your father call you a ‘typical boy,’ but I’m sure he meant it as a compliment. You’re unique, baby, but you’re not *different*. Not like that.” There was a silence, as if my mom was trying to choose her words carefully – as if she had something else she wanted to say. I couldn’t help thinking about how she’d called me a caterpillar – a bug, for Christ’s sakes. I waited for what felt like a full minute before she spoke again. “He doesn’t always show it,” she added, “but your father does love you very much.”

Not until I heard the door close did I remove the pillow from my face. I waited until the footsteps retreated into the baby room before I snuck out and headed for the basement. Once there, I started fishing through photo albums until I came to one that was from the year of my birth. Using a small, pen-flashlight, I found a photograph of the three of them, my mother and father and older brother, posing around a newborn baby. A baby boy. And I’ll be damned if my father wasn’t the only one smiling.

There had been a day when he’d been proud of me. Even if that was 11 years earlier.

# # #

Two weeks passed before Tanner answered the door. I’d been calling six times a day, every day, sometimes setting down the phone on a counter and letting it ring all afternoon. By that time, I’d become convinced that I’d said something wrong, that my best friend had found a reason to cast me aside, just like all the others had. But then his door cracked open one afternoon as I stood on the doorstep, and that big, round head stared back at me, his eyes blinking in sunlight from inside a dark house.

“I can’t explain now,” he said in a whisper. “I’m not even supposed to open the door, but both my parents are sleeping.” He looked past me, into the street, as if we were being watched. “Meet me in the clearing tomorrow night, out by the pool,” he said. “At sunset.”

I could hardly wait. The anticipation of our reunion set my heart beating and slowed the clock down to a snail’s pace.

He was tossing pebbles when I got there, his ankles crossed as he sat atop a rock. Only a couple of weeks had passed since I’d seen my best friend outside his house, and yet I swear he looked older, even two or three inches taller.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

I waited for an apology. I didn’t know how things like this worked. I felt like my mother probably did after an argument with Dad. When I saw in Tanner Boudin’s face that he had no intent to make an apology, I again felt that guilt that I was the one who had done something wrong.

“You can’t tell *anyone* any of this,” Tanner Boudin said. I nodded in agreement. I was impatient, eager to hear what came next. Then Tanner said: “My dad’s in trouble.”

I sat down next to my friend. He didn’t look scared, but he didn’t look safe, either. Tanner proceeded to tell me the whole story, all the way back to when he was a little kid in Toronto. He said there was this French guy, a guy with a shaggy beard who was one of his dad’s patients. Tanner had first heard of the guy when the Boudin family decided to move to the U.S., the time his mom and dad sat him down and explained that a man had just escaped jail and was looking for Dr. Boudin. Apparently, the guy had been sentenced to eight years for attempted murder, and Tanner’s dad was one of the people who’d testified that he was mentally fit to stand trial. The guy vowed, right there in the courtroom, for revenge. He pointed at Tanner’s dad when he said it. That’s the way Tanner told me it happened.

A year later, the guy escaped, and the Boudins moved to the United States, to my hometown.

“And now,” Tanner told me on that 12th summer, four years after he’d moved from Canada, while sitting on that rock in the clearing, “that French guy knows where we live. He called a couple weeks ago, just asked for a Dr. Boudin in that accent of his. He didn’t say anything else. So my mom called the cops. And now we’re kind of like stuck in our own house. We’re not even supposed to answer the phone.” He flicked a pebble toward the woods. “There’s even a cop watching all day and night,” he added.

“A *cop*?”

He giggled.

“A couple of them, depending on the time of day. They kept asking me who you were, since you kept riding your bike by the house two or three times a day.”

“They saw that?” I said. I felt chills knowing that someone had been watching me. I hoped I hadn’t picked my nose or scratched myself while they were watching.

“It’s okay.” He smacked my arm lightly with the back of his hand. “Cops aren’t that smart, anyway. They don’t even know I’m gone.” He turned up one corner of his mouth and shrugged. “I snuck out through the garage.”

He picked up a rock, stood and threw it toward the pool. It fell short.

“He’s gonna kill us,” Tanner said matter-of-factly. “The French guy.” He was staring out at the trees. His face showed no fear. He might as well have been talking about comic books or my skateboard. Then Tanner Boudin added: “Unless someone kills ‘im first.”

The darkness made my head suddenly feel light. Tanner picked up another rock and hit the side of the pool with a dull thud. Then he smiled.

“Check it out,” he said. “We might have to change our name.” His face, as usual, showed little emotion.

“Are you scared?” I said.

“About changing my name?” he said with a short laugh. I said nothing. He knew what I meant.

He looked at me, his small mouth closed. The calmness in his face provided my answer.

“If it happens, it happens,” he said with a shrug. “I guess we all die when our time comes.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, not then and not now. All I knew, out there in that clearing next to the pool, was that *I* was scared. I knew I didn’t want him to die. And I didn’t want to die, either, not then.

It was getting dark. My eyes bounced around the trees, looking for moving shadows in moonlight, searching for the crazy Frenchman.

# # #

That was the last time I saw Tanner Boudin that summer. I spent most of my days in our basement, trying to avoid the heat while reading comic books, making up new games with my father’s dice collection and writing short stories. I was lost in a world of make-believe, so much so that my voice sounded scratchy on those rare occasions that my mother or father induced me to speak.

My mother, sensing my boredom, bought me an Atari with three games – “Centipede,” “Space Invaders” and “Asteroids” – and a Rubik’s Cube. Each of them held my attention for only a few days before I went back to my fantasy worlds. Not having Tanner around was the best thing for my imagination.

Mostly, I continued to write fiction during that summer. While other kids my age were, for all I knew, writing in diaries at night, I preferred making up stories and places and people. I wrote one about a boy who found out that he’d been adopted and that his real dad was a famous Rock N’ Roll singer. Another was about an abused dog that got revenge on its attackers. I wrote about pirates and alien invaders and a boy who cried so much about life that his bed floated away in a stream of tears.

When school started in the fall, I didn’t want to go back. I was scared that I might be alone again, that Tanner and his parents might have moved on again, but when I walked into my sixth-grade classroom, there he was. He’d appeared just as suddenly as that first day four years earlier, without warning. He was sitting at his desk, arms folded and mouth closed, looking at me without acknowledgment. My heart began to patter – not in the way it did around Amanda Kornhalter but the way it would when I’d come up with a really good story idea and couldn’t wait to start writing.

We fell into our old pattern that day at recess, taking a spot far from the others. Instead of looking for bugs, we just sat in the dirt and watched our classmates play, occasionally tossing a pebble at each other’s legs or torso.

“So did they find him?” I asked.

“Who?” Tanner had started flicking his pebbles toward a small log near the fence.

“The crazy Frenchman.”

He looked up toward the clouds, squinting in the haze, then stared out at a parking lot where the teachers kept their cars during the day.

“Oh, that,” he said quietly. “No. Nothing. Guess they gave up. Cops aren’t even camping out at our house anymore. I’ve seen ‘em drive by a few times, but …” He jammed a finger up his nose and rooted around. I scanned the schoolyard, not so much for kids as for a crazy Frenchman.

“So he’s still out there?” I asked, wanting to follow up with a predictable question about whether he was scared but knowing better than to ask.

Tanner shrugged. “Doesn’t much matter, I guess.” He stood up and wiped dirt from the back of his shorts. “You’ve got to move on eventually.”

I felt an arrow sink into my gut. The words echoed in my head. *Move. On.*

“You’re … Are you *leaving*?” I asked.

Tanner opened his mouth and laughed.

“No, stupid,” he said. “I just meant you’ve got to go on with your life. It’s a figure of speak. You have to *move on*. You can’t live your life scared.” Then Tanner looked at me with humor in his eyes. “Besides,” he said, “I can always disappear.”

He winked at me and clapped his hands in the air, catching an unfortunate gnat that was smashed against the open palm he flashed proudly in front of my face. Then he wiped it on his shirt and turned to walk toward the parking lot. I jumped up to follow. He was headed to a part of the yard that was off limits, where some kids from the middle school across the street would go to smoke sometimes.

“Where are you going?” I said, struggling to keep up, but he didn’t answer. Tanner just continued on through the parking lot, across a patch of open grass and on toward the woods. I followed, unwilling to lose him again. I gave chase, trying not to let him out of my sight even when I tripped and fell over a log. I scrambled to my feet and caught sight of his back, of his black, collared shirt and his white jeans and his Keds walking away from me. My pace quickened into a jog as I followed.

Not until Tanner had pushed deep enough into the trees to not be seen did he finally sit down.

“What are you doing?” I asked, out of breath.

“Change of scenery.” I sat down next to him on a log. “I can’t go through another year of sitting in that schoolyard,” he said, nodding toward the school, “the two of us by ourselves, like we’re some freak show for all the other kids to stare at.”

“Tanner …” I didn’t really have anything else to say. I didn’t remember this much anger in him, not back before the summer. Seeing him like this kind of made me mad myself, although I didn’t quite know why.

“School is stupid,” he said. “Why can’t we just do homework in our bedroom, mail it in to the teacher, get our grades, and not have to worry about all that other dumb stuff like recess and class and *people*?”

I watched him silently, thinking about pointing out to him that, without school, I never would have met him. But in my head, it sounded too sappy, so I didn’t say anything.

“I *hate* being out there at recess, where all the other kids can just stare at us,” he continued. “Like we’re in the *zoo* or something.”

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“I just want to disappear,” Tanner said suddenly, looking down. “I mean, really. I wish …” He closed his eyes. Just as quickly, they flickered open. “To heck with it,” he said.

He stood up and walked to the edge of the log, then crouched down to look through it. I took a place on the other side, staring back at him through the opening. His face was blank. His eyes were wide but said nothing.

Then we heard something scurrying in the leaves, and we both stood up quickly.

“Check it out!” He was pointing, his hand in front of him with finger extended toward something I couldn’t see. Tanner pulled his arm back and fell into a crouch, tiptoeing through the dirt. Standing on the other side of the log, I saw something small scurrying in a bush in front of Tanner. My best friend crept forward, slowly extending his arms.

“What is it?” I said.

“Shhhh!”

I watched as he stood over his target, which I now concluded by its striped tail to be a chipmunk. With the care of a newborn’s father, Tanner crouched all the way down and held his hands to either side of the oblivious animal. We were frozen, both of us, as the rodent scratched at a small clump of leaves, its tail twitching. The chipmunk’s beady eyes showed desperation as the rodent frantically clawed toward something different than the life it knew.

What happened next came in a flash flood of images, like it had just a couple of years earlier when Tanner got bitten by the dog. The turn of the chipmunk’s head. One beady eye. Tanner’s hands snapping together around the rodent’s body. Tanner’s triumphant exaltation, followed quickly by a shriek of pain. The chipmunk, flung toward the ground, scurrying around on its back. Tanner standing over it, rubbing the scratch marks on his arm.

“I think it clawed me,” he said. We stared at the chipmunk, which was on its back and too broken to flip over. The desperation in its eyes took on a look of fear. Its legs kicked as it chirped with panic. I couldn’t help but to feel sorry for it, and wanted nothing more than to see the helpless chipmunk relieved of its pain.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tanner raise his leg. This, too, came in a rush, too quickly for me to realize what was going on. His leg came down, and one Ked shoe slammed on top of the chipmunk with a crunching sound. And then there were only the calm, still woods.

Tanner stared down at his damage. Bones stuck out of the matted fur. The chipmunk’s head was still in tact, its beady eyes aimed straight at me but not really looking at anything. The blood was darker than I would have expected, and it quickly mixed with dirt on the ground between us.

“Holy munchkins,” Tanner said while shaking his head and staring down at the carnage. He bent over and picked up the carcass by what was left of its tail. Blood dripped from the dead animal. Tanner smiled. “That was rad,” he said.

Without warning, my insides turned over. I leaned across my knees and retched. The green jello I’d eaten for lunch curdled in the dirt between my feet. I heard a soft thud in a pile of leaves: Tanner dropping the carcass. In the distance, the school bell rang to signal the end of recess.

“Aw,” he said while staring at my green vomit. “Why’d you have to go and do *that*?” He giggled. I looked up into his eyes, small and steely – like those of a chipmunk. “C’mon,” he said, his eyes widening now. “I had to do it. He was … *suffering*.”

I wiped my mouth and stood among the trees. Flies circled around us. My best friend slapped my shoulder.

“It was his time,” he said. His face offered nothing else, just a pair of big, emotionless eyes and that small, closed mouth. He looked like a different version of himself, like the older brother Tanner never had. He still had that scar on his forehead from the dog a couple of years earlier. Maybe the chipmunk was his sick form of revenge. “Come on,” he said, using his arm to push my shoulder playfully. “Let’s get back to that mental institution they call school.”

# # #

When I got home from school that day, my mom found some drops of chipmunk blood on my shirt. She had just put the baby down for a nap, which was becoming the only time she seemed to notice me at all, when she stopped and looked me up and down. Her eyes got all wide, and I sheepishly looked down at my shirt.

“Oh, that,” I said. “That’s Tanner’s.” As soon as I said it, the words echoed with regret in my own ears. I couldn’t tell my mom that he’d killed a chipmunk. I had to back-pedal. “He cut himself,” I added.

My mother’s eyes went from my face to the blood and back to my face. Her hands were on her hips. She said my name in that way that only a mother can: a single word that brings back all the other times I’d disappointed her.

“Honest, Mom,” I said, but I could hear the nervousness in my own voice. “He got cut.”

“Tanner did,” she said flatly, her fingers dancing on hipbones. I nodded. My mother turned her head, and I knew right then that she was considering calling the Boudin house.

“It was a little cut,” I said. I thought about this cop show I’d watched once where two suspects had to get their stories together, and I realized I shouldn’t say anything more specific until I called him.

My mother’s arms went from her hips to her chest, where she folded them while staring at me. I was certain that her next move would be to go to the phone. But what happened next was what I called Saved By the Bailey, in that the baby started to cry in the next room. All my mom said to me was: “Well, I hope Tanner’s okay.” And for a split second, I thought I’d gotten off with a close shave. But then she added: “Your father will be home soon.”

While I waited in my room, I flipped through some comic books and considered my chances of sneaking into my parents’ bedroom to use the telephone. I didn’t want to say anything more until I talked to Tanner. I don’t know why, but I felt as if I’d been caught in a lie. Even a prisoner, I reasoned, got one call.

But before I got up the nerve, my father arrived home from work. I could barely hear the two of them talking downstairs, my father saying Tanner Boudin’s name and following it with Jesus Christ’s. He opened the door to my bedroom twelve seconds later, without knocking.

“Okay, let’s get one thing straight,” he said, his tie loosened and his face red with the frustration of another day at work. “I want you to tell me what happened today, and I don’t want to hear any of this bullsh … *nonsense* about Tanner.”

I knew right then, with my father standing over me and holding out his massive hands in front of my face, what I had to do. If Tanner and I were going to continue being friends, at least in my parents’ eyes, I was going to have to take the fall. If they found out about him killing a defenseless animal, that would be the end of our friendship.

“Okay, okay,” I said, softly and while burying my face in the comforter. “It’s not Tanner’s blood.” I dropped the comforter to show him the front of my shirt. “It’s … I got into a fight.” Sitting in my bed with my back against a pillow, I couldn’t find the nerve to look up at him. “With a kid named Sean Tate,” I added. Just saying the name made my face feel flush. In my head, I could see my fist punching his freckled face while all his so-called friends stood around and did nothing.

My dad didn’t say anything, not right away. He held his thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose before slowly sitting down next to me on the bed. Then he did something unexpected; my father smiled.

“How’d you do?” he said, rubbing my shoulder. “I mean, did you get the best of him?” His fingers clenched on my shoulder bone. “Did you take it to this bully, this John …”

“Sean. *Sean* Tate,” I said. And then, with a coy smile, I pointed to the droplets of blood on my shirt, blood that could’ve been Tanner’s or could’ve come from a dead chipmunk. “All I’ll say,” I added, “is that this is Sean’s blood – not mine.”

My father laughed at this, then stood and mussed my hair. “Atta boy,” he said. It’s as close as I ever felt to him.

**CHAPTER 11:**

Through a window in the kitchen of his four-bedroom, three-bathroom home north of San Francisco, my father holds a cup of coffee in his hand and smiles as he watches his new family in the backyard. His second wife, a woman named Monica who’s only six or seven years older than my brother Anthony, pushes her daughter’s swing with one arm while holding an infant son in the other. The daughter laughs and shakes her blond curls in the air, her 4-year-old mind as happy as can be. Her younger brother stares with wide eyes and meaty cheeks, his weight resting on his mother’s hip.

I watch them from my cloak of invisibility, right there next to my father. The years have taken a toll on him, I can see from up close. He’s sixty now, and the thinning gray hair and age-spotted hands illustrate his years. The two of us stand there, and as he stares out at his perfect family, my father’s greed shines in his eyes. This time, he’d gotten his baby girl first. “She needs a baby sister,” he had told Monica two years earlier, hoping to strike gold twice. And a year after that, they had a baby boy.

Out in front of us, this baby boy bounces on his mother’s hip with a blank stare and a clean slate. His life is out there for the taking. His tiny world will expand with each day, each week, each year, spinning at him until his destiny has been wrapped around him like a swaddle. Now, his future is open. Anything can happen. Life’s possibilities could never be more infinite.

My father’s wife slows the swing and helps her daughter jump off. She kisses both of her children, then pats the girl on the behind as she calls out: “How about some dinner?” My father waves to them through the window, then takes his cup of coffee to the basement. He’s got a second office there, where my father can escape into his work, to phone calls with familiar voices of men whose faces he’s seen only once or twice – if at all. These are the people to whom my father devotes most of his time, and to his young wife this business of his has always seemed somehow alluring. The mystery of my father is what drew her to him.

Upstairs, she sets her son in a highchair and gives her daughter a short stack of coloring books. She turns on the gentle sounds of a James Taylor album and begins cutting vegetables. Even in her early 40s, my father’s wife has a certain beauty. Her dark skin hints of an ethnicity unlike our own: perhaps Asian or Hispanic or a touch of Caribbean. (Even in life, I never was much good at such things.) She has dark eyes and the petite figure of someone half her age. Their daughter has her dark skin but dishwater blond hair. The son is a doughy, chubby little boy – a happy child. But then, don’t we all start out happy?

Or do we?

My brother Anthony hadn’t been pleased when he’d heard that they were getting married eight years earlier. He skipped the wedding in protest, and only recently have my father and brother resumed speaking to each other. My brother, 36 now, has a new family of his own, a wife and two boys, on the other side of the country. On this night, as my father’s new wife prepares dinner several states away, my brother puts his two boys to bed and whispers their names. His youngest child’s middle name is the same as my first name, and whenever Anthony says it he shows no sign of sadness. He kisses them both, closes the door, and makes himself a drink. He’ll stop after one, as he always does, because he has to run his six miles the following morning. His wife is in the next room, asleep on a couch, where she was when he left her thirty minutes earlier. He stands over her, drink in hand, and stares. The glow of the television illuminates her face.

He finishes his drink. He goes back upstairs. He climbs into bed.

Twenty minutes later, with tired eyes and a groggy gait up the stairs, she joins him. She wraps her arms around his back and kisses his neck.

Two-thousand miles away, my father will sleep alone on this night. His wife puts the children to bed, and he’s working on a proposal until well past midnight. The five cups of coffee finally wear off, and he falls asleep on a couch in his basement. His eyelids twitch as he sleeps, as if the things of which he dreams have the sting of an insect’s bite.

When they all wake up the following morning, there will be news of planes crashing into buildings in New York City. The world will change around them.

But tonight, they sleep.

# # #

From the payphone in the lobby of the alcohol rehabilitation clinic where she has just completed a 30-day stay, my sister Bailey listens to the ringing phone and clenches her teeth. My mother picks up on the other end.

“Mom, it’s me, don’t hang up,” my sister says. She’s 22 years old and 15 pounds heavier than she was 30 days ago. “Mom, I just wanted to say that I’m okay, and I’m sorry for everything. I just want you to know that. I don’t expect you to say anything.”

“Where *are* you?” my mother says softly, her voice catching.

“Nevada,” Bailey says. She clicks a fingernail against her teeth. She’s wearing a tight dress but only because those are the only kinds of dresses she had when she checked into the Seven Pines Awakening Center. “I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner,” she says, “but there really wasn’t anything to say.”

“It’s been six years, Bailey.”

Bailey lights a cigarette and blows smoke through her nose.

“I’m clean now, Mom. That’s what I want to say. Thirty days. Not a single drink. I had a problem. I know that now.”

My mother doesn’t say anything.

“A lot’s happened,” Bailey says. “A lot’s changed. I’m not the crazy little girl who –“

“Six *years*,” my mother says. “My *baby*.” She begins to cry. It’s become her only skill. “You disappeared,” she says. “*Disappeared.* I lost you, just like your brother. And then the planes in New York. And I didn’t know if you … ”

Bailey’s tapping her fingernail again. She’s losing her patience. “I’m fine, Ma,” she says, sounding like my older brother. She’s the same age Anthony was when I took my own life. “C’mon,” Bailey says. “Let’s not do this. I just wanted to let you know. I just want things to be … *better.*” She looks around the lobby. She’s alone. The girl at the front desk, the one into whose face Bailey spat 30 days ago, is on a smoke break. “I gotta go, Mom. I just wanted you to know.”

And she hangs up the phone.

She grabs her bag and goes outside for one last cigarette before checking out of rehab and starting a new life. A fifty-something man is out there, smoking and looking out at the trees. He’s been here since Bailey arrived, and he looks like he’s been in and out places like this for most of his life.

“Last day,” he says when he sees her. He’s nodding, smiling. “Last day. It’s really the first day.”

Bailey forces a smile and pulls out a cigarette. She’s come to trust men like this a little more in the past 30 days – not *all* of them want something. She used to think they all wanted the same thing.

“It’s easier to get in here than it is to stay out,” he says, holding out a lighter for her. She leans in and inhales. “Cruel world out there,” he says, snapping the lighter shut. “Know what you got that I envy?” he says. Bailey shrugs as she drags off her cigarette. “You’re young,” he says. “You still got time.” The man smiles. The wrinkles on his face intensify as he does. “You got help young. That’s a good thing. Shit, when I was your age, I knew it all. Didn’t need no help from nobody.” He holds his hands out. “This is where it’s gotten me – over and over and over again.”

“At least you got here,” Bailey says. “Some never make it.”

“Damn straight, young lady,” the man says, nodding and putting out his cigarette. He looks out at the trees again. “You still got time to make a difference,” he says. “We ain’t all that lucky. For some of us, time’s all but run out. Me, I got no goals in life, ‘cept for staying sober. That’s all that matters now.”

Bailey picks at her fingernail and taps ash from her smoke into a coffee can filled with sand.

“I’ve lived a good life, though,” the man says. “Didn’t kill nobody. Didn’t fuck up a family and a bunch of kids. Didn’t do much jail time. Just tried to stay straight and narrow. That’s how I finally got sober, by staying straight and narrow.” He turns and looks at her. “We can’t all be Ghandi. Not everybody’s gonna be Mother Teresa,” he says. “Not everyone’s made to save the world. Some of us are just tryin’ like hell not to fuck it up for everyone else.”

Bailey finishes her cigarette and gives him a hug.

“You’ve still got time,” she says. “Time to make a difference.”

He shakes his head. “Time to make sure I don’t fuck anything up,” he says with a smile. He waves his hand. “Go,” he says. “Go be young and sober. Can’t imagine there’s anything better than that. A whole life in front of you.”

Bailey hugs him again.

Two weeks later, she’s drinking tequila from a coffee mug.

# # #

The boy is standing on the roof, facing the world and shouting. He’s looking out at the lights of the city miles and miles away.

“Fuck you!” he shouts. The boy is tall and lanky, with a few dark whiskers on his chin that match the color of the curly mess of hair on his head. A single braid, colored pink, hangs over his ear. He is a few years from becoming a man, officially, and he still has the face of a small child, with olive skin and features that may be Spanish or may be Egyptian or may be Israeli but are almost certainly a mixture of things.

“Wanderling, come down from there!” a voice shouts from below. It is the voice of my best friend. He has changed his name again, but this time only his first name, as he continues to move around in adulthood.

“Fuck youuuuuuu, Dr. Boudin!” the boy shouts back. He crouches, up there on the roof three stories high, 50 feet above the snow upon frozen dirt. “Fuck youuuuuu, Bouuuuudddddiiiiinnnn!” he shouts again, over and over, carrying the U each time. He turns his face toward the moon. “Fuck youuuuuuu, Dr. Bouuuudddiiiinnn!”

Tanner Boudin stares up at him. His face shows patience, his hands folded in front of him.

“Wanderling, come down,” he shouts, sounding like a man much older than his 31 years. “Let’s talk. Come on down now.”

Wanderling Muldoon comes out of his crouch, standing again while looking down at Tanner like a crow in a tree. He holds out his arms, sets his chin toward the night, and shouts.

“Fuck youuuuuuuu, Dr. Bouddddinnnnn! Fuck youuuuuuuuuuuuu!!!”

The sound of his voice echoes into the night, through the falling snow, over the rooftops, out toward the moon.

**CHAPTER 12:**

The only two places where Tanner and I could go to be away from classmates’ ridicule and the craziness of our families were the abandoned pool and the wooded area behind the church where our parents took us on occasional Sunday mornings. The pool had become our weekday hideout, where we could go after school just to talk and read comic books. Tanner had a stack three inches high, having earned a few extra bucks mowing neighbors’ lawns. My only income was an allowance that my mother slipped me without telling my father.

Tanner’s favorite comics were the ones with lots of blood and gore. The pictures were much like his drawings, only a lot better. He had one series of comic books where these muscle men would fight each other and tear off limbs. He seemed particularly interested in the blood and animated sounds of breaking bones – POP! SNAP! “The more blood,” he’d say, “the better.”

On the weekends, we’d hide out behind the church. The woods were thicker there, and we could do whatever we wanted without getting caught. Tanner brought some spray-paint cans one day, and we sprayed the trees green and blue. Another day, we set off some firecrackers.

One gray Saturday afternoon in the fall, after another week of avoiding the constant inattention and occasional torment from our seventh-grade classmates, Tanner and I were hanging out in the woods behind the church when he suddenly pulled out a small, red-and-white pack with the word MARLBORO printed across the front. A gentle rain had begun to caress the tree branches.

“Want one?” Tanner asked while opening the pack. I stared at his hands. “They’re cigarettes,” he said. He took out two, jammed one in his mouth and then the other, then he pulled a matchbook from his pocket. “Smoky, smoky,” he said while grinning and holding the cigarettes between his teeth. He lit both and held one out for me. I could feel my heart beating and my hands shaking in the pockets of my jeans. I stared at the cylindrical cigarette butt and could feel my hands shaking – so much so that I couldn’t have imagined holding it steady enough to stuff into my mouth. Tanner giggled, watched my eyes, and then his face grew serious. He pulled the cigarette meant for me back. He returned it to his own mouth and inhaled both. He coughed out a puff of smoke. I waved the cloud away from my face.

“Yuck,” Tanner said, and he put one out on the side of a tree. He took short puffs off the remaining cigarette and was careful not to inhale.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

“Ass,” said Tanner, and then he flicked the cigarette into a small puddle. But I noticed that he put what was left of the pack back into his pocket. I knew right then that we wouldn’t be able to share everything, that there were some things meant to keep to ourselves.

We spent most of our free time together, and, although I never saw him smoke again that fall, I did occasionally smell it on him.

Sometimes, we’d go out to the movies on a Thursday or Friday night. Tanner figured out a way to sneak into the Rated-R movies – either by buying a ticket to some Disney movie and slipping into an adjacent theater, or by waiting outside the exit door in the alley. Horror films were his favorites – “Halloween,” “Friday the 13th,” “When a Stranger Calls” – and he would shout with excitement every time someone got killed. The blood bothered me, but most of the movies had enough female skin to keep me interested.

That was the year when I started looking at girls – and women – differently. I noticed boobs and legs and wondered what women’s parts looked like underneath their clothes. The horror movies, with their R-ratings and their busty, vulnerable females, often satisfied this curiosity for me, and it was worth all the chainsaws and beheadings and screaming teenagers as long as I got a glimpse of some nipples along the way.

I also came to looking at Amanda Kornhalter in a different way that year. She’d started wearing miniskirts and sleeveless shirts, and I found myself staring at the tanned skin of her shoulders and arms and thighs and calves. She became even more beautiful in my eyes: the subject of something I came to know as infatuation. Staring at her became a habit so familiar that I had to remind myself constantly that I’d better stop or get caught and never have a chance with her.

I felt ashamed for staring at the girls this way, especially Amanda. I held a devotion to her that went back almost five years – the closest thing to love that I knew. And so looking at her body and the way her hips swiveled felt invasive, and yet I couldn’t help myself. I wondered if the other boys in my class were thinking the same kinds of thoughts as I was about girls.

Tanner didn’t seem to notice any of this. While a whole new world had been opened up to me, his world still seemed to be caught up in comic books, drawing pictures and horror movies. We’d be sitting outside the school waiting for the bus, and some eighth-grade girls with boobs and curved hips would walk by, and Tanner wouldn’t even look up from his comic book.

One morning, while I sat alone in English class and Tanner was four doors down in Math, one of the prettier girls in our class was called up front to read from her daily assignment. Her name was Kim Rutherford, and she was pretty in more of a sexy way than Amanda was, with large breasts and long, thick legs that she liked to show off while wearing short skirts. On her way to the front of the room, Kim Rutherford dropped her notebook and bent over to pick it up. Out of dedication to Amanda, who sat three rows behind me but never seemed to notice I was alive, I looked away. What I saw were the eyes of every other boy in that room growing wide as they got a glimpse of Kim Rutherford’s ample butt. I knew then that I had something in common with the others – something I never could admit. The female body was not a discovery all my own.

I’d started to discover my own body at home around that same time. This was something else I couldn’t tell Tanner, and so I was overcome with shame after each one-on-none session – in the shower, while sitting on the toilet with a wash cloth, sometimes even on the basement couch. I became convinced that I was breaking some unwritten law, that if there really was a God, he would punish me for the very act. When kids shunned me in school, I began to trace it back to my nightly act – a work of the devil that would curse me from ever making any new friends. If it rained, I saw it as punishment for my giving in to desires the previous night. Everything bad that happened was because of the things I was doing in darkness. I began to hate myself, to lose respect for the person I had become.

One day that spring, when the weather was clearing and the seventh- and eighth-grade girls were leaving less and less to the imagination, I unknowingly stared at Amanda Kornhalter’s legs for almost an entire lunch period. The only thing that snapped me out of my daze was a sudden voice, inches away from my ear.

“Take a good look,” one of the guys in my class said, having caught me in mid-leer. “It’ll feel better when you’re pulling your pud in the shower tonight.” A group of guys laughed when he said it, and the group continued on its way, and I noticed one of them was Sean Tate. I felt my face go flush, wondering: *How could they possibly know?* For a brief moment, I was convinced that people *could* go invisible after all, that maybe they’d been spying on me. That made me think of Tanner Boudin, and the rush of shame was so intense that I stopped eating and rushed to the bathroom to throw up.

What if Tanner knew?

Sean Tate’s group continued to antagonize me after that, but they never brought up my whacking off again. They would say things like “nice pants, when’s the flood?” or “hey, onion face, you make the girls cry,” or “who cuts your hair … Stevie Wonder?!” Sean never said anything like that, but he was always there. And he was always laughing, just trying desperately to be part of the crowd. They were a firing squad of artillery that greeted Tanner and me every day at school. I tended to file it all away in a part of my brain reserved for things like family and school that I could not control, while Tanner grew more and more despondent with each passing day. He joked about showing up one day in a hockey mask and taking a chainsaw to anyone who’d ever tried to knock us down. We laughed at that, but inside I knew that it wasn’t entirely a joke.

# # #

While Tanner’s disposition was changing before my very eyes that year, I was experiencing my own set of changes in a different way.

Up to that point, I’d always been among the best students in my class, bringing home A’s and an occasional B when I didn’t feel like sticking out among my classmates. But seventh grade, for me, proved to be a totally different challenge. The workload doubled, and I quickly found that the time I used to spend reading comic books, writing short stories and making up games was quickly being replaced by homework. Studying also invaded the time I’d previously spent with Tanner. And so, naturally, I cut back on the books.

I brought home my first C that fall. During the winter, I had two C’s and a D – in art. My mother’s first accusation was that it was all Tanner’s fault, that I’d been spending far too much time with him. I lied, telling her that Tanner had actually been helping with my studies, that without him I’d probably have flunked out of the seventh grade by now. My mother wasn’t buying it, and so she forbid me to hang out with him on weeknights that spring. I shrugged it off in front of her, but when I got to my room I broke down in tears for the first time in as long as I could remember. I thought about running away, to Tanner’s house so I could live with him, but I knew that’s the first place my parents would look. Canada seemed like a good option, until I remembered the Crazy Frenchman and deduced that he had probably already targeted me as a friend of the Boudin family. I’d read about a place called Jamaica, which was all beaches and friendly people who might take me in, but I didn’t know how I was going to get there.

I just fell into more solitude after that, holing myself up in my bedroom and scribbling stories on loose leafs of paper until well past midnight. My homework became a nuisance, and I wondered how I could get by without any school at all.

When my grades didn’t improve that spring, my mother resorted to Plan B. It might have been the worst thing that ever happened to me.

# # #

When we arrived at Dr. Siegmann’s office, I was still under the impression that we were going in for my annual physical, albeit with a new doctor and at a new office. It was inside a three-story office building, with carpeted floors and a waiting room that smelled of cleaning supplies. Not until my mother and I sat down in the waiting room did she break it down for me.

“Sometimes, it’s okay to tell a little white lie in the name of love,” my mother said softly, as if she had suddenly started reading passages from an Ann Landers book. “I lied to you. I knew if I didn’t, you wouldn’t come.” I felt my head go numb. “This isn’t a *regular* doctor,” my mother continued, wrapping her fingers around the back of my hand. Her touch was cold. “Dr. Siegmann is a therapist. She’s going to ask you some things. Things about … what’s going on inside of you*.*”

“*Inside* me?”

I could tell that my mother was fighting to hold back tears, although she looked more nervous than sad. Her face, once flawless in its smooth skin and soft eyes, was beginning to look weathered and hard – the face of a mother suffocating in worry.

“I’ve been concerned about your grades,” she said. “There’s something going on inside you. And if you’re not going to talk about it with us, I think maybe someone else should listen. And maybe even help.”

I pulled my hand from under hers and folded my arms across my chest. I knew running wasn’t an option, even though we were less than a mile from home. I couldn’t think of anything else to do. I closed my eyes, trying Tanner’s trick, but I could feel my mother watching me. When I opened them, her gaze went from my face to a window and out toward the parking lot.

We must have sat like that for ten minutes before Dr. Siegmann came out. *She* was not the male doctor I had expected.

Our question-and-answer session went a lot like the recent conversations with my mother – and every other female authority figure in my life. Women seemed to have a way of glaring at me like they were trying to pry my innermost secrets from me, and I was determined not to let go. Dr. Siegmann would ask something, and I’d keep my response to only a word or two. It went like that for about 15 minutes with this new therapist. My mother would interject every now and then, until Dr. Siegmann politely asked her to leave the two of us alone.

When my mother had closed the door, Dr. Siegmann leaned forward and asked: “Are you mad at your mother about something?”

“No.”

She tilted her head. “I sense some frustration.”

I shrugged.

“With your mother.”

I stared at my hands. They were folded in my lap. I knew what she wanted -- even at that tender age, I knew. She wanted me to tell her things that she’d heard before, things that she could use to put me in a box and tell me I was this type or that type. In fifty minutes, she wanted to put a label on me. She wanted me to be like other patients she’d seen. If I’d learned one thing in my 13 years, it was that I wasn’t like anyone else. I was *different*. I had come to be proud of that fact.

Dr. Siegmann’s chair squeaked as she shifted her body, and she came at me with a different question.

“Who is Tanner?”

The name hit me like a jab, and my first reaction was to counterpunch.

“Who told you about Tanner?” I shot back. A small grin formed on her lips.

“Your mother and I talked,” she said. “We met last week.”

I shrugged again.

“Who is he?”

“Friend.”

“Do you have other friends?”

Shrug.

“Are you mad about coming here?”

Shrug.

Dr. Siegmann shifted in her seat again, then leaned forward.

“Let me tell you how this works,” she said. “I’m asking questions because I’m trying to get to know you. You don’t have to answer *all* of them, of course, but I do need some kind of give and take.” I could feel her smiling, even though I was still staring at my hands. “Maybe if we talk a little,” she said softly, “I’ll tell your mom it was productive, and she’ll get off your back.”

My eyes focused on a pen atop her desk. I wasn’t going to loosen my grip on everything inside of me, no matter how hard she tried to pry it away. Dr. Siegmann waited a minute or two before reaching into a drawer and pulling out a wind-up timer.

“Okay,” she said, “we don’t have to talk. Not if you’re uncomfortable.” She cranked the timer with a growling sound. “I’m going to set this for fifteen minutes,” she said. “We don’t have to say anything for fifteen minutes. We’ll just *think*. And then … well, we’ll see what happens after fifteen.”

She released the timer’s crank and set the device on her desk. I stared at it as the timer clicked through the silence, but out of the corner of my eye I could see Dr. Siegmann watching me.

Taken in a vacuum, fifteen minutes is a long, *long* time. Every second seems to double in weight, and you can feel your heartbeat and hear every slight movement and see things change shape as you stare at them. This happens until you feel like your spine is about to splinter and everything inside you is going to spill out.

But I was determined not to crack. Not in that office. Not in front of Dr. Siegmann. Not with my mom in the next room thinking she’d finally gotten someone to solve me. And so we sat, the doctor and me, neither of us making a peep. The timer’s ticking tested our patience. But I refused to take my eyes off the dial. An eternity passed, and still there were twelve minutes left on the timer.

I’ve got to give it to Dr. Siegmann. She stood her ground without so much as a hiccup. I expected, out of the corner of my eye, to see her flip open a folder and begin shuffling notes, or to arrange the items on her desk, or – for god sakes – to break the silence with another of her inane questions.

But five minutes of silence passed. Then ten. Then each passing minute took on even more weight. I counted down the seconds from 300 in my head, watching the timer tick away in intervals of sixty. Until at last, blessedly, the time ran out with the single ring of a bell.

And my reward, after enduring the test with military self-discipline was a firing squad of more questions.

“How did that feel?” “What were you thinking about?” “Are you one of those people who finds silence uncomfortable?”

I fended off each question with a shrug, careful not to look the doctor in the eye. At one point, I inadvertently glared at her breasts – thick and saggy – and was suddenly overcome by the thought that she had somehow defeated me. Her womanly assets, no matter how disgusting, had momentarily broken my will.

But in the end, I was the one who achieved victory. We sat in uncomfortable silence for twenty-two more minutes, until our session was over, and all Dr. Siegmann said was: “We’ll see you next week.”

The following week, she cranked the timer as soon as I sat down. She flipped through a medical magazine while I maintained my vow of silence. Each passing second brought not pressure but a comfort that was actually pulling me further and further within myself. I imagined what asinine questions she might ask next, whenever the silence would finally be broken. But that day we went fifty full minutes without saying another word.

When the bell rang, I stood and walked out of the room and into my mother’s waiting car.

“How was it?” she asked.

I shrugged.

# # #

Dr. Siegmann and I went through just one more week of this before I cracked. I readily admit that our next session was more uncomfortable than the first two, if for no other reason than the constant engaging-disengaging of her ballpoint pen as we avoided conversation for another fifty minutes. Engage. Disengage. Engage. Disengage.

Engage.

I stared at her pen until my eyes hurt then looked away. I was just about ready to snap when the timer’s bell rang.

So I made a plan. The next week, when my mother dropped me off at the doctor’s office, I waved good-bye and watched her drive away. As soon as her car was out of sight, I scurried around the back of the building. I knew I would beat my mother home if I jogged, since she was going to run errands with the baby, so I ran all the way back to our empty house. I erased all the messages on the answering machine. I took the basement phone off the hook and set it gently on the base so it wouldn’t look suspicious. I listened to the beeping sound, to the woman’s voice repeating, “If you’d like to make a call …,” and waited until the phone went silent. Then I ran back to the doctor’s office and waited to meet my mother outside, telling her on the ride home how Dr. Siegmann hadn’t shown up. I was sweating, but my mother didn’t say anything about that. The baby was crying in the back seat. When we got home and she saw no messages on the machine, my mom said: “That’s strange. And unprofessional.”

“I feel a lot better,” I said, “after talking to her for a few weeks.”

The next morning, my mom called the receptionist at the doctor’s office and canceled any further sessions with the therapist. I was free. But the damage had been done. Even my own mother thought there was something wrong with me. And when enough people think there’s something wrong with you, it becomes harder and harder to convince yourself that they’re all full of shit.

**CHAPTER 13:**

On what is supposed to be my 30th birthday, my sister Bailey is sashaying in her ribbons and bows. Colorful strands hang from her dishwater blond hair, and the flow of her long dress moves to the soft rhythm of the music. She sings the words that roll across the screen in front of her, as if she were born to be singing this song on this stage in this bar on this very night.

“I will remember you,” my 19-year-old sister purrs while standing on stage at the Gray Fox Tavern on the city’s south side. “Will you remember me? Don’t let your life pass you by. Weep not for memories.”

I can’t recall if I’ve ever seen her so beautiful, or so peaceful. Her eyes are closed, and the words drip from her mouth like they’d been written just for her lips. Singing is one thing Bailey does well – so well that, in an alternate life, she might have become famous. In her right hand, she holds a glass of vodka on the rocks, most of the liquid spilling onto the stage as she moves her body.

“I’m so tired but I can’t sleep. Standing on the edge of something much too deep.” She looks out into the haze, as if it is an auditorium filled with faces. What’s left in her glass sloshes around to the rhythm of her swaying hips.

When she is finished, there is only a spattering of applause, as most of the Gray Fox’s clientele – almost entirely made up of males in their 50s and 60s -- is more concerned with another round than the young woman with the fake ID who is finishing on the karaoke stage. But my sister, who drops the microphone while fumbling to put it back in its stand, handles the moment as if she’s at the center of the world.

“That,” she says into the microphone after getting it back in its rightful place, “is dedicated to someone I barely knew but never forgot.”

As she steps off the small stage in the corner of the bar, my sister slips and falls, crashing through a small table covered with glasses half-full of cheap beer. She’s flat on her back, her eyes flickering in the dim bar lights. All at once, she is just as I was: lost, lonely, cursed to be out of place in this world. My sister, in all her beauty and talent, is a circus freak.

I try to look away. But this is not something I am allowed anymore.

A disco ball reflects specks of light across her bare ankles and knees, the hem of her dress, her stomach and chest and wiry arms and elegant face and flowing blond hair. The ribbons and bows have gone still. Her eyes have closed. My sister Bailey, now surrounded by a small crowd of gawking middle-aged men, begins to snore.

# # #

My mother sits across from a man who wears a blue turtleneck and brown suit coat. His thick head of hair is perfectly groomed. He speaks with a slight Southern drawl. He tells my mother that he’s never tried a dating service like this one before, that curiosity led him here, to lunch, with her.

“How about you?” he says while sipping a glass of water and holding a closed menu between them.

“This is my first date,” my mother says softly. “My first since …” She picks at a dinner roll. She glances at the menu. She’s wearing jeans and a modest blouse, dressed like she’s going out for coffee with a female friend.

The conversation stops and starts, and it’s soon apparent that these two divorced people are not compatible. They talk about the food, the weather and places they’ve been. My mother is careful not to let the subject drift to family, and the way her gaze goes distant shows just how uncomfortable she’s become. This dating thing was the idea of a new therapist, one my mother won’t visit again. It was a plan to help my mother move on, but it’s going horribly. By the time they’re finished eating and waiting for the check, they’ve both gone silent. My mother’s eyes have welled up. She looks as lonely as ever. She can barely speak.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers, fumbling with her purse. She drops three ten-dollar bills on the table, covers her mouth and rushes out the door.

She slams her fist against the steering wheel the whole drive home, her tears flowing now. She pulls into the driveway, slams the door behind her, and closes all the shades on the windows of her condominium. There, she pulls out a photo album. My mother has not taken or posed for a photograph in years, and so the only ones she has are faded. She unpacks them chronologically backwards -- since I died, my mother has continued to live her life in reverse – beginning with the Christmas card from when I was a junior in high school. The five of us face the camera, with my kid sister Bailey in front; my older brother Anthony, home from college, on the far left; my father next to him, dressed in a sweater, with an arm around my mother; and then there’s me. Even here, in this family photo, I look alone, out of place.

My mother turns the pages of the album, then moves on to the next. There are photos from the few vacations we took as a family. Images of my brother laughing, my sister’s birth, my father at a golf tournament. These photos are my mother’s lifeline; they’re what she turns to in grief. They are the comforting burn of a stiff drink to the throat of a recovering alcoholic. She flips through photos of my childhood, of my 2-month-old body being caressed in her arms as she stares proudly at my face.

But my mother’s life did not begin there. She pulls out an album of Anthony’s baby pictures, of a vacation to Mexico she took with my father, of their wedding day.

She’s lost all these people now. My mother, she has let go of everyone.

# # #

My brother Anthony, 34 years old and a world away from the demons that haunt his mother and sister, still looks the way I remember him to have been. He’s stocky, confident, always running toward something just beyond his reach. He’s even still got his full head of black hair and a way of laughing obnoxiously after he’s said something funny. This is the Anthony I knew, the Anthony that many others have known over the years. He’s drifted from most of his high school friends, and his college friends too. He makes new ones at every stop, keeping them close for as long as it’s convenient.

“I tell yah my brother called today?” his neighbor friend Bill says as Anthony flips a steak on the grill behind the house Anthony lives in with his wife and two young boys. “Yeah,” Bill says, “he just up and got engaged. You believe that shit?” He laughs and takes a long pull off a bottle of Lowenbrau. “Yeah, last I heard, he was broken up. Now they’re engaged.” He looks out at the fence that separates his yard from Anthony’s. The darkening sky has turned a shade of orange. “They’ll probably break up five or six more times before the wedding.” He laughs again, looking at his bottle. My brother laughs along with him. After another gulp, Bill looks at Anthony. “Any of your brothers or sisters married?”

Anthony re-arranges the meat on the grill. His dark eyes stare out at the yard.

“Nah,” he says. He grins, a defense mechanism he’s had since childhood. “My sister’s a mess,” he says. “I’ll grow 10 inches, get drafted by the Bulls and be named most valuable player before *she* gets married.” He closes the grill. Smoke billows out through three holes on the top.

“Just a sister, huh?” Bill says. “That all you got?”

Anthony looks at him.

“My brother died,” he says, then looks down. “Twelve years ago. Would’ve been 30 this month.”

Bill watches his eyes. “Jesus,” Anthony’s neighbor friend says. “I’m sorry.”

Beer bottle to his lips, Anthony shakes his head from side to side. He swallows and smiles.

“Happened a long time ago,” he says. “I was young.” And hearing this is strange to me, because back then, I never really thought of Anthony as young at all. He picks up a barbecue brush and lifts the grill lid.

Bill nods his head and helps himself to a handful of chips. “Sorry to bring it up,” he says.

Anthony waves his beer bottle in the air, an act of surrender.

“Long time ago,” he says, then takes a sip. Anthony will stop after one beer, maybe two, just like he always does. I can’t remember ever seeing him drunk, although I can’t be certain it didn’t happened when he was younger. When he pulls the bottle from his lips, he uses it to motion toward the house, toward where their wives are in the kitchen cutting vegetables and watching the kids.

“*That’s* my family now,” Anthony says. He smiles, which is something he did a lot when I was young but something that never seemed as sincere as it does now. He looks at Bill. “We can’t change what’s done,” Anthony adds.

Bill forces a smile and takes in a deep breath while looking out at the spacious yard that surrounds them. Anthony cracks open another beer and hands it to Bill. Through a window, their wives and children are now visible in the living room.

“Family,” Anthony says, almost in a whisper. “My brother’s gone, my sister’s strung out, my mom’s all over the place. My dad, he might not be perfect, but at least he was *there.* He didn’t take the easy way out, like everyone else.” He stares at his kids. “That’s the most important thing, right? To be *here*. To be *alive.*”

He shakes his head.

“You know what’s messed up?” Anthony says to Bill, but he’s looking out at the horizon above the backyard fence, looking out at something he can’t see. “It’s like I feel guilty about life sometimes.” He begins to marinade the flank steaks with the brush. “It’s like I was cursed, in some weird way,” he says. “Cursed to be normal. My family had all these problems, these things that bonded them, and …” He shakes his head again and picks up the slabs meat, dropping them onto a porcelain plate. “It’s like I was in the wrong family or something,” he says. He’s still shaking his head as he passes Bill and walks through the patio door that leads to the kitchen of his 2,500-square-foot house in the suburbs.

Anthony stops and turns, looking at the trees near where I am.

“What?” Bill says to him.

“Nothing,” Anthony says. “I thought I heard something, that’s all. Must have been the breeze.”

###

Tanner Boudin is sitting on the kitchen floor, his palms splayed out on linoleum, his legs stretched out and feet pressed against a mop closet. The door is moving as somebody – some*thing* – tries to escape.

“It’s been forty-five minutes,” Tanner says to a man sitting next to him, a man named Duncan who is 56 years old and will be dead in less than a year. Duncan is healthy now, as far as he knows, and he’s sitting in a similar position with his feet against the door. The two of them are trying to keep whatever is inside the closet from getting out.

“Just keep it up,” Duncan says to Tanner. “He’ll tire. He always does. Man, I could use a smoke, though.”

Tanner stretches his back and keeps his legs straight. “This can’t be good for him,” he says as whatever’s on the other side of the door bangs and screams. When the man next to him says nothing, Tanner asks: “Is this okay? For his health?”

The man shrugs. “You’re the one with the degree from med school,” he says. This response doesn’t get much of a reaction from Tanner, who not so long ago found out just how easy it is to get a fake degree over something called the internet; he does it under the name Paul Tanner. The man adds: “It’s fine. He’ll tire out. It’s the only way.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, they sit like that, holding the door closed, as the bangs and screams gradually subside.

“He’s a handful, huh?” Tanner says, his young, clean-shaven face looking tired.

Duncan smirks. “Since the day we got him. Two cops showed up with a 7-year-old kid, said they’ve got no place else to take ‘im. Said he’d been to five foster families in less than two years and that none of them could handle him.” There’s a thump on the door, weak and quiet, like a half-hearted kick. “The last one,” the man says, “he tied up their daughter – I guess they had a 10-year-old, from what the cops told me – and he tried to light her on fire.”

“On *fire*?” Tanner whispers.

Duncan nods. “With his foster dad’s lighter, from what they told me. It kept goin’ out, so the girl was saved. Thank God he was too young to know about gasoline or kerosene or something worse than that.”

“God. That’s …” Tanner shakes his head.

“Pretty messed up, yeah,” the man says. “Anyway, that was five years ago. And it hasn’t gotten any easier. Be glad you’ve only known him for a couple of weeks, Doc.”

Another soft thud, this time sounding like a head resting on the floor.

“They get old before your eyes; the ones that stick around for more than a few months, anyway,” Duncan says for no particular reason. He scratches his arm. Duncan doesn’t know that he’ll only be around for 11 more months himself, that his breathing will start getting heavy in the next few weeks and that he’ll get diagnosed with lung cancer – terminal lung cancer. “Anyway,” he says, “it’s been a help havin’ you around. Not just the medical stuff, but –“ he points to the closet door – “all the other craziness that happens around here.”

“Yeah, well,” Tanner says, “it’s not as bad as some people made it out to be, when the job opened up.”

“Never looked at this as a job,” Duncan says, “before he arrived.” He points to the closet again. “My first fifteen years here -- since I opened it back in 1985 because my parents were never there for me and I wanted to create a place where lost kids could have a home – those years were a breeze. It was like having my own family, one that kept changing every few months.” His face is bright, the smile fading as he goes quiet. He nods toward the closet door. “Wanderling Muldoon certainly changed the vibe in here,” he says. “That’s why I couldn’t do it myself no more.” He looks Tanner up and down. “I’d give my left leg for some family to take him off my hands,” Duncan says quietly, “but it just don’t seem right asking a family to do that without telling ‘em about all his problems. And if I tell ‘em about all his problems, they’re not taking him off my hands. Vicious cycle.” Duncan chuckles. “People like you,” he says, “prob’ly don’t even know places like this exist, huh?”

“People like me?”

Duncan smiles. “Normal folk,” he says, then laughs. “There are some normal people in the world still, no?”

Tanner shrugs. He looks at the door.

“Seen a lotta kids come through here since ’85,” Duncan says. “That’s a lot of kids, and a lot of foster families. And I loved every last one of ‘em.” His eyes fill with pride. These eyes will lose their sparkle when the pain in his lungs begins, and the only times it will return are on the days when the foster kids visit him at the hospital in his dying weeks. Tanner will visit him, too, and when he does, he’ll wish he had a way to put an end to the suffering. “Fifteen years,” Duncan says.

“Fifteen years,” Tanner echoes. Fifteen years earlier, he was entering high school, his best – and only – friend by his side. He appears lost in thought, perhaps lost in time. Then he looks at the door.

“How come so many have given up on him?” he asks softly. Tanner nods toward the door. The closet is still quiet, the boy behind it silent. “How come they’ve given up on Wanderling Muldoon?” He looks at Duncan. “And how come you haven’t?”

Duncan stares at him. One corner of his mouth turns up.

“We all need someone,” he says. “No?” Duncan, his lungs feeling healthy now but beginning to fill with the disease that will kill him, nods toward the closet door. “If you’ve got nobody,” he adds, “you ain’t nothing.”

Tanner forces a smile, then leans his head back and stretches again. He takes in a deep breath. His face goes blank, as it so often is.

“How often does he get like this?” my best friend asks.

“He’s fine when he takes the pills,” Duncan says. “He fakes it sometimes. Don’t sweat it. Pretty common for him to hide them under his tongue, you know? Some kids just don’t want to feel better, I guess.”

Tanner looks up at him but doesn’t seem to know how to respond. They’re sitting there like mirror images of each other, their legs out and their weight on their hands, waiting for the violence in the closet to conclude. And just when it looks like it has, the thumping begins again. Wanderling Muldoon, the lost 13-year-old kid who’s been at this foster home longer than any of the others, resumes kicking. And then he starts screaming, words that string together as one -- awful things.

“*Motherfuckingcuntlickers letmeoutofhereorI’lleat yourballs*!” “*Ihopeyourmothers burnin aplanecrash intoanuclearplant*!” “*Maythiswhole fuckingplacegetcovered inshitanddiarrhea andyousuffocateinthebrownriversthatfill yourlungs*!”

Tanner and the man next to him brace themselves. They hold their legs out straight.

“Here we go,” Duncan says. And then: “Thank holy heavens I only have to put up with nine more years of this. Retirement can’t come soon enough.” He smiles and strains to keep the door closed.

The cancer has probably already started to grow in Duncan’s lungs, for in less than a year, he will be gone. It will start when his breathing becomes difficult, then he’ll start stealing antihistamines and speed from the infirmary where Tanner sleeps, and then he’ll finally be diagnosed with cancer … only it will be too late.

And then Tanner will be left behind, 31 years old and in charge of the New Beginnings Foster Home and all the kids that will come and go over the next few years.

And he’ll also be in charge of a boy named Wanderling Muldoon.

**CHAPTER 14:**

Looking back, even in my final hours before I took my own life as a senior in high school, I remembered eighth grade as the last time I felt any sense of hope. The school year began with an unseasonable blanket of rain, and the showers and gray clouds seemed to break a pattern of impending doom inside me. Whereas sunshine made others happy, it was gloom that seemed to bring out the best in me.

Despite the previous year’s short stint with the therapist – not *because* of it – I had a renewed dedication to the classroom. Pushing myself into my schoolwork brought a welcome distraction and, I surmised, could only keep my mom off my back. I got my grades up during that first semester, although it became apparent that I could never get them up to where they were in grade school. Whereas Tanner had always maintained good grades without having to spend too much time doing homework, I found myself struggling just to stay afloat. The A’s that had come so easily to me were elusive now, no matter how hard I worked. But as long as my mother kept her nose out of my business, as she now did, my work was paying off in my own mind.

Another area where I secretly made a promise to improve was in my pursuit of Amanda Kornhalter. I had come to listening to bands like The Smiths and The Cure, mysterious bands that seemed to fit my mood when I would lie in the darkness of my room, and I found my curiosity piqued by the songs about love. I knew I could find it with Amanda Kornhalter – I *knew* it -- and so I made myself a vow that, if I was ever going to ask Amanda on a date, it was going to have to happen that year.

Amanda had returned from summer vacation with a new look, having cut off a few inches of hair in favor of a spikier style that made me think of Pat Benatar. It made Amanda unique among the other girls, as if maybe she was, like me, a little bit different. And it only made me want her more. She still had the tan legs and perfect teeth and cute dimples, but now she also had an *edge*. I could see a darkness within her that made me think maybe I had a chance.

Still, she thought me invisible. And so, hoping to stand out in her eyes, I got my sandy hair dyed black. It was longer now, just over the ears, and I thought maybe I could look like some of the rock stars I watched on MTV late at night. My mother cried when she saw my hair for the first time. My father rolled his eyes and groaned. Anthony told me I looked like a Playmobile action figure. Even Bailey, little Bailey who was just starting to walk and mumble semi-coherent words, looked at me differently with her big, dark eyes.

But I got my satisfaction when Tanner saw me for the first time and uttered a single word: “*Cool*.”

Without any experience asking a girl out, I took notice of the way my father had been wooing my mom since the baby had arrived and re-sparked their marriage. I watched the two of them pinch each other and touch each other’s faces, promising that I would do the same if I could ever get Amanda to love me. My mom and dad giggled in each other’s presence and lied on the floor with Bailey between them, smiling and interlocking their fingers. It made me feel nauseous, to see them like that, but it also made me jealous. I was pretty sure I would never have anything like that – not ever in my life.

But I could always try. Armed with my new hair color, and desperate to satisfy my curiosity for contact with actual girls, I readied myself to make Amanda Kornhalter mine.

I knew I had very little to offer to the world, and yet I still thought I could have been a great boyfriend to Amanda Kornhalter if she would have just given me the chance. While she’d always fit in with the popular crowd, Amanda herself was different from the others. She carried herself with a maturity and easy smile that said she wasn’t concerned with her place on the social ladder. She tended to meander between groups – with the cheerleaders one day, the artsy types the next, and she’d even sit with a couple chubby, homely girls at lunch on occasion. Her ability to drift from one clique to the next made my objective difficult: it wasn’t as simple as trying to work my way into a specific group in an effort to get to know her. She was a bit of a chameleon, and I was still a bug.

All I had was Tanner. He had grown a couple of inches and sprouted a few whiskers above his upper lip, but still he was so obviously different from the other kids our age that he could only be described as *odd.* But, like me, he started watching the others with a curiosity in his eyes – like he didn’t necessarily want to *be* one of them, but he wanted to see what made them tick.

And so my chance with Amanda came after my best friend came to me with an unexpected offer. One Friday night, citing boredom and curiosity, Tanner suggested that we find our way, uninvited, to a party a couple blocks away. I went against my typically distant nature and agreed to do it; Amanda Kornhalter might just be there. Tanner had overheard some kids talking about the party location at school, and the anticipation of Friday night brought both fear and excitement. “Maybe this will be our chance,” I told him eagerly on that Friday morning. “To what?” he said. “Get our asses kicked?” We both laughed at that, but it only made me more nervous.

The party wasn’t anything like I’d expected. There were mostly unfamiliar faces, older kids from the high school and maybe even the junior college a couple of miles away. The only music came from a small boom box in the basement, and the kid whose parents owned the house kept turning the volume down. The music was crap: Boston, Foreigner, Duran Duran – stuff that not even the most drunk teenager could have *possibly* enjoyed. While I’d expected to see wall-to-wall people, there were scattered spaces of emptiness between the small groups of partygoers. There was no focus, nothing to look at. It was just groups of three, four and five people lumped together in little pockets, talking but not really saying anything of importance.

Tanner and I wandered through the house together, starting in the basement where people were talking and taking pictures of each other, then up to the kitchen, where a group of five guys who were playing some game with ping-pong balls and cups of beer took pause to stare at us dumbly. We left that room and wandered into the living room, where two small groups lingered. The furniture and immaculate decorations on the walls stood out like targets. One wall was covered with family photographs, of people I didn’t recognize. The whole house smelled of beer and smoke, and I couldn’t figure out how the kid who lived there was going to get away with having so many people over without his parents finding out. I picked up and empty beer bottle and peered inside with one eye, staring down the neck before setting it back down. Tanner and I stood in silence as the room began to fill in around us. There were moments when our invisibility brought safety, others when I felt like a spotlight was upon us. We did not drink or talk; we simply watched the others like journalists at war.

My own curiosity had almost been squeezed out when I caught a glimpse of the Pat Benatar haircut – short in back, spiky on top, with long bangs hanging over one eye -- moving across the living room. Amanda Kornhalter.

“There you go,” Tanner said with a nod, and I felt myself blushing because he’d remembered. I didn’t know what to do after that, whether to play it cool or admit my feelings to him, and so I said nothing.

“Check it out,” a voice said from nearby, and when we turned, two drunk kids from our class were looking at us as they passed. They both had crap-eating grins and hollow eyes, like they’d just discovered alcohol for the first time. “It’s Beavis and Butthead,” one of them said, pointing toward us. They both laughed, but Tanner and I found it easy to ignore. We’d been taunted for so long that our psyche had become calloused. Only after they were well out of earshot did Tanner lean toward me and say, “Yeah, and they’re Boy and George.” I laughed at that, but my eyes never left Amanda Kornhalter.

From a safe distance, I remained aware of her general location. I would wait until she’d move on, then I’d nudge Tanner, trying to feign indifference, and led him on another circular, repetitive tour of the party house. All the while, I was keeping one eye on Amanda. A guy was trying to kiss a girl at the bottom of the stairs, but she turned away, grinning. A group of big guys pushed each other to the beat of the crappy music. One of them stabbed a key into a beer can and drank through the hole.

Tanner didn’t seem too eager to leave the party, even after we’d been there for two more hours and the house began to get thick with bodies and heat. The music had been turned up in the basement, and about twenty people were dancing and mingling. It didn’t take long before I spotted Amanda again, sitting on the couch with some high school guy’s arm around her. The guy was looking at her boobs and legs as he talked to her, but he was careful to maintain eye contact when her gaze fell to him. He wore a backward baseball cap over a floppy haircut, and his polo shirt was faded and wrinkled. He wore his collar up.

“Let me know when you’re ready to leave,” Tanner said from behind me, and I simply shook my head.

I found a safe spot from where I could watch the two of them, wishing that I had Tanner’s ability to “go invisible.” An occasional drunk would stumble by and say something mean-spirited, but it all bounced off like rubber balls. I could see the older guy breaking Amanda down: giving her drinks, making her laugh, cutting through her boundaries of space. When he leaned in for a kiss, and she didn’t push him away, I felt my stomach drop like a roller coaster. I felt a surge of anger, then self-pity, then sorrow. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I had to turn away. When I did, Tanner was gone.

Backing into a wall in the corner of an unknown basement, I frantically looked around but could not find him. That familiar pang of loneliness returned, as it had the day three years earlier when he’d been late for recess and the previous summer when he’d been holed up waiting for the crazy Frenchman from the North. I found myself wondering if maybe Tanner had finally closed his eyes and really disappeared. The thought of his invisible body watching me then, with my panic and isolation and broken heart, sent an icy rush through my veins. I gnawed at a fingernail – a habit I’d picked up in recent months.

I glanced back at the couch just in time to see Amanda and the high school kid getting up and moving toward a hallway in the back. I made my way through the crowd, bypassing the partiers – there were dozens of them now, packed into the basement like sheep -- while I stood on my tiptoes so as not to lose sight of Amanda. The baseball-cap guy led her into a back room, then closed the door. I stopped at the other end of the dark hallway, waiting to see if they’d re-emerge. After a few minutes, I went down and tried the door; it was locked.

“Occupied,” some older kid said from behind me, where he was holding a red, plastic cup. He had droopy eyes and an open mouth with foam across his upper lip. “Somebody went in there to party.” He smiled and, for effect, shoved the index finger of one hand through the A-OK sign of the other. I felt like slamming my shoulder into the door frame, perhaps rescuing her from danger, but I realized the futility of even trying. I stared at the door for a minute or two before deciding that the best thing to do would be to go home and cry myself to sleep – if I could make it that far. My legs felt weak. My stomach gurgled. My head went light.

But when I turned back around, another older kid was standing there, grinning slightly and fighting to keep his eyes from crossing. He wore a floppy hat and had a necklace dangling over a Led Zeppelin T-shirt. He burped.

“Fuckin’ nerd,” he stammered, his breath reeking of alcohol. “How the hell’d you get …” He burped, then laughed. “How’d you get in here, dork?”

I felt naked. I was self-conscious of all my features: my dyed-black hair, my facial twitch, the slight scoliosis that prevented me from turning my head to one side again. Unexpectedly, the kid reached around and grabbed me by the back of my neck. “Nerd!” he yelled, and he led me down the hallway. Other guys were laughing, calling him Smitty, cheering like they were at a sporting event. I heard a girl say something about leaving the poor kid alone, but she was quickly drowned out by the excitement of the others. A couple guys started to chant “Fight! Fight!”, even though I had no intention of fighting anyone. I couldn’t turn my neck to look at them or to try and escape Smitty’s grip.

He dragged me toward the bathroom, kicking the door open on some poor kid taking a leak. The kid scurried to zip his pants up, stepped aside, and suddenly I was staring into the yellow urine of a toilet bowl.

“Drink!” Smitty yelled, and that was the last thing I heard before tasting piss. He held me under for what was probably a few seconds but what seemed like an hour. I could hear chanting and laughing because my ears were just above the water. I pressed my eyelids so tight that blisters of light shot through my consciousness. There was a moment when I thought I couldn’t hold my breath anymore, when I considered taking in a mouthful of piss and toilet water and whatever else was in there, but Smitty yanked my head out of the water just in time. I could hear chanting from behind us. Smitty was laughing and howling like a wolf.

“Drink!” he called again, and after a deep, interrupted breath, I found my face under water again. I felt vomit rise up inside of me, and I tried desperately to keep it down. When he pulled me up again, I could smell piss on my own face, could taste salt in my mouth. Stomach acid pushed up through my esophagus, into the back of my mouth. I swallowed hard.

All at once, I felt Smitty’s grip on me loosen. He patted me on the back and fell into the crowd, which welcomed him as a hero. I sat on my knees for several seconds, unable to hold back the tears, before I started to sob. A minute or two passed, and I expected someone to save me – Tanner or one of the girls or maybe even Amanda Kornhalter – but the only sound I heard was someone slamming the door behind me. The barf rose up in me again, and this time I let it loose. I barely got my chin over the rim of the toilet bowl, and everything I’d eaten came out with a violent rush. It tasted like mac and cheese, coca-cola and Dorito’s mixed with piss. The chunks floated in the water with a nuclear-orange glow. When I was finished, I fumbled for the flusher, pulled it and coughed.

I washed my face, looked into the mirror, and began crying again. I had no escape, other than to walk through the crowd like a sacrificed lamb. I sat down on the toilet seat, wiped my eyes, and came to the realization that none of it mattered. The kids at my school already laughed at me, so what was a few more tormentors from the high school?

And so I ran. I fled from the bathroom, through the hallway and the crowds of laughing kids in the basement, up the stairs, out of the house and onto the front lawn of the unknown person’s house just a few blocks from my own. I’d never felt further from my own home, and the thought of scrambling into the darkness of my parents’ basement, under a blanket and hidden from the world, was the only thought that brought any comfort. I fell onto the lawn, gasping for breath, eager to continue on. The taste of vomit in my mouth brought up another wave of nausea. I looked up. That’s where I found Tanner, reeking of cigarette smoke.

“What happened to you?” he said. I could feel the sadness boiling inside me. The odor of urine and barf on my lips was not even as bitter as the image of Amanda Kornhalter doing God-knows-what with the baseball cap kid in the basement.

“What happened to *you*?” I shot back. “I turn around, and you’re …”

Tanner put his hands out, fingers up and palms facing me, in front of his chest. “Slow down,” he said. “Jesus, you …” He covered his nose. “What’s that smell?”

I felt my lip quiver but refused to cry – not again. He helped me up and put an arm around me. His comfort made me feel even more helpless. I pulled away. We walked together to the sidewalk, then turned toward the direction of my house. “Jesus Christ, you’re soaking wet,” he said. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t even tell Tanner what had happened. Maybe a part of me was scared – scared at how he might react. He was just as likely to vow revenge on that Smitty guy as he was to cast me aside. Both of them seemed to carry dire consequences. As we walked without talking for a block or two, I felt like I was back in the silence of Dr. Siegmann’s office. The moonlight illuminated our path while the sound of a howling dog broke through the soft hum of night. What hurt the most wasn’t the incident in the bathroom but something else.

“Amanda and that guy,” I said suddenly, the words pouring out of my mouth. “They, they … *left.*”

“Left?”

“Together. Into a room.”

I turned to look at him. Tanner’s eyes got all big. He stopped walking, and I couldn’t hold the floodgates back anymore. Tears started pouring out. It became hard to breathe. Tanner patted me on my shoulder and told me to sit down.

“I just want to go home,” I stammered between breaths.

“*Sit*.”

Obediently, I dropped into the grass of a front yard a block from my house. I couldn’t stop crying. I could still smell piss and toilet water on my skin. I could still see Amanda’s face in my mind as she laughed at the baseball-cap guy’s jokes. My chest hurt. I could hardly breathe. I began gnawing at a fingernail.

“Chill,” Tanner said, standing over me. “It’s just a girl.” He rubbed his palm across his forehead, brushing away bangs of black hair. His eyes glowed in the moonlight. “There’ll be others, man,” he said. He sat down next to me and moved an arm around my shoulder again. “It’s just a girl,” he repeated, softly. And even in my misery, I was glad to at least have Tanner in my life.

We sat like that for a few minutes, until my sobbing subsided. I could feel the emotion leaking out of me, even the love I’d carried for Amanda Kornhalter all those years. I wished Tanner and I could disappear together, maybe live on an island where there were no girls, nor school, nor families. I wished that having him in my life could be enough.

When my eyes were dry and my breathing back to normal, Tanner removed his arm from my shoulder and I could see, out of the corner of my eye, him staring at me. I couldn’t turn my head that direction, and sometimes it was easier not to have to look people in the eye.

“You know what we oughta do?” he said. He stared at me, waiting for a response.

I rubbed my nose. Chewed a fingernail. “What?” The embarrassment of breaking down in front of my best friend was beginning to override the other emotions.

Tanner stood up and wiped off the back of his pants, his eyes staring down at me. He held his arms out in front of him, gesturing like a preacher.

“We should kill them,” he said flatly, without any emotion in his voice. While I stared back at him silently, he dropped his arms and nodded in the direction of the house where the party was. “That girl you like,” he said, “and the dude she’s with.” Then he used the index finger of his right hand to make a slow, slashing gesture across his throat. He stood like that for several seconds before I forced a smile and began to giggle. The emotion of the night overcame me. My giggle turned into a laugh, as I was certain that my friend’s dark humor had caught me again. All those horror movies had given him a sick sense of what was funny, and I was still getting used to it.

But as I stared at him, Tanner’s eyes burned with a passion I’d rarely seen from him. He looked like Freddy Kreuger or Norman Bates or Jason from Friday the 13th. His child-like face stared back, his long, lean limbs stretching out as he stood over me. I could tell then that he wasn’t kidding.

He said it again, more conclusively this time: “We should kill them.”

And while he never brought up the subject again – not that night, and not ever – I knew that we would have done it if I’d shown any interest at all. The look in Tanner Boudin’s eyes that night never left me. Something inside him had already died. Maybe it was his sense of right or wrong. Maybe it was his regard for other humans.

Or maybe, like myself, he had started to lose his thirst for life.

###

Monday came around, and the thought of going back to school made my stomach hurt and my face twitch. I tried to play sick, but my mom wasn’t buying it. “Buck up, kiddo,” she said, patting the sheets that covered my legs. Realizing that the alternative was to stay home with her, I got up and went into the bathroom. I stared into the mirror and saw all the things other people had seen in me. My dyed hair looked greasy. My eyes were too close together, my nose too big. My teeth looked crooked. My ears were uneven on my head. My chest sunk inward, and my ribs stuck out. I looked meek and scared. My face twitched. Placing my hand on my chin, I tried to force my head to turn to the left. But it wouldn’t turn.

These were things I knew would never change.

When I got to school that day, I roamed the halls in a state of disarray – there, but not really there, my brain scattered. Before I could find Tanner, I saw her. She sat in a small group at a cafeteria table, chatting while waiting for the first period bell. I walked straight up to her, pushing my way past some guy I vaguely recognized, and leaned over, my lips right next to her beautiful, silky hair.

“You,” I whispered into Amanda Kornhalter’s ear, “are a *whore*.”

I stepped back. I pointed at her. “She’s a *fucking* whore!” I screamed, as loud as I could.

The area went quiet. I could only feel eyes upon me. One girl whispered, “*Oh,* my *God*.” Amanda said nothing. She didn’t even look up. “Look at me!” I yelled. “Goddammit, whore, LOOK AT ME!”

Somebody hit me – *hard* – and I fell to the floor. I don’t know who it was, nor did it seem to matter. I ended up doing six days of detention for making the scene.

**CHAPTER 15:**

Televisions flicker in daylight.

My father watches at the office, his eyes transfixed on the screen. He’s canceled a sales call to watch the coverage. His only living son, my brother Anthony, is at an airport restaurant, staring at the television as he chomps on a Reuben during a layover in Chicago. His teen-age sister Bailey is shooting heroin with a guy she met at a truckstop outside of Vegas. “Turn up the volume,” she tells the guy, “this shit’s *crazy*.”

And Tanner Boudin, now living under someone else’s name in an apartment outside of St. Louis, he’s the one who watches with the closest eye. He’s wearing a towel, having heard the news on his bathroom radio before rushing to the living room to turn on the television set. He heard something about a SWAT team and a high school and a couple of outcasts who were out for revenge on the jocks and popular kids. He sits down on a coffee table in front of the television.

The television cameras are fixed on a high school outside of Denver. Kids are filing out of the building with hands on their heads. Tanner watches them with intensity, although I can’t tell whether he’s empathetic or envious. He looks up at the ceiling, unaware that I’m just a few feet away, and whispers: “Jesus Christ. You watching this, buddy?”

He’s speaking to me, to what he believes to be me. He remembers. I still can’t tell whether he’s giving off empathy or envy. “Jesus Christ,” he says again. This is nothing we could have planned, nothing we even would have thought up. It’s something we could have copied. If we’d been born in a different era, we could have copied those killers. But we didn’t think of it ourselves.

Looking at Tanner Boudin’s face, I still can’t tell whether he feels bad for the victims or envious of the kids that carried it out.

###

Mom rolls from her side to her back and stares up at the ceiling, motionless and with her mouth open. She stays like this for five, maybe ten, minutes. If a person were to walk up on her now, he would think her dead. She is catatonic. Her husband left her six years earlier. He said he couldn’t live like this anymore – with *her* like this. He didn’t say anything about the other woman, not then. That came up later, when my mother’s friend Mrs. Gaylord told her there had been whispers that my father had found someone else, that he had been seeing someone for months, even though they were still married. My mother appeared numb to that news back then, as if she had already been through enough and didn’t have the emotion to take any more on her shoulders.

Today she just lies there, catatonic -- there in the lonely squalor of her townhouse, as the images on the muted television fade in and out of her consciousness. The only thing that snaps her back to the moment is the telephone, which rings eight times before she sits up and grabs the receiver.

“Ma, you watching this?” my brother Anthony says into the phone. “About these two kids?” She looks at the images on the television, an overhead shot of Columbine High School with faded yearbook photos of the two suspects in an inset, but says nothing. “Ma?” Anthony says into the phone.

“I’m here,” my mother says in a barely audible voice.

“Ma, these kids,” Anthony says, “they’re just like *him*. It’s scary.”

She turns away from the television.

“They don’t look anything like him,” she says, and she’s talking about me. My mother doesn’t speak of me often these days, and when she does she never uses my name.

“No, Ma, they *sound* like the he way he used to be, like he was,” Anthony says. “Angry. Disconnected. From the world. From everything.”

“Thank you, Dr. Anthony,” she says curtly, the sarcasm cutting through her sadness. She takes in a deep breath. “He wasn’t angry,” my mother says. “Besides, he would never do something like this.”

Anthony flips the phone from one ear to the other. He can hear in her voice that she’s more affected by the news clips than she’s letting on – or that maybe she’s still mourning a loss from long ago. “Ma, you okay?” he says, his tone soothing. “Is everything okay?” He asks this every time he calls, and it’s obvious that Anthony is just as tired of asking as my mother is answering. But he has to ask, and she has to answer. “Ma, maybe you should get out,” he says from the Chicago airport only 90 miles from where my mother sits on her couch. “Maybe you should go for a walk.”

“That won’t be necessary.” My mother lies back down and stretches her legs as she holds the phone against her cheek. “Was that the only reason you called?” she says. “To tell me these *devils* remind you of your brother?” She runs a finger through her mangy hair and glances at the television. “Oh, those poor parents,” she mutters, mostly to herself.

Anthony is silent. When he does begin to speak again, his voice is gentle. He’s careful not to shatter the fragility of my mother. It’s as if he’s speaking to a child.

“The parents have to realize that it’s not their fault,” he says into the telephone. “Just like it wasn’t your fault. You know that, right, Ma?”

She rolls to her side and says nothing. She’s staring at the television but doesn’t seem to see it. She can barely move, even though she’s totally healthy – in body, if not in mind.

“Mom, some people are just not right. That doesn’t mean you did anything wrong.” He laughs uncomfortably. “Just look at me,” he says. “I turned out all right, didn’t I?”

Into the telephone, my mother says: “You did, baby. You did. By the grace of God, you did.” She doesn’t talk about God much anymore, unless she’s cursing him.

“Ma,” Anthony says, “turn off the TV. I’ll cancel my flight, drive down there, and we’ll go out for coffee or something. Just you and me. Sound good?”

My mother doesn’t say anything, not right away. She obediently clicks off the television set and pulls the comforter over her chest. “I’d like that,” she says softly. “I’d like that, if you’d do that for me.” She coughs into the phone. “You did turn out all right, Anthony,” she says. “By the grace of …”

They sit in silence on either end of the phone for a few seconds before my brother tells her good-bye and that he’ll be home soon.

###

She shivers as the man touches the inside of her thighs, shivers as if his hands are cold. My baby sister Bailey spreads her legs wider. He turns and, with a quick apology, puts on a pair of thin gloves. Her knees are shaking.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says. He touches her again. His hand finds her warmth; his fingers feel around inside. She tenses up. “Relax,” he says softly. He says something conversational, asks her if she heard about that shooting a couple days earlier in Denver, tells her that he thought it was “disappointing.” That’s how he says it. *Disappointing*. Like it was a crumbling stock share. He looks into her eyes. He must see something there, because he removes his hand and leans back into his chair.

“You know we’re going to have to give you something,” he says. “Something for the pain.”

Bailey nods quickly. She’s biting her lip. A puddle of blood forms on her front teeth. Her eyes are swollen, but there are no tears.

“You’ll be under,” he says, “during the procedure. I just have to check some –“

“Just *do it*!” she shouts suddenly. “*Justgetitoverwith*!”

He folds his arms across his chest. She is shaking violently.

“The *fuck* you *waiting* *for*?” she shouts.

He takes off the gloves and leans forward, gently taking her feet off the stirrups.

“The fuck you doing?!” she shouts.

“You’re not ready,” the doctor says flatly. On a wall behind him, there’s a sign that reads UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD EMPLOYEES USE THE FRONT ENTRANCE OR PARK IN THE PUBLIC LOT.

“What?” she shouts indignantly. Her feet are dangling beneath her, her legs closed. She tries to pull her feet up, but the doctor is pulling the stirrups apart with business-like patience. “Gooddammit!” she shouts, steadying herself. She glares at him. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Who are you to tell me when I’m ready and when I’m not ready?” She leans forward and grabs his arm, and when he pulls away, her head falls to his shoulder. The doctor catches her and helps her into a chair. Her hospital gown is pulled up around her waist, her shaven parts exposed.

“The fuck are you?” she’s saying, her speech slurred. “Just do it already. Just kill the fucking thing. *Just get it out of me*!”

The doctor folds his arms again.

“You need help,” he says. “I can get you a counselor.”

“*You* need help!” She picks up a jar of cotton swabs like she’s going to throw it at him, but it falls harmlessly to the floor with a thud.

“Young lady,” he says, his voice baring the impatience that is undoubtedly creeping up inside of him. “I can’t perform the procedure if you’re under the influence of …” He reaches for the folder, which is open on the desk behind him. Nearby, there is a closet door with another sign: DO NOT DISPOSE OF SATURATED GARMENTS IN HERE. “I can’t,” he continues, “give any anestesia to a patient who’s already on something.”

“On what,” she says accusingly, and it’s not really a question. “You don’t know what I’m on and what I’m not on.”

“You’re obviously sedated, Ma’am,” he says.

“Don’t call me that, asshole.”

“Bailey.”

“Don’t call me that, either. *Don’t call me anything*! *I don’t have a name to you, asshole!*” She swings a bony arm in the air but misses his head. “*Just do it!”* she screams. “*Get this fucking thing OUT of me*!”

An hour later, Bailey is sticking a needle into her arm outside of the Gab N Tab Tavern on Eighth Street. She’ll kill the baby on her own if she has to. She’ll find a way.

Across from her, an older man who provided the heroin stares at the opening in the hospital gown she still wears after running out of the clinic without her clothes. The man is licking his lips.

“Boy or girl?” he says.

“Huh?” Bailey mumbles, her eyes rolling back and her body going limp.

“They tell you it was gonna be a boy or a girl?” the man asks.

Her eyes close, like she’s going to pass out, but then they open again. She steadies herself from falling down.

“I don’t want to know,” she says. “I don’t care.” She takes in a deep breath. She rubs her face. “It would kill me to know,” she mumbles. She turns, and her gown opens just enough for the man to see a breast.

“I know a guy,” he says. “A guy who can do it for ya.” He smiles. He’s missing two teeth. He badly needs a shave. “Let’s go back to my trailer,” he says. “We’ll give him a call. We’ll hang out. I got more shit.”

Bailey, her eyes closed again, nods and limply reaches out her hand. The man helps her to her feet.

###

He cannot be Tanner Boudin, not anymore. Not after what he’s done. He has to change his name. Again.

Tanner Boudin, or whatever he’s calling himself these days, has become a master at stealing identities. He has tracked down a lost soul named Leo Winicke, a man who was trying to escape some past demons and changed his name to Paul Smith. He has changed his name to Michael Toulet, to Brent Kilkenny. He has changed it and changed it. Tanner is running from his past, and so he steals identities like some people steal candy bars.

He changes identities as quickly as he changes towns. He can be a truck driver, a handyman, a doctor. Whatever he can get.

He must change it again because he’s on the run. He has killed someone now, and he can’t get caught. It was a small child this time – *this* time, for there will be others -- and although he successfully made it look like an accident, he is not taking any chances. He wanted to save the child, and so he set him free.

And now Tanner must run to keep his own freedom. The only way for him to be free is to become someone else.

In a sense, he has finally found a way to disappear.

And so he heads east, toward the town where he was raised. He hitches rides, scrapes together money for bus fare, whatever he has to do. He is someone else now, so he can finally go home.

Except Tanner never makes it that far. He sees a sign for a foster home along the way, just a few miles from home, and he calls out for the bus driver to pull over.

**CHAPTER 16:**

By the time ninth grade started, I had begun to feel some changes within myself. My voice was starting to deepen, my hair was curling and I seemed to find a new zit on my face every day. I kept my hair dyed black, and I grew it longer. I’d buried myself in The Smiths and wrapped myself in lyrics like “If it’s not love, then it’s the bomb that will keep us together,” and, “To die by your side is such a wonderful way to die.”

I imagined myself singing in a band, standing onstage while everyone from school looked up at me in awe and listened to my every word. My short stories condensed into poems about life and love, poems that could become songs that I’d sing to large, adoring audiences one day.

In a sense, my class had become the big men on campus then, having the distinction of being the oldest kids at the junior high school. But Tanner and I still felt smaller than the others, even the kids from seventh and eighth grade. We couldn’t wait to get through this year and move on to high school, where there would be more kids and a greater chance of finding someone else like us to add to our group.

My parents had fallen back into a typical pattern, with my mother staying home to take care of little Bailey and my father working late hours at work. When the two of them were together, they carried on like young newlyweds, but I could also sense a growing exhaustion in both their faces. It was as if they were near the end of something, in that their two oldest kids wouldn’t be around the house much longer, and yet they still had to muster up the strength to start another run at parenthood.

I was starting to sense these things that year, and I’m not sure why I was so attuned to the people in my own house. I watched how everyone interacted and I made promises to myself about how I’d be better at it when I got older. I felt a growing disgust for the way my parents had become – for how my mother seemed to be trying too hard to grip a rope that had long since frayed, and for how my father put so much of himself into his work and his marriage but left virtually nothing for the rest of us.

My brother Anthony seemed to sense some things, too, because one day he came into my room unannounced and closed the door behind him. He, too, had achieved a sense of promotion at school in that he was now a senior and at the top of the food chain, and I could tell that the confidence that came with it took away some of his desperation to be admired. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d entered my room, so I thought for sure that he was coming to deliver some kind of bad news.

“Guess who’s outta here?” he said, jamming a thumb into his own chest before picking up a baseball from my shelf and tossing it gently into the air. He turned to me. “Just got my Get-Out-of-Jail card,” he said.

I stared at him blankly. Habitually, my hand went to my mouth and I began nibbling at my thumbnail. The light of an open window shone around his shoulders.

“I got in,” he said, smiling. “To college. *On the other side of the country*.” He tossed the ball in the air, caught it, and set it back on the shelf. “You know what this means?” he continued. “It means I don’t have to deal with this bullshit anymore.”

“What … *bullshit*?” I said, hearing my voice crack and immediately wishing I hadn’t spoken.

“C’mon,” he groaned. Anthony sat down on a crate next to my closet. There was an empty tube of Pixie Stix at his feet, and he bent over to pick it up, looked through it like a test tube, then tossed it aside. “Mom, Dad. Their weird, lovey-dovey bullshit.” I didn’t know what he was getting at. “This place is whacked,” he said. “Always has been, always will be.” He shrugged. My brother had thick, loose shoulders – my father’s shoulders. Mine were thin and stiff, and the scoliosis in my neck only made them that much more bony. “Look on the bright side,” he said, “you’ve only got – what, three, four more years of it?”

He picked up one of my comic books from the floor and started leafing through it. I immediately felt an unexpected sense of self-consciousness. My gaze went to a notebook next to his foot, where pages of short stories and poems that were never meant for someone like him were hidden within the covers.

“You know Mom and Dad are worried about you,” he said without looking up. “You know that.” He dropped the comic book and looked around the room. My bedroom had no posters on the walls, and the floor was covered with books, cassette tapes and a few empty candy wrappers. I wondered whether he’d even heard of bands like The Smiths and The Cure, and whether he would make fun of them if he had. “You know something?” he said. “Things are about to turn around for you. I know it. I know you’ll find yourself in high school.”

“What do you mean,” I said, “*find* myself?” His grin faded. “I’m not lost,” I said.

“I just mean that high school is a little more … I don’t know. It’s got more activities. Different kids. There’s theater. Glee club. All kinds of shit.”

“I’m not lost,” I repeated. “And you can tell Mom and Dad that, too. I don’t need to be found.”

Then he did something unexpected. My older brother reached over and tousled my hair with his hand, like a father would do to his son. I pulled my head away, almost falling off the bed as I did.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “None of us are.” He smirked. He looked at his hand and wiped it on his jeans, glancing at my dyed black hair as he did. “Nobody’s lost, huh?” he said. “We’re all on the right path.” His voice trailed off, and he looked around the room. “So,” he said, “it’s gonna be weird being the oldest, huh?” His glare grazed across my face, then back at blank walls. “When I’m off at school.”

I shrugged. I couldn’t remember ever having a talk like this, with him, and I was pretty sure it had been years – not months – since he’d been in my room.

“I won’t even know you’re gone,” I said, and my brother flashed an awkward smile. He picked up the baseball again and tossed it lightly in my direction. I turned my shoulder so the ball wouldn’t hit me in the chest, and it bounced off harmlessly into my lap.

“You’re weird,” he said.

And I knew he was right. I knew I’d always be weird, even when I got to high school and to college after that. I knew that I’d work in an office where they thought I was weird, that I’d be the old guy who lived alone and got strange looks from parents as their young children rode bikes in front of my house, that I would probably die alone one some street where no one knew me by name, where they would have to call police and tell them there was a strange odor coming from the weird old guy’s house. Deep down, I knew that I would always be different, and the thought made me wish I could move to another city in another state on another planet – an undiscovered place where there might be kids or adults or aliens who would accept me for who I was.

Tanner reminded me of as much one day that summer, when the two of us were hanging out at the abandoned swimming pool on an overcast weekend afternoon.

I was skateboarding in circles around Tanner, who was reclining on his inflatable raft at the concrete bottom of the pool. He had on a pair of oversized sunglasses with white frames. His jet-black bangs were swept across his forehead, dancing in the light breeze of an overcast summer day. I thought he’d fallen asleep, but suddenly he spoke to me.

“If only this could last,” he said. I flipped the skateboard and landed atop it, circling around him again.

“Summer?” I said.

He smiled and adjusted his glasses. “No, dipshit,” he said. “Youth.” He popped an orange slice into his mouth, sucked its juices and spit the peel onto the dried-out bottom of the pool shell. “They say this is the time of our lives, y’know,” he said.

“*Who* says?” I asked.

“Adults.” *Ah-dults*, his Canadian accent slipping out. “The ones who’ve already pissed their lives away.”

I smirked and dropped my skateboard, continuing on around him, doing the same two tricks over and over because I was too cautious to try any new ones.

“No, really,” Tanner said. “It only goes downhill from here. Ask anyone. College, job, wife, kids, death. Some 9-to-5, Monday-through-Friday bullshit. That’s what we have to look forward to.” I tried not to look at him as I went up one wall and down another. “And we won’t always be together,” he said, sitting up. “You know that, right?” He stood. His shirt was tattered. He stretched and let out a yawn. “I’m going into the army one day, you know that,” he said, and although he may have mentioned it before, I hadn’t remembered or ever taken the pronouncement seriously. “I’m going to kill people and fight wars. It’s better than going off to med school, like my dad wants me to do.” He looked up at the gray clouds above. He was still wearing sunglasses, with white rims, the shades so big that his large oval face looked small around them. “You’re going off to college,” he said flatly, as if he were making the decision for me. “We’re going to be apart.”

I circled around him on my skateboard. “I could always join the army,” I said. “Like you.”

He smirked. “Yeah, right,” he said. “You and the army.” I didn’t like the way he said it. But I didn’t know how to respond.

We stayed like that for a few minutes – him, staring up at the sky behind his white-rimmed sunglasses; me, skating in circles and doing the same two tricks. We could have been strangers right then, just two boys who happened to be standing near each other.

“So,” Tanner said, falling back onto his inflatable raft, “you gonna miss this? The time of your life?” He lifted up his sunglasses and watched me until I dropped off my skateboard and stood up over him. He smiled, kind of like one of those bad guys in the horror movies we’d watch on Friday nights. My skateboard slid into the wall as I stood there. “You gonna miss me when I’m gone?” he said, staring up at me.

My skateboard flipped over and laid a few feet away, its wheels still spinning.

“That’s a long ways away,” I said, but inside I felt like it was just around the corner. “You’re not gone yet.”

Tanner smiled, pulled his glasses back over his eyes, and rested his head on the hand that was folded behind his head. He looked so relaxed. I could feel my face twitching. I could smell rain in the air. I felt alone, even though he hadn’t left me yet.

###

Having lost my burning respect for Amanda Kornhalter after catching her with that high school kid a few months earlier, I felt a refreshing sense of freedom that school year. I was free to look at the girls from my class and think about them late at night. I was devoted to no one and nothing. My only bond was to Tanner Boudin, and his to me. And even that bond, in a strange way, seemed to be slipping from my feeble grip. I felt like maybe he was with me simply because he had no one else. And as much as I tried to convince myself of the contrary, the truth was that I was probably only hanging out with him because I had no one else, either.

His dark hair had grown longer, and he wore it in his face like a rock star. I tried to grow mine out and grease my bangs a la Ralph Macchio in *The Outsiders,* but my hair was too thick and mangy to cooperate. Trying to look like someone else, trying to *be* someone else, was something at which I had eternally failed.

My grades crept back toward the B-range, which got my mother off my back and still kept me in that large, chasm that separated the smart kids and the dumb jocks. My mother had her hands full with a 4-year-old daughter and an oldest son who was soon to be heading off to college, so she didn’t have much time to worry about me. I caught my mom crying on several occasions that winter, but she always shrugged it off to allergies. I was old enough to know better, that she was coming to terms with having two children ready to go off to school – one to college and the other to pre-school. I fell somewhere in between, kind of like the afternoon bathroom break that comes after a satisfying lunch and before a gourmet dinner. I had become the equivalent of a family pet: there but not there, mostly among the shadows and a sudden nuisance if I were to make my presence known. I was thankful for the inattention that year, when Tanner and I were free to do whatever we wanted.

The only thing upon which my mother insisted was getting me confirmed by the church. We were not a church-going family, and so I wrote it off as another attempt by my mother to fix me so I’d be out of her hair. I was convinced that, had there been a pill that would make me just like all the other kids, my mother would’ve slipped it into my morning oatmeal. She’d gone from over-protecting me to pushing toward a higher power, both strategies an obvious attempt to *save* me somehow. The only thing that made it halfway bearable was that Tanner’s father, the psychiatrist, had the same plan for her son, and so off we went to church every Wednesday night.

Midway through the first session at church, Tanner nodded toward me with his head, then raised his hand and asked to go to the bathroom. The pastor said that would be fine, and I waited ten minutes before making a similar request of my own. Tanner was waiting there, outside the bathroom door, smiling while holding a small stack of girly magazines that were folded over.

“C’mon,” he said, and we snuck back to our familiar spot in the woods behind the church. We flipped through the magazines and pretended that the images were less arousing than they actually were – or, at least, that’s what *I* was doing. I tried not to let my eyes linger too long on the women’s boobs and pubic hair as I turned one page over and then another. Part of me wished Tanner would leave me alone with the girly-mags, while a bigger part of me wished he’d put them away so I wouldn’t be so distracted.

While he didn’t bring the magazines the next week, we fell into a similar pattern. As soon as my mom dropped us off at the front door of the church, wasted a half hour in confirmation class before taking a pretend piss break, through the welcoming area, and out the back door. We sat in the woods and tossed around ideas for a comic book: a kid whose skateboard could fly and shoot lasers, a group of trenchcoat-wearing guys who infiltrated the government, a seven-foot-high vampire that masqueraded as a high school basketball star. The following week, we listened to cassette tapes on his Walkman. He introduced me to little-known bands with names like Husker Du and The Sex Pistols, bands with a harder edge than the ones I’d listened to in the privacy of my own bedroom.

We’d been carrying on like that for a few weeks when Tanner showed up one night with a pack of matches. I expected him to pull out some firecrackers or maybe another pack of cigarettes, but Tanner just smiled, lit one of the matches and flicked it out toward a pile of dry branches. The flame went out as soon as it hit the ground, so Tanner lit another one.

“I don’t know if …” I said.

“If *what*?” Tanner said, condescendingly. He used one of his hands to cover the match from the wind and set it down in a pile of leaves. A small flame rose. Tanner watched it flicker out. He looked at me. “You do it,” he said, holding out the matches. I didn’t want to, and I could tell he knew it, but I took the match anyway. Eternally, there was something about letting Tanner down that petrified me to my soul.

I struggled to light a match, as they kept flaming out in the wind. Tanner chuckled as he watched me, but he never allowed me to give up. Unlike the cigarette experience a year earlier, Tanner was unwilling to let me off the hook this time. Not until I spiraled down with him.

“Like this,” he said, moving his fingers in an imaginary striking motion. It was getting dark now, so it was hard to see his face. “Slowly, smoothly.”

I tried again, and the match caught fire. I held it in front of me, panicked, and quickly blew it out. I looked at Tanner. He was smiling and shaking his head.

“You’re the worst pyro I’ve ever met,” he said, brushing the hair from his eyes. Then he turned toward the church and said, in a slightly louder voice, “The worst pyro God ever createth.”

We both smiled, and Tanner reached for the matches. But I pulled them away. I didn’t want to fail in front of him. I kept striking until I got one to flame up, then I held it between our faces. We stared in wonder, the glow reflecting off Tanner’s closed-mouth smile. Without taking his eyes off the fire, he pulled the matchbook from my fingers and lit it off my flame. Together, we slowly lowered our hands toward a pit of leaves and sticks. The flame built on top of itself, the smoke making us both cough.

A sickening feeling grew inside of me as the orange flame rose and its heat tickled my arms and face. I looked at Tanner, whose eyes had widened. His face showed no panic.

“We should do something,” I said, and Tanner stood up. He smiled and held his arms out like a prophet.

“Effigy!” he shouted, his face an orange glow. I didn’t know what that meant. Tanner had that same look on his face that he’d had a year earlier, when he’d said we should kill Amanda Kornhalter and her temporary lover. The fire’s glow made his face more sinister in the darkness. He looked at me. “Maybe you’re right,” he said, zipping up his jacket. “We’ve got to do something. Like … get the *fuck* out of here!”

We scrambled out of the woods, past the church and toward the main road. I chased him through the darkness, barely able to stay on his tail and squinting to see his hair flowing in the breeze as we ran. His legs moved so quickly that I strained to keep up. I sucked in gusts of air from the cool night breeze. I could smell the first snow of the fall waiting in the distance. I looked back and saw smoke billowing into a cloud above the church. We ran toward a safe space between trees, just far enough to be out of harm’s way. Tanner held a hand out, stopping me, and we crouched in a bunker.

“We have to *do something*,” I repeated, and it’s the only thought that was going on in my head. At that moment, and only that moment, I wished that Tanner and I had never become friends. I wished I was in my bedroom, listening to music and writing short stories about a couple kids who couldn’t stay out of trouble. I wished I was *alone*.

“Shit,” Tanner said, “it’s out of control.”

We stayed like that, watching the smoke build and smelling the fire, until the sound of fire trucks could be heard in the distance.

“C’mon,” Tanner said, grabbing my arm. “We’ve got to go back.”

“Back *where*?”

“To the church,” he said. I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. Its like he’d wanted to be a hero or something. But then he smiled. “We were in confirmation class, right?” he said. “That’s where we were when the fire started.” He nodded. “We’ve got to get back. Before they know we’re missing.”

A few minutes later, we were mingling with the other kids in the parking lot. No one seemed to notice that we were there, or that we’d ever been gone. Being invisible to other people’s eyes did seem to have its advantages.

It took two small fire trucks to put the fire out, and as far as we knew, it was never investigated as arson.

Tanner and I never got confirmed, not because of the fire but because we’d missed the class when the other kids took their final written test on God and Jesus and all that garbage. Of course, we didn’t care, but what was surprising was that my mother didn’t either. I’d answered the phone the day the pastor called, handed it to my mother, and watched as she listened impatiently. In the middle of the conversation, Bailey stumbled into the room and started screaming and throwing a tantrum; something about a missing shoe. My mother abruptly ended the phone call, attended to her daughter, and never mentioned anything about confirmation to me – ever again.

When my grades came that spring, after another long year of feeling overwhelmed academically, I’d gotten three B’s, an A-minus and two D’s. I could sense that things were slipping away, school-wise, and I felt hopeless to the slide. While my brother was soon to be going off to a fancy college out East, I was wondering whether I’d even be able to make it through high school.

Upon seeing my grades, I thought about dropping the envelope in the trash and hoping that my parents would never know. But for some reason, I felt an eagerness to show my mom what I’d done. I rushed into the living room, grades in hand, and held out the piece of paper for her. My mother took it between her fingers, glazed her eyes across the page, and handed it back.

“You can do better than that,” she said, and nothing else. She turned away from me, her gaze returning to a television program about a 1950s family in the Midwest, a family not unlike what ours could have been. My sister was playing on the floor at her feet. My brother was off with friends or running miles on the snow-covered sidewalks of our neighborhood. I stared at my mom. She stared at the TV. Her eyes looked tired and old.

That was the day that I lost respect for my mother. And when you lose something like that, everything else soon follows.

**###**

It was early that spring, just after the first thaw, when I saw the three-legged dog again. I’d gone back to the empty pool alone one April afternoon after school, just to make sure our secret hiding place was still there after another long winter. Leaves and sticks littered the bottom of the pool, so I descended the stairs at the shallow end and began to clean up. I heard a sharp bark and looked up to see it staring down at me, tail wagging. It’s like the dog knew I was there, knew I’d be alone. The unconditional love in that dog’s face was something I’d never experienced – not from my family, not from my teachers, not even from Tanner. Everyone seemed to want me to be something I couldn’t be, to be something everyone else was. But that dog didn’t give a damn. It was there just to see me. *Me*.

I wondered if the dog had a home. If it had a name. If it had anyone to love it.

“Hey, boy,” I said softly, returning to the stairs with my hand extended. The dog moved toward me, licking dirt from my fingers. Its tongue slapped across my nose and cheeks.

I wished then that I could be a dog – that I could love everyone and everything and be loved just for being me. I wished I could be something else. Something lovable.

**CHAPTER 17:**

My mother’s eyes are swollen from the sobbing and insomnia that have claimed her for 10 years now. Her eyelids flicker as she struggles to let in the daylight. She wears a pretty dress and high heels, which teeter with each step because it’s been so long since she’s dressed up like this.

She exits and locks the door to the condominium where she’s lived alone for two years, since my father left her, a few months before her baby girl followed in his footsteps by disappearing from her life, and then my mother presses the remote control of an automatic garage-door opener. She’s still driving the same Honda from 10 years earlier, although the paint has begun to rust and the brakes squeak at every red light.

My mother drives across town, past the reminders of grade school and church and the small medical center where she used to drop off her middle child at Dr. Siegmann’s that summer a lifetime ago. My mother has told her best friend Mrs. Gaylord that there are times she feels reincarnated, like she has a vague understanding of another life, while there are other times it feels like she is still dead. She used to find peace of mind in church, but she stopped going after a vandal destroyed hers a few years back and the congregation failed to come up with enough money to repair it. She drinks a glass of wine – sometimes two – in order to get to sleep at night, and when that doesn’t work my mother turns to painkillers. Since my father left, she hasn’t been on a single date. She has a dwindling circle of friends, some that comfort her but most of whom have pulled away as the years have passed. Some in town look at her with fear in their eyes, as if she’s a disease that can be caught through elongated stares.

Traffic begins to back up a mile from the high school. My mother stares out at the sunlight, past a crack that’s crept across the windshield of her Honda one millimeter at a time. She can hear the faint sounds of car stereos through an open window, honks of celebration from all around. Her lips quiver, as if she’s holding back ten years of sorrow, and she puts a hand over her mouth to keep it all in. The line of cars moves at a snail’s pace until she’s finally guided it into a makeshift parking lot two blocks from the high school’s football field.

My mother, for the first time in a decade, falls into the flood of a crowd. She is swept up in it, consumed by it, her face showing the fear of claustrophobia, of agoraphobia, of being alone in a world full of company. She’s been lost in her hometown ever since her middle son took his own life 10 years earlier. I’ve seen her search the internet for condominiums in other cities, far from this one, but she can’t seem to get away. All of the others have escaped: first her oldest son to college, then me, then her husband and, finally, her daughter, who was 16 at the time but is 18 now. Somewhere, her daughter is 18.

My mother watches the exuberant teenagers run past her in black gowns, perhaps realizing that they might have known her daughter Bailey not that long ago. The music gains in volume as my mother gets closer to the football field, and she can see parents and their teenage children exchanging hugs of congratulations. The speakers churn out “Pomp and Circumstance,” and bodies scurry to find a seat; my mother sits at the top of the bleachers that are filled on Friday nights in the fall.

Just a few months earlier, this stadium hosted a football game between my high school and the rival catholic school, a homecoming event that brought college kids and young adults from all over the state. Many of my own classmates had attended for what would be the 10-year reunion of our class. I was among them, in spirit, watching as they bantered and joked and spoke of names that were not mine, as if I had never existed at all. Tanner Boudin was not there, an absence that went unnoticed by everyone but me. He had spent that night holed up in a hospital room, just Tanner and a 2-year-old boy with a cleft palate and a small tumor in his heart.

Now, on a bright June day eight months after that homecoming game, my mother sits in the heat of a graduation ceremony much like one that Tanner Boudin skipped at this very school all those years ago. But this is not Tanner’s class, not my class, but her daughter Bailey’s class. She watches the new class of graduates, wearing black caps and gowns, as they file into the stadium and accept diplomas and plan their lives in other places. They will escape this place, like so many have, and yet my mother is doomed to be chained to the town like a prisoner of war. She just can’t bring herself to leave.

My mother wipes tears from her cheeks as she watches. One by one, the graduates walk across the stage, proud parents surround her, their tears of joy spilling out. My mother feels only sorrow, which is obvious by looking at her face. Who knows why she came here, what she had hoped to find. So much time has passed that they no longer stare; she is able to blend in now, as if the expiration date of her tragedy is long in the past. The faces that surround her look not at my mother but at the children that have become adults, that have made it through this part of their lives and are destined to another. Many will move on to successful lives, others to failure. They will all have their hearts broken, their dreams dashed and their lives altered in an unforeseen direction. Many of them will weather the storms and become what they had always wanted to be; others will never know what they could or should become. At some point, all of them will experience some sort of tragedy in life, all will come face-to-face with death, and never will they be fully ready to take it on.

When the 1998 graduates of my high school are back in their seats, a teacher whom I recognize but cannot name shouts a single word of congratulations and, all at once, hundreds of black caps are thrown into the air. The members of the audience stand and clap their hands together, ignoring the heat of a June day. Every person stands except for a middle-aged woman with swollen eyes who only buries her face in her hands.

Ten years have passed, and she still can’t bear to watch the exuberance of 18-year-olds. She is looking around, like maybe by some chance she’ll see her daughter for the first time in more than a year, like maybe she’ll see her son come back from the dead.

The mass of people gathers and sweeps her up again as it heads toward the exits. Many parents peel off to find their young men and women, to wrap them up and tell them how proud they are. My mother, she just keeps pressing along. I cannot tell by the look on her face whether she regrets coming here to watch the graduation of a class ten years behind my own, but the way she pushes past people shows that my mother is in a hurry to get back home, to the darkness and solitude of a condominium that is not unlike a casket.

She is almost to the spot where her car is parked when my mother feels a body crash against her own. She looks up and sees a boy, dressed in a black gown, staring back in apology. His face, all at once, shows some kind of recognition.

“Aren’t you …?” he starts, and my mother’s body tenses up. This is how all the questions began 10 years earlier – at church, at the mall, at so many places that she just stopped going outside -- as if she was some kind of sick celebrity whose mourning was an open box for everyone to see inside. “Aren’t you,” the boy says again, “*Bailey*’s mom?” And the sound of her daughter’s name takes my mother aback, then makes her cringe. She stares back at the boy with hatred, as if he’s uncovered some secret, but he only presses on. “Whatever happened to her?” he says, and my mother uses her shoulder to cast him aside with whatever strength she has left in the shell of her body.

###

Six states away, in a bar outside of Reno, Nevada, a pickup truck pulls up in front of a strip club and screeches to a halt. Dirt billows out from the tires as a group of men wearing baseball caps smoke cigarettes nearby. The passenger door opens, and an empty bottle of Rhinelander falls out, followed by my sister Bailey. She is wearing a small, red dress and one high-heeled shoe. She has blond hair and appears to be bleeding out of the corner of her mouth. The driver peels out when she hits the pavement, his tires screeching again. One of the men in the baseball caps attempts to help her up, but Bailey just pushes him away.

“The fuck off of me,” she snarls. She stands and flashes her middle finger to the truck that’s disappearing in the distance. She is 18 now, and although she is as beautiful as ever, it’s impossible to tell with all the blood and running mascara on her face. “Fuck off, Rick!” she screams in the direction of the truck, but the driver is long gone.

Then my sister Bailey gathers herself, pulls at the hem of her red dress, and goes inside. She’s ten minutes late for her shift. She barely has time to wash her face when she hears her music and rushes onto the stage. Slowly, to the sound of a heavy metal band, she takes off what’s left of her clothes for all to see.

**###**

Tanner Boudin celebrates his 29th birthday in a crowd. He is surrounded by jugglers and gypsies and acrobats and thieves. He is among the bearded ladies and the midgets, mingling among the outcasts and circus freaks, the kind of people to whom he’s always seemed to gravitate. Tanner prefers the people on the edges of society, the people who have no place.

Tanner Boudin has spent most of his adult years running away. He goes from one city to another, briefly returning home but retreating just as quickly. And not until he landed a job as a carnival worker five years ago, as one of those people who runs the dart-and-balloon game, has he found something resembling a home. Sometimes he drives one of the trucks from town to town, even though the closest thing he has to a driver’s license is the one with my face and name, one that he has renewed twice since my death – just in case. He has a new name now, a new identity, one that he took from a college kid in Louisiana or Texas or Oklahoma or one of the dozens of towns he has called home since we were in high school. Not until now, with all these freaks, has he found people that are like he sees himself. Not since that day in the shed near the pool has he found camaraderie in someone as different as himself.

Among them, one small boy stands out from the rest. Tanner has seen this child grow from an infant to a small, 3-year-old boy who really has no chance. The boy’s face is disfigured from a cleft palate, he is missing part of one arm, and he has seizures at least twice a week. In part because his gypsy mother rarely has time for him, the boy still has not taught himself to walk or talk.

Traveling with these people, with their magical gifts and their unique features, Tanner has noticed that this boy is the worst among them. The child is destined for failure; Tanner knows this. The boy is destined to fail. Life will not be kind to him, much like it has been unkind to so many others. Even among the oddities that travel with this carnival, the boy stands out.

Tanner takes the boy in during the late hours, because his mother is rarely there. Sometimes he reads to him, from a worn notebook that used to belong to Tanner’s childhood friend. Some of these stories have been seen by others, but most have not. Some nights, Tanner just holds the boy and tells him everything will be all right.

It’s late at night, and Tanner thinks they are alone. The boy’s mother is carousing with one of the male acrobats in a nearby tent, and Tanner believes the time is right. He has lost all hope for the boy, and he sees no one around. He cannot know that I am here, and so he moves in the darkness of what he thinks is solitude.

He fills the boy’s bottle with a clear, tasteless liquid. He holds it to the boy’s mouth. The boy drinks with the ferocity of an animal in the wild.

“I’m so sorry,” Tanner whispers, and although he thinks no one else can hear, his words carry. A few feet away, hiding in the shadows, the magician dressed in black watches and waits.

And then, quietly in the night, it’s all over. No one can see the exact moment that it ends – not Tanner, not the magician, and not even me. Even in death, I cannot see the boy’s soul free itself from his body.

**CHAPTER 18:**

That summer between the ninth and tenth grades, I got to know my brother a little bit. He had come home from college and offered to spend an hour a week teaching me how to drive a car so I’d be ready to get my license in the fall. Our conversations were one-sided deals: Anthony telling me about all the pretty girls and raging parties at his college. “You’d love it,” he’d said once, while I was trying to negotiate our father’s Mazda around a corner. I looked at Anthony when he said this, and I could tell by the insincere smile on his face that he didn’t mean it. He knew as well as I did that the colleges and the coeds and the parties would only swallow up a person like me. “I’m telling you,” he’d said. “You need to get away from here. A whole world out there.”

Sometimes he’d tell me stories about the pranks he’d been in on back at school. The fire alarms. The water-filled garbage can leaning against a door. The time they taped a kid to the upper bunk of his dorm room. My brother was four years older than me, and he’d traveled all the way across the country to go to school, but right then I’d felt like I was the worldly one – not him.

Anthony went back to school in the fall, I got my license, and I started driving Tanner to school. Our first year of high school carried a hopefulness that was quickly dischargeds like an armful of textbooks.

Within us, Tanner and I had buried an optimism that perhaps there were others like us out there somewhere, and so moving to a bigger school with more kids was met with more hope than fear. What we were quick to learn is that there were other groups out there like ours, but no one quite like us. The halls of our high school included as many invisible loners as they did cliques, and yet we had no means to reach out to them.

And so Tanner and I went right back to being alone together, and those daily car rides provided a bubble within which no one could find us. We were untouchable there. In an $800 used car my dad helped buy me, I drove to school every day, we could truly be ourselves without worrying how others might perceive us. Tanner had come across this series of comic books featuring zombies. He would read them out loud while I drove. “You believe in the undead, right?” he said one day, and I just shrugged. Tanner laughed at that, in a way that told me he thought he knew something I didn’t. Snow banks lined both sides of the streets, and he wore a big red stocking cap with a white cotton ball-like thing on top. He said he loved zombies because he believed in the afterlife.

In the back of the magazines, there were ads for all sorts of crazy stuff – from false body parts to Halloween masks to T-shirts that featured slogans like I’LL SLEEP WHEN I’M UNDEAD and I BRAKE FOR CORPSES. One morning, Tanner was flipping through the ads when he sat straight up in the passenger seat of the $800 used Chevy.

“Holy shit,” he gushed. “Check it out.” He held up the ad and pointed a finger.

“Tanner, I’m driving,” I said, careful not to take my eyes off the road. With my neck, it was hard to turn to look at him in the driver’s seat anyway.

“I can’t believe it.” He pulled the book down and stared. “*Faces of Death*. No shit. We got to get this.”

“*Faces of* what?”

“*Faces of Death*,” he repeated, his voice showing more enthusiasm than I’d ever heard in it. “It’s a movie – a seriesof movies. They’re all about guys getting killed. *Dead* people.”

“Dead people,” I said flatly. “Sounds enthralling.”

“*Sarcasm* is dead,” he said, playfully pushing my forearm off the panel between us. The wipers squeaked as they continued to knock off what was left of the frost on my windshield. “I’m telling you. These are *real* dead people. Jumping off buildings. Getting eaten by alligators. I read about these movies. They’re, like, banned.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him admiring the page like a stray dog stares at food scraps.

Three weeks later, the first two videotapes arrived. We waited until my mother took Bailey to the grocery store, and we popped them in the VCR. He was right: real murders, accidents, beheadings. All on video. There were screaming people and bloody body parts. The first time I’d actually watchedsomeone *die.* It was the most hideous thing I’d ever seen.

“Hell, yeah,” Tanner said, staring at the screen, and right then we heard the garage door start to open upstairs. We scrambled to get the tape out and scurried off just as my mother and sister were coming into the house.

###

Tanner and I spent a good part of that fall and winter skipping classes and hanging out at the abandoned pool or behind the church. His fascination with setting things on fire had faded since the incident behind the church the previous year, so we mostly sat out there and flipped through comic books or girly magazines. Tanner seemed more interested in the articles than the women, so I tried to feign indifference when turning the pages myself. The truth was, I secretly wished I’d had a photographic memory so I could see all those women clearly when lying in bed at night. I’d lost interest in most of the girls my age – especially Amanda Kornhalter, I told myself, even though she had undeniably gotten more beautiful since the start of high school. I became more fascinated with older women: actresses, models, lead singers in bands. Whenever Tanner would let me pick a movie on Friday nights, I’d choose one with Jodie Foster or Phoebe Cates or an actress I’d seen in one the People magazines at the bookstore on East Hill. Tanner would typically leave the theater talking about what a piece of shit we’d wasted 90 minutes of our lives on, but I would private solace knowing that at least I’d have a mental image to help myself climax before sleep that night.

As the winter months descended upon us, Tanner and I spent more and more time indoors. We’d rent movies from the local video store or watch MTV for hours on end. Whenever a Madonna video would come on, Tanner would remind me how much her music sucked. I would agree but stare at the television anyway, enthralled by the shape of her breasts and the way she moved her hips.

One weekend, we were sitting in my parents’ basement, watching music videos, when Tanner asked: “Would you ever fuck a dead chick?”

I looked at him but couldn’t respond. I was chewing a fingernail.

“Seriously,” he said, sitting up in the brown La-Z-Boy my father had retired to the basement two years earlier. “If it was, like, *her*. Madonna. Or one of Charlie’s Angels. If they died tomorrow. Would you?”

“If she’s … *dead*?”

He was nodding, his closed mouth slightly askew. “As deli meat,” he said.

“That’s sick.”

“Think about it,” he said. “Take Madonna. No offense, bud, but you’ve got no shot at boinking her alive. But if she was *dead* …”

I smiled. “Like 10 minutes dead?” I offered. He nodded. “Maybe Madonna.” I giggled.

“OK,” he said, “how ‘bout *thirty* minutes dead.”

“Depends,” I said with a wink. “She smell yet?”

We both fell onto the floor laughing. I’d never seen Tanner so alive. I, too, was caught up in the moment. Only later, when Tanner had gone home and I was lying in bed in the early stages of jerking off, did I realize just how sick our sense of humor had become. All I could see when I closed my eyes was a female corpse.

“Jesus, Tanner,” I whispered out loud, and I’m not sure I ever fell asleep that night.

###

That was the year when I started thinking about killing someone. I couldn’t stop. I knew it was wrong, but the thoughts overcame me at all times. When I would pass a kid in the hallway, one of those assholes like Sean Tate, the images of corpses and blood and *murder* flooded my brain unexpectedly. I couldn’t escape them.

One day, I was so flustered that I pulled out a blank notebook and started writing. I wrote a short story, thirteen pages long, in about an hour. The story was about revenge, about a kid whose peers had tormented him so much that he finally set the school on fire. Only after everyone was dead did he start thinking about the lives of the people he never really knew. Only then did the guilt set in.

I started drawing up a list of kids I wanted to kill. The names came to me in a rush, too fast for me to scribble them all down. Just as quickly, I’d crumple the paper up and light it on fire so no one could ever find it. Then a few days later, I’d make another list.

The first name, always, belonged to Sean Tate. He’d grown out of his adolescent awkwardness and into the confidence of a tall, lean, 16-year old. There was nothing spectacular about the way he looked – his reddish, course hair and fair skin and doughy chin and small ears– and yet Sean had become one of the most popular kids at the high school. No longer was he the new kid, desperate to make friends with anyone who would have him. He now had friends in all social classes, he knew every pretty girl by name, and he was even relaxed when talking to teachers and administrators – all of whom looked at him like he was the son they’d always wanted.

I watched the way Sean carried himself and wondered what it was that people liked so much about him. He looked people in the eye, touched them occasionally when he spoke, always looked interested and had an easy laugh. He did things that adults did; pure mimickry, and it seemed to win everyone over. Mostly, Sean smiled a lot. It made me realize that I never did; it felt uncomfortable when I tried.

Sean Tate had made it look so easy. He’d come into my town and, within a few years, won over all the kids with whom I could not connect. And he did it by simply acting like everyone else. He had gone from befriending Tanner and me to laughing at us to ignoring us and casting us aside like we didn’t matter. This is how he’d found a way to fit in.

And for that, I wanted him dead.

I wanted Amanda Kornhalter dead, too. I’d seen her walk the hallways with a series of boyfriends, all of whom seemed to carry that blank stare of indifference around her. I tried to feel the same way about her but felt only anger. I remembered the time I’d called her a “whore,” and how she couldn’t even look at me long enough to listen. I dreamt about pinning her up against a locker after school when no one was around and doing things to her that would finally make her notice me. I even followed her home one day, just to find out where she lived. It was a big, white house a mile from school. I stared up at the bedroom windows and wondered what it would be like to sneak up there one night, climb in and kill her in her sleep.

These thoughts would make me shake. I knew I could never tell anyone, not even Tanner. He was fascinated with death; I’d become fascinated with murder.

That year was mostly a lost one, with Tanner and I floating through the school like we didn’t even exist. The more people ignored us, the more I knew what it felt like to be outside of yourself. Like Tanner’s invisibility, my existence had become something that others could not grasp.

###

Tanner approached the pursuit of a driver’s license much like he had his classes. He avoided studying, believing that his natural intelligence would be enough to get him by. I often wondered what Tanner could have made of himself had he tried.

But when it came to driving, brains wasn’t enough. He hadn’t even looked at the driver’s manual before the big test, so he missed the easy questions and flunked the exam. Instead of brushing up and trying again, he borrowed some of my biographical information and took it to the bureau, saying he’d lost his license. He got re-issued a new one, with my name and forged signature, and just like that we were both legal to drive. It was, in a way, his first act of stolen identity.

Sometimes park the car in the lot before school and let him sit in the driver’s seat. I’d sit in the passenger seat and read aloud the ads from the back of his comic books. When I came to one for “Faces of Death III,” one morning, he perked up.

I asked him: “How come you think those movies are so great, anyway?”

“You kidding?” he said, looking at me with his large eyes as he played with the steering wheel with a thick, winter glove. He was wearing that hat with the cotton ball on top, with strands of black hair filtering out over his ears. He had on his white-rimmed sunglasses, even though the sky was gray. “All that blood and broken bones and death,” he said. “It’s *cool*.”

“Kind of gross,” I said softly.

He smirked. “Not for the faint of heart,” he said.

I stared at him. The car was parked up against a snow bank, and the windows were fogged up all around us. It was late February. His stocking cap was tilted to one side atop his head.

“Could you even do it?” I asked him. He looked at me, then back at the steering wheels.

“Do what?” he said, throwing the gear into Park. I could see his breath in the cold air between us.

“Kill someone,” I said. “Could you kill someone?”

He took off his sunglasses. He stared at me for a long time, his breath pouring out and then hovering in the air in clouds. He was looking at me kind of the way Dr. Siegmann had in that therapist’s office a couple years earlier. His eyes were dark and cold, trying to read my face. I had to look away, out of a small, circular clearing in the window and toward the snow banks and the kids in their winter coats who were filing into the school.

“If I had to,” Tanner said softly, after a full minute of silence. He tossed his sunglasses in the glove compartment inches from my knees. “I think we all could,” he added, “if we had to.” And then he said something else, something I didn’t understand right then – something I wouldn’t understand for months. “Some people are better off being dead,” he said.

For some reason, right then I thought of that crazy Frenchman that had been stalking the Boudin family all those years ago, and how I’d never heard another word about him. I thought of asking Tanner about him right at that moment, asking whatever happened to him, but I felt more comfortable in the silence that had blanketed over us like a cloud of smoke. We grabbed our backpacks and fell into the crowd of bodies on their way to another day of school. I watched Tanner as he walked out in front of me, moving through the others as if he didn’t even notice they were there. I wished I could be like him, that I could see only what I wanted to see, and yet I felt doomed to be reminded of the presence of others – always, doomed by the presence of others.

I moved through the crowd, bumping shoulders and being knocked off balance. People’s elbows and hips grazed my body but their eyes never once looked my way. To them, I was still invisible. But to me, they were eternally in my way.

**CHAPTER 19:**

There is morning daylight, a slight orange tint that peeks through a window and draws a thin line across the wall above her head. She is breathing hard, pushing with the strength of an ox. My brother Anthony stands over her, holding her hand. He’s wearing the same suit and tie he had on yesterday afternoon at a clinic on the other side of town, where he was trying to sell pharmaceuticals to a doctor’s assistant when his pager went off. Anthony knew immediately that her water had broken, and without so much as a wave goodbye, he shot out of the clinic, into his car and drove 80 miles and hour back to the apartment the two of them shared together not far from where we grew up.

And now, a little over 14 hours later, they are holding hands and trying to welcome another life into this world. In a way, Anthony has spent his entire life working toward this moment. He was always trying to be someone else, someone that people could like, that maybe a woman could one day love. He found her a few years back – she wasn’t the first, but there was no doubt that she would be the one – and together they began a journey not unlike so many other couples that span countries and continents and generations. They are the kind of people at whom Tanner and I would laugh when we were young, the kind of people that seem to be pulled by an unspoken life path that has very few detours. Some people’s lives seemed destined to travel on straight lines, from where they were to where they wanted to be.

My brother took a job in pharmaceutical sales not because he had any talent for it or any passion for it – he has, on several occasions when I was alive and after my death, taken a hard stance against the use of over-the-counter drugs to cure what he called “made-up” conditions such as depression and Attention-Deficit Disorder – but because he knew that there would be easy money in it and therefore it would take him where he needed to go. My brother, so hell-bent against curing people who never really seemed broken, has sold his soul to live the American Dream.

And here he is, sweat on his forehead as his wife pushes, standing over her and telling her everything’s going to be okay – for him, everything is always okay – until at last the crown of a tiny human peeks out from inside of her. And then the screaming face, the shoulders, all covered in a filmy substance, followed by a torso and legs. This howling being, which causes my stone-faced brother to turn a shade of pale I have never seen in him, brings him to one knee before my brother Anthony breaks down in tears.

When Anthony is back on his feet at his wife’s bedside, he holds the child, and they look into each other’s eyes. The child, a boy, is all fear and panic. We all come into the world this way, expecting the worst, until – for some people – the world tells us everything is going to be all right. For the rest of us, the world takes our screaming body by the throat, tightens its grip, and refuses to let go. Eternally, some of us are being strangled until the end when life mercifully loosens its vice and sets us free.

My brother doesn’t know what this is like. He’s never considered what it might be like. He just carries on as if everything will be all right, and for people like him it always is.

My brother sets the naked newborn on his wife’s chest and rests his own head against hers. They stay like that, the three of them, for so long that the nurse exits the room and leaves his family to its own silence. In the orange glow of the sun, my brother watches a tear roll down the cheek of his wife’s face, down onto the top of their child’s small head. The child is sobbing and fearful of a world that seems so cruel and so unforgiving.

###

When the carnival closes late at night, Tanner likes to take one ride on the ferris wheel, to be high above the world when the lights are being shut off for the day. He prefers to be alone at these times so that he can stare out at the land of whatever city the carnival calls its temporary home, so that he can swim in the silence. He looks like a god at these times, up there above the living and the lights. These nights, when Tanner is being taken on circles by a slow-moving wheel that lifts him toward the glow of the moon and back down again, he looks like the child he was so long ago. His face is open and innocent, his eyes wide, his flowing dark hair dancing in the breeze. The air smells of cotton candy and caramel corn.

When the ferris wheel stops and the carnival lights are all shut off for the night, Tanner, now 27, will watch the other carnival workers drink beers and build bonfires and tell stories of past lives. Tanner Boudin, who’s calling himself Mitch and doesn’t ever use a last name, probably doesn’t know what to believe when he hears the stories that seem even more far-fetched than the bearded ladies and the men on stilts that surround him in daylight hours.

Tonight is one of those Friday nights in a small town, somewhere in a plains state where the sound of cornstalks in the breeze can be heard even when there is no noticeable wind. Most of the others – the trapeze artists and animal trainers and the minimum wage workers like “Mitch” himself -- have fallen asleep or retired to their small tents. The man who I once knew as a boy named Tanner Boudin finds himself in the company of a magician, just the two of them together sitting beside the glow of a campfire. They can hear the sounds of others cavorting inside the tents. The giggles of a gypsy woman who has been particularly friendly with the others. The growl of a lion tamer’s snore. The gargling of another carnival worker who has just finished brushing his teeth. As Tanner sits beside the magician by the logs of a smoldering fire, he watches the smoke hover and dissipate in the night sky. And then the magician speaks. Although he has had far too much to drink, he guards his secrets close as if they are members of his immediate family.

“I know what you want to ask me,” the magician says, smoking a cigar as he holds up what’s left of his bottle. “You want to know how to disappear.” He watches Tanner’s eyes, which reveal nothing. They never do. “I know you want to ask,” the magician continues, “because everyone wants to know this.”

He unscrews the cap, holds the bottle out to Tanner for the sixth time, and for the sixth time Tanner shakes his head from side to side. The magician drinks. He swallows hard. “Being able to disappear,” the magician says, “is the greatest trick ever created. And there are only a few that can pull it off.” He leans in so close that the fire in front of them glows in his eyes. “I’m not talking about a slight of hand, my boy,” the magician says. “I’m talking about truly *disappearing*.” He winks and lifts his bottle. “It can happen,” the magician says.

He takes another drink. They are listening to the crickets. A coyote howls in the distance. All around them are tents, most of them small and filled with sleeping carnies, but one of them is much larger than the others and temporarily free of the cheering crowds and the flying trapeze artists and the magic that swells within every weekend of the spring and summer.

The magician swallows and wipes his mouth. “Most people,” he continues, “they want to disappear to escape their problems, to get away from whatever their life has become.” He leans in close again and holds his cigar in the air. Smoke billows in the moonlight. “There is no such place,” the magician says, placing the cigar in his mouth.

Tanner nods his head but says nothing. He stokes the fire and looks out at the stars. One thing that never changes, no matter how far Tanner runs and where he will lay his head down for sleep, are the stars that hover over him. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, carefully pulling one out and placing it between his lips.

The magician screws the cap back on his bottle and stares deeply into Tanner’s eyes. “I bet you got plenty of secrets,” he says to Tanner. “I bet you got your own secrets, and those of a lot of other people.” He smiles. “I bet you keep secrets.” Tanner still doesn’t say anything, but the magician is grinning and nodding and reaching into the pocket of his long, black coat. “I’ll tell you one,” he says, “and it’s got nothing to do with magic.” He pulls a small, clear flask from his coat and sets it between them. The few remaining embers of the fire shine through the transparent liquid. “I used to be a doctor,” the magician says. “It was another lifetime ago. I saw lots of things then – old people suffering and loved ones being taken from one another and kids dying of cancer. Horrible things. Things people shouldn’t have to see.” He points to the flask. “In there,” he says, “is a magic potion. Easy to make, really. Just a high-proof form of sleeping medicine – a *potent* form.” He stares at Tanner, who can’t take his eyes off the flask. “What it does is make people disappear,” the magician says. He smiles. “It lets them die. Some people need to die, need to disappear, and that there potion shows them how.”

The magician nods and takes Tanner by the arm.

“Come,” he says, standing, “I’ll show you how to make it. Maybe you could use it one day.”

“To kill someone?” Tanner says, speaking for the first time.

The magician stops but does not release Tanner’s arm. “No,” the magician says. “To allow them to die.”

###

My father has no way of knowing that his eldest daughter didn’t come home from school yesterday. He is 800 miles away, with his new wife, new daughter and a son who was born just a few months ago. He doesn’t know that Bailey, now 16 years old, got into an argument with my mother yesterday morning, that she got a ride to school from one of her friends, that she never came home. He doesn’t know that my mother has tried to call him, but that she can’t get in touch with him this time because his number has changed for a third time since the divorce.

Another thing my father doesn’t know about his 16-year-old daughter is that she’s been dating a 22-year-old car mechanic for three months now. I watched the guy pull up to the high school at 11:50 this morning, I watched my sister come bounding through the snow in a red coat and denim miniskirt, and I watched her jump into the 22-year-old guy’s T-bird. She plucked the cigarette from his mouth, put it in her own, and tossed a backpack filled with his clothes into the backseat.

And now they’re lying in a cheap hotel room 150 miles from home. My father can’t know this, either. He wouldn’t want to know this. The guy and Bailey are naked, smoking cigarettes and looking at a map of the United States.

“Sunnyvale sounds nice,” Bailey says, pulling up a sheet to cover what little there is of her teen-age breasts. Just as suddenly, she pulls it away. She doesn’t appear self-conscious being naked around this guy – or any other, for that matter. “Or here,” she says, pointing to the map. “Half Moon Bay. *That* sounds cool.”

“Relax, baby,” he says. “Those kinda places cost major coin. I’m thinkin’ more Stockton or Bakersfield. I met a guy from Bakersfield once. Says they got lots of mechanics down there who could always use a helping hand.”

My sister rubs his bare chest, her fingers running through the dark hair. She takes a pull of her cigarette and coughs. She’s still getting used to them. He laughs, and she looks at him self-consciously. She sits up and pulls a T-shirt over her head. It’s one of his shirts.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” she says. “Wherever you can get a job, I’m cool with it. I just want something *different.* As long as it’s California. And as long as it’s away from The Bitch.”

He laughs again. “I can’t believe you talk about your own mom like that,” he says.

She lays back on the bed and pulls on the denim miniskirt. “Try living with her,” my sister Bailey says. “Just the two of us. She’s *crazy*.” My sister looks around the room. “Are you out of beer?” she says.

“Why you getting dressed all a sudden?” he says. “I still got another round in me.”

“Todd, I’m *thirsty*,” she says. “Can’t you please go get some more beer?”

He reaches over and wraps his arms around her. He puts his hand up her skirt.

“I’ll go on a beer run in a few,” he says. She tries to push him off but gives up, turns and kisses him passionately. My father can’t see any of this, but I can.

My father also can’t see his ex-wife, 150 miles away, picking up the telephone and dialing 9-1-1. She’s curled up in a ball, with tears on her cheeks.

“Oh, my God, I know she’s run away,” my mother says into the phone. The operator tells her that it has to be 72 hours before the police can do anything.

“She was mad when she left,” my crying mother tells the operator. “*Really* mad.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am,” the operator says. “Seventy-two hours. Then call the runaway hotline. They’ll be happy to help you.”

The words must be echoing in my mother’s head as she looks at the clock. Fourteen hours have passed since her daughter went to school that morning. She has a long way to go.

**CHAPTER 20:**

Tanner was waiting outside the video store when I finally arrived ten minutes late. He had two videocassettes stuffed under his arm, and his face was blank. I wished he’d shown something: irritation, anger, disappointment – anything to tip me off that I’d let him down. He’d told me to be there at seven, at the seedy video store on the east side of town, a part of town we’d never go past dark. He’d told me the city bus would drop him there after work and that I should pick him up right at seven o’clock. It was ten after by the time I pulled up to the curb.

He was wearing a bright yellow T-shirt and black jeans. He was shivering, as the spring temperature dropped into the 50s after dark. A limping man passed between us but did not look up, past the video store and toward the motels and appliance shops on a busy street that’s on the way to nowhere.

I could feel my heart beating, and my face twitching, not only because of where we were but also because of the anticipation that had built up within me. I couldn’t wait to see what videos he’d picked out at this forbidden store 10 miles from where our parents’ houses were. Glancing at the videos tucked under his arm, I imagined women with big hair and fake breasts rubbing oil all over each other, or maybe something weird with midgets or two guys doing it with the same girl.

When I leaned over and rolled down the window on the passenger side, he tossed the videos onto the empty seat.

FACES OF DEATH, PART IV

KILLER INSTINCT, THE UNEDITED VERSION

He was smiling as he opened the door. “They just came in,” he said, then blew into his bright red hands. The darkness was beginning to creep in, but he didn’t look as nervous as I felt -- not even here, in this part of town. He sat down and rolled up the window.

“This one,” he said, holding up KILLER INSTINCT, “is from France. It has a *real* decapitation. That shit wouldn’t even be *legal* over here.”

I dropped the clutch and threw the car into drive. Neither of us was wearing a seat belt. The car stereo didn’t work, and where the cigarette lighter was supposed to be there was simply a cylindrical hole, insulated with metal that stared back at us from just above the stick shift.

“Didn’t know you spoke French,” I said, turning my body slightly to look at the video cassette from France that sat between us.

Tanner shrugged. “Who needs plot,” he said. “Decapitation is bilingual.” He laughed at that. I stared straight ahead, hoping he couldn’t see in my face the disappointment I felt from knowing I wouldn’t see any naked women on film. We were sitting at a red light. I locked my door and nodded for him to lock his. Tanner waved his hand in front of his face.

“Afraid someone’s gonna decapitate us?” he said. And then he laughed out loud. I just stared at the red light.

# # #

The summer after my sophomore year of high school was one of the hottest my home state had ever seen. Temperatures swelled to triple digits, and people mostly stayed indoors during daylight hours. We started the summer like zombies, Tanner and me, spending our days in the cool basement of my parents’ house, staying out of sunlight, going out only at night. We were going out to movies two, sometimes three, days a week. We must have seen every horror movie ever made, either on the big screen or on the bulky VCR that my parents had in their basement, until I felt like I’d become an expert on the whole genre and, perhaps, become somewhat of an expert on the act of murder. While hanging out in public places at night, Tanner and I would watch the kids from our school pass by and whisper things to each other: “I’d love to take a chainsaw to *him*,” or, “Imagine her with a crossbow arrow shot through her mouth.” We’d say things I couldn’t imagine other people overhearing, and yet it felt okay because we’d become so de-sensitized to death. Death had become, in a way, the third member of our little posse.

The four-dollars-per-pop movie prices were becoming too much for my meager allowance, and I hated the thought of sitting around my parents’ house, so three weeks into the summer before my junior year of high school, I went looking for my first job. I filled out applications all over Southland Mall, turning on whatever charm I could muster while trying to force a smile that only came naturally when Tanner was nearby. Without him, I felt helpless, something less than human. In those moments when I was forced to go out into the world and sell myself, I felt even more like a failure than ever – to myself, to my family. I really had nothing to sell.

All of those mall jobs were what I call pretty-face positions. When the interviewer and I would stand face-to-face, my application atop a clipboard held between his or her fingers, I would feel the involuntary twitch of my face muscles, and I would see the muscles of my interviewer’s face tense up and the smile fade. I would sense my interviewer’s interest dissipate as I’d try to turn my head to the left, as my slight handicap would be exposed. My skin would feel hot, my nose too big for my face, my shoulders slumped and fragile and weak. I couldn’t blame them for turning me away; I myself would have done the same to someone as pathetic as me.

Three days of this went by before I found the kind of job that best fit my physical shortcomings. While driving around on a Thursday afternoon, I’d seen a HELP WANTED ad posted outside The Green Apple diner a couple miles from my parents’ house. I filled out an application for a dishwasher position and got hired the following afternoon.

###

The Green Apple was my chance to step outside myself, although I had no way of knowing it when I showed up for my first day of work that summer. I came in guarded, afraid that if I showed myself, they might reject me like all the others had. What I didn’t know on that first day was that adults were different. People in their 20s and 30s were less quick to judge, less prone to pounce upon someone’s inadequacies, less likely to notice things like a facial twitch or a neck that won’t turn in one direction. Some of my co-workers looked at me strangely, at first, just like everyone else had in my life, but their curious glances quickly morphed into acceptance. I had no plans to talk to anyone, and yet they all talked to me. Tasks were our bond, the ice broken by phrases like: “Hand me the dish towel, will ya”, or, “We’re out of plates,” or, “cleanup needed, Table 6.”

I even got a nickname that summer. High School, they called me. “Let me know when the ladle’s ready, High School.” “High School, you keep workin’ that hard, you’ll own this joint by next spring.” If they had something in common with kids my age, it was that my name did not matter. It was as if I didn’t have one. And for once, I didn’t care. High School had an identity all its own, and that’s all that mattered.

I worked most closely with a guy named Ray, a busboy who could’ve been twenty-five just as easily as he could’ve been forty-five. He was a short, spindly guy with a crewcut hairdo and a scar across his left cheek that I never felt right asking about. Ray was the head busboy at The Green Apple, and he carried himself like he’d worked there since birth. He taught me the best ways to stack a dish tray, where to load the soap into the washer, which utensils needed to be washed by hand, when to take breaks, how to sneak an extra few minutes onto your daily timecard, and which employees did blow in the bathroom and when. Ray seemed to trust me immediately, to give me whatever information he held close.

“I like you, High School,” he said one day. “You listen more than you talk. Not many people got that gift.” Ray, it turned out, was not among those who did. He babbled non-stop, and the sound of his voice was both calming and refreshing. By no means were Ray and I friends, but he was almost as valuable as one because he kept me out of my own head. Those constant thoughts of anger and revenge and lust that overcame me – even when Tanner was around – disappeared when Ray went on one of his 10-minute diatribes. He never asked any questions about me, and that might have been the thing I appreciated about him the most.

There were others, too – Derek, the head cook; Janice, the greeter; Ted, the swing-shift cook; the other dishwasher, a 21-year-old college dropout named Zach; and the waitstaff, Kelly, Brittany, Molly and Yolo. They all treated me with respect, even when pressing me to move faster or help in the kitchen or clear a table because Ray was too busy.

Sunday mornings were the busiest time of the week. A flood of traffic would gush in and drown us for four, five, sometimes six hours. There was a constant line of people standing impatiently out front, yet somehow we’d always make it through without killing each other. “You really haven’t lived,” Yolo once told me while smoking a cigarette near the fire exit in back, “’til you made it through Sunday rush.” She held her cigarette out between two fingers with long, pink, speckled nails, and stared at my face after she said it. “Those people in there who got one of them college degrees,” she added, “bet you my first-born they wouldn’t make it through fifteen minutes of Sunday rush.”

I liked Yolo the best because she held nothing back. She talked like the guys, but still carried herself like a lady. Her carefully painted fingernails, thick coat of makeup and perfectly-kept black hair were signs of a woman who spent a lot of time in front of a mirror. She was easily the most buxom of the waitresses, but also the heaviest and oldest. While Kelly, Brittany and Molly were thin, tanned and pretty, Yolo was about as sexually attractive as the bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches she served to customers. But by the way she talked, and the three children she mentioned at least twice an hour, it was obvious that Yolo had hosted a few men over the years. And something about the way she held her cigarette and carried herself made me understand how someone so plain-looking could lure them into her bed.

Sometimes, when she’d be smoking a cigarette outside the open exit door next to the dishwasher, she’d peer out at the parking lot and comment on the clientele as they came and went.

“Oooh, child,” she’d said one day while on smoke break as I stood nearby loading garbage into the dumpster. “Look at that one. Bet you ass cheeks to assholes that he’s hung like a donkey.” She’d smiled. “You can tell by the way he walks – all stiff-backed and confident and shit.” She’d taken a puff off her cigarette and leaned against the door frame. “Yolo knows stuff,” she’d added. “You take a few trips around the block, you learn things.”

On another day, she used her cigarette to point at a fat man getting into his car. “Yolo’s man would never get that big,” she said. “Yolo’d make sure of *that*. I’d be his exercise bike and *demand* that he go for a ride five times a day.” She thrust her ample hips for effect, although the visual aid wasn’t necessary.

She’d even talk that way about her own kids sometimes.

“My oldest, he’s sixteen,” she said one day on her smoke break. “He got a tiny ass, just like his daddy.” She looked me up and down. “Had him when I was not that much older than you, High School. Shit, he about your age now, only he don’t live at home no more.” She smiled. “Hope you don’t make yourself happy as much as he did. Yolo spent half her free time cleanin’ his sheets.” She laughed, then looked me up and down again as she took another drag. She seemed to be out there every time I went on a dumpster run, as if she were timing her breaks around my schedule.

Yolo had thick, stumpy legs but loved to wear heels. She had dark skin, but not dark enough that she was black. She was a single mother and worked two waitress jobs just to make ends meet.

“Promise me somethin’, High School,” she said one day. “Promise me you’ll get a real job and start you a career before you knock up some teen-aged honey. A job with insurance and all that shit.” She waited until I told her I’d promised, then she took a long drag off her cigarette and looked me square in the eye. “You ever need any practice,” she added, “you know where you can go.” She tapped the middle finger of her cigarette hand between her massive breasts. “Yolo,” she said with a wink.

In the coming weeks, I would hear her say this to every guy on staff – even Ray. “Come to Yolo,” she’d say with a wink, and there seemed to be a general acceptance that it was just harmless flirtation. “You come to Yolo anytime.”

At night, while lying in bed, I’d pretend the other waitresses had made the same offer. Kelly, with her long, blond hair and perfect teeth, would slowly unbutton her faded green uniform: “Come to Kelly.” The next night, it was Molly, with her fake tan and deep-set eyes: “Come to Molly.” Brittany, the tall one, would open a robe and press her naked body against mine, whispering: “Come to Brittany.”

These were the kinds of things I could never tell Tanner, my best friend. I mentioned the waitress names only in passing, preferring to spend most of our time together talking about things other than work. Even when the subject of The Green Apple did come up, my stories would mostly involve the male co-workers: Ray and Derek and Ted and Zach. Talking about girls was not something Tanner and I did – and a part of me wondered whether he even looked at girls.

I certainly had no reason to talk to him about Yolo. She seemed to be all sorts of things he might not like: old, thick-waisted, unattractive*.* I wasn’t sure whether she was black or Mexican or from some Middle Eastern country, but I did know that she was not at all like us or anyone in our families. Maybe that’s what I liked about her, that she was the way I always felt: unique. She may have noticed that I was different than others, too, but she didn’t seem to hold it against me. She treated me like everyone else.

When school started, Tanner and I continued our routine of movies, mostly on Friday and Saturday nights, and I even talked him into a few non-horror flicks. I knew all that blood and gore was getting the best of me, so I offered a few lighter suggestions. We saw one called “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” a comedy about two friends who skipped school one day. There’s a scene where they’re sitting next to a pool talking about the future, and for whatever reason Tanner couldn’t stop talking about it all the way home.

“I hate that guy,” he said as we got into my $800 car. “That Ferris Bueller … what an insufferable prick.”

“A righteous asshole,” I offered.

“Like they made a movie about half the kids in our school,” he said, nodding his head. He flipped on the heater in my car. “Who would pay to watch that?”

“We just did,” I said, and we both laughed.

“I know one thing,” Tanner said, looking out the window, “if I took a skip day like that, I wouldn’t waste it going to a downtown parade and a stupid baseball game.”

I nodded in agreement.

“I’d probably set the football field on fire,” he said. “Or take a brick to a teacher’s window.”

“I’d throw a brick *at* a teacher,” I said, and I laughed. Tanner didn’t say anything. “I’d drop a bomb on the whole school,” I said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Tanner look at me. I felt suddenly as if I’d said too much and immediately wished I could take it back.

“Yeah, well, I probably wouldn’t go near the school at all,” he said. “I’d just go to, like, the comic book store or something.”

We rode in silence for another minute – Tanner looking out the side window, me watching traffic -- before he turned back toward me again.

“You know in the movie, when that Cameron guy goes: ‘After this, you’re gonna go off to college, I’m gonna go off to college, and it’s never going to be the same?’” he said. I nodded my head as I merged into the left lane. I knew where Tanner was going. “Well,” he continued, “that’s just how I feel. Like we’re both going to go … you know.”

He didn’t finish the thought. We drove on in silence for ten minutes, my car easing out onto the highway, then in and out of a tunnel that surrounded us like a chamber, before I pulled the car off a familiar exit and I pulled in front of his parents’ house.

“It’s not gonna be the same,” Tanner said, staring up at his own bedroom window. “It’s not always going to be like this, you know.”

I had to look away. “I know,” I said, softly. He got out of the car and just stood there, as if waiting for me to look at him. When I did, his face seemed to be hiding something. I couldn’t read it, not right away, and then it dawned on me. “Tanner,” I said, and what I wanted to say after that was: *Promise we’ll always have each other*. Instead, what I said was: “We’re not gonna really, y’know, be like that. We’re not gonna grow apart, are we?”

He smiled at this, his face brightening like it did only occasionally. He rapped his hand on the car door just beneath the window. He pointed at me and nodded, as if accepting the promise. But he didn’t say anything.

As I pulled away from the curb, I felt a sickness inside of myself. As much as Tanner and I despised high school, there was a chance that it wasn’t going to get any better than this in life. What if this was the best life had to offer? Would things only get worse after graduation?

I watched him saunter up the sidewalk toward his parents’ house, away from me and away from my desperate need for eternal companionship. I could see him, at that moment, as a soldier at war. There was no doubt in my mind then that the military was his fate – even if he’d always struck me as too free-thinking and independent to join anything at all.

The front door to his parents’ house closed, and Tanner Boudin disappeared from the warm summer night. I could smell his deodorant hovering in my car.

###

As eleventh grade crept into October, it was difficult to believe that this was the time of our lives. We were caught somewhere between the superiority of the seniors and the wide-eyed angst of the sophomores. The kids in our own grade seemed stuck in a transition between here and there, and it manifested itself in false acts of bravado. Often, Tanner and I were on the wrong end of these acts, being teased and tormented, pushed in the hallway, laughed at behind our backs. Things built up inside of me, and the pressure only felt heavier when I would go home to a 6-year-old sister who looked to me for some sort of leadership. I had nothing to offer Bailey, and that’s what hurt the most.

I was, as always, nothing much of anything. And she was still too young to figure this out for herself.

I began to spend more time writing fiction, even when Tanner and I were alone together. He would draw his pictures, with their blood and gore and guts, in even greater detail than in previous years, while I would write about fantasy lives that were much more interesting than my own. Our days in the abandoned pool had moved into the dark, dank pool house when the rain and cold and snow blew in.

One day, sometime just after Thanksgiving, he came into the pool house wearing the thick red stocking cap on his head. He nodded and took off his gloves. I closed my notebook and watched him sit down on a rusted folding chair.

“Whatcha writing?” he asked, nodding toward the notebook in my lap.

“Story,” I said. “I’m writing a story.”

“About what?” He unzipped his coat. He rarely asked me about my fiction, and I wasn’t real keen on talking about it, but I couldn’t dodge the question.

“About this kid,” I said, looking down. “Thinks he can fly. Builds a little launching pad in a tree in the backyard and tries to take off. Hates his life. Wants to fly off to somewhere else.”

“Yeah?” Tanner said, pulling off his hat and putting it into the pocket of his coat. “So what happens?”

I shifted on the uncomfortable chair beneath me and looked down at my closed notebook. “Well,” I said, “he keeps breaking bones trying to jump off. But he knows he can do it. So he keeps trying.”

Tanner nodded his head and leaned back, pulling a stack of comic books from his backpack. Each breath came out in a pool of smoke. “And? What happens at the end?”

I looked at him, at his goofy hat-hair and his closed mouth.

“He does it,” I said. “That’s the last scene. He flies.”

Tanner smiled out of one corner of his mouth. He pulled a sketch pad out. “He flies,” he said, setting the sketchbook next to an empty chair. “That’s the end?” I nodded and tossed my notebook to the floor, then reached for one of his comic books. He handed me one I’d read before. “Why can’t he, like, climb up on a cliff and try to fly and go crashing down, all bones and blood gushing out of his head?” he asked. “That’d be more realistic.”

“Is that all you think about?” I said. “Death?”

“It’d be more realistic,” he repeated.

I opened the comic book and started flipping through it, looking but not looking.

“Everybody dies in the end,” he said, sitting down and grabbing his sketchpad. “That’s the end of every story, you know.” He laughed, but I’m not sure why. He waited until I looked up at him. His eyes were steely. His breath came out in a cloud, hovering between us like gun smoke. He looked into my eye and said: “That’s how every story ends.”

I didn’t like the way he’d said it. I didn’t like talking about my stories, and I damned sure didn’t need anyone telling me the ending was all wrong.

“What do you know about fiction, anyway,” I said curtly. I could feel my heart beating as I said it.

“What’s there to know?” he said with a shrug. He crossed his legs and opened his sketchbook. “Fiction’s not real. It’s fake. It’s a lie.” He was starting at my notebook, laying there helplessly on the frozen floor of the pool house. “That,” he said, “is a notebook of lies.”

I tried to ignore him. I flipped a page of the comic book. Superheroes and aliens and monsters were strewn out in front of me.

“Yeah,” I said softly, “and all this is real, huh?”

“C’mon,” Tanner said quickly, holding up his hands. “Don’t get all sensitive on me. I’m just saying …” He stopped to think. His cheeks were red from the cold. “I’m just saying we all need things, things that aren’t real, to escape reality. We all make things up to feel better.”

“Thanks, Ron,” I said, using his father’s name. He knew what I meant: that he was beginning to sound like a wanna-be psychologist.

“Don’t be a dick,” he said. “You know what I mean.” He closed his sketchbook and stood up. “Think about it,” he said. “Think about everyone you know. Just look at our parents. You don’t think our parents are living a lie? This bullshit about how they’re so in love and so happy and … Just look at them. It’s *all* a lie.” I stared at him silently. “Look at the kids in our school,” he said. “They’ve got all these fake smiles and fake stories and fake friends. That’s their fucked-up life of fiction.” He pointed at my closed notebook on the ground. “That,” he said, “is yours.”

Then he sat back down, opened his sketchbook and started drawing. “And this is mine,” he said. He looked up at me and smiled.

When he went back to drawing, I said: “So what’s real?”

He just kept drawing. He didn’t look up. He didn’t even stop to think. He just said one word.

“Pain.”

###

While I was working at The Green Apple, Tanner had taken a job at an old folks’ home. He hated it, but he needed the money to keep going to movies and buying comic books. He told me stories about having to clean up after old people, how he had to clean their bed pans with piss and shit in them. He told me he saw a guy die once, just keel over in his chair, fall to the floor and stop breathing.

Tanner told me all sorts of stuff about old people drooling on themselves and farting without knowing they farted and breaking their hips when they tried to get out of bed. He told me about a woman whose mind was so far gone that she didn’t even remember her own daughter. When the daughter came two days in a row, the old lady thought to call the police.

“Her own *daughter*,” Tanner said.

I didn’t know what to believe and what not to believe, thinking maybe Tanner was putting out his own version of fiction. He talked about old people like he was an expert on the subject, even though he was the same age as me.

“It’s sad,” he said one day after working a long shift at the nursing home. “I don’t ever want to get old.” He was making a snowball that he threw harmlessly toward the trees. “Somebody ought to put these people out of their misery before they get like that,” he said. “I don’t know why nobody’s ever thought of that. I don’t know why we let them get like that. Nobody should have to live that long.”

He made another snowball, faked a throw toward the tree, then fired it playfully at my head. I tried to move but wasn’t fast enough. It hit me in the cheek.

“Oh, you bastard,” I said, smiling. I scrambled to make a snowball while he turned and retreated. I chased him through the woods, and we played like that for the rest of the afternoon, like we were little kids again. I felt young but less than alive. For the first time, I felt myself getting older. I didn’t know what life held, but I knew I didn’t want to end up in some old folks’ home, losing my mind, unable to decipher reality from the fiction of my own brain.

**CHAPTER 21:**

She picks this day because she knows they have other things on their minds.

It is the Fourth of July, and the fireworks outside drown out the hammer she uses to shatter the stained glass windows and the porcelain water bowls and the six-foot-high cross atop the altar. The neighborhood parties divert the attention of police while she rips up the hymn books and flips over pews and curses the name of Jesus Christ. Nighttime has fallen, so they won’t find her scurrying from the church through the humid summer air to the car that sits below a poplar tree. My mother slams the door and stares through the darkness in the direction of a church and a religion and a God that have all let her down.

She knows that today it’s okay, that today they have other things on their minds.

###

She is still getting used to her role as a single mother, and perhaps that’s why my mom told Bailey that there’s money in the top drawer for pizza and that she’ll be home sometime tonight, sometime before midnight. It’s a holiday, so Bailey knows Mom isn’t going to the church, like she does most other nights to help out with retreats and scheduling and whatever else they ask her to do. Bailey has lost her mother to the church, and so, as a 13-year-old girl, she has come to hate the church. As much as my mother begs her to go, Bailey wants nothing to do with it. And my mother doesn’t want to push her. Since my father left town, my mother has handled Bailey with kid gloves. My mom seems to be afraid of her, afraid of what she might become if my mother pushes her too hard. They’ve been fighting a lot lately, and in the end Mom lets Bailey get her way. Pushing too much might send her only daughter out the door forever. And so Bailey is mostly free to do what she pleases.

It’s 7 o’clock at night, and Bailey knows that the fireworks show will start in an hour or two. She’s not that big on fireworks, but she’s looking for something to do. This time of night, kids her age are always looking for something to do. She’s outgrown most of the neighborhood kids, who, as she once confided to one of her older school friends, “all still seem stuck in a Norman Rockwell picture.” That Bailey is only 13 years old and able to drop a name like Norman Rockwell would come as little surprise to our mother, who can’t believe how quickly she’s growing out of her adolescence.

Bailey pulls her pink bike from the garage, pops up the kickstand with her bare foot, and pedals off toward the orange glow of dusk. She rides helmetless, with an abandon that shows her lack of concern for anything – whether it be my mother coming home early or getting hit by a car. She is as she likes to be: free to do whatever she pleases.

Bailey pedals around a cul du sac a few blocks from my childhood home, down a street and past a house where Tanner Boudin and I once attended a high school party long ago. Bailey stands on the pedals, whether she’s using them or just gliding, because the position makes her look more defiant. She attacks the pedals as if they’ve wronged her, and her lithe body sways back and forth violently as she picks up speed.

Bailey’s blond hair, which she rarely brushes, flows freely in the air. She wears a halter top and short shorts that hardly cover any of her stick-like legs. She circles through Raymond Park, back toward our neighborhood and then a few blocks south. The orange sky is darkening, and she can hear the popping sound of fireworks in the distance. Yet Bailey shows no sign of fear.

She drops her bike in a patch of grass next to a large water fountain in a small park, a spot where she’s able to see the first round of fireworks above the trees. Only when she approaches the fountain and hears a cracking sound does Bailey realize she’s not alone. She freezes, then sees three sets of eyes on her from behind a cloud of black smoke.

“Damn, where’d you come from?” says one of the three boys, who look to be 16 or 17 but may as well be 25 or 30 in Bailey’s eyes.

“Fuck, little girl,” another of the boys says. “Don’t go sneakin’ up like that, yo. You damn near got blown up.”

The others laugh and pull out a new package of fireworks. They’re each holding a book of matches.

“I’m *not* a little girl,” 13-year-old Bailey says. She crosses her arms across her braless chest. “I’m *six*teen,” she says. My baby sister actually looks closer to 9 than she does 16, so the boys snicker when she says it.

“I call bullshit,” one of the boys says. He has short hair and a shaven-line carved into the scalp on one side. “What school you go to?”

“Dropped out,” my sister says quickly. “School’s for buttlicks.”

“Buttlicks, huh?” one of the boys says.

“*Assholes*,” my sister says proudly. She stares at one of the boys, the one who hasn’t spoken. He has longer hair, pulled back in a short ponytail, and she licks her lips when she looks at him – probably because she once saw someone much older than her do that in a movie.

“If you’re 16,” the kid with the carved head says, looking at her bike, “how come you don’t got a car, yo?”

“Can’t afford it,” Bailey shoots back. She’s alone, with no one around but these boys and their firecrackers, yet she shows no sign of fear at all.

“You smoke?” the other guy, the one who talks, says. The one with the short ponytail just watches silently. When Bailey’s eyes fall on him, he does not look away.

“I do lots of things,” my sister Bailey says, without possibly realizing what she’s saying. She hasn’t done all that much in her life, not yet. She’s too young.

“Oh, yeah?” the carved-head guy says. “Like what?” He laughs, but his eyes are serious.

My sister shrugs. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” she says. One of the guys holds a cigarette out for her. She reaches for it and sees a half-filled bottle of liquor near the carved-head guy’s head.

“What’s that?” she says. She puts the cigarette behind her ear. The carved head guy looks at the bottle, then at the cigarette, then into Bailey’s eyes.

“You’re full of shit, little girl,” he says. He holds up two fingers like a peace sign. “Total V,” he says. “I can smell a virgin a mile away.”

“Nuh-uh,” she says. She glances at the ponytail guy, then looks away. “*You’re* virgins,” she says. My baby sister probably doesn’t even know what a virgin is. The only time my mother has talked to her about sex, she had told her, “Once you give it up, you can never get it back.” Bailey had just stared at her blankly.

Now, she’s looking from guy to guy to guy, trying not to lose their companionship. She has nothing else to do, nowhere to go. She’s told our mom a thousand times that she hates this town because it’s boring, and she’s always wished she was a few years older than she actually is.

“What’s in the bottle?” she says again. She takes the cigarette in her small, shaking fingers, twirls it around while looking into the filter like a kaliedescope, then puts it in her mouth. She moves the cigarette around on her lips, like she’s seen women do in the movies. She can’t possibly know what she’s doing, but she keeps playing this game.

They continue to pester her about being a virgin, until the dare comes out. “You’re so experienced,” the carved-head guy says, “show us.” A few minutes later, my little sister is lying on her back with her shorts pulled to her knees as the carved-headed guy unknowingly takes her virginity. The other two guys each take a turn, and although her face shows that it hurts when she’s doing it, my sister doesn’t whimper or shed a single tear. She keeps her eyes open, and above them the fireworks begin to shower the night sky.

My baby sister lies like that, staring up at sky, her lithe body stiff as they pound their bodies against it, and damned if she doesn’t smile, just slightly, out of the corner of her mouth.

She likes it so much that she comes back the next day, probably hoping to run into the one with the ponytail. But she never sees any of them again.

###

It’s a few weeks later, and my sister Bailey is wearing a short dress and heels. She’s standing next to my mother, and the two of them look painfully uncomfortable together. They don’t speak. They watch the people move around them. Just 13 years old, my sister is already taller than her mother. She stands straight, she walks elegantly, and she doesn’t mind when guys catch her staring.

If my father was here, which he isn’t because it’s his oldest son’s wedding and he wasn’t invited, he would probably be mortified to see her like this. When he left home, she was still an innocent adolescent, and perhaps that’s how she’ll always stay in his mind.

My mother does not cry when Anthony and his wife read their vows. She is emotionless now, as if my death 5 ½ years earlier has ripped everything from inside of her.

In the receiving line, she hugs Anthony and dutifully tells him how proud she is of him. Anthony looks at Bailey and says, “Dang, you clean up nice. Who knew you’d grow into such a pretty girl?”

Bailey all but rolls her eyes, saying nothing in response and not even offering a courtesy smile. She isn’t much of a conversationalist these days, not even with the two other older boys she’s seduced since that day in the park. The only time she talks to my mother is when they’re fighting, like the time four days ago when my mom found condoms in her underwear drawer. Bailey threatened to run away, saying she couldn’t live in a house where there’s no privacy. But in the end, Bailey stayed, most likely because she has as much freedom as any 13-year old could want, especially with her mother checked out most of the time.

When the reception begins, my mother and Bailey pick at their salads and then excuse themselves from the reception. Bailey tries to make eyes with one of the waiters on the way out, but he seems too preoccupied to notice.

Before they can get out of the reception hall, my brother Anthony catches them at the door.

“Ma,” he says. “Ma, wait.” His tuxedo coat is open, his bowtie is undone, and he wears the sweat of a man who’s been dancing non-stop for nearly an hour. “Hey,” he says, hugging her, “thanks for coming.” Except the way he says it, his voice sounds like he half-expected her not to come. Anthony and my mother have stayed close, but he’s still not sure what she’ll do from one day to the next. That’s the way he’s looking at her, now, on his wedding day.

“She seems nice,” my mother says, looking at Anthony’s new wife out on the dance floor. My mother only met her once before, briefly, and my brother did all the talking that time.

“She’s great, Ma,” he says now, while his wedding reception goes on around them. “You’ll like her. I can’t wait for you to get to know her.”

“We’ll see,” my mother says quietly. Bailey’s looking around the room, probably for the waiter with the soft eyes who wouldn’t give her the time of day. Anthony puts his hands on my mother’s shoulders.

“Ma, I want you in our lives,” he says. “You know that. Anytime -- anytime you want – we’d love to have you come and stay with us for a few days. Maybe it’ll help, y’know, clear your mind and all.”

My mother forces a smile. Her face looks thirty years older than it did when I died, even though it’s only been less than six. Her hair is pulled up, a futile attempt to look respectable at her son’s wedding. There was a time when I wondered how my mother would look at my wedding, and this is as close as I’ll come to knowing.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” my mother says, patting Anthony gently on the cheeks. Her eyes are welled up with tears now, although she dares not let them fall. “I always knew you would be.”

Anthony smiles at her. Bailey is impatiently playing with the hem of her dress.

“You were always my rock,” my mother says to her only living son.

He hugs her, and into my mother’s ear, Anthony whispers: “Sometimes rocks need water, too.” They hold each other like that. He looks up at Bailey. She’s sticking out one, long, bare leg, scratching her thigh. She looks like she can’t get out of there fast enough.

“I love the both of you,” Anthony says, and neither my mother nor Bailey says anything in response. They don’t say anything on the ride home, either. This is how their life has become. The next word, they both know, will spark a fight. My mother is intent on not meddling in Bailey’s life, even though she’s undoubtedly seen and heard things that would make a mother cringe. My mother isn’t going to get involved this time -- not with this child, and not with anything.

As she drives home from the wedding, her stare is as vacant as ever.

###

On a still, cool night in his hometown, 24-year-old Tanner Boudin looks up at the stars and then closes his eyes. The symphony begins.

From across the prairies and farmlands and the lights of the city, out of the night sky that hovers over our hometown, out past the airplanes much like the one Tanner took for a rare visit to his parents’ house, he hears the rustling of chimes. It flows in like a wave at high tide, lifting his body and all of its senses until he is completely washed away.

That sound, he undoubtedly remembers now, is from his childhood. Every seventeen years, it comes. It’s the sound of cicadas.

It’s a whirring, buzzing, building sound that could awaken something inside of people, a penetrating buzz that at once sounds calming and then sounds like the apocalypse. It’s the sound of ten thousand drum rolls, of dying thunder, of an earthquake in the sky. It’s the sound of a man’s head being opened up and scratched like a rash, of his mind being scrambled to the point that he can no longer see.

It’s a sound he’s heard only once before.

Tanner Boudin opens his eyes and stares at the sky. In a sudden motion, he sits, then stands, then begins to run. He’s running through darkness, down a hill toward a ravine, across a two-lane highway, past the elementary school where he first met a scared little boy whose name he hadn’t yet learned, past the parking lots and fields and trees. He is running through that which he cannot see, through a tunnel of darkness. I am beside him, finally able to keep up. We are side by side now, like I always wanted us to be.

And then, he is there. Here. The abandoned pool at night. He is heaving breaths. The sound of cicadas has grown in volume amid all the trees, like they’ve circled him and become a choir. He stands on the edge of the waterless pool. He holds his arms out like he’s going to jump, down to the concrete 12 feet below. He stands like that, as if maybe he thinks he can fly, or perhaps because he knows he can’t, above the concrete below. A half hour passes, then another, until raindrops begin to fall out of the sky and rattle the leaves on the branches above. Even when the downpour begins, Tanner Boudin does not move. It’s as if he’s waiting for something.

Or someone.

What he cannot know is that I’m already here.

**CHAPTER 22**

During that summer, what would be my final summer, I went to see Yolo.

“You come see Yolo,” she had said so often to me, to co-workers, to every man with whom she had come into contact during the year that I knew her.

And so I went.

It was not about love. In my heart, I knew I was incapable of love, and of being loved. Deep down, I knew that love, like Tanner had once said, was only fiction. Amanda Kornhalter had taught me as much.

Going to see Yolo was not really about desire, either; to me, there was nothing very sexually attractive about her. Curiosity was what led me there. It was the only place I knew where I could have that unbending curiosity for flesh satisfied. In the time that I’d been working at The Green Apple, nine different waitresses had come and gone. Eight of them, I would have paid to let me have my way with. Yolo, the ninth, was the only one who would possibly have me. And so I went.

We met at a cheap motel on a Saturday night, just like in the movies. I told my parents I was going out with Tanner. I told Tanner I was working a late shift at The Green Apple. He undoubtedly had his secrets, so I felt like I could have some of my own. My best friend didn’t need to know everything, did he?

When I arrived at the motel on the east side of town, not far from where Tanner had been waiting for me at the video store, Yolo’s car was already in the parking lot. Seeing the familiar white Chevy Nova with the duct tape over the left taillight made me nervous, so much so that I almost retreated. I stood, frozen on a gloomy summer night, ready to run. The motel door opened. Yolo’s face smiled, setting me at ease.

“Come,” she said softly, rubbing a fingernail along the hem of her black dress. “Come see Yolo.”

I went to her, and she closed the door behind us. I stood near the closed window shade as she moved into the small motel room and sat on top of the maroon-and-navy-blue, patterned sheets on one of the two beds. She called me over with a finger, and I sat carefully on the bed across from her. My knees were pressed together; hers were apart. The skin of her legs stared at me beneath the hem of the short dress.

She told me that she had gotten a babysitter for her kids, that we had all night. She talked about the weather and offered me a cigarette. I stared at it. My vision focused on the strands of dried tobacco that looked like the clumped fingers of a miniature hand reaching out.

Then she said: “Your first time?”

“Smoking?” I said.

Yolo laughed. She laughed long and hard, until there were tears in her eyes.

“You slay me, High School,” she said, popping the cigarette in her mouth after I ignored her offering of it. “Your first time … with a *woman*, silly!”

This time she wasn’t asking. So I said nothing in response.

Yolo lit the cigarette and set it in an ashtray next to the bed. She stood up. She wore a loose-fitting dress, which she pulled over her head before lying back on the mattress. She wore only a pair of lace black panties. I stared at her naked breasts, the way they drooped and fell to either side of her rib cage, the darkness of her nipples. She had folds of skin in places I had not expected, and her thighs were wavy and covered in dimples. She smelled good, better than I’d ever noticed before.

“You gonna just sit there all night?” she said, lying on the bed across from where I sat.

I stood slowly and looked down at her. I thought of Tanner and what he might think if he knew I was here. This was the most important night of my life to date, and yet I couldn’t possibly tell him about it – not with this woman. He wouldn’t approve of her; I knew that without asking. I didn’t know if it was because she was older than us, whether it was because she was overweight, or if it was just that he didn’t believe in romance. But I knew, without a doubt, that Tanner would not approve. He could never know about this.

I turned around as I undressed, taking off my long-sleeved T-shirt and plaid shorts. Yolo giggled.

“Boy, you shy,” she said. I could feel the heat of her gaze on my bare back. Looking down, seeing my erect penis pressing against a pair of striped boxer shorts, I felt my insides turn and an acidic taste form in my mouth. *Not now*, I thought. *Please, God, not now.*

I heard her giggle again, from the side to which I could not turn. She was not real in that moment, just a ghostly sound that seemed to call out from another place. Suddenly I wanted nothing less than to be here, with her, on the verge of losing my virginity. I closed my eyes and thought of that thing Tanner did as a kid, the thing where he could disappear, but I couldn’t escape the moment. Slowly, I pulled my boxer shorts down and stepped out of them, turning slightly so that my bare backside was staring at her.

I stood like that – unexposed, my back to Yolo – for more than a minute. I could feel my body shaking.

“Come to Yolo,” she said softly.

I turned mechanically, in stages, the erection staring up at me with guilt. When I looked down at her, she was still lying on her back with those sagging breasts hanging on either side of her. She slowly pulled her underwear off. I felt no passion, only fear. Yolo’s stumpy body, with the rolls of skin, gave me little pleasure. This was my first woman in the flesh, and would be my last, and yet when I climbed on top of her I quickly escaped to the pockets of my mind. I returned to a place where Kelly and Molly and Brittany from The Green Apple, where Pam Neugard from geometry class, where Dana Petrie from Phys Ed and the cheerleaders who wore their short skirts on football Fridays all waited for me. I imagined Madonna and Phoebe Cates, Jodie Foster and one of my mother’s friends who wore heels wherever she went – even Amanda Kornhalter, whom I had imagined for as long as I could remember being here with me for this very moment. I thought of all this as I lied on top of Yolo and fumbled through the act, until I finally released. Everything came out of me like I’d been punched in the gut. I hadn’t even thought to protect myself, and only when it was over did I begin to wonder if maybe I’d gotten myself one of those diseases we’d read about in eighth grade sex ed. And then I just rolled over, breathing in the smell of her perfume and sweat and vagina juice, and all I could think about was Tanner –what he would think of me if he could see me here, naked, with this woman. There was a brief moment when I felt outside myself, above myself, staring down at the bodies – young next to old, skinny next to fat, white next to dark, man next to woman. I felt like an uninvited guest, like a voyeur on my own life.

I felt not so much a sexual awakening as I did a rush of guilt – for caving in to my desires, for taking advantage of a lonely woman and, mostly, for doing something that would disappoint Tanner.

When I rolled away from her, my chest heaving as Yolo and I laid there, she began to talk incessantly – about work, about her childhood, about the regrets she’d had in life. She told me she used to dance in nudie bars, that she’d even worked as a masseuse for a time not that long ago and made pretty good money in tips – a lot more than she’d ever make as a waitress. She talked about her three children, how they all had different fathers. She had only married one of them, and that lasted only six weeks before she came home from a previous job as a cocktail waitress to find a note telling her he was gone. The other fathers, she said, were just something she called “tricks.” All three of her kids had interesting names: Eugustus, Meeganstance and Skilkelly.

“I like kids who got their own name,” she said.

She told me of her name, about how her Jamaican father had wanted to name her Yolanda and her Puerto Rican mother had wanted to name her Melosa, and how they settled for something between the two.

“I like my name ‘cause nobody else got it,” she said. “Wanted my kids to have their own too, to feel like there weren’t nobody else like them in this world.”

Yolo never said anything about my name. I couldn’t remember if she’d ever used it. High School, she’d called me, even when I was inside of her, and even when I stood up to start putting back on my clothes.

“You ‘member this, High School,” she said, laying on her side as her folds of skin rested on the wet of the mattress, “you get that itch again, you come see Yolo.” She winked, then added: “First time’s free. Next time, we’ll figure out a nice, good rate.”

Even before she revealed herself as something of a prostitute right there in that motel room, I had decided I never would go back to her. I promised myself right then that I would wait until I fell in love to do it again, that next time would really be my first time and that this whole night didn’t even really count. I promised I’d be better next time, and that the girl would know everything about me, that she would call out my name as we made love. She would love me for me, not because I was trying to be anyone else. Tanner might not have believed in love, but I did.

What I didn’t know then was that I wouldn’t get another chance. Not ever.

And I wouldn’t see Yolo again, either. She stopped working at The Green Apple – the other waitresses said she’d gone back to one of her old jobs, but no one knew where – and so my final memory of her included the plump, naked folds of her skin resting in the wet spot we’d left on the mattress. Thinking back on it, for the next few days and weeks and months, brought that acidic taste back in my mouth, like I might throw up all over myself. My soft stomach would turn, and I would have to swallow hard just to keep it all down.

The next time I heard her name at work, Ray the busboy was telling me that he’d seen her walking up and down the streets in the rough part of town, wearing high heels and a low-cut dress, walking like she was waiting for someone – anyone. He told me he thought she might have gone back to turning tricks.

“Glad I wore two rubbers,” he added with a wink. Then he took a tray of clean glasses out the door and to the main part of the dining area.

###

The way that I forgave myself for lying to Tanner Boudin was by reasoning that he never asked. Through all the time that we knew each other, he rarely asked me anything about girls. He didn’t seem to care whether I was a virgin or not, and I guess I’d never much thought about his sex life, either.

And besides, best friends don’t have to tell each other everything.

I thought about that as we sat in silence one afternoon, there on our folding chairs down in the well of the abandoned pool. He was reading a Stephen King book, and I was staring at a blank notebook page. At that moment, I missed what we used to have, back when we were kids and all that mattered were comic books and bugs. I thought about what Tanner had said after we’d watched that Ferris Bueller movie, about how we’d go our own way one day. Even in the days and weeks that followed, Tanner never mentioned the army again, but somehow I knew he was still thinking about it. His life was more mysterious than mine, and it was possible he’d even met with a recruiter. The thought of him leaving made my head spin. I knew what life would be like without Tanner. Loneliness was all the real world would have to offer – of this, I was convinced.

I watched him as he flipped the pages of his book. While I was more of a storybook dreamer who loved to live through my own fiction, Tanner was a person of action. If he thought there was a better place, I figured, he would make a run for it. He was the kind of guy who would change his surroundings the first time he got a chance, and for some reason that came to me as clear as blue sky on that gloomy, gray afternoon, as I sat next to Tanner watching him quietly read a horror novel.

Our surroundings that fall were as bad as ever. Being seniors afforded us no power over the underclassmen, for we were too low on the social structure to be considered part of the ladder. Tanner privately acted like he held some kind of superiority over them all, saying things like: “They’re all sheep being led to the slaughter,” or, “Must be hard to think when you’re all sharing the same brain.” He began reading books by people like Camus and Huxley and Kafka. He’d even started to dress differently, preferring baggy T-shirts and camouflage pants. Tanner had a style all his own, while I preferred to blend in and not get noticed. My hair had returned to its natural brown color, and I wore simple sweatshirts and jeans. Once befuddled by my anonymity amongst peers, I now basked in it. The invisibility my classmates allowed me was a comfortable space. And yet I still had a misdirected anger inside of me, along with the fear that I wouldn’t be able to suppress it much longer.

At home, I felt a bit of a leadership role myself that fall. My little sister, then six, had started following me around and asking me questions about things I’d never have considered. She wanted to know why I drank so much milk, why I always wore the same grey sweatshirt, and why I spent so much time writing in my notebook. I rarely had answers for Bailey, so half the time I would just mess up her dirty blond hair and tickle her until she fell to the floor in uncontrollable giggles. That my six-year-old sister was one of only two people with whom I could open up and be myself was something that frustrated me; it made me feel guilty for enjoying her company. As much as I loved my sister, and as much as I loved being around her, I found myself trying to avoid her because of the shame I felt inside myself. I didn’t want her to be like me, and by looking up to me, that’s where she might have gone with her life. I was not who she wanted to be. Who I was, to her, was only a figment of her imagination.

One afternoon that fall, a couple of weeks after school had started, I was rooting around in the freezer when my sister surprised me with a playful, barefooted kick to the calf.

“You eat lots,” Bailey said. “Why are you so skin-skin if you eat lots?”

I tossed a box of frozen fishsticks onto the counter and shrugged. I turned to my left to look at her and, like always, twisted at the hip so that my body could face that direction.

“Fishstick?” I offered. She shook her head loosely from side to side, so violently that she began to giggle. She stopped and stared up at me, breathing hard.

“Why …?” Bailey said, and she was holding her arms out on either side of her while waving them as she rotated her body. She wanted to ask another question but couldn’t seem to find one. She looked up at the ceiling and smiled, then looked back at me. “Why is your neck like that?” she asked suddenly, still twisting her tiny body. As the words came out, I could see the faces of so many people who’d never had the courage to ask: the schoolchildren who grew up with me, the teachers, the parents, the interviewers for jobs. Not even Tanner had ever asked me why I looked the way I did. I felt my face begin to twitch, although I was also overcome with a sense of relief at the opportunity to explain.

I leaned against the counter, looking down at my little sister. Her face, so pure and innocent, showed only curiosity. There wasn’t a trace of sympathy, like I sensed on so many other people’s faces when they looked at me. At that moment, as I stared at my little sister’s innocent face, I wondered whether those looks were real or imagined.

“What did Mom tell you?” I said to her. “About my …” I almost called it a handicap, even though I’d have been heartbroken to have heard anyone else to refer to it that way. It wasn’t a handicap; it didn’t prevent me from doing anything other than looking like other people.

“About your neck?” she asked flatly. “Mom said …” She rubbed the heel of her hand across her chin, momentarily disfiguring her face. “She said something I didn’t get,” she said, then giggled. Bailey took her hand from her face and smiled. “She said to stop asking about it,” she said, looking at me with a grin that was missing two teeth.

I placed a hand on top of her head. Maybe Bailey – sweet, innocent, naïve Bailey – maybe she could have been the one to save me. Maybe if things had been different, if we had been closer in age or if maybe I had let her in more freely, maybe she could have been the one to pull me out of the darkness of my own mind. But I had been too busy resenting her presence for all those years to let her in.

“It’s called a genetic disorder,” I said, and her expression did not change. “My spine” – I pointed toward the back of my neck, running my index finger along bone – “it’s missing a small piece up here. It’s something I was born with; no one really knows why.”

Bailey jammed a finger up her nose as she looked away. She stuck her toe in a grate at the bottom of the freezer, below the door, and looked up at the ceiling again.

“Do you understand?” I said.

Bailey shrugged and picked at a scab on her knee.

“No,” she whispered. “Doesn’t matter, though.” She looked up at me and smiled. For a brief moment, she looked much older than she was – maybe 14 or 15. “Sorry I asked,” she said.

I looked down at her, wondering how innocent, pure little girls like her grew up to be women like Yolo. I wondered what Bailey’s life would turn out like. “Never be sorry,” I said, patting her head. “Asking is good. Never apologize for asking.”

A half-smile was frozen on her face as she stared up at me. I don’t know why, but I leaned over and kissed her on the top of the dirty blond hair that covered my little sister’s head.

###

A few days later, Tanner had just left the basement of my parents’ house after a long afternoon of playing video games, when my father came down the stairs unexpectedly. I was wrapping the joysticks in their cords, although if he’d snuck up on me 15 minutes later, it would have been just as likely that I’d have been fiddling with my own joystick.

“Hey, Sport,” he said, standing there at the bottom of the stairs. He glanced around the room, as if it was the first time he’d ever been in his own basement. “Whatcha doin’?”

I shrugged and told him I was just hanging out. I tossed a joystick onto a nearby shelf. He nodded, slowly, while staring at me with a focus he rarely showed.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” he said, and he lifted one leg and rested his penny loafer on a chair. He pulled at his slacks so that they wouldn’t tear and leaned on his knee. “Got a second?” I set down the joysticks and sat on the couch, where Tanner and I had been beside each other only minutes earlier. “You’re a senior now,” my father continued. “Right?”

I nodded. He picked up a baseball from a nearby shelf and examined it, trying out a grip. “Are you a part of any … clubs?” he said without looking at me.

He was beginning to make me nervous. “Clubs?”

“You know,” he said, tossing the ball up and down while watching it carefully fall into the softness of his hand. My father claimed to be an athlete long ago, but he didn’t much seem to care for sports anymore. “Chess club. Drama club. Are you a *part* of something? At school.”

I could feel my heart beating really fast. I felt like a defendant in a courtroom. These were the kinds of questions I hated, the kinds my mom always asked but never seemed that interested in having answered. The rarity of my father standing in front of me, looking at me, made the inquisition feel like my last rites.

“It would help you get into college,” he said. “To have some *activities* on your application.” He stopped tossing the ball. “You *are* planning on college, right?”

He looked at me like he knew the answer: that I hadn’t much thought about it. He set the ball back on the shelf and began to pace, like he was running one of his management meetings at the office.

“Anthony had a lot of things he could put on his college application,” he said, setting the baseball on a shelf. He used his hands to help him speak, waving them out in the space between us. “He was pretty involved, and I think it helped him get into a good school.” He rubbed his hands together in front of his chest. He was still wearing his work tie, although it had been loosened around the neck. “Besides,” he added, “it’s always good to be a part of something.” He clapped his hands together. For the first time, I noticed his hair was thinning. “You’ve got to belong to something,” he said, “or you don’t belong.” He stared at me like he’d spoken some sort of golden mantra, like I was supposed to spring off the couch, run up the stairs and announce by candidacy for the AV Department at my high school.

When I said nothing, my father rapped his knuckles on the wooded shelf, pointed toward me with a wink, then turned to walk back up the stairs. When he was gone, and I heard the door carefully close above me, my eyes immediately went to the baseball that he’d left on the shelf. I don’t know why, but I thought about Yolo right then, how she probably didn’t belong to anything, how she had gotten lost somewhere along the way, just like I’d gotten lost, and how I’d gone to her looking for something she didn’t have.

I wondered what she was doing right then, whether Ray was right about her going back to turning tricks, and whether she ever thought about me. I wondered what there was to look forward to in her life. And what there was in mine.

###

I was lounging in the basement again a few days later when my father’s voice from the top of the stairs startled me to attention. “Get your tail up here!” he called out, and I struggled to remember what I may have done that would get me in trouble. All I could think was that he’d caught me pleasuring myself, and it was time for me to pay for my sins. Sheepishly, I ascended the stairs and found my father and sister Bailey waiting for me. *What’s she got to do with this?* I thought.

“C’mon, Sport,” my father said. “Get a move on. We’re heading out.”

I didn’t know where we were going, nor was I too eager to find out. He led Bailey and me toward the garage.

“I’m tired of watching the two of you loaf our life away,” he said as he opened the door that connected the house to the garage. “I’m going to show the both of you where a life of laziness ends up.”

We got into his blue sports car and headed east, out of the familiarity of our own neighborhood and its massive trees and children playing in the streets. He drove past the church we had avoided for several years, out toward the other side of town. His windshield wipers flapped to their own rhythm – he didn’t allow music while we were in the car, so the drive was made almost entirely in silence – and a sprinkle of rain was met with the occasional crash of thunder.

We turned onto Geary, and he spoke for the first time.

“Losers, vagrants and creeps,” he said. “Thieves and free-loaders. That’s what hangs out in this part of town.” One corner of his lips curled. “There,” he said, pointing toward a bearded man who was huddled in a doorway next to an overstuffed garbage bag. “That’s a guy who had no clue what he wanted to do with his life. Probably screwed around in class and hung out with his deadbeat friends after school.” My father sneered. I watched the man get smaller in the rearview mirror on the passenger side. “That’s where it got him,” my father said.

As we sat at a stoplight, with the rain picking up around us, a black man walked by the car hurriedly. My father flipped the switch on his automatic locks. “That guy,” he said, nearly in a whisper, “he probably got a couple of girls pregnant and had to drop out of high school. Now he’s running from the cops.” I glanced in the rearview mirror again and saw that the man had broken into a run, with a city bus waiting a block ahead. On the back of the guy’s jacket, it said: STERLING AC REPAIR. He carried a lunchbox.

“There,” my father said suddenly, and up ahead I could see a woman wearing a large jacket with a fur hood. “That’s a prostitute,” my dad said, and immediately I thought of Yolo and wondered if she was really back to working the streets. “They do things, with men,” my father said, “*bad* things. For money.” He glanced at Bailey in the rearview mirror. I turned to look at her and saw a frightened little girl. “All these people,” my dad said, “they never had any motivation. They waited for people to *give* them things … instead of going out and *earning* it.”

The three of us drove on like that for another fifteen or twenty minutes, with my dad occasionally pointing and telling us some story, and my sister cowering in the back seat. I just couldn’t stop thinking of Yolo as we rode around. My eyes scoured the avenues as my father spoke meaningless words that seemed to gush out as quickly as they popped into his head. I knew she was out there, out in the mist and rain somewhere. I felt sorry for her. I wondered why she had to be out there, while I was in this warm, heated car with my dad and my sister. I wondered why all those people were out there while I was safe and dry. What had I done to deserve it?

And why was I the one who always felt so sad?

**CHAPTER 23**

A year has passed since he’s left her, and only now, as she slips into the skintight pantsuit that he bought her on one of those forgotten Christmases when we were all a family, does she appear to notice. The drops that roll down the wrinkling skin of my mother’s face are for him. Even I can see this – by the anger in her eyes, by the set of her jaw, and mostly by the copied documents that her lawyer left her and that she now takes with her as she leaves house without much of a visible rush. Three years after saying good-bye to her son while staring at his casket, she will say good-bye to her husband.

An hour later, she sits across from him, wearing the pantsuit and a crimson silk scarf. She has on makeup for the first time since my funeral. My father glances at her, then does it again, as if he’s forgotten that she could look pretty. There is a shame in his eyes, for now that he belongs to another, he should not be looking at his wife this way.

Each flanked by a lawyer, they sign the papers, and she is not his wife anymore.

“I’m sorry it’s come to this,” my father says in a stoic voice, unable to look at her now.

My mother stands and pushes the pen across the desk between them.

“Save your fucking sorrow for your girlfriend,” she says. As she turns, her chair falls backward and hits the floor. My father smirks, as if he’s better than all of this. My mother’s lawyer grabs her elbow in an effort to steady her, but she only pulls away. She turns and looks at my father for the first time.

“You don’t know the first thing about family,” she says. “You know that? Not the *first* thing.” He’s still smirking. He looks at his lawyer as if to say, *Can we go now?* “That’s why we’re here, Tony,” she says. “Because this family was always a *burden*. That’s how you saw it.”

He looks at her. His face shows that he’s going to resist the urge to respond to her childish outburst -- that he’s not going to lower himself. But then he opens his mouth, and the words spill out.

“You know what’s a burden, Peg?” he says. “Ten-hour days. Sixty-hour weeks. Busting your ass at the same job – day in and day out. Every minute – every *second* – accounted for because of some fucking job that meant something to me once but stopped a long time ago. *That’s* a burden, Peg, that need for *survival*. That’s what it felt like. If I didn’t keep making money – keep working toward promotions and raises and staying in the boss’s favor – then the family wouldn’t survive. That was *my*  burden.”

They’re staring into each other’s eyes for the first time in as long as I can remember, burning each other with their glares. Something in my mother’s eyes says that she’s never seen him this exposed before; something in my father’s makes him look as vulnerable as he’s ever been.

“We would’ve survived, Tony,” she says softly. Both lawyers are sitting, staring at papers, pretending they’re not there. “You know we would’ve survived.”

My father sneers.

“On what?” he says. “And don’t say *love* because you know that’s bullshit. We had plenty of love. For a long time.”

“What they needed was a father.”

He stands and takes a step forward. “They had one, Peg,” he says, pointing at her. “Godammit, Peg, you know they had one. Don’t you *dare* say …” His voice trails off, and his finger hangs in the air. “Remember this,” he says, his voice measured. “I told you, long before we were married, that I never wanted kids. *You’re* the one who wanted kids, Peg. Don’t forget that. I did that for *you*. Don’t blame me for …” He exhales and waves his hand in the air. He looks like he has more to say, but he doesn’t.

She is crying, shaking her head. She covers her mouth. Her lawyer stands and rests a hand on her shoulder.

“Enough,” he says. “The two of you have had enough. Let’s wrap this up and –“

“You know what your burden is?” my father says, ignoring the lawyer while glaring at my mother. “Your burden is you can’t let things go. You couldn’t let *him* go, and now you can’t let go of *us*.” He takes another step toward her and touches her arm. She pulls away. “Let me give you some advice, Peg,” he says. “You’ve got to let it go.” He turns, nods to his lawyer, and grabs his coat.

Before my father can leave the room, my mother calls out.

“You’re right,” she says. “Maybe you’re right, Tony. And maybe, for some, it’s damned easy to let go. You’ve always been like that. It’s always easy.”

After he walks out, and months before either of them will reach out and try to mend whatever’s left of the relationship, my mother stares at the open door and whispers to her lawyer: “It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t *our* fault.”

She turns to look at her lawyer – a frumpy, balding man in an expensive suit.

“It wasn’t our fault,” she says to him. “Was it?”

###

Tanner Boudin is alone in a tavern outside of Dallas. Since he turned 21, he’s started hanging out in college bars and living his life as if he’s among them. He listens to their stories and wonders what his life could have become.

He never even earned his high school degree. After my death, Tanner dropped out of school and began moving around. He’d never applied to any colleges or followed up on his military dreams, and so he assumed a new life and took on a new identity.

He became me.

Tanner Boudin used my driver’s license, my name and my small collection of short stories, and he moved on. He sold a few stories to a small publishing company, took the money and started a new life on the run. And now here he is, still moving, not running away from anything but not running toward anything either.

He drinks alone, staring into a long, empty glass that used to be filled with gin and grenadine, and in the next booth he overhears a conversation that piques his interest. A man about his age is crying, barely able to speak. He tells his friend that he can’t go on without her, that he just wants to *die*. He says he can’t believe she’s dead, that he didn’t know how much he loved her until she was taken suddenly from him. They were going to be married, the guy says, and now what’s left? All because of a drunk driver, there is nothing left.

“I just want to be with her,” the man behind Tanner says to a friend. “I just want to be *up there* with her. Forever.”

Tanner doesn’t believe in love, but he does believe in pain. And so he follows the man and his friend home later that night. He follows them to campus, past the huge buildings and manicured trees and the dormitories that line the grass. When the man’s friend peels off with a handshake and hug, Tanner continues on with him for 200 yards before moving in closely and wrapping his arm around the man’s throat in darkness. Using a knife that he carries for protection, Tanner takes the man’s life. Tanner is trying to save the man from the inevitable pain. Tanner has always been a protector this way, for as long as I’ve known him. He stands over the bleeding body, holding the knife, and he begins to weep. He whispers to himself. He whispers: “There must be an easier way.”

And then he is running again. He steals the man’s identity, leaves mine behind, and moves on. Running away, Tanner begins a new life.

Again.

**CHAPTER 24**

My brother Anthony came back from school only twice that final year of my life: at Thanksgiving and Christmas. He bragged about all the parties and activities and girls in his new world, and a part of me felt envious that he’d found the right place for himself. Anthony seemed to be the kind of guy who always stumbled into the right situation, while I was left to an existence of continual failure. For this, among other things, I hated my brother.

During one evening of his Christmas Break visit, Anthony wandered into my room without knocking, and I had to scramble to hide the notebook I’d been filling with self-hatred.

“So,” he’d said upon closing the door behind him, “what’s up?”

“What do you mean?” I said, carefully sliding my notebook under a pillow. I could feel my face twitching.

“It’s a pretty straight-forward question,” my 21-year-old brother said, his eyes bouncing around the room. “Like, with Mom and Dad and everything. Are they” -- he thought for a moment, then looked at me and smiled – “still nuts?” He waved his index fingers around both ears in a circular motion.

“They’re the same,” I said with a shrug.

“What about you?” he said, sitting on my bed. I had a sense of déjà vu, back to the time he appeared in my room uninvited to tell me he’d gotten into college two years earlier. But that had been about *him*. Now he was cracking open my least favorite subject: *me.*

“What *about* me?” I said.

“You doin’ okay, kid?”

I laughed, louder than I’d expected. Maybe it was the way he called me *kid*. Or maybe it was just the sudden interest he’d taken in me, now that he was gone. “Are you like some kind of psychology major now?” I said. “You come back from your fancy school with your fancy new friends, and you’re going to solve everyone’s problems?”

He stared at me silently, his mouth closed and his eyes pensive.

“What’s gotten into you?” he said after a long staredown. “You’re so … *angry*.”

“Thanks, Dr. Anthony.” I rolled over in my bed and picked up a paperback, one of Stephen King’s novels that Tanner had loaned me.

“This is hard,” he said. “For you. Being the oldest. You’re the big brother now.”

I turned and looked at him. “Jesus Christ, Freud,” I said. “Give it a rest.”

Anthony stood. My bed creaked underneath his weight. I thought maybe he’d try to tackle me, even though I’d passed him in terms of height. He was still my older brother, and the thought of a physical confrontation made my jaw feel tight.

“That’s the way you are now, huh?” he said, and that’s all he said. He didn’t attack me, he didn’t ask any more questions, and he didn’t wait for an answer. My brother Anthony simply turned and left the room, leaving the door open behind him.

I stood up and kicked the door closed. A single thought passed through my mind: that he might never see me again.

I stared at the closed door, separating me from my family and the world outside, and felt a heat rising within me. I wanted nothing more than to punish them for everything they’d done all those years, for the way they’d treated me like some kind of a nuisance on this planet, for how they all made me feel like I needed to be *fixed*.

Staring at the door, I couldn’t help wondering how we’d grown up in the same family and turned out so different. I didn’t know why I was so miserable, nor why he wasn’t. I couldn’t escape.

I stared at closed door. I thought of what Tanner Boudin had said. *You’ll miss me when I’m gone.*

I don’t know why I thought that, but I did.

###

A year before some shaggy-haired kid from outside of Seattle strapped on a guitar and turned out a new generation of rock music, and long before he put a shotgun in his mouth and ended his life, I got into my first big argument with Tanner Boudin.

“Trust me,” he said as we sat across from each other on a cold winter day inside the abandoned pool house, “if Jim Morrison was still alive, he’d be a fucking *joke*.”

I could feel my blood boiling. The Doors were playing on my portable cassette player a few feet away, and although they’d broken onto the scene about 20 years earlier, I’d only *really* discovered them that week. Classic rock had become my latest obsession – be it The Doors or Velvet Underground or The Stooges or Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. My musical tastes were moving backward, even if my life was stuck in neutral.

“You’ve got to listen to the lyrics,” I pleaded, holding up the cassette case for *Doors* with Jim Morrison’s ghostly face staring back at us. “It’s poetry. I’m telling you. The guy’s a genius.”

“Because he’s dead,” Tanner said flatly.

I stared at him, at a face that seemed void of all emotion.

“He was ahead of his time with the things he was saying and the beliefs he had,” I said.

“Jesus,” Tanner countered, throwing his hands up. “You weren’t even *there*.”

I pointed to the cassette player. “Listen,” I said. “Just *hear* the words. I’m a writer; I know what poetry is.”

“Everyone’s a writer,” Tanner said nonchalantly, and although I don’t think he said it to hurt me, the words slapped across my face. “Besides,” he added, “you don’t have to be a chef to know that fish sticks don’t taste as good as Filet Mignon. All I’m saying is that Jim Morrison is *way* overrated by this generation – and it’s because he’s dead.”

“That’s so –“

“Janis Joplin,” he continued. “Jimi Hendrix. John Belushi. James Dean.” He was counting each name off with his fingers. “*John F. Kennedy.* All overrated by premature death. Karen Carpenter. Nick Drake.”

“Who?”

“They all became legends *after* they died. Think about it. Bob Marley. *Che Guevara*.”

“*Who*?”

“The only way to become a legend in this world – truly a legend – is to die young.”

“What the hell does that have to do with The Doors?” I said.

Tanner leaned over me, his eyes big and menacing.

“You like Rod Stewart?” he said.

“Like, ‘Infatuation’ Rod Stewart?” I said. “Like, ’If You Think I’m Sexy?’”

“Yeah, him.”

“Sucks balls.”

“Correct,” he said, nodding emphatically. “Billy Joel?”

He was beginning to frustrate me. “’Uptown Girl’ sucks,” I said.

“And how about Jefferson Airplane? You like ‘We Built This City’?”

“Tanner, what the -?”

He slammed his hand down on the back of my chair.

“That’s who Jim Morrison would be right now if he was still alive,” Tanner said. “He’d be Rod fucking Stewart. David Crosby.”

“The cokehead guy with the bad mustache?”

“If Crosby had died the last time he snorted coke,” Tanner said, “he’d be bigger than Morrison right now.”

“Stupid,” I said.

“Morrison was a genius only in when he chose to die.”

I laughed. Probably too heartily, because it made Tanner step back. He folded his arms as I stood up and looked him in the eye.

“He *chose* to die,” I said. “That’s what you’re trying to tell me.”

He nodded.

“He overdosed,” I said.

“Precisely,” he said. His breath came out of his nostrils in clouds on a cold winter day.

“He *accidentally* overdosed, Tanner.”

This time, he was the one who laughed – a short, breathy laugh.

“Right,” Tanner said sarcastically, “and he *accidentally* became a legend.” He unfolded his arms and shook his head. “Genius,” he said. “I’ll give him that. *Genius.*”

Tanner sat down in a folding chair as if he’d won the argument. He pulled an apple from his backpack and took a bite.

“I suppose,” I said, measuring my words, “you’re gonna tell me Martin Luther King was overrated, too. That he *planned* his *assassination* at the right time.”

“The timing didn’t hurt,” Tanner said with a shrug. He took another bite, and I felt the urge, for the first time in my life, to slug him. He looked up at me. “*I have a dream*,” he said in a mocking voice. “*If I die young, they’ll name a holiday after me*. C’mon, man, everyone knows his star was fading.”

“Jesus Christ, Tanner,” I said.

“His timing was pretty good too – Jesus, I mean.”

“That’s enough!” I shouted, surprising myself with the passion. I turned away from him, rubbing my head. I could hear him munching on the apple behind me. Even in the cocoon of the pool house, where the biting winter wind could not find us, I shivered in the cold, Midwest chill. He smiled when I finally looked at him.

“What’s up with you, anyway?” he said. “Why are you getting so *mad*?”

I wasn’t sure why he’d gotten under my skin, but my face felt flush and the facial twitch was back. Maybe it was because, deep down, I knew he was right.

“Just leave me alone,” I said weakly. I tried to turn away from him, but my spinal condition prevented it.

He had a smile on his face, which wasn’t like Tanner at all. The blank-stared, closed-mouthed kid had been replaced by a more sinister version. He looked at me like all the other kids had looked at me – when they looked at me at all.

“You’re being a pussy,” he said.

I knew I should have punched him, or should have *wanted* to punch him, but all the strength sapped out of my body. My stomach turned over, like it so often did. My eyes welled up. It was as if the anger inside me was ready to seep out in vomit and tears.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Tanner said. “You’re gonna cry.” He tilted his head. “A senior in fucking high school, and you’re gonna fucking cry.”

The look on his face said that he was finally in control of someone. He finally had a sense of power. I was such a piece of shit that even weak, useless Tanner Boudin was now looking down on me.

He was waiting for me to say something, to *do* something, but I couldn’t move – for fear that I’d break down. Part of me wished he would just hit me or walk away, just let me be alone with my soft stomach and my welled-up tears. He was probably right … no, he *was* right: I was a pussy. I was weak and useless and fragile. But so was he. He was supposed to be like *me,* not *them.*

As I stood there, I thought of my birthday. I would turn 18 in less than a month, and the thought of having no one there to celebrate made me feel faint. I couldn’t lose Tanner, not now. I couldn’t spend my life alone.

He broke the silent standoff.

“Hey,” Tanner said. “It’s okay. Christ.” He leaned forward and patted me on the shoulder awkwardly. The tears came. I couldn’t stop them. “Jesus,” he whispered. “I don’t even know why we’re fighting.” He sat down next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. The act made me feel even more helpless. The Doors tape had ended – “*It hurts to set you free*,” Morrison had sung, “*But you’ll never follow me/The end of laughter and soft lies/The end of nights we tried to die/This is the end*.” We sat in silence for a full minute.

“This is all I’m saying,” Tanner concluded, “if *we* died today, we’d be remembered. That’s all. That’s what I was trying to say.” When I turned to look at him, his eyes were focused on a window that looked out on the darkness around the waterless pool.

“What are you talking about?” I said softly, wiping my eyes.

“Dying young,” he said. “We could do it. It’s something we could do, and no one could stop us. We could control them – for once. We could be remembered for *something.*” Then Tanner pulled his arm from my shoulders and stood. “Think about it,” he said. “We could go on with our lives – you off to some college, me to the army -- take a bunch of shit from frat guys or superior officers, get some degree in something or other, sit at some desk every day for forty years, then die an insignificant death with a potbelly and a thinning, gray hairline.” His eyes were closed now, as if Tanner was trying to see the future. “Or,” he said, “we could die young and be forever remembered for what we *could* have been.” He smiled and opened his eyes. “Possibility,” he said. “It’s the foundation of legend. That’s all I’m saying.” With a wink, he added: “Just ask Morrison.”

I stared at him. Until that moment, the thought hadn’t crystallized so clearly in my conscience. Of course, I’d been thinking it all along. This was my way out. This was my chance to show them just how miserable I’d been, to show my mom that she couldn’t fix me, and to show my dad that all that sadness I felt was real, and to show all the kids in school that they should have accepted me – accepted *us*.

And it was a way for me to prove to Tanner that I wasn’t a pussy. I could do something. I could fix my problems, and nobody could stop me.

Mostly, it was a chance to escape. I knew what this life was like, what it would always be like. In death, there seemed to be unlimited possibilities.

“When?” I asked Tanner Boudin on that cold winter day inside the pool house. “When do you want to do it?”

He smiled.

###

No act, I realized as I lied in bed that night, could be more intimate than to die together. This would be something Tanner and I could share, perhaps a way to stay bonded forever. Maybe in death, we would be eternally at each other’s side.

I knew he’d been thinking about moving away and joining the army after graduation, and I was terrified to see him go. My only way to stay close to him, barring a military commitment of my own, was to die alongside him, to have our bodies found side by side in the woods and be buried together. Nothing could be a better sign of friendship.

I remembered an article I’d seen in a magazine one morning while waiting at the dentist’s office, an article about a kid who got cancer when he was 14 years old. He was involved in all kinds of school activities, on the track team and all that, and the article told the whole story of his life and everything he had to go through just to survive. They called the kid a “hero” and talked about how he could’ve been this and could’ve been that, had his life not been cut tragically cut short.

I was certain they’d write the same things about me: the suffering, the loneliness, the unlimited potential. Tanner Boudin was right: they would talk about all the things we *could* have been and *could* have done.

The next day, we made an oath. Sitting inside that pool shed on a snowy afternoon, with the wind blowing so hard that we could feel the walls shake, we looked into each others’ eyes and shook on it.

“In a blaze of glory,” Tanner said as we made our promise.

“Friends forever,” I said in response.

We held our handshake grip hand for a long time, staring at each other without saying anything. There was something in the way he looked at me that said he didn’t fully believe me; his eyes were telling me that if I backed out on him, I’d be alone forever.

As the day got closer, I didn’t know if I had the courage to go through with it. I didn’t even know if I was ready to die, not yet. I tried to think of a way to tell him that I just couldn’t do it. But I couldn’t say anything. I was too scared.

And in my heart, I knew he was right. It was time to go.

###

I walked past a group of teenagers smoking cigarettes behind a tree, past three guys with lacrosse sticks, past a small gathering of band kids holding their instrument cases, past four skinny girls with matching miniskirts and badly dyed hair, past a trio of big guys in letter jackets, and into the school. Tanner had not shown up that day, nor had he on the previous day, the day after we’d made our pact. He’d completely given up – on everything – while I kept plugging along for the sake of not raising suspicion from my parents or teachers.

I had a few minutes before the first bell, with nothing to do, so I headed for the bathroom. As I reached for the door handle, a big wooden door opened suddenly and knocked me back. I tripped and fell backward onto the floor, by books scattering all around.

“Oh, shit,” a voice said from above me. “I’m so sorry.”

I looked up to see the square face and red hair of Sean Tate, standing over me and offering a hand. “I’m so sorry,” he said again, his voice soft and somewhat embarrassed. I looked at his hand but refused to take it. I wasn’t going to fall for one of his tricks.

“I didn’t even see you there,” Sean Tate said as I pushed myself off the ground and stood up. I grabbed my books and turned to face him. He offered a grin. “Hey, man,” he said. “I haven’t …” He held out his hand again, this time looking for a handshake. I stared at it. Then I looked at his face. We were alone. “I’m sorry about that,” he said. “Really, I am.”

I pushed past him and into the bathroom, where the only sound was a dripping faucet. I went into one of the stalls, even though I only had to take a piss. I stood over the toilet when I heard the bathroom door open. I heard my name; it disoriented me. I quickly zipped up my pants without peeing.

“Listen, man, I just …” It was Sean Tate. His voice sounded different. He seemed meek and without the confidence he often showed while walking the halls in a pack. “I just really wanted to say I was sorry. I didn’t mean to push you over.”

“It’s okay,” I said, hoping that would end the conversation.

“You all right?” Sean Tate said.

“I’m taking a piss.”

I could hear him snicker behind the closed stall door between us, but not the way he did when one of his so-called friends was making fun of me.

“Listen,” he said, and the sound of his voice was making me wish I had an escape door. I looked into the toilet, thinking maybe I could dive in and swim to freedom. “You still, um, see Tanner?” Sean Tate asked. “I mean, do you …?”

I didn’t know what he meant, so I just repeated myself.

“I’m trying to take a piss in here, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. He didn’t say anything for a couple of seconds, and all I could hear was that drip of the faucet. “I just wanted you to know that I never told any of them about Tanner,” he said, breaking the silence.

“Who?”

“Tanner Boudin.”

I opened the stall door and looked at him.

“Told who?” I said.

“Anyone. Any of my friends. I didn’t say anything.”

I went over to the sink and started washing my hands, stealing a glance in the mirror. He was looking at his feet.

“I didn’t tell anyone about him, if you were wondering,” Sean Tate said.

I stared at him through the mirror.

“What about him?” I said. I turned off the faucet, then turned to face him. “What about him?” I repeated.

Sean looked at me. His face showed pity, a look I knew all too well. I could feel my face twitching.

“Nothing,” he said softly. Then he ruffled his red hair and said: “I just wanted to make sure, you know, you’re all right and all.”

The first bell rang, startling us both.

“Thanks, mother,” I said to Sean Tate. He forced a smile, turned and walked out.

Then I looked at myself in the mirror again. I didn’t like what I saw. There in the privacy of the quiet bathroom, I looked lonesome and weak and scared. I worked up some phlegm in my throat, washed it around in my mouth, then spit at the mirror. The white, foamy substance rolled down the glass slowly and made my face look disfigured and even uglier than it already was.

###

When I finally saw Tanner again, we met out by the pool. It was a cold day, but we sat in the snow and made snowballs that we threw aimlessly. We didn’t seem to have much to say. It was kind of weird. I even thought about asking him if he still thought about the army, just to make conversation, but I didn’t.

“Missed a great day at school,” I said finally, after our arms were tired and my lips were numb with cold. “Teachers were boring, kids were retarded. Just like all the other days.”

He forced a smile but didn’t laugh. His head was down, and he scribbled pictures in the snow with his gloved finger. He was wearing his stocking cap and those big, white-framed sunglasses and red stocking cap.

“Why even bother,” he said quietly. “With school, I mean.”

“Just doing my time,” I said. He didn’t say anything at that. He was being really quiet, more quiet than usual, but I couldn’t think of a way to ask him why.

“So how are we going to do it?” I said, trying to start another conversation.

“Do what?”

I stared at the white ball on top of his stocking cap. I wondered how he could possibly have anything else on his mind.

“You know,” I said, “the pact.”

He stopped scribbling in the snow and looked up at me through the bulky sunglasses. Then he lifted them onto his forehead. His eyes looked tired, like he hadn’t slept in three days. His cheeks were red from the cold.

“Does my badge say KILLING YOURSELF TOUR GUIDE?” he said coldly, pointing at the breast of his coat.

I chuckled at that uncomfortably. But he wasn’t even smiling. He looked back down at the snow and scribbled some more with his finger. He’d drawn a large bird, with wings that spread out past either side of Tanner’s body.

Carefully, I said: “Why do you want to die?”

He didn’t say anything at first, and I thought he was ignoring me. But then he spoke without looking up.

“You’re not chickening out, are you?” He had stopped scribbling, still staring at the snow. “Are you, pussy?”

I hated it when he called me that. He knew it got under my skin. “No,” I said sheepishly, remembering just how easy it had been for him to make me cry that day. “I just want to know. *Why* do *you* want to die?”

He shrugged and started drawing again. “Control, I guess,” he said. “I hate the unknown, and this is one of those variables you can control.” I thought he might be finished, that his vague explanation was all my best friend was going to provide, but then he continued. “Maybe this will make someone notice,” he said. “Just once. You and me, we walked around the same hallways every day, went to the same movie theater on weekends, crossed paths with all the same people. And none of them even looked at us. It’s like we’re *not there*.” He finished his snow bird, stood up and examined it, then looked at me. “Maybe by dying we’ll kind of come alive, y’know?”

I nodded, although I didn’t know. Not really. I’d never known that Tanner had felt this way. I had always thought that he was able to ignore how others perceived him, and I admired him for that. As it turned out, we were even more alike than I thought.

“You can’t go through life invisible,” he said. “Not forever.” He crouched and ran his gloved hand through the snow, erasing the bird he had drawn. He looked up at me. “If we do this,” he said, “*when* we do this, every one of them is going to look. They’ll see our pictures in the papers and have to look at our faces and they’re going to acknowledge our existence – just this once. Just for this one time. The first time. We can *make* them look at us. That’s what I call *control*.”

I stared at his face, what wasn’t covered by the big sunglasses. His small mouth looked sad. His skin looked pale except for the red cheeks. He looked the same way I probably looked.

“That would be enough for you, huh?” I asked.

Tanner nodded, then started clapping his gloves together to shake off all the snow.

“You were going to go off to the army,” I said. “You’d already decided that, hadn’t you?”

“I signed the papers six months ago. I had to go off somewhere. I had to get away,” he said. “I had to *fight* for something.”

“Fight where?”

“Anywhere. I wanted to go to war.”

“There’s no war going on.”

He stared at me. He took off his sunglasses again and looked deep into my eyes. He did that for about fifteen seconds, then put his sunglasses back on and stood up. A cloud of breath spilled from his mouth like gun smoke.

“My dad’s got a gun,” he said softly, looking out at the trees. “I know where it is.”

“Do you know how to use it?” I asked.

He exhaled a cloud of imaginary smoke-like breath. “I used it once,” he said calmly. I stared at his face.

“You what?” I asked.

“The Crazy Frenchman,” Tanner said, glaring at me. “Remember him?”

I nodded my head. I couldn’t speak.

“I shot him,” Tanner said. “Once. In the back of the head.” His gloved hand formed the shape of a gun, and he made a shooting sound. “I made him disappear,” Tanner Boudin said.

I froze. Looking up at him, I didn’t know what to say. My friend had a secret, one much bigger than playing with your private parts after dark or losing your virginity to an older lady from work. I wondered what else he hadn’t told me. I wondered if his life had been a lie.

“That’s why I wanted to be in the army,” he said softly. “Once you kill someone, you can’t stop.”

I felt myself stop breathing right then – just for a second, but it felt like my air had been cut off for minutes, maybe hours. That, I thought, is what it’s like to die. My own best friend had become a murderer, and I had no way of knowing. Inside, I also felt a pang of jealousy. I wanted to ask him what it was like to kill. I wanted to tell him that I’d dreamed of doing it myself. But deep down, I knew I would never have been able to do it, that I didn’t have it in me. Unlike Tanner, I never could have been a soldier. I was too much of a pussy, just like Tanner had said. The only person I could kill would be myself.

“Now all we’ve got to do is get you a gun,” Tanner said. “We need two. We have to do it *together*, or somebody’s going to chicken out. We have to do it at the same time, just to make sure.”

I nodded but couldn’t say anything. It felt like I already had the barrel of a gun jammed into my mouth. I couldn’t swallow. I couldn’t breathe. At that moment, I felt like I might die right there. And I wasn’t ready. Not yet.

**CHAPTER 25**

Tanner Boudin is celebrating his 18th birthday by becoming a man. He’s drinking the last of a six-pack while standing outside of a massage parlor in a sketchy part of town – a part of town we visited only once in high school, and that was so that Tanner could pick up his gory movies at some crappy video store on Broadway. He’s forcing down a beer, wincing with every sip, and smoking a cigarette. Since that day in the shed four months earlier, the day when he sat nearby while his best friend died, Tanner has taken to smoking a pack a day. The school gave him a few weeks of bereavement, and when he finally went back, he lasted less than a week. He’s got no high school diploma, and very little money, yet he’s standing in the darkness of a cold Midwest winter and waiting to spend $100 on a prostitute who’s operating under the pretense of a masseuse.

The daylight has faded, and the only lights that surround Tanner are the cherry of his cigarette and a flashing MOTEL-M-MO-MOT-MOTE-MOTEL sign across the street. The door to the parlor opens. Tanner drops his cigarette, steps on it and polishes off what’s left of his warm beer. His hair covers his ears now, and he’s got whiskers on his chin.

“Someone out there?” a female voice says from behind the screen door. “Smell like a smoke.” A face appears. One that I know.

Tanner looks at the woman but says nothing. Her eyes scan the darkness, eventually falling on his face in the dim moonlight.

“Hey, there,” she says. “You come for a rub?” Tanner’s inability to respond might as well be a nod of approval, because the woman smiles and says: “You come to the right place, son. You come to Yolo.”

There, on a cold winter night on the east side of town, my best friend and the only woman I’ve ever had stare at each other as complete strangers. He drops the empty beer can on the ground and goes to her. I cannot say what it is inside of Tanner that allows her to lead him through the door and into a back room. Only four months have passed since we sat together – Tanner and me – for the final time, inside that abandoned pool house, with guns in hand. But what I know now is that I never knew my best friend quite as well as I thought I did.

“Yolo,” he says flatly. “That’s your name?”

She smiles. She looks years older than I remember, even though only a year or so has passed. “You know Yolo?” she says.

His face blank, Tanner Boudin shakes his head. “Never heard that name before,” he says. He nods. “Yolo – You Only Live Once.”

She giggles and rubs his arm. “I like that,” she says. “I never hear that before. ‘You Only Live One.’” Yolo licks her lips and tosses her brown hair.

“It’s my first time,” Tanner says suddenly to her, and for some reason there is pride in his voice.

I am not allowed to run away – not now, in death. Escape is no longer an option. I cannot look away – not now, not ever. I can only watch as my best friend undresses quickly and prepares to lose his virginity to the same woman who took mine. Our town is big enough for two lonely teenagers to get lost in a crowd, but small enough that the same hooker can take the innocence of two friends by pure coincidence.

“Here,” Yolo says, holding out a condom, “wear this. I don’t need no more babies.”

Tanner, standing only in his underwear, takes the wrapped condom between his fingers. Yolo unzips a tight skirt, lets it fall, lifts her blouse over her head, and stands only in a yellow bra and red underwear.

“I got four,” she says, also with pride in her voice. “Four kids. Just had me another one two months ago – a little boy.” She grabs the folds of skin above her waist. “Not bad for the mother of a two-month-old, no?” she says, nodding her head.

“You’re very pretty,” Tanner says, unconvincingly, looking down. He’s still standing in his underwear, the wrapped condom dangling between his first two fingers. He’s struggling to stand up straight. “You’re married?” he says.

She laughs. “Hell’s no,” she says. “Yolo never make that mistake again.” She unsnaps her bra from the back. “Four different daddies,” she says. She looks him up and down. “My little baby’s daddy, he’s not much older than you.” Her bra straps fall off her shoulders, down her arms. Her large, dark nipples stare at Tanner, who stares back. “You like?” she says. He nods but says nothing. The bulge in his underwear has gone flaccid as he stands there in the darkness of a back room at the parlor. “You nervous,” she says. “My littlest baby’s daddy was nervous. I think it was his first time, too.” She smiles. “You got a name?” she says.

“Ralph,” Tanner says, changing his identity for the first time that I know of.

She smiles. “I like that. Ralph’s a good, strong name. Names are important.”

Tanner looks around the room, then back at Yolo. He nods while staring at her breasts.

“My babies all got strong names,” Yolo says proudly. “Eugustus, he’s 17 now. Megganstance and Skilkelly, they’ll be in junior high soon.” She points to a fresh scar across her abdomen as her meaty breasts hang down above.

“My baby’s name,” she says, “is Wanderling. Wanderling Christian Muldoon.” She looks out toward the wall, as if she’s trying to see her child’s face. I’m watching the two of them, here in this massage parlor a few miles from where I grew up, not far from where I died.

“Wanna hear somethin’ messed up?” Yolo says to Tanner. “My baby’s papa, Wanderling’s daddy, I didn’t even know the guy’s name. He was some kid, probably about your age. A kid from work, a kid we all called High School.”

By the way Tanner stares blankly, it’s obvious none of this means anything to him. He’s just looking for a quick way to break the seal on his own virginity.

“Can’t say I ever saw him again,” Yolo says. “The baby’s daddy, I mean.”

Tanner looks back down at the floor. His underpants are still flat in the front. Talking about a woman’s two-month-old baby is clearly not his idea of foreplay.

“How old you anyway?” Yolo says. “You barely a man, huh?”

“Just turned 18,” Tanner says proudly.

“Damn, boy,” Yolo says. “That a great age. Got your whole life in front of you. Your *whole* life.” She smiles. “What you gonna do with your life, Ralph? What you gonna do?”

Tanner looks down at the floor. He is a different person now, if only in name, and yet he can’t run from the feelings inside of him.

“Can’t really say,” he says. “I was going to join the army, but …”

“But?” she says. “But what? Nothin’ wrong with the army. They say that where heroes are born.”

Tanner looks at her, his face blank, his mouth closed.

“I’m no hero,” he says. “I can’t even stand the thought of picking up a gun. Never again –“ He stops himself. He’s said too much. He’s revealing himself now, being Tanner instead of Ralph.

“Do you give massages?” he says quickly. “Just massages. Like, if I’m not in the mood for anything else?”

“Just massage?” she says, tilting her head. Tanner nods. Disappointment flashes in Yolo’s eyes. She picks up her blouse from the bed cover and holds it against her hip. “Fifty dollars, boobs out,” she says. “Twenty with shirt on. Half hour only.”

Tanner holds out the unused condom for her. She takes it back.

“Twenty will do,” he says.

Yolo throws on her blouse, pulls up her skirt and begins to stretch her fingers.

###

They’re holding each other, just lying there in the darkness with their shades pulled down on a sunny afternoon. They spend too much of their time like this, my mother and father, and today they’re so overcome that my mother hasn’t even gotten out of bed.

“Tony,” she says. She’s not crying now; she’s out of tears. “Tony, why? Why why why?”

He strokes her hair. His other arm is around her shoulders. He’s taken another day off work – that’s more than 20 now since I died.

“There’s no way, Peg,” he says softly. “He was broken – that’s it. No one could fix him.”

They lie there in near silence, the only sound a clock ticking in the hallway as time continues on. My bedroom is down the hall, just the way I left it. Posters of Morrissey and Johnny Rotten and Jim Morrison on the walls. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Catch-.22* and *Fountainhead* on the bookshelves. Decorations I never really used, like the baseball my dad tried only once to teach me to throw and the Bible that my mother gave me but that I never opened – not once. In the days that followed my death, my father would come in here looking for clues. He’d stare up at the face of Morrissey, as if to say: *What have you done with my son*? He even went as far once as to put one of my Smiths records on the turntable near my window and listened for only a few seconds before wincing and lifting the needle off the vinyl. He held the baseball in his hand, felt around in my drawers for any sign of drugs and even read the first 12 pages of *Catcher in the Rye*. None of it seemed to satisfy his curiosity.

And now, as he holds my mother in the darkness of their bedroom, my father carries the look of a man who’s tired of trying to find meaning.

“You know what I think?” my mother whispers. He’s still stroking the top of her head.

“What, babe?”

She looks up at him. “I think it was Tanner Boudin,” she says. “I think he put him up to it.”

“Shhhhh,” my father purrs, rubbing her cheek. “Peg, hush. You need rest. Why don’t you close your –“

“I do, Tony,” she says out loud. “I do think it was him.”

My father stares down at her.

“Tanner,” he says flatly. “You think it was Tanner Boudin.”

“I think he put him up to it,” my mother says again.

My father groans and gently removes his arm, standing and walking over to the closed window shade. He touches it.

“Peg,” he says softly, the frustration in his voice barely detectable, “you’ve got to pull it together. We can’t do this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she says, sitting up now.

He lifts the side of the shade with a finger and peeks out, squinting in the sunlight.

“Tony, what? What are you saying?”

“Peg, stop. Please stop.” His voice is even, despite the obvious impatience that he cannot hide. He groans again, looking out. “Jesus Christ, the people,” my father says. “He releases the shade, and there’s darkness again. “I swear to God. Every time I look out there, a damn neighbor is staring and whispering. ‘Look at the *freaks*! Hey, it’s the people with the dead kid!’”

My mother rolls over and stands up. She looks tired – not just from the emotion but from all the time she’s been spending at church this week. She was there for ten hours yesterday, helping set up pews for a Thursday night service, and then she watched a group of kids return on a bus from a week at Christ Camp and hug their parents in front of the church. She watched them all drive off, even a single lonely child who lingered around out front until she asked him if he was searching for something. The kid had looked at her but hadn’t said anything, and his parents drove up a few seconds later.

“At least he’s at peace now,” my mother says, probably for the 800th time in the past few months. “At least he’s at peace up there.” She’s looking up at the ceiling. My father watches her, then sits on the bed next to where she it.

“Do we know that?” my father says.

She looks at him. “Know what?”

“Do we really know where he is?” my father is saying now, as they glare at each other in the dim light of their bedroom. “Do we, Peg? Do we know for sure?”

She tosses a used Kleenex into a pile on the floor. She closes her eyes.

“I mean, what if he’s somewhere else,” my dad adds, “maybe stuck somewhere in between? Being punished for his –“

“He’s in heaven, Tony,” she says, sighing. She lies back on the bed. His face is ashen.

“You really believe that,” my father says softly. “You think a kid can do that to himself and –“

“How *dare* you,” she says, glaring at him. She pulls a sheet over her body. My father stands over her and puts a hand on her shoulder.

“Peg, you know that he …” My father’s voice peters out. He’s lost his momentum. In silence, he undresses and climbs into bed beside her. There is a visible space between them.

He rolls on his back and stares at the ceiling, lit only by a small lamp next to his bed. They lie like that, next to each other, in total silence. The sound of a dog barking up the street can be heard through the closed window behind the shade. They both stare at nothing in particular.

She speaks first. “I think of the baths,” she says, “the ones I gave him as a baby.” She goes silent for a full minute, maybe two. “The way he used to eat Oreo cookies, first tearing them apart and scraping off the filling with his teeth,” she says. “Seeing him in the rearview mirror, staring out the window at the world, while I wondered what was going on in his tiny little head.”

“Peg,” he says, “don’t do this.”

She falls silent again. He closes his eyes for sleep.

“His first haircut,” she says, startling him. “That white T-shirt with the blue sleeves that he wore a week straight one summer.”

“Peg,” he says impatiently.

“He’s still here,” my mother says. “He’s still here, Tony.”

He sits up in bed.

“Fucking *stop*, Peg,” my father says. “Stop! You’re –“

“I know how he felt,” my mother says. “I didn’t want to admit it, but I do.”

He groans and closes his eyes.

“Turn out the light, Tony,” she says softly.

“What?”

“Turn out the light. I have to tell you something.”

He obeys. We are in total darkness, the three of us.

“I thought about it once,” my mother says when they can no longer see anything in front of their faces. “Once, briefly,” she says. “I was young. Nineteen, maybe twenty. Before I met you.” She swallows hard, so hard that it’s audible in the otherwise silent room. “I got pregnant,” she says. “I know I never told you that, but I never could. I can’t even now, not when you’re looking at me. I was pregnant once before I met you, and I thought about killing myself. But I didn’t do it. I …”

My father’s not saying anything. All I can hear is his patient breathing.

“The child was … I had an abortion, Tony.”

He says nothing, not at first. He rolls over, like he’s going to turn on the light, but he doesn’t. He just says this: “That’s what we should’ve done. With him.”

When she doesn’t say anything, my father adds: “You ever think about that? About what it would have been like if …”

“If *what*?” my mother says. She turns on the lamp next to the bed and sits up, staring at him. “If *what*, Tony?”

My father looks at her, then looks away.

“If he’d never been born,” my father whispers. “What would it have been like if he’d never have been born?” He turns to look at her again. My mother’s eyes are wide, and she has to look away. “All that time we wasted …” my father says.

My mother sinks down into the sheets, under them, until she’d completely covered.

“Goddammit, Tony,” she says softly, almost in a whisper. “Goddamn you when you say things like that.” She shivers beneath the sheet. “When you say something like that,” she says quietly, “you can’t ever take it back. Not ever.”

“I don’t want to take it back. It’s how I feel, Peg. “I’m just telling it like it –“

“That moment,” my mother says flatly. “We’ll never have it back.”

As they sit in the silence, he shuts off the lamp again. They lie in darkness, saying nothing, until my father falls into a deep sleep and interrupts the silence with snoring. My mother pulls the sheet down and stares out into the darkness. She sleeps lightly, then slips out of bed and heads downstairs as the orange glow of sunlight paints the kitchen walls.

She eats alone, nibbling on a sliced pear with cottage cheese. And before my father wakes, she’s off to church to make final preparations for the Thursday service.

**CHAPTER 26:**

My senior year I assumed a new role at home: that of an occasional babysitter. Bailey had just turned 7 years old, and my parents felt more comfortable leaving me at home with her – if for no other reason than to get her off their hands for awhile on a Friday night. She was a ball of enthusiasm, all wrapped up in innocence and curiosity. She wanted to play games like Go Fish or go out in the backyard and ask me about the stars. She never seemed to want to go to bed, so most nights I’d have to lie on the floor of her room and tell her stories until she drifted off to sleep.

On many of those nights, I’d end up on the couch in the living room, watching television in darkness. I tried to ignore the sounds I heard, mostly the creaks a house makes in the wind. At least twice, I was completely certain that someone had come into the house and was going to kill Bailey in her sleep. But I panicked in fear at the thought of going upstairs to check on her. I was scared to die; I finally knew that for sure. I found that playing with myself was the only way for me to keep my mind clear of the images of death and dismemberment that came with the strange noises at night.

On one of those nights, long after my sister had fallen asleep, I was lying on the couch masturbating to a late-night movie when the front door burst open and my parents spilled into the darkness of the room. I froze in place. Their laughter paralyzed me, so much that I couldn’t even pry my hand from my penis. I was certain I’d been caught.

But as they moved in the dim light of the muted television, I realized that they had not only failed to catch me in the act but that they had also overlooked me altogether. They laughed and slurred their words as if I wasn’t there at all, as if I was invisible.

“Oh, Tony,” my mother said, “that was so much *fun* tonight.”

She giggled, and I could see that they were holding hands.

“Can I tell you something?” my mother said. “Something serious?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “There was a moment tonight, when I was off getting another h’orderve from the buffet table, and I looked up at you and Mr. What’s-His-Name, your boss. And you know what I thought? I thought: *He’s all mine*. That gorgeous man over there, the one telling the stories and making everyone laugh, he’s all *mine*.”

She kissed him on the lips, then stared at him. The silhouettes of their heads were only inches apart. “I was so proud of you tonight, Tony,” she whispered. “I’m *always* proud of you.”

My father kissed her again, then began humming a tune, one that sent him fishing through the record collection on the other side of the room. I watched them silently, my sweatpants now pulled up and my hand now safely on my stomach and my body deadly still. The music began.

“May I have this dance?” my father said, standing with his back to me. My mother giggled and placed her hands on his shoulders. They moved around me as I lied frozen on the couch. I closed my eyes and pretended I wasn’t there, but it was no use. I could hear their feet moving to the music, could decipher their occasional missteps as they danced.

“I love you,” my mother said drunkenly. “I don’t tell you that enough, do I?”

“You don’t need to,” my father said. The music filled their silences. “Remember when it was always like this?” he said, his speech slightly slurred. “When it was just the two of us?”

I opened one eye and saw my mother smiling in the dim light. The images on the television advertised some machine that could separate coins.

“How much fun we had,” my mother said. And then: “The kids certainly change things.”

Their feet pattered along the carpeted floor as they moved slowly in a circle.

“Eleven more years,” my father said. “In eleven years, they’ll all be gone.” He broke into a wide smile. “And I’ll have you all to myself,” he said.

My mother rested her head on his shoulder. I closed my open eye and fell asleep to the music, uncertain of whether they ever realized I was there.

###

Two weeks later, he was leading me through the woods. Darkness was setting in, and Tanner Boudin was breaking into a slow trot as the grey clouds above opened and dropped soft pellets of rain. I had left my $800 car at the church, and we had set off on our final journey. He was out in front of me from the start, and as his pace quickened I struggled to keep up. He would disappear behind a tree, then return to my line of sight in a flicker. In darkness, I could barely see his silhouette moving through the woods. His hair, longer now, splayed out behind him and his breath clouded up in the moonlight. He ran faster and faster, appearing and disappearing in front of my pursuit, continually fading into the night. I was moving my legs as fast as I could, but still I was unable to catch up to him. I remembered all the times he’d led me through these woods, through the trees and puddles and fallen leaves, through the clearing and toward the only place where we could truly escape. The wind whistled overhead. Rain battered m face. The crash of thunder overhead. And still, I struggled to keep up with the darkened figure that ran in front of me, as if trying to escape my pursuit.

I stumbled and fell. I reached out for him. He was gone.

In my mind, I could see him hiding somewhere, smiling, thinking about the army and the battles he would wage and the people he would forget.

And then, back on my feet and sprinting through the rain, I saw him again, out in front of me. I ran until he disappeared again, my feet in heavy pursuit, my lungs burning and my eyes straining in the tunnel vision of darkness, until he was there again, standing by the side of the empty pool with his back to me. He was just a dark figure, standing in the night. The rain poured down, bouncing off leaves with the sound of small firecrackers. When I finally caught up to him, he turned and looked at me.

“It’s time,” Tanner Boudin said.

###

We sat facing each other, my best friend Tanner Boudin and me, just a few feet apart. The cold of the metal chair seeped through my jeans. Our breath danced in smoke clouds between us, the walls of the abandoned pool shed offering little protection from the fall. We stared into each other’s eyes, not saying anything. My hands shook as I held the frosty steel of a .357 magnum between them. I’d bought it at a gun show that came through the city two weeks earlier, along with one single bullet. It’s all I would need.

Tanner was just as he had been on the day that we first met: disengaged, yet unafraid. His dark eyes still held that calm curiosity; his closed mouth symbolized all that he held inside. He sat there as if he was already dead, as if this moment was just a symbol of what had already happened. He didn’t show any sign of the nerves I felt within myself.

A strange thought gripped me as we sat in the cold, silent solitude of that abandoned pool shed. I stared into Tanner Boudin’s dark eyes and had a passing certainty that we were the last two people on earth, that whichever one of us did not fire first would have the distinction of inhaling humanity’s last breath.

“I hope my dad finds me,” I said, my palms rubbing the handle of the gun in hopes of warming the steel. I had not seen the words coming; like my initial meeting with Tanner Boudin, they were just there.

He said nothing. Nor did he look away. His stare blanketed me with a feeling that everything was going to be all right. The time had come. We would go together.

“What will you miss?” I said.

“Strawberries,” Tanner said matter-of-factly. “And the next Friday the 13th sequel.”

I looked around the shed. Paper bags and empty cups from fast-food restaurants were littered across the floor. My notebooks of stories were under my chair. Tanner’s sketchbook was under his. These were the only signs of our existence.

“I’ll miss the look on my brother’s face when he hears,” I said. “Smug bastard.” My hands were shaking.

Calmly, Tanner stretched his legs out between us. “We’ll be heroes,” he said. “Heroes always die young.”

I thought about the argument we’d had a few weeks earlier, when we were listening to a Doors cassette tape in this very spot. Now we were sitting in silence, except for the occasional rattling of the wind on the aluminum siding of the abandoned pool house.

“Ghandi was 78 when he died,” I said. Since our previous argument, I’d armored myself with knowledge.

“You’re right,” Tanner said, grinning, “but he was surrounded by six million fools. They didn’t know when to get out.” Tanner’s body was loose and relaxed, like he was preparing to take a nap – not preparing to kill himself. He wore a hooded sweatshirt and his camouflage pants. He looked down at the gun in his hands.

“What’s next?” I asked, and although I meant it literally, Tanner took it to be a philosophical question.

“We’re free,” he said. He held his hands in the air. His gun sat on his lap. “Of all this,” he said. Then he folded his arms across his chest and stared at the gun. “Who the hell knows where we go?” he said. “Who cares? We’re free.”

My hands were shaking. I could feel my face twitching and my stomach turning over.

“We’re not going to heaven,” I said softly.

Tanner shrugged. “Heaven,” he said with a smirk. “Heaven’s just a concept. It’s something people created to comfort themselves from the unknown.” He rubbed the gun, clutching it between his hands. “Another one of the things we imagine,” he added, “to protect us from reality.”

He looked me dead in the eye and nodded without words. It was his signal to begin the process of ending our lives.

As one, we lifted our guns and held them to our heads. My hands were shaking so violently that I could barely hold the pistol to my temple. Tanner sat across from me with a blank stare. He looked just as he had as a child, as if the 9-year-old Tanner Boudin was there sitting with me again, each of us taking a break from searching for bugs or reading comic books. Except for the gun.

At that moment, all the violence that I’d sensed within him over the years was gone. Peace had returned to his face. He knew this was the right thing to do.

“This is it,” I said. These would be my final words – to Tanner Boudin, or anyone else. My unfeeling mind thought nothing else, only those three words over and over and over.

Tanner nodded. This was it. Tanner held the gun to his head calmly. I could not keep mine steady. My facial twitch had spread to my shoulder, to my arm. A confidence had come over me as well, only mine told me that I wasn’t ready to die. Not now. I wanted to live, maybe just for a few more minutes, maybe for a few more days, and maybe for a few more years. Tanner must have seen this. He watched as my hand shook, as my face twitched uncontrollably.

I would do it not for the attention, not for the end of the suffering, nor even to prove a point to my family. I would do this because I had promised Tanner Boudin I would. And he, the same to me.

Then Tanner Boudin said the final words I would hear as a living being.

“No one,” he said, “should have to die alone.”

The next sound was like a concussion. I swear, to this day, that the sound is what killed me. I felt nothing. I knew nothing. The world, it rushed away.

**CHAPTER 27**

You want to know what it is like to be dead. You still want to know. You expect me to be able to explain death, which I cannot do. I did not know what life was, and yet you expect me to explain death.

All I can say is that I was swimming, lost in the depths of dark water and an inescapable pull from beneath me. My body fought the inevitable drowning without the approval of my mind. I wanted to fall, but I could not do it willingly.

The smell of gunpowder and the taste of blood flashed through me. What followed was a fierce struggle, an acceptance and, at last, an emptiness. A familiar abyss of emptiness. I had expected relief from the chaos, and yet the chaos was still out there, beyond what I could see but there nonetheless. Peace, I could not find either. I was gone, even within myself.

Time had also escaped, so I had no way of knowing how many seconds had passed before the echoing in my head became apparent. I felt its grip in intervals, ringing inside of me until I could finally make out its origin. Only then did the echo of a single gunshot hover inside me. One shot. The significance did not hit me until the smoke floated up and cut into a million smaller particles, clearing a space of light between us.

There, sitting across from the slumped body that had fallen in a puddle of blood at the foot of one metal chair, Tanner Boudin sat motionless, his gun pointed toward my head and his finger on the trigger. His hands did not shake. His mouth was closed. His dark eyes were blank. A single tear ran down his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. Had he fired the shot, or had I? This is another thing I do not know. In death, I know nothing.

Tanner stayed there, alone with my body, until the police arrived. They taped the floor around my bones and took photographs of the dark splattering on the wall behind my chair. They said nothing to Tanner, nor he to them. They asked him no questions. They moved around him as if he wasn’t even there.

Beside them, the three-legged dog. It had heard the sound and led them here, deep in the woods and to an abandoned pool shed long since forgotten. The dog hopped around and barked – first circling my dead body and then around Tanner’s live body. Still, the police did not acknowledge Tanner’s presence.

And then, he disappeared.

###

No one looks at Tanner Boudin as he walks the halls of our high school. His life is just like before, like it was when his best friend was alive. He is still invisible to them.

To them, he is dead.

In a way, I am more alive than ever. My suicide creates a buzz at the school. People I recognize but never knew are in tears. A girl named Rachel talks about me in front of the television cameras, a girl with whom I’ve never spoken. She looks into the camera’s lens. With tears in her eyes, she says: “We’re all in shock right now. It’s pretty sad.”

Counselors are brought in. For forty-eight hours, they mourn.

Two words sum up the next few days:

“*Who*?”

“Why?”

And then they move on. No one ever talks about what I could have been. My name and face do not linger very long after death. Tanner drops out of school and disappears from their lives.

In a way, Tanner was right about one thing. In death, I became something like a hero, for a millisecond; for the blink of an eye, they knew who I was. In life, he’s still nothing.

**CHAPTER 28:**

When they open the garage door, 41-year-old Tanner Boudin is gone. He is there, and then he’s not there. This is how Tanner Boudin has lived his adult life. Or has he been living my life?

The police officers shine a flashlight on the car. The soft purr of the engine almost drowns out the sound of cicadas in the night. The flashlights move up and down the interior of the car. They cannot see anything. Nothing is there. Tanner Boudin is not there; he is never there, unless someone needs him to help them disappear. Or maybe he’s never been there at all. Maybe he didn’t become the night nurse or take the names of Bill Tanner and Leo Winicke and Paul Smith, or work at the orphanage or own a country house where he helped people die with dignity. Maybe Wanderling Muldoon escaped the fire on his own. Maybe these people didn’t need Tanner, or maybe they didn’t have him.

Maybe they needed me. And I wasn’t there.

Who could I have been? Maybe a carny who traveled the country. A person to help run a foster home, to be there for the lost children who had no one else. Perhaps I could have been a doctor who helped people die with dignity. Who knows? Maybe a famous writer. A champion skateboarder. A world-class poet, or just a man who wrote words people loved but a man that no one ever knew.

I could have been a hero. Or a person who never made much of his life. Or maybe I would have been one of those millions of people whose only goal was to make it through life without making any catastrophic mistakes, trying desperately to stay on the straight and narrow and make it through each day without being noticed.

Or maybe I would have been a murderer. A serial killer. A terrorist. A cold-blooded killer. An animal with a thirst for blood and a passion for taking the final breath of others.

Perhaps Tanner Boudin, the person that I believed him to be, maybe he saved me from all of this, saved me by helping me to end it all.

Who am I to know what I could have been? I know nothing. I am dead. I am nothing. I feel nothing.

I feel nothing at all.

###

He is standing on the Santa Monica Pier staring out at the ocean. The sun is setting, creating an orange glow on his face. The sunsets seem to do something to him, something I can’t quite read. They give him a calm I never found within myself.

And then all at once, we’re no longer alone. My father, who’s away on a business trip while his wife and kids are back home, senses someone in his presence. He turns around. My mother looks up at him.

“Holy shit,” she whispers. “You.” Her face is barely recognizable, with lines and wrinkles from the years that have passed. Her body is hunkered over; her hair is completely grey.

They are both in their seventies now. My mother has survived a cancerous tumor in her left breast. The doctors called her a “miracle case” and talked about how she returned from “death’s doorstep.” She told them life has taught her to be a survivor. That was 10 years ago, and her gray hair is still short and more clumpy than it was in her younger years. My father, his hair no white, stares at her but doesn’t immediately recognize her face. He has endured some of life’s usual complexities in recent years: a strained second marriage, a teen-age daughter who talks back, a company that has replaced him with a younger version of himself, and a brooding son who’s mysterious mood swings keep my father on edge.

“Tony,” she says softly. “Holy shit, it’s you.”

His face goes pale. Behind him, the orange sky dances as the sun fades. Someone sets off a firecracker on the beach.

“Peg?” he says meekly.

They are finally alone, together. No kids. No second wives or lawyers or therapists. Just my mother, my father and the ghost of their middle child.

“It’s been a long time,” my mother says.

“It has.”

They both look away. So many words to say, yet none come to them. Ten years have passed since the day my mother called her ex-husband to tell him Tanner Boudin had found her. In those ten years, my father has drifted further and further away from his past life, while my mother has continued struggling to come to terms with hers. She has fought cancer and won, yet she can’t seem to win her decades-long battle with the sadness that comes with a sudden void of a child who’s no longer there.

“How are the kids?” my father asks awkwardly. He smiles then, pleasantly, and adds: “Of course, they’re not really kids.”

My mother chuckles. “No,” she says. “No, they’re not.” A slight glow covers her face as the sunset races into the sea. “You could say they never really were,” she says.

My father forces a smile, although his face says that he’s not quite sure what she means.

“Let’s not talk about the past,” my mother says. She takes a step toward him. She grabs his hand. “Let’s not talk at all,” she says. My mother lifts my father’s arm, spins him like a dancer, and lets his hand fall on her shoulder as they stare out at the orange sky in silence.

For those few minutes between the most beautiful time of day and the darkness that snatches the moment away, my mom and dad stand in silence. They stare out at the night as the stars, invisible in daylight, begin to shine above. Something else seems to be out there too, something they can’t quite see. They say nothing as their bodies separate and a space comes between them.

Then in the darkness, they quietly wish each other well and walk along the opposite sides of the pier, out past the lights of the promenade and down the stairs to the sand below. Walking away from each other, they listen to the tide.

THE END