

CHAPTER 1

Jason Hogan stuffed the hundred dollar bills deep into his pocket and killed his torch when he heard the crunch of tires on gravel. Breaking out in a panicked sweat, he took off after the Sloan brothers who were already scrambling toward the backdoor of the high-end kitchen, slipping and sliding on the polished floors. The moon and stars were hidden by clouds when the three teenage boys raced through the woods, beams from their flashlights the only source of light. They successfully disappeared into the black forest of Douglas firs. Five minutes later they stopped running, gasping for breath.

“Shit! That was close,” Jason panted, bent over, hands on thighs.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Evan glanced over his shoulder. “I thought we was goners.”

Brent snorted. “Wuss!” His shouted insult was aimed at his younger brother. He balled his right hand into a fist and slammed Evan’s shoulder so hard he fell.

Brushing leaves and fir needles from his clothes and hair, Evan got up. “Screw you! You almost pissed your pants when you heard the car.” He lunged at Brent and they scuffled.

“All right girls, back to your corners.” Jason’s arms shoved between them like a referee. “I think we did good. You got jewelry and I got cash. Not bad, considering we was interrupted.”

Jason glanced again at Brent whose eyes moved toward the distance and focused on a dark shape a hundred feet away.

“Whassat?” Brent aimed his flashlight at what appeared to be a vacant cabin.

“Epic! Let’s check it out.” Jason headed toward it.

Two obedient soldiers Evan and Brent fell in behind. Their squabble forgotten, they shined their beams at each other like light

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sabers.

Jason stopped at the front door and grasped the knob. "It's rusted, won't turn." He swept his light over the moss-covered roof and dirty windows. A spider spinning a web near the drain pipe scurried out of sight. He rubbed a clean circle on the glass with the sleeve of his hoodie, cupped his hands and tried to look inside. "I can't see nothing . . . dark curtains. This place is weird. Gives me the creeps."

"Wanna break in?" Brent was the most reckless of the three and already boasted a rap sheet of misdemeanors. "A stone through the window an' you can climb in, easy. C'mon."

"Naw, it's too dark and I don't wanna cut myself."

"Yo brah, you 'fraid?" Brent's voice taunted.

Jason flipped him the bird and Brent flipped him back.

"Let's count the bones, ya?" Handing Brent his electric torch, Jason reached inside his pocket and retrieved the wad of bills. As his fingers flipped through them he let out a whistle. "Man, look at these dead presidents. A pair of hundreds!" He counted the remaining tens, twenties, and fifties totaling eight hundred dollars.

"That's sick," Evan said grinning.

"How you gonna divvy it up?" Brent eyed the stash.

"Two-fifty for each of you and I'll keep three—finder's fee," Jason's voice told them not to argue. "Let's smoke some root to celebrate."

Brent struck a match and lit a thick doobie. The tip burned red in the darkness as he took a deep hit. He held the smoke inside his lungs a few seconds, exhaled and then offered the joint to Jason who toked it and handed it over to Evan.

"Good shit." Jason blew out a cloud.

Evan smoked and passed the joint to his brother.

"Grew it myself. Grow lights in the attic." Brent took another drag and handed it back to Jason. "What we gonna do with the bling?"

"No worries, my guy'll take it. Listen, no one else knows about tonight, okay? Swear on your life you're gonna keep your mouth shut or the yaps at school will blab and we'll all be shifted."

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Brent gave the peace sign. "Swear." Brent knew one more arrest and he'd be off to Juvie and if that happened, their mother had threatened to send Evan away to military boarding school. He didn't want *that* on his conscience.

"Yo dawg, it's gettin' late. We better split." Evan stubbed out the joint and pocketed the remains.

The three teens turned around and retraced their steps through the woods passing a *No Trespassing* sign. Inside the cabin, curtains parted and flickering light from an oil lantern illuminated the window.

Jason kicked off his shoes and carried them inside. He tip-toed across the kitchen floor and peeked into the living room. His father, Arthur, lay sprawled on the couch his snoring a grinding engine. Empty beer bottles littered the floor; cold half-eaten pizza sat in its delivery box on a coffee table littered with an empty cigarette pack, overflowing ashtrays, crumpled napkins and a half-full bottle of tequila. The TV was tuned to a black-and-white western with cowboys on horseback firing smoking guns and chasing Indians. The remote was nowhere to be seen.

How did Mom marry such a loser? Why doesn't she kick his ass out? He's always drinking and yelling, doesn't give a fuck about me. I can't stand him. Jason knew his mother, Margaret, had gone to bed hours ago safely locked inside a bedroom she hadn't shared with her husband for years. Sleep was her only escape from a miserable life with an abusive spouse who was unemployed more often than not, and made it his sole life's purpose to keep her in a constant state of emotional turmoil by delivering a daily barrage of demeaning insults and beatings.

Jason escaped the depressing scene to the solace of his room, closed the door and flopped on his bed. He grabbed his smart phone and texted Brent.

U there?

Solid no worries

L8R

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He grabbed a pair of gym socks from his dresser drawer and stuffed the three hundred dollars inside one and rolled the socks together by the cuffs. Then he placed them inside his bowling bag with his bowling ball, T-shirt and shoes, so if anyone peeked inside all would appear normal. Without a tinge of guilt, he slept peacefully through the night and woke the next morning when his mother knocked on his door and announced breakfast was ready.

“Be right down, Mom.” He jumped out of bed, splashed cold water on his face, raked wet fingers through his hair. He gave his teeth a quick brushing and shoved his legs into his jeans. He pulled on a clean T-shirt and slid his feet inside his Nikes. Lifting his navy blue hoodie off the floor where he’d tossed it, he shrugged his arms inside and grabbed his phone and school books. When he raced downstairs the TV was off, but his father was still passed out on the couch. *Fuckin’ loser.*

During lunch break, Brent and Evan met Jason in the quad and they followed him to the cafeteria as they did every day. They fell in line with the other kids and stacked their trays with hamburgers and French fries, macaroni and cheese casserole, big slices of artificially flavored chocolate cake topped with thick artery-clogging icing, and extra cartons of chocolate milk.

“I love vegetables,” Jason said eating a handful of greasy fries.

“Dairy is good for you.” Brent gulped his chocolate milk from the carton instead of using a straw. He belched and grinned.

“I’ve arranged a meeting with my ‘friend’ after school today.” Jason lowered his voice. “Meet me at the park at four and I’ll bring the bling. He’ll unload it and give me the cash by the end of the week.”

“Solid,” Brent said. They fist-bumped.

Evan nodded. “Yeah, solid.”

CHAPTER 2

A few days after the heist, Jason received his cut for the stolen jewelry and divvied it up. Then, as though he wasn't a thief and with a clear conscience, he took his girlfriend for a picnic out in the country. They bundled up with thermals beneath sweaters and jeans, and wore warm jackets and knit caps. Jason drove the two-lane highway through the woods to the outskirts of Ships Cove, Washington. He parked and they walked to a secluded place to have complete privacy. Sixteen-year-old Summer Miller held Jason's hand as they strolled through a field of grass and wild flowers still damp from morning drizzle. Now the promise of sunlight broke through the layer of clouds exposing patches of blue sky. The April air smelled sweet with the fragrance of vanilla from the wild-growing sweet vernal grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) commonly called vanilla grass that grows in the woods of Western Washington. It was a perfect day to be alone together.

Without too much searching, Jason and Summer came upon the concealed opening in the marsh hidden amongst a thicket of tall cattails and searched for the flat stepping stone they'd discovered the first time they were here. They slipped through, paused, and looked around to make certain they were alone. Jason set the picnic basket down on the grass, noting with approval the way a tall patch of bamboo planted by someone years ago—likely the same person responsible for the stepping stone—had spread and created a dense border that camouflaged them even more. On the slight chance anyone happened to pass by, they were obscured from view and wouldn't be seen. Privacy was foremost on his mind today.

"No one will see us here. I wanted to be alone with you today to give you this." He held out a braided bracelet of vanilla grass he'd purchased in Poulsbo at a Suquamish Indian store and fastened the clasp around her wrist.

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"Thank you, Jason. Oh! I love it." She held her wrist to her nose and inhaled the sweet fragrance.

"The woman I bought it from said it's supposed to mean positive intentions and caring thoughts. I sure have those for you."

The sexy look he gave her made Summer's lips curve into a smile showing off her perfect white teeth. A gentle breeze teased the curls of her light brown hair as she relaxed and took in the scenery. He knew from behind her designer sunglasses she was watching a family of ducks swimming upstream.

"I like it here. It's private and peaceful." She removed her cap and shook her tresses.

"Here, help me with this." Jason handed Summer two corners of her comforter he'd carried rolled up beneath his arm. He grabbed the other two and they stretched the quilt out, positioned it on the grass a few yards from a stream bordered by patches of wild strawberries and daisies.

"My mother gave me this comforter six years ago for my tenth birthday. She ordered the whole set through Sears catalog. It used to be so pretty, now it's all worn and stained. It's not good enough for a bed anymore."

Jason brushed away some bits of grass before Summer sat down. "But still perfect for picnics and watching fireworks." *And for making love with you today, I hope.*

He folded his long legs beneath him and sat down cross-legged while Summer unpacked the picnic basket. She handed him a peanut butter and banana sandwich and a bag of potato chips. He took a bite of sandwich, chewed and swallowed, took another bite and watched her hair move slightly in the breeze while he considered how relaxed and natural she was in that moment compared to how phony and gangsta she acted at school when surrounded by her stuck-up bitchy friends, Monica and Bonnie. When they were alone she was totally different and he wished she acted more genuine all the time.

"Got a Coke?"

"Sure, catch." Summer tossed him a can.

He popped the lid and Coke fizzed out. Laughing and wiping

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the foam from his chin with the back of his hand, he licked his lips.

She knelt beside him and touched his arm. "Do you like the sandwich?" Watching his flicking tongue she felt herself getting turned on, remembering how it felt searching inside her mouth and ear, and running up and down her neck.

"Mmm hmm." He swallowed and popped a handful of chips in his mouth.

She unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite, but couldn't stop thinking about how warm and soft Jason's lips felt pressed against hers the last time they made-out on the comforter, right here on this same exact spot. Today she was ready to let him go further.

Jason put down the bag of chips and carefully removed the sandwich from Summer's hand and pulled her down. She slid off her sunglasses and rested her head against his chest while he stroked her hair. When she rolled over and pressed her body against his, their lips met and his tongue explored her mouth in a passionate kiss. He slipped his hand beneath her T-shirt and caressed her breast. Her nipple responded to his touch and he slid his other hand behind her back and unclasped her bra. He felt the heat of her soft skin, heard her moan urging him on. He reached down to unzip his fly, but his hand froze at the sound of a man's voice.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" the unexpected voice of a stranger said. "Watch those hands, son. You don't wanna get the girl in trouble now, do ya?"

Jason and Summer bolted upright. A wild-eyed bearded stranger had approached them and was only a few feet away. When he took a step closer they detected the odors of his unwashed body, and clothes that smelled like mildew. His fierce eyes frightened them and gave them chills.

Summer quickly fastened her bra and rearranged her T-shirt and sweater. Embarrassed and afraid, her arms shivered despite wearing three warm layers of clothes. She clung to Jason who was trembling. Too late, they both realized they'd been stupid and careless. No one knew where they'd gone and they hadn't taken their phones out of the car because this place was too remote to get

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service.

Jason's heart pounded. "Who . . . who are you . . . sir?" He sought to steady his voice while he watched the man's features rearrange themselves into a grotesque mask of wrinkles and a mouth twisted into a menacing grimace.

"Well, seeing as you asked real polite I'm gonna tell ya." The man paused and tugged his scruffy beard. He coughed and spit on the grass. "Know that old house down the road folks think is haunted?" His thumb pointed in the direction.

Jason nodded. "I've heard rumors."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like people who ignore the *No Trespassing* sign disappear, so I always stay away from there." *Dammit! Until the other night.*

"Well, whaddya know? That's *my* house and I'm the ghost." He slapped his thighs and laughed so hard at their terrified expressions he bent over wheezing and coughing. He hocked and spit again and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Jason could hardly believe his bad luck. He and his friends had been standing outside this creep's house the night of their most recent heist. He wondered if he'd heard them talking and figured it was likely he had. Looking at the man's bloodshot eyes reminded him of scary drawings of Satan. It wouldn't have surprised him if concealed beneath his tangled hair the guy had horns and the mark of three sixes on his neck.

Attempting to hide his fear and sound friendly, Jason asked, "Have you had lunch? Would you like a sandwich and a Coke?"

Sneering, the man straightened up to his full height of six feet two inches. "I ain't no charity case. You think you're better'n me, don't cha, sonny?"

"Why no, sir. I was only trying to be polite. Sorry if I offended you."

Jason yanked Summer to her feet so they could run, but the man swiftly blocked their escape. Scared stiff, Jason watched him glare as if they were his quarry. There was no point in screaming for help because no one was nearby. *Please, God, protect us and get us out of here alive and I'll never be so stupid again,* he silently prayed.

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As if he were in a trance, the man reached out to touch Summer's hair, but she backed away and cowered behind Jason. He felt her trembling. Thinking quickly he said, "So, what's it gonna be? Do you wanna eat something or not? We came here to picnic and you're welcome to join us, ah . . . sir . . . isn't that right, Summer?"

She peeked around Jason and managed a weak smile. "Yes, that's right. A picnic."

The deep wrinkles relaxed and the man's features softened. "I haven't been invited to share a meal with anyone since – well, a long time. Sure, thanks." He sat down on the grass and waited.

"Take this," Jason said holding out Summer's unopened can of Coke and offered the man the other half of his sandwich. "We've got plenty to eat, right?" He looked at Summer, willing her to be strong and play along.

"Yes, I made plenty." She practically threw another sandwich at the stranger.

"Sit down!" the man ordered.

Too afraid not to obey, Jason sat down and his inner alarm went off when he spotted a knife stashed in a sheath strapped around the guy's right ankle. Summer sat behind Jason cowering with fear.

"Well now, here I am taking your food and I haven't even introduced myself. My name's John Carrows and I own all this land you're sittin' on. Even the water of that stream belongs to me." He offered his hand and Jason shook it.

"No kidding?" Jason didn't believe a word, but hoped playing along was the safest thing to do. *Keep on this guy's good side until I can figure out a way to get us out of here.* He discreetly wiped his hand on the grass. "My name's Jason and this is my girlfriend, Summer."

"Glad to make your acquaintance." John Carrows nodded to Summer, but when he offered his hand she cringed and wouldn't shake it.

"We've . . . we've got cookies," Summer stammered. "I made them myself. Chocolate chip."

John Carrows' eyes teared and he swiped at them brusquely.

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“That’ll be fine. Thanks.”

Minutes passed and the three of them ate in silence while Jason’s thoughts raced. *I’ve put us in danger by taking us to a secluded place and no one knows where we are. The freak sitting a few feet away lives in a cabin everyone in town avoids. If he drags us there no one will think to look for us until it’s too late. The guy claims to own the land we’re sitting on and is either crazy or violent. Probably both. He’s armed with a knife, but when Summer offered him chocolate chip cookies he looked like he wanted to cry. Somehow, I’ve got to figure out how to escape from this lunatic.*

“You said all this land belongs to you?” Jason asked hoping he sounded calm.

Carrows took a swig of Coke and part of it dribbled on his salt-and-pepper beard. He smacked his lips. “Sure, look up my family in the library. The Carrows clan homesteaded this land over a hundred years ago. That cabin down the road was the first house my great-great-granddad, Adam Carrows, built. I’m gonna restore it someday—when I get around to it. I’ve been meaning to, but sometimes my head hurts so bad I can’t do anything.” Another wheezing attack brought about minutes of hacking and spitting. “Goddamn orange!”

“It will look nice when you do,” Summer managed to say in a quivering voice.

Jason wondered why John Carrows was cursing fruit. The guy was definitely nuts.

When he finally stopped coughing, Carrows finished his sandwich and Coke. “How ’bout some of those cookies?”

“Here, have some.” Summer opened the plastic container, removed three and held them out daintily with her fingers so his grimy hand didn’t touch hers or the rest of the cookies.

He took them and ate slowly, reverently. Jason observed him savoring each bite, seemingly oblivious to how disconcerting his presence was to them. When he finally finished, Carrows belched and was about to wipe his mouth on his sleeve again, but Jason handed him a couple of napkins.

“Well now,” he said reaching for the napkins to wipe cookie

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crumbs from his beard. He shot them a creepy grin. "You kids be good and don't get into trouble, you know what I mean?" He stuffed the balled-up napkins in his pocket and winked at Jason. "Gotta be going now. Thanks for the lunch, son." He rubbed his belly and stood up and belched. "I'll remember you in my will."

Transfixed, Jason and Summer watched him walk away and disappear behind the wall of bamboo.

"Let's get outta here!" Jason jumped up and pulled Summer to her feet.

They hastily packed their remaining food and the comforter. "That guy scared the shit out of me," Jason said rolling the quilt.

"Me too."

They walked as fast as they could, but once beyond the cattails they ran.

"No one knows where we are. Oh my god, Jason. I hate to think what could have happened to us."

"I'm so sorry. I'm dumb as rocks for bringing us here. I swear I'll never put your life in danger again."

Summer started to cry. "I was so scared. I was afraid he was going to kill us."

"Me too."

They raced to Jason's truck and didn't feel safe until they were inside with the doors locked. The tires screeched in the dirt and the truck tore down the road. Jason didn't slow down until they saw the familiar roofs of the police station and library loom ahead like welcome friends.

"Let's go to the police and report that guy," Jason said. "Maybe he's an escaped convict."

"No. I want to go to the library and see if we can find out whether he was telling us the truth about his family. If not, then we'll go to the police."

"Okay."

Mrs. Hunter, the graying middle-aged librarian seated behind the front desk, gave them a dimpled smile when she saw them enter.

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She'd known Summer since first grade when her mother started taking her to the library to choose picture books to read before bedtime. She recognized Jason as Summer's boyfriend, but to her knowledge he wasn't a reader and had never checked out any books on her watch.

Mrs. Hunter was all about reading. "I don't care if the kids today are into vampires, zombies or graphic novels," she said at a recent board meeting. "As long as they're reading that's all that matters."

"Hi kids, what can I do for you?" She greeted them warmly.

"Do you have any books on the Carrows family?" Jason asked.

"I sure do. Carrows was the richest family around these parts and responsible for establishing a lot of things people enjoy today. Why do you think they named the main street Carrows Boulevard? Then there's Carrows Medical Center, Carrows Savings & Loan, Carrows Elementary School and Carrows State Park, to name just a few."

Summer and Jason both shrugged.

"I've lived here my entire life without giving a thought to the town's history," Summer said.

"Guilty," Jason confessed.

"Well, that's about to change. I'll show you some photographs of the Carrows clan." She came around her desk and led them to another section all the way in back, talking softly as they walked down the aisle. "I've heard rumors a Carrows ghost haunts these parts. The family was wiped out in a terrible fire back in December, 1972. What became of their fortune is somewhat of a mystery. It's assumed no one survived."

"How did the fire start?" Jason asked intrigued. Maybe there was one survivor no one knew about except Summer and himself. The guy was loaded so if he robbed him he was certain there was no chance of being caught.

"The Carrows family was so big they built a meeting hall on their ranch. You know, for Sunday dinners and family celebrations. The kitchen was equipped with a propane stove and after the terrible fire the investigator determined it was an accident. One of

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the burners malfunctioned and kept leaking gas when it was turned off. That's what caused the explosion."

"How awful!" Summer's hands flew to her mouth. "Couldn't they smell it?"

"Unfortunately, no. The aromas of cooking food and cigarette smoke would have masked the odor. It's assumed someone lit a cigarette and that's all it took. It was like a bomb exploding."

"In chemistry class we learned propane's heavier than air and settles on the floor," Jason said, surprised he'd even listened and remembered. "It was leaking and no one knew."

"That's right. Such a tragedy—the whole family wiped out in an instant. Well, here we are." Mrs. Hunter pointed to the framed reproductions of old photographs hanging on the walls. "The Carrows clan."

"I never really paid attention to these photos before," Summer admitted. "Guess I should have."

They stared at the images of unsmiling men wearing coarse dark suits. All had full beards and some wore hats. The women's long hair was parted in the middle then tucked severely into buns at the nape of their necks. They wore long cotton skirts and their strong hands were either folded in their lap or holding a child. Summer and Jason recognized that some of the men bore a striking resemblance to John Carrows and some of the women looked like they could have been his sisters.

"Why are you so curious about the Carrows family?" Mrs. Hunter inquired.

"Oh, you know, a school project," Summer lied. "We're doing research for our journalism class."

"Wait here." Mrs. Hunter walked down an aisle to the section devoted to local history and returned with several thick hard-bound volumes. "Here are some books about the Carrows." She set the heavy books on the table with a thud. "Anything else you kids need, just ask. I've got to get back to the front desk."

They sat at the table and slowly looked at the pages, studied photographs and read how the Carrows's fortune was amassed by fishing, lumber, livestock, and breeding horses.

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“What do you think?” Summer whispered. “Do you think he’s really rich?”

“I guess anything’s possible. If I wasn’t so scared of the creep I’d snoop around his cabin with my brother’s metal detector. Maybe that socio’s got metal chests full of money stashed away in the woods. Like buried treasure, ya know?”

“Are you insane?” She tugged his sleeve. “Promise me you won’t go anywhere near him or his cabin.”

“Word. But you gotta help me find us another secret place. We can’t go back to the stream and well, I wanna finish what we started today. Don’t you?”

Without hesitation she answered. “Let’s go.”

Summer slipped her hand into his and smiled at Mrs. Hunter as they left the library.

Back in Jason’s truck they headed for the woods and the secluded tree house his older brother, Mike, and his friends built when they were teenagers. Before he left for the Army three years ago, Mike took Jason aside and swore his brother to secrecy because their parents didn’t know he and his buddies had a hideout where they went to smoke pot, drink beer, and ogle porn magazines.

“You’ll need a place to get away from the old man,” Mike said the day he showed Jason around. “Trust me, you’ll thank me.”

After graduating high school Mike and his friends had either enlisted or taken blue-collar jobs. Some were now married with children. The tree house got taken over by Jason and his friends, but until today Summer hadn’t known about it.

Jason and his crew had updated it with big floor pillows and, for the occasions when they brought girls, candles and incense, a mattress with sheets and blanket. They stocked their lair with matches and ashtrays, and nailed an Indian tapestry to the ceiling. Macklemore and Beyoncé posters were tacked on opposite walls.

“Where are you taking me?” Summer asked as they walked through the woods.

“You’ll see.”

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Ten minutes later they arrived at a small clearing and there it was. She climbed the wooden ladder after him and ducked inside. "This is dope!" she said looking at everything. "Very cool."

After stomping on spiders that didn't scurry away fast enough, Jason hid the magazines under the mattress and swept the floor clean of fir needles and leaves. Summer shook out the dusty blanket and smoothed it over the mattress. She lit a candle and incense and they sat down cross-legged facing each other. Jason lit a joint from the flame of the candle and handed it over to her. She inhaled and passed it back to him, lay back, and waited.

CHAPTER 3

*Journal of John Jacob Carrows
Great-great-grandson of Adam Carrows
Son of Elizabeth and Abel
Born August 4th, 1953*

April 20, 2014

Today I've decided to begin this journal because I have a story to tell and no one to tell it to. I live in a 100-year-old cabin in the woods of Ships Cove, Washington, built by my great-great-granddad, Adam Carrows. I live alone, don't even have a pet. When I was eighteen I was deployed to Vietnam. I was angry because I was the youngest and I felt like at least one of my older brothers should have gone instead—but they were all 4-F. Matthew was tall and had big flat feet. We called him Steamroller. Then there was Mark who fell off a horse when he was twelve and fractured his right shoulder and arm. His arm healed so crooked he looked like he was strumming a guitar. We nicknamed him Elvis. Luke was born deaf in one ear so we called him Erie Canal. That left me—the unlucky one who got drafted and sent to fight. Call me Damaged.

I saw and did terrible things over there that still torment me. Doesn't matter it happened 40 years ago, I can't get my brain to stop. My mind runs like crazy, like a loop that goes around and around. It won't stop thinking about things I want to forget. Most nights I wake up covered in sweat. I was in country only a few months when I killed a VC woman. I heard someone shout, "Shoot that gook! She's got a grenade!" I saw her moving fast toward us and I grabbed my M16 and shot her to hell. She had more than a grenade though, she also had a little boy squatting by the road screaming because I killed his mother in front of him. Enemy or not, I have

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never been the same and the nightmares don't stop. I see that kid's face, hear his anguish and it torments me. I'm depressed most of the time and feel like there's no reason to live.

My lungs are shot and I'll probably die of lung cancer from Agent Orange. They said I was down-wind and far enough away from the spraying so it shouldn't affect me and I believed them. Liars! Now I know they were wrong and I curse them to hell for what's happened to me. I cough and sometimes I can't breathe, but there's more. I got blasted up pretty good when our armored personnel carrier drove over a mine and the explosion tossed the vehicle into a ditch. Shrapnel shot into both my legs and the explosion just about tore my head off before I passed out. The driver's teeth went clear through his lips and he lost an eye. I remember blood everywhere. Blood and pain. They patched my head together pretty good at Landstuhl and transferred me stateside to Walter Reed. Got sent home with a Purple Heart and a metal plate in my forehead, but I was lucky I didn't lose any limbs.

Last year I went to the VA hospital because I couldn't sleep for weeks and I was exhausted from watching the same horror movie over and over inside my head. Voices and explosions and death and stench all around me until I could hardly stand another second. Christ, how much more of this can I take? They asked me lots of questions. I pissed in a cup, they took blood samples and X-rays, poked and prodded me all over, prescribed Prozac, an inhaler, and a month supply of Cipro to ward off infection. Said I have PTSD and need counseling. No thanks. I never went back to find out my test results. Don't want to know. The Prozac helps me get through the day though. I haven't killed myself so I guess it's doing something.

Getting injured in 'Nam didn't prepare me for the worst that was yet to come. I'm the last of the Carrows. My whole family died in a fire while I was laid up at Walter Reed. Maybe fifty relatives died when a propane stove exploded in the family meeting hall. Men, women and children all gone just like that. When I heard about it I went crazy! The doctors had to restrain me. Gave me shots to calm me down. I screamed and cried and cursed and wished I'd never been drafted so I'd have been home and died along with everyone

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else.

Every Sunday after church the family gathered for a potluck feast. Ham, chicken, biscuits and gravy, greens, mashed potatoes, apple pie, cookies, cake and cobbler. I'd be in the hospital bed with bandages on both legs and wrapped around my forehead, pumped full of painkillers and anti-depressants, but my mouth was watering from thinking about Sunday dinner and going home to Mom's cooking. That hope got me through it, kept me hanging on. I pictured the whole family together—Mom and Dad and my brothers all waiting for me, praying for my recovery. Aunts, uncles and cousins too. Then the letters from Mom suddenly stopped and I didn't know why until I received a letter from my only friend, Harry Chase, with newspaper clippings about the fire. That's when I totally lost it and went psycho.

After my release from the hospital I couldn't stand the thought of living in that big empty house after what happened so I moved into this cabin in the woods and I'm still here, hiding from the world. I just can't be around people. I don't know how to act around them anymore and I'm all messed up—inside and out. Never know when I'm going to have a flashback so it's better for me to be away from everyone. The farm is still there, but I can't run it. Harry made all the arrangements. I leased it to a co-op that raises crops and has a weekly farmer's market, and there's still a working stable. I'm glad about the horses.

I know the townspeople think this cabin is haunted and that's just fine. I posted a "No Trespassing" sign by the road just to make sure no one bothers me. Every couple of weeks when I need supplies I slip into town at night and give Harry a list and he does my shopping. He was in 'Nam too, but was lucky, managed to come home in one piece, body and soul. Don't know how I'd get along without him. He's the only person in town who knows I'm alive. Everyone else around here thinks I died in 'Nam. We meet behind a thicket of trees off the main highway and I wheel all the stuff back home in a shopping cart. If anyone saw me they'd think I was broke and homeless, wouldn't guess I could buy them and the whole town too!

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Except for Harry, the nurses and doctors at the hospital, and an occasional sexual encounter with a woman I'll pick up at a bar in another town—if I'm lucky, I haven't seen or talked to another person until a few days ago. It was so strange how it happened. I was walking on the property when I stumbled on some teenagers making-out near the stream where I used to ride Spindle—my horse when I was a kid. That's the first time I ever came across anyone during my walks and it caught me totally off guard. Man, I couldn't believe what those kids were up to. The boy had his hand under the girl's sweater and was rubbing her tit. When they heard my voice they almost shit their pants! I could tell they were scared and thought I was a nut job. Anyway, that boy was something. Told me his name is Jason. He was real polite, but I recognized his voice from the delinquents who smoked pot outside my house a couple of weeks ago. From their conversation I know they robbed a house and almost got caught. They ran through the woods and wound up outside my front door, tried to open it, but I keep it locked. Don't know what would have happened if they broke the window and tried to climb in. Somebody would have been hurt real bad and it sure as hell wouldn't have been me.

Jason shared their food with me even though I scared him and his girl. Her name is Summer—what kind of name is that? Whatever happened to names like Becky, Susan and Mary? Anyway, I sat on the grass and ate a peanut butter and banana sandwich, drank Coke and ate homemade chocolate chip cookies. Lord they were good! Haven't had anything home-baked since Mom's pies, way back before I was sent to 'Nam. Made me cry. Summer was too scared to touch me, wouldn't shake my hand. I think she's maybe a bit too uppity for her own good, but Jason didn't hesitate and shook my hand. Gave it a real good shake like a man. I think I'll ask Harry about him next time I see him. He knows something about everyone. That's all for now. My hand is tired of writing. Think I'll shower and go for a walk.

CHAPTER 4

Summer stood in front of the mirror applying frosted peach lip gloss. She blew herself a kiss and reached for a wand of mascara when her smart phone chimed alerting her to Jason's text.

SUP?

CHLN she wrote back.

WT (*want to*) get a burger?

No can do, meeting the homies

L8R

When she was satisfied with her appearance, Summer grabbed her purse and car keys and lifted a pack of cigarettes from her mother's carton on the kitchen counter. She drove to Monica's house—her best friend since kindergarten—pulled up and honked. Monica and Bonnie walked out together swaying their shoulders like runway models. Both girls were dressed fresh off the pages of *Teen Vogue*.

Monica's shoulder length chestnut hair shimmered with expensive blonde highlights from one of the town's most upscale salons. She emphasized her long shapely legs by always wearing leggings or skin tight jeans. Bonnie's wavy blonde hair went half-way down to her waist. Her lips were naturally full and pouty and she had startling deep blue eyes framed by lash extensions.

Inside the car a CD of rap music blared, and after they climbed in—Monica up front and Bonnie in back—the girls started shouting the lyrics in unison, something about cranky bitches, drugs and the 'hood all jumbled together and peppered with expletives. When the song finished Monica shouted, "Ayo!"

"Ayo!" Summer answered, tossing her head from side to side.

"Got a loosey?" Monica asked.

"Look in my purse; got a new pack from Mom's stash."

Bonnie said, "Light me one too."

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The signal turned red and Summer rolled to a stop. "What do you *beyatches* feel like doing?" She looked at Bonnie in the rear view mirror.

"Shoplifting at Target," Monica said. "I need some makeup."

"Absofuckinlutely good idea," Bonnie agreed leaning forward to talk.

"Hey bitch! Keep that ash offa me." Summer brushed hot cigarette ash off her shoulder and scowled at Monica.

"*Sor-reee.*" Monica flicked her ash out the window.

The light changed to green and they took off heading for Target. Summer circled around the parking lot until she found a space close to the entrance in case they had to make a fast getaway. "Don't get caught—if you do you're on your own," she warned as she parked.

"Chill, I know what I'm doing," Monica assured her.

"She does," Bonnie said. "We've done this before."

They got out of the car and tossed lit cigarettes on the ground without crushing them out.

"There are hidden cameras taping you," Summer warned again. "Be careful."

"I'm all over it." Monica sounded annoyed.

"Meet at the car in twenty minutes. I won't wait." Summer turned and headed for the entrance.

They watched her walk away.

"She's so uptight," Monica said with disgust.

"Yeah, lame," Bonnie agreed.

Monica and Bonnie strolled around until they paused at the jewelry counter, casually looked at beaded bracelets while the salesperson helped a customer purchase a watch. Bonnie let two bracelets slip inside her purse while deliberately hanging the rest back on the display arm. They tried on sunglasses and put them back, leisurely walked to the cosmetics department and scoped it out. The L'Oreal aisle was empty. Monica pretended to fumble inside her purse, dropped it and scrambled the contents with the items that got knocked off the shelf. Bonnie positioned herself to block the view of the overhead camera and picked items off the

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floor giving Monica ample opportunity to grab ones she wanted and scoop them into her purse. For the benefit of the camera, they both made a big show of putting the remaining cosmetics back on the shelf and arranging them neatly.

"Let's go!" Bonnie said when they finished.

"Chillax. We've got ten minutes and I'm starving. Shoplifting makes me hungry." Monica started walking toward the grocery section.

"Later." Bonnie turned and headed for the exit.

Summer was already waiting in the car smoking a cigarette. She blew a perfect smoke ring and stuck her index finger through it. "Where's Monica?"

"Getting some munchies."

"What the . . . ?"

"Yeah, she's a gweeb."

"If she's not here in five minutes I'm leaving."

"Agreed. Look what I copped." Bonnie fastened the bracelets on her wrist and jangled them for Summer to admire.

"Nice."

A few minutes later Monica got in the car munching a bag of Cheetos. She slammed the door. "Let's go."

Summer fired up the engine. "I almost left without you. Two more minutes and I was outta here."

"Quit being so snarky. I had plenty of time."

"Whatever." Summer backed up, shifted into drive and took off.

Bonnie laughed from the back seat. "I just about lost it when you spilled your purse. Hey, gimme some of those Cheetos." She reached impatiently.

"I packed it with plenty of junk this morning." Monica handed her the bag and licked the orange off her fingers.

"Listen homies, I've gotta talk to you about something twisted that happened the other day."

"Go ahead girl," Bonnie said.

"I'm all ears," Monica said popping Cheetos in her mouth.

"Not here. I'm gonna take us somewhere private that's totally cool." Summer cranked up the volume and didn't speak another

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word until she pulled onto a dirt road on the outskirts of town and parked.

"Where are we going?" Monica asked getting out.

"You'll see."

Bonnie shrugged and shot Monica a questioning look.

They walked ten minutes through the woods and when they arrived at the tree house Summer slung her purse over her shoulder and got ready to climb the ladder.

"What is this place?" Bonnie asked.

"Jason's hideout," Summer answered. "C'mon, homies!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"I'll break an ankle climbing that thing," Monica complained.

"Stop whining like a wuss," Bonnie taunted.

"Shut up bitch!" Monica pushed Bonnie out of the way and grabbed the ladder with both hands.

Once everyone was inside they tossed their purses on the floor and checked out the posters. Then they slipped off their shoes and flopped on the mattress. Looking around, Bonnie said, "This is dope."

"Yeah, Jason took me here the other day."

"Did you get it on, girlfriend?" Monica poked Summer's arm with a manicured fingernail.

"Later. There's something more important to talk about."

"Wow. Sounds serious. This calls for some of Brent's excellent homegrown." Bonnie reached inside her bra and withdrew a small plastic baggie rolled up with two joints inside. She lit one and passed it to Summer who took a hit and passed it to Monica.

"A couple of months ago Jason and I discovered this hidden place by a stream. So we went there Saturday for a picnic and we had just started making-out and he put his hand on my boob." The weed made her pause and giggle. "I was getting really turned on when this horrible disgusting man snuck up on us."

Monica exhaled. "For reals?"

"That's totally warped. What did the perv look like?" Bonnie said, reaching for the joint.

"Dirty hair, dirty clothes, scraggly beard. He stank really bad

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and his eyes were like the devil's. Looked like a total freak."

"No doubt." Bonnie took another hit. "What did you do?"

"At first Jason tried to get us away from him, but he blocked us and yelled, 'Sit down!'"

"Here, take this. Your hands are shaking." Bonnie handed the joint back to Summer. She and Monica waited while Summer smoked.

"So then Jason offers the guy some of our food and while he eats, he tells us he owns all the land we're sitting on, like even the stream belongs to him. But that's not the weirdest part. He says he lives in that cabin in the woods—you know—the one with the *No Trespassing* sign."

"No way! For reals?" Monica snorted as if this were funny.

"Totally."

"Whoa," Bonnie said. "I've heard a psycho killed people there and buried the parts he didn't eat."

"That's nasty!" Smoke blew out Summer's nostrils as she choked and laughed, and her stoned friends laughed with her. Summer took another drag and passed the joint to Monica. "So anyway, I offer the mope some chocolate chip cookies, and like he gets all emotional and starts to cry."

Bonnie's eyes opened wide with admiration. "Chickie, you've got balls. I'd have been too scared to do anything."

"Believe me, I was terrified. We were just trying to keep him from flipping out and hurting us."

"No shit," Monica said.

"For reals. Go on, what happened next?" Bonnie got her lighter and lit the other joint.

"So he eats the cookies and leaves and we split."

"Wow, you were really lucky he didn't hurt you—or worse." Bonnie exhaled a cloud of smoke and waved it away from her eyes.

"Trust me. I've never been so scared in my life."

Monica unfolded her long legs and wiggled her toes. "Did you go to the cops?"

"Jason wanted to, but I wanted to go to the library first and see if what he said was true about owning the land. If he lied we'd go

to the police.”

“So?”

“It was true, everything. His family was original settlers and made a fortune. Supposedly, they all died in a fire and he’s the only one left.”

“How come he didn’t die too?” Monica rolled her ankles in circles. “Do you think he set the fire?”

Summer tapped her lip thoughtfully. “Mrs. Hunter told us it was from a propane explosion, but you’ve got a point. He didn’t say a word about why *he* didn’t die. Maybe he was somewhere else when it happened.”

“You can ask him next time you see him,” Monica teased.

“Like *never*.”

Bonnie giggled. “Wow, I’m *so stoned*. That’s some crazy story. What’s the freak’s name?”

“John Carrows.”

Monica stopped making ankle circles. “Like you mean Carrows Boulevard, Carrows?”

“Yeah, and Carrows Elementary School and Medical Center. Can you believe? Like, he’s a real fuckin’ celebrity. Anyway, after we were safe Jason told me he saw a knife stashed in the freak’s boot. Shit, I feel lucky to be alive.”

“No shit.” Monica got her brush out of her purse and started brushing her hair. “Spill girl, when Jason took you here how far did you let him go?”

“Yeah, did he ‘do’ you?” Bonnie said.

Summer’s cheeks flushed. “He’d be mad if I told you. He likes to keep things like that private.”

“C’mon! We’re BFFs.” Bonnie reached for Summer’s hand. “No secrets between sistas.”

Summer clutched her forehead. “OMG that weed is strong! My head is *spinning*. Well, we didn’t actually do it, but . . . we had oral sex.”

“OMG! *Finally!*” Monica tossed her brush in the air and caught it.

“I’m not like you,” Summer said defensively.

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"No shit. I do that on the first date."

"That's why you're a hoe." Bonnie snorted.

Monica flipped her off and dismissed her with a head toss.

"Did you like it, Summer?"

Summer rolled her eyes. "I thought I'd die. Then he wanted me to go down on him and I was kind of embarrassed. I didn't know how to do it."

"You'll learn."

"I think it's gross," Bonnie said. "I'll let a guy eat me, but I don't do him back if I can get away with just giving him a hand job."

"Ew." Monica wrinkled her nose and shook her fingers as if trying to fling off something really disgusting. "You'll 'cum' around eventually."

Bonnie fell backwards laughing hysterically.

"Listen girls, don't tell anyone, *please*. And don't say anything about this place either. Jason will get mad if he finds out I took you here."

"Word," they promised.

"Let's smoke on it." Bonnie sat up and lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER 5

The high pitched chattering of squirrels and sound of claws scrambling across the roof woke John from another night of fitful sleep filled with battle and horror. He was exhausted and depressed and sleep deprived, so instead of getting up, he rolled over and shut his eyes, and listened to the squirrels.

Half an hour later his stomach rumbled. *Well, I'd better get my ass out of bed if I'm gonna eat.* Bags under his eyes and hair disheveled, he got up and plodded across the floor in his thermals and socks. He stood in front of a shelf neatly stacked with clothes so perfectly folded from his military training they could have passed inspection. He chose a clean pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, got dressed, brushed his hair, and pulled on his boots. Once he was finished dressing he carefully strapped his ankle knife in place.

When he first moved into the cabin instead of installing a new modern stove he kept "Dragon" – the original cast iron pioneer stove that had belonged to his great-great grandparents and had been passed down through generations. With a roaring fire inside, the side draft door created an unusual whooshing sound. As a young boy he imagined that sound was like dragon's breath and he liked to sit by the stove and daydream.

John lit some kindling and when the fire was hot, he put on a pot of water. Once the water was bubbling he emptied a package of oatmeal from his store of non-perishable doomsday food stored inside stackable plastic boxes, and stirred with a wooden spoon. While the cereal cooked he opened the refrigerator and removed two eggs, scrambled them in an iron skillet with butter. He ate at the table and drank a cup of hot hobo coffee to finish the meal.

Now what? Breakfast over, dishes rinsed, the rest of the day had to be filled with a chore of some kind or something to do or it would be meaningless, just like so many thousands of others. He

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looked around his rustic living room searching for something to occupy him and saw his hand built shelves stacked with books and military magazines, but he wasn't in the mood for reading. The wood box beside his stone fireplace was full and didn't need restocking. His grandfather's gramophone stood in the corner like a lonely child waiting to play, but he wasn't in the mood to listen to the collection of old scratchy records. He started to feel agitated, could feel his heartbeat starting to accelerate, and ran his trembling fingers through his hair. No! He wasn't going to allow another episode of anxiety to cripple him today. He poured another cup of coffee and sat at the table collecting his wits. Then he picked up his pen, opened his journal, and began writing.

April 24, 2014

Lord, it felt good to wash up the other day and lay on clean sheets even if I couldn't sleep. I'd really let myself go, didn't realize how bad till that snobby Summer girl wouldn't shake my hand. You and I know I wasn't always this way, dirty and disheveled like a tramp. Time was when I looked and acted normal, had a happy childhood, a loving family and friends. My life was as good as anyone's. After graduating high school with honors I'd planned on taking courses in biological science at junior college because I hoped to breed horses and get a degree in veterinary medicine. Then I'd graduate, fall in love, get married and have kids. Had it all mapped out—then I got drafted and 'Nam killed all my plans. Messed me up bad. I was scared to go, but too afraid to show it or I'd get hassled even more by that prick SSG who was always breathing down my neck and busting my ass. Christ, he acted like it was his hobby to destroy me. Goddamn bastard.

Then, after losing my whole family and coming home to no one I didn't want to live and went into deep depression. Wasn't fit to be around people or animals anymore. In country sometimes I lived like an animal. I was forced to do things I'd normally never do, and I'm still not normal. Never will be. I devoured food with my hands. Ate food infested with maggots. Just picked them out and ate

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because I was hungry. And scared. Scared of dying. Couldn't see Charlie, but knew he was out there. Had to "beat the bush" and stay within perimeter at night. Never could tell the enemy from a friendly. Sometimes they'd act friendly, but were enemies undercover. Women followed platoons around and camped outside base camp. Provided "entertainment" and were spreading sexually transmitted diseases so the guys would have to be taken in and treated. Jungle rot, leeches, malaria, elephant grass, spiked booby traps, wearing the same clothes for a month and not bathing. Saw guys mutilate dead bodies. It was hell!

I agonize over why soldiers with families died, but I—who had no one to come home to—survived. The guilt is hard to live with and often overwhelming. I'm damaged inside, mutilated. I don't know the right words to express how I feel and I think about putting an end to it and killing myself. Once I even had the gun cocked and loaded and was ready to do it, but as I raised it to my head somehow my mind conjured up memories of Spindle and I put the gun down. Damn, that horse saved my life.

As clear as yesterday I remember the morning of my tenth birthday. Dad shook me and told me to get dressed so I'd get my present—my own horse! It was still so early the sky was dark and we held lanterns as we walked to the barn to watch Lady birth a foal. The barn smelled of hay, horses, manure, and leather. I watched Lady's body strain and twitch. Her tail flicked while she pushed, her head raised and dropped. After a burst of fluid I saw the sack starting to emerge with a head and two front legs inside. I just stood there amazed. Dad's voice soothed Lady while she pushed and he tugged at the foal's legs. I watched him rip open the sack with his fingers, saw him brace his legs, tugging and straining as hard as he could to pull out the rest of the body. When a slimy reddish-brown colt lay beside Lady, from that moment I was a goner.

Dad told me to come over and wipe him off. He handed me a blanket and said not to be afraid. Hell, I was too excited to be scared. I wiped his head, legs, and back. He was handsome, had four white pasterns and a white diamond on his forehead, a black mane and tail. When he stood up on four long spindly legs I cheered and

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called him Spindle. He had his name! Dad warned he was giving me a lot of responsibility, expected me to care for Spindle and help out with the other horses, too. He said I'd have to gain Spindle's trust so I could train and ride him.

If I didn't do what I promised, Dad threatened he'd sell my horse and I sure as hell didn't want that to happen. As soon as I came home from school I mucked out stalls, freshened water and buckets of oats. I brushed Spindle's coat till it shined like copper and talked to him about everything that boys my age think about, mostly girls and sports. When Spindle was weaned I fed him carrots and slices of apple and once in a while a sugar cube. He'd know I was coming before he could see me and he'd be waiting for me by the fence with his ears perked up. He'd pull back his lips and chomp apple slices right out of my palm. I loved rubbing his velvet nose and hugging his muscular neck. Years later when I was an angry frustrated teenager suffering mood swings with raging hormones doing a number on me, I poured out my soul to that horse. Told him about my brothers beating on me and my failures with girls and he'd flick his tail. I was convinced he understood every word. I can still close my eyes and imagine I feel his head nuzzling against my neck, feel the warm breath from his nostrils.

When I climbed on his back we'd race through pastures and jump over logs. I galloped him through the woods and we'd stop to rest in the field by the stream. I'd lie in the grass and watch the clouds change shape while Spindle drank and grazed. One day a long time ago I planted bamboo there to make a place where I could hide from my brothers. We grew up together, two gawky long-legged creatures going through puberty. The only difference was I had two legs and Spindle had four and a tail.

Before I left for Vietnam I hugged Spindle goodbye and in a way it was worse than leaving Mom because she knew what was happening. Spindle sensed I was leaving and he whinnied and pawed the ground. I ran away so he wouldn't see me cry. First thing I did when I came home was go looking for Spindle. He was gone, sold along with the rest of the livestock. That just broke me. I stood in his stall and fell to my knees, buried my face in my hands and bawled

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like a baby.

I've known how happiness feels, how it feels to love and be loved. The love I shared with my family and the love I shared with my horse were equally strong. Since I've lost everyone that ever mattered I haven't been happy or felt love toward anyone or anything. I doubt I'm capable.

CHAPTER 6

Home from school and standing in the kitchen doorway, Jason saw the warning expression in his mother's eyes and noted how she had braced herself against the wall for protection.

"Look at you!" Arthur shouted in a drunken rage. "Your toes point out and you waddle like a duck, and your bra strap always falls down. You look like a white trash whore."

"I'm sorry I offend you, your highness." Margaret sniffed.

"And your clothes! Why can't you put on something decent once in a while? And those awful earrings. They went out of style fifty years ago."

Margaret's eyes raged. "I married a bum and I don't have money to spend on nice clothes and jewelry." Her fingers touched her earrings. "These were my mother's. You know nothing about good jewelry."

"Shut your mouth!" Arthur slapped her a good one across the left cheek. Jason watched in horror as his mother's back slid down the wall and she landed with a thud on her buttocks, legs extended. A 14 carat gold clip-on clam shell earring flew off and skidded across the wood floor.

"That's enough!" Jason's fists clenched and he yelled, "Don't you dare touch her again or I'll . . ." He came charging into the room.

"Yeah? You'll *what*?" Arthur thrust his fist at his son's jaw, but was so tipsy he lost his balance and stumbled against the kitchen table.

Jason grabbed his father's shirt, pulled him to his feet and punched him hard in the gut. Arthur fell to the floor in a heap and passed out. Jason ran to his mother and helped her get up. "You okay, Mom?"

"I think so." Her hands fluttered nervously over her clothes

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and hair. An angry red welt showed on her cheek. Jason handed her the fallen earring and she clipped it back on. "He'd never dare do that if Mike wasn't in Iraq. He'd protect me."

"That's it! Mike's not here, but I'll protect you. We're changing the locks and Dad's outta here."

Margaret grabbed a dish towel and ran it under cold water, folded it into a compress to press against her swollen cheek. "What are you saying? I can't survive without his disability checks and food stamps."

"I'll take care of you, Mom. He's a worthless piece of shit and you know it. You don't need him, look what he does to you." He pointed to the dark bruises on her arms from a beating a few days ago.

"How are we going to eat?" she asked, genuinely afraid.

"Write Mike a letter. Tell him you need him to send money."

"I don't want him to know. I'm too ashamed." Her shoulders shook when she covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

"You can apply for food stamps, and social services will give you some money. It won't be much, but I'll get a part-time job and we'll be okay. Trust me."

A small glimmer of hope prompted her to say, "Maybe I'll get a job too. I used to be a file clerk at an insurance company before I married your father. He insisted I stop working, said it was a man's job to support his wife. I never should have listened to him."

"Why'd you marry him anyway? He's so rotten."

Margaret walked to the living room couch and sat down. "What can I say? I met your father in high school and fell in love. I guess part of me felt sorry for him because I knew how awful his father treated him and his mother. After graduation we dated a couple of years. When he proposed I fooled myself into thinking by being a loving wife it would make up for all the hurt." She wrung her hands with dismay. "I was wrong. Our wedding night he got drunk and slapped me around. I was too afraid and ashamed to tell anyone."

"So why'd you stay? I don't get it." Jason lit a cigarette and sat down to listen.

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“Son, you don’t understand. In my day things were a lot different. People didn’t have children without being married. Back then they were called illegitimate and it was a big disgrace. People didn’t get divorced so casually like they do now. Problems were kept secret, private. Everything happened behind closed doors. For years I’ve wanted to get away from him, but his rages terrify me.”

“Well, it’s no secret anymore. The whole neighborhood knows he’s a fuckin’ loser. What’re you gonna do now?”

Margaret got up and walked back to the kitchen. “How are we going to get him out of here?”

They both stared at Arthur’s unconscious body heaped on the floor.

“I’m calling the police. Once they see your arms they’ll arrest him if you’ll press charges. Then you can take out an order of protection so he can’t come near you.” Jason whipped out his phone.

“How do you know so much?” his mother asked.

“I watch *Law & Order*.”

Brent heard his phone start playing rap music and read the text. He told his younger brother, “Jason wants us to meet him at the tree house. Urgent.”

“What’s up?” Evan asked.

“I don’t have a clue.”

Without a word to their mother, they grabbed their jackets and ran outside. The door slammed as they got into the car and sped away.

Looking through the kitchen window, Liz Sloan watched her sons’ departure. She noted the date and time inside a small red spiral notebook along with many other similar notations she had previously recorded. “I know they’re up to no good,” she said aloud. “They think I don’t keep track of their comings and goings, but someday they might be in for a big surprise.” Liz put the notebook back inside a catch-all drawer in the laundry room—a place she knew they’d never look for anything—then returned to

the family room to finish watching the rest of her *Lifetime* movie.

Brent pulled up and parked behind Jason's truck. He and his brother rushed through the woods. They climbed the ladder into the tree house, unprepared to see Jason's lips pressed together into a thin bitter line while he repeatedly slammed his fist into his other hand.

"I'm gonna kill the bastard, *kill him.*"

"Who?" Brent asked sitting down.

"My alcoholic father. He slapped Mom's face so hard she fell."

"That's messed up." Evan folded his legs beneath him and he sat.

"Extremely. What are you gonna do?" Brent asked.

"I called the cops and they arrested him. Mom's had enough and is finally pressing charges."

"Fresh." Brent nodded approval.

"Listen, she's worried about money, but I have a plan."

Evan scratched his crotch. "Yeah? Spill."

"Remember that socio I told you about who scared me and Summer? Well, I'm pretty sure the guy's loaded and I wanna scope out the ground around his house."

Brent frowned. "Hey dawg, I sympathize, but like I'm not lookin' to get myself slayed, ya? You made the guy sound dangerous."

"Yeah, dangerous." Still scratching, Evan echoed his brother.

"He bragged about how rich his family was, owned all this land and shit like that. Hell, the guy's gotta be loaded. The way I see it he's got money hidden somewhere in metal boxes. Like treasure. It's gotta be buried close to his house."

"Makes sense," Brent said.

"Yeah, sense."

"So my plan is to take my brother's metal detector over there and see what it finds."

Brent lit a joint. "Are you packin' heat?"

"Yeah, and you should too – but you're also gonna be carrying

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something else.”

“A gun’s not enough?”

“Cookies.”

“Excuse me?” Brent almost choked. “I thought you said ‘cookies.’”

“Yeah. The plan is for you to knock on his door holding a plate of chocolate chip cookies. When he opens the door just smile real nice and say they’re a gift from Jason and Summer. He’ll take them, absolutely.”

“No way!” Brent shook his head no. “Are you totally insane?”

“I’m telling you, when Summer offered him some of her cookies the water works started.”

“Okay, say he takes the cookies, then what? How’re we gonna distract him so he won’t see you snooping around?”

“How many times have you talked yourself out of getting arrested?” Jason reached for the smoke.

“Plenty.” Brent jutted his chin forward.

“So use some of that charm and ask him, I don’t know, something. He likes to talk about his family. They were early settlers so tell him you’re researching a school project and ask if you can interview him. Bring something to write on so it looks on the level.”

“I can bullshit anyone, but what if he’s really dangerous?”

“He’s an old fart and can’t take you both on at once. Plus, he won’t expect you to be packin’ heat. Trust me, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“What do you think, Evan? And will you stop that goddamn scratching?” He shoved him roughly.

“I’m down with it if you are, bro.”

CHAPTER 7

Harry Chase slowed down when saw the shiny outline of the metal shopping cart reflected in the headlights. He pulled to a stop and rolled down the window. "Stow your cart in the back of my truck and climb in, John."

"You gonna give me one of your pep talks? Not interested."

"Nope. Just wanted to spend some time with my bud."

John collapsed his cart and placed it in the truck bed beside an ice chest filled with packaged meat and bags of groceries Harry had shopped for him. He slid inside the cab and slammed the door. Harry noticed John's hair was brushed and tied back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He watched him stroke his trimmed beard. "Got a hot date?" he joked.

The unexpected question startled John and made him gasp and wheeze.

"Hey man, I'm sorry."

John waved his hand in dismissal. "Never mind. Got my inhaler." He removed it from his shirt pocket, shook it and placed his lips around the mouthpiece. He pressed the button and sucked medication inside his lungs.

"Orange really did a number on you."

"Yeah, dammit. But I'm too stubborn to die."

"I'm glad, old friend. Let's order some take-out and we can chow down at my office and catch up."

"Sure." John sprayed his inhaler again.

Harry speed-dialed The Golden Dragon and ordered some appetizers and entrees. "Be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Fine."

"You been doing anything unusual?" Harry's foot stepped on the gas pedal and they headed toward town. "You're all cleaned up."

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John stowed his inhaler back in his pocket. "Yeah, matter-of-fact I have. Started writing a journal."

Harry let this information sink in. "Glad to hear it. You know I've wanted you to join a veterans' group and talk about what's been eating at you all these years."

"Can't do that sissy shit. Writing's better."

"Whatever you say."

Harry drove into downtown Ships Cove. The picturesque streets were like wet mirrors reflecting the street lights decorated with hanging garden baskets. Sidewalks were lined with an assortment of unique shops consisting of bakeries, art galleries, and seafood restaurants by the water. The marina was full of docked boats of all sizes, some with lights on from the live-aboards who were cooking dinner.

He steered the truck around a corner and pulled into an empty parking space. "Be right back." Harry grunted getting out of the truck. He was naturally stocky and his upper body and arms had well developed muscles from regular workouts at the gym. He walked inside the Chinese restaurant to pick up their food and John slid down in the cab to avoid being seen. Some minutes later Harry emerged and handed two full take-out bags to John. He started the engine and pulled away.

"Smells good." John reached inside one of the bags. He removed a fried shrimp and offered one to Harry, then took one for himself and ate it. "Crunchy."

"Don't eat all of them, I got us some dip."

"Roger that." John gave a mock salute, took one more shrimp and rolled the top of the bag shut.

At his law office Harry parked his truck around back and they entered the building through the rear entrance. A short walk down the hall and Harry unlocked the office door. He flipped on the light switch and John followed him inside to Harry's corner office with a stunning picturesque view of the park across the street. "Put the bags on the desk and get comfortable while I shut the blinds."

"Will do."

John set the bags down and stood in front of a black-and-white

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photograph hanging on one of the walls. A heavily-jowled Winston Churchill wearing a bowler hat and smoking a cigar stared back at him. Beneath his portrait engraved in bronze was an excerpt from his famous speech after the end of the German Blitz: "Never, give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense."

Harry noticed John reading the caption. "I try to make that my daily motto." John didn't say anything and sat down and waited while Harry moved a stack of files to the top of a filing cabinet and cleared space on his desk for the food and paper plates. He got some bottled water from the small refrigerator in his office. "Come and get it."

They fixed themselves plates from the steaming containers of food and the bagged shrimp. Harry settled into his comfortable executive chair and John sat across from him.

John was anxious to get some information without letting on. He casually dipped a shrimp in spicy mustard. "Do you know anything about a teenage boy named Jason?"

Harry had been eating an egg roll and wiped his greasy hands with a napkin to hide his surprise. "Matter-of-fact I do. Full name's Jason Hogan. How do you know him?"

"I ran across him and his girl last week having a . . . a picnic."

"No kidding? You're always so careful to stay invisible. Where were you?"

"That open field by the stream where I used to ride Spindle. You know, the place I'd go to get some peace and quiet away from my brothers."

A wistful sigh escaped Harry's lips. "Sure were good days back then. We didn't have a care in the world."

This time John dipped a shrimp in sweet sauce. "Well, there was that time you and me, Steamroller, Elvis and Erie Canal all went fishing at Skykomish River."

"I'll never forget how you saved my life that day. I'm eternally grateful."

John squirmed in his chair. He wasn't accustomed to gratitude

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and it made him uncomfortable.

"Bunch of dumb-ass kids that day, weren't we?" Harry got a faraway look recalling the carefree teenage boys they'd been so long ago. Life had taken a harsh toll on both of them. He finished his egg roll and took a drink of bottled water. "It was early July when we went to the river to fish. We figured the water would be warm enough to swim, but we were wrong, almost dead wrong."

"I remember Steamroller wanted to roast hot dogs. E.C. and Elvis bent wire hangers into skewers. Damn, we sizzled those dogs good."

"Best dogs I ever ate," Harry said, remembering. "After we toasted marshmallows I got the brilliant idea of climbing into my chest waders and walked into the river to fish. The water was so high from spring runoff my boots slipped in a mud hole." He paused to take another drink. "I lost my balance and next thing I knew I was neck deep in the freezing river."

"You scared the piss outta me shouting for help."

"I couldn't fight the current because my waders pulled me down." Harry's next words rushed out one after the other. "That's when you jumped into action and threw me a cattle rope and hauled my ass to safety. Saved me from drowning."

"Dad taught me some good survival skills. 'Always have a good strong rope if you're gonna be in the wilderness' was one of his cardinal rules." At the memory of his father John fell silent.

Harry observed his friend's mood darken. "Why are you interested in the Hogan boy?" he asked hoping to reel him back in.

"He seemed like a nice kid. I know I scared him and his girl, but he offered me some of their food and was real polite about it."

"That was good of him."

"Yeah, except a couple weeks before, he and his delinquent friends were robbing a house and almost got caught."

Harry stopped eating and put down his plastic fork. "How do you know this?"

"They escaped through the woods and wound up at my house. Tried the front door, but it was locked. They didn't know I was inside, thought the place was deserted. I heard them talking outside

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my window about what they stole. They were smoking pot. I recognized Jason's voice from that night. He and his friends are heading for serious trouble."

Harry stirred his mandarin beef and took a bite. "Don't be so quick to judge him. I don't know about his friends' home situations, but I can tell you that Jason's father has abused his mother for years and she finally kicked him out. I was in court the other day when she petitioned to get a restraining order against him."

John had nothing to say.

"I also know his mother is scrambling to pay the bills. Her husband is a drunk who wastes a good portion of his monthly SSI check on booze."

"How do you know about their finances?"

"I'm their landlord. Remember when I bought a block of foreclosure real estate at auction some time ago? The Hogan's have rented that house from me for years. I've never had the heart to evict them because Margaret is such a nice woman. She's always managed somehow to scrape together the back rent."

John sat back in his chair. "He doesn't know it, but that boy did me a favor when he invited me to share their food. I owe him something in return. Maybe I can help his mother."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to give it some thought."

"John Carrows, do you mean you actually want to help another human being instead of avoiding everyone, but me?" John didn't answer and Harry watched him look down at the floor and realized he'd gone too far.

"Don't get your hopes up. I haven't," John said gruffly.

"Forget what I said. Here, have some more mandarin beef."

After driving John back to their secret meeting place and helping him load his supplies into his cart, Harry watched his lonely friend disappear into the darkness of self-imposed isolation. He pondered the unfairness of life that singles out certain people for tragedy, while blessing others.