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Harmless Stories

David Wraith Dandridge

University of Missouri-St. Louis, davidwraith@yahoo.com

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Harmless Stories

David Wraith Dandridge
B.A. English, Webster University – 2000

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri St. Louis in
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Writing

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Advisory Committee

Mary Troy
Chairperson

John Dalton

Sylvia Cook

HARMLESS STORIES

DAVID WRAITH DANDRIDGE

**GOOD MORNING,
BABY KILLERS**

6:17 AM. Time to kill the babies.

The bridge I normally take to the clinic is being prepped for demolition, so I'm caught in a tangle of angry motorists, news vans, and construction trucks. It's not yet eighty degrees, but, stuck in traffic with no air conditioning, it's plenty hot enough. I could have kept my happy ass in bed. No one would blame me if I didn't show up. I could have gone back to sleep and said the alarm never went off. I could have spent the whole day not being called a murderer or having a bunch of angry white people accuse me of trying to exterminate my own race. I could have done that.

I try one of the Positive Visualization techniques I learned in my Anger Management class. I imagine myself with wings, soaring above the traffic, which is the only way I'll make it to the clinic on time since it's my turn to pick up the coffee and doughnuts. I'll gingerly float down to the clinic gate and all the other escorts will politely ignore the giant wings sticking out of my shoulder blades, like in that dream where I arrive at school naked and no one mentions it. And, the wings will make the day easier. I can sit on my perch atop the clinic, high above the taunts of the protestors. When a patient arrives, I'll swoop in and snatch her up the moment she gets out of her car. I'll fly her over the parking lot, glide down and gently place her at the top of the front steps. Maybe even take an aerial dump on one of the protestors for good measure.

The guy behind me leans on his horn. The light's turned green and there's a whole two car lengths worth of road to advance.

I stop at the bakery down the street from the clinic and order a dozen doughnuts and three large coffees. The bill seems a little light and, sure enough, when I check the receipt, the cashier didn't ring up the coffee. I'm just about to say something when the look in her eyes tells me that she did it on purpose. She must be pro-choice. I don't recognize her but maybe she's seen me in here with the other clinic volunteers after our shift. As the only black, male volunteer, I'm kind of recognizable. I put a little extra enthusiasm into my "thank you" and she nods, solemnly. That's when it hits me: she's had The Procedure.

I'm a volunteer escort at a family planning clinic. "Family Planning" is such a nice way to say it. It was a big day at the pro-choice think tank when they came up with that one. My job is to get the patients in and keep the protestors out. It's like I'm a doorman at a popular night club, but instead of buckets of champagne on ice, there's a doctor with a vacuum hose on the other side of the velvet rope.

Ours is the only clinic of its kind in the state of Missouri, and it only offers the procedure on Saturdays, so with my monthly shift, any woman who's had the procedure in the past two years had a one in four chance of being escorted in by me. It's one of those occupational hazards they can't prepare you for in training. Not only did my volunteering at the clinic change the way people looked at me, but it changed the way I looked at people, especially women. Suddenly friends, casual acquaintances and total strangers were explicitly or implicitly sharing intimate secrets with me, secrets that some of them hadn't shared with their mothers, husbands, or boyfriends. My fourth month in, I had to hide in the employee lounge while my high-school history teacher came in for an appointment.

I park in the overflow lot across the street from the clinic and walk to the corner, balancing the three coffees in their cardboard caddy on top of the doughnut box. I can see

through the fence that my fellow “Deathscorts” are here, already wearing their fluorescent orange and yellow vests like feminist crossing guards.

“Good morning, Baby Killers!” I say with a bright smile, handing the first cup of coffee to Adele, the five-foot octogenarian.

“Decaf?” she asks.

“Decaf.” I answer. This woman survived the Third Reich. I’m not about to be known as the guy who murdered her with caffeine.

“Thank you very much.” Her accent is equal parts Germany, Great Britain, Middle America and just plain old. I’d met her, years ago, when she was the oldest and only female facilitator at my court-mandated Men’s Group. I was the only member of the group she’d ever approached about volunteering at the clinic. Given my history, she was taking a big chance, but she believed in me. She may be my favorite person in the world.

The usual band of Anti’s is setting up outside the gate when the first patient arrives. She’s wearing high heels, a suede skirt and a brown silk top. The Anti’s yell at her. They yell at everyone, indiscriminately, but I learned fast how to tell who’s here for the procedure and who isn’t. A woman comes alone, in heels, tight jeans, she’s probably just here for a check up or to get a prescription filled. If she’s wearing sweats and tennis shoes, or pajamas, if she’s with her boyfriend, or her mother, can’t look you in the eye, she’s probably here for the procedure.

The Anti’s are unloading their signs from their van. The classics that never die: “YOU CALL IT CHOICE. GOD CALLS IT MURDER,” a Gerber baby over a caption that says, “Life... What a wonderful choice,” and the perennial favorite: Baby Malachi. In 1993 a woman in Dallas retrieved dismembered fetal remains from the dumpster behind a clinic, took them home and

photographed them. Photographed them. If you've driven by the clinic on a Saturday morning, you've probably seen this poster: the fetal hobby kit, some assembly required. The Anti's gave him a name: Baby Malachi. They throw birthday parties for him.

I only recognize a few of the regulars: "Granny," an elderly woman who always wears straw hats and sundresses and tries to give flowers to the patients; "Salem," a black, paraplegic woman in a motorized wheelchair with big eyeglasses and a wide-brimmed church hat, who accuses everyone on the staff of witchcraft; and "Patton," the ring leader, a heavysset woman who always seems to be speaking into a megaphone, even when she isn't.

"Morning," I say, meeting the patient at her car. I never say "good morning," because if she is here for the procedure, it's not a good morning.

"Don't go in there, Mom!" This is one of Patton's favorite taunts. She calls all the women who come in "mom" and all the men "dad." Sometimes she brings her daughter to shout "Please don't kill me, mommy!" But not today.

I walk her to the door, keeping myself between her and the Anti's. She says, "Thank you," then looks over her shoulder at them, "Whoever thought I'd need an escort just to buy birth control."

Once inside she will show a photo ID to Darryl, our security guard. He'll direct her to a set of bullet-proof sliding doors wired to a pressure sensitive floor and a bank of motion detectors. She will have to stand perfectly still to get the doors to open and then proceed to another set of sliding glass doors with their own pressure sensitive floor and motion detectors. If she does anything suspicious before the second set of doors open, Darryl will lock the place down, confining her in an airtight ten-foot by five-foot chamber. In 2002, the FBI came to the clinic for training on handling Anthrax attacks because we had a protocol and they didn't.

Karma is our crew chief. Her real name is Karen. People think she took the name Karma during her barefoot hippie days in the 60s, but it came about in the 80s when she started teaching Stress Reduction and Diversity Awareness workshops for large corporations. She's a tall, broad-shouldered, wide-hipped lesbian with the pre-requisite masculine hair cut and black plastic framed glasses. One look at her and you just know that nothing in her kitchen bears a corporate logo. She looks over at the Anti's, unpacking their signs, "Oh, God. It's too early in the morning for Fetizilla."

"His name is Baby Malachi," I correct her, "show some respect."

"Wow, Jack. You sound like one of them." she says. "Look alive, folks. My sources tell me that we might be getting a visit from Gwendolyn Owens, today."

"The Gwendolyn Owens?" Adele says, "I'm impressed."

Gwendolyn Owens: right-wing blogger, mother of seven, host of AM radio's *Life Line*. We'd gotten word from a clinic in Kansas that Gwendolyn had purchased an RV and had it customized into a state of the art mobile medical unit, complete with an ultrasound. She calls it the Crisis Pregnancy Bus. She parks outside of clinics and lures women in with the promise of free health services, then shows them a grainy, black and white images of their little fetus' beating heart and tries to talk them out of the procedure. The internet chatter from the Anti's was that this was a game changer. It would solidify Gwendolyn's status as the Michael Jordan of the Right to Life movement. She was already a rock star to them; now she had the tour bus to go with it. "I've seen her picture in the paper," I say. "She's not a bad looking woman. If she does show, let me handle her. Who knows? Maybe I'll get her pregnant."

Karma nods with mock seriousness, "Tactically, that would be a good move."

By 8 a.m. the parking lot is full. Karma looks over at the Anti's. "It's going to be a long day." When the lot is full, the patients have to park in the overflow lot across the street, meaning they have to come through the Anti's to get to the clinic. Both parking lots are private property, but everything in between is fair game. Last year an Anti grabbed my arm and I elbowed him: a lucky shot that knocked the wind out of him. The Anti's, seizing the opportunity, called the police. So I'm unofficially banned from escorting anyone from the overflow lot.

Adele is already escorting a couple from the overflow lot when a black Buick Skylark pulls in. Alice Neufeind's black Buick Skylark. I should have seen this coming; one clinic in the whole state, one in four odds and all. I should have seen this coming, but I didn't. I wish there was some discreet way I could have told all my female friends and family members, "If you're going to make an appointment at the clinic, try to avoid the third Saturday of the month." First it was my high-school history teacher. Then it was the hostess at the restaurant where I waited tables my last year of college. And now, Alice Neufeind: my ex-girlfriend.

I'd met Alice the year of my divorce. She was a cashier at my favorite independent record store and played in a punk band with her ex-boyfriend, Devon. Her stage name was Uber Alice.

The first time I went to hear them play, Devon saw me in the audience and started trashing their equipment. He walked off stage and the band went with him. Alice stood among the remnants of a smashed guitar and the overturned keyboards and finished the song, looking right at me the whole time. In the red gelled lights and the smoke machine fog, she looked like the last warrior to leave the battlefield.

What started as a rebound relationship for both of us quickly turned serious, and we moved in together. But, she was an angry drunk and I was just angry. By the time I moved out, the cops who came to our apartment on the domestic disturbance calls greeted us by name.

I hadn't heard from her for four years after that. Then, last November, I got a phone call. "Are you familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous? The Twelve Steps?" she asked. She was on step nine: apologize to all those you have wronged. "There's something I have to tell you..."

"Escort! Escort!" This is Karma calling me as I head toward the entrance. We never use our real names loud enough for the Anti's to hear. She catches up to me and grabs my arm, "You're not going to the overflow lot are you?"

"I got this." I say. Karma just gives me this concerned look. "I promise not to hit anyone." She still won't let go of my arm. "I know her."

Now she's looking at me like I'm out of my mind, "All the more reason. Now go wait in the lounge and I'll come get you when she's inside."

I pry myself loose. "Karm, I got this."

A few more Anti's have arrived and a couple of them are dispatched to the entrance of the overflow lot. I reach Alice's car just as she's getting out. Her hair is bright pink now and she has even more tattoos than before. She still looks good. No one wears hard living as well as Alice. She has a lovely neck and I can imagine how nice my hands would feel wrapped around it. The urge to strangle her is rising in the back of my throat like acid reflux, but I take a deep breath and force it back down. I'm not that guy anymore. Positive Visualization. Find my happy place and all that. "Alice."

“Oh fuck!” She says, shielding herself with the car door. She presses her hand to her chest, catching her breath. Nodding toward the protestors, she says “I thought you were one of them. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m your escort.” I say, tugging at the bottom corners of my florescent “Escort” vest, “Where’s Devon?”

“What makes you think it’s his?”

“I thought you guys were still together.”

“Who says we’re not?”

I’m a little surprised by this, but I shouldn’t be. It’s just the way Alice is. I try to change the subject, “You still in AA?”

She puts a cigarette in her mouth and without thinking I light it for her, just like when we were together. “I quit going to those stupid meetings. But don’t worry. I’m still sober.” She looks across the street. I can see it in her eyes, she’s in no hurry to go in. “What about you? Still going to your men’s group?”

“No.” I gesture toward the clinic, “I’ve got this now.”

The cigarette bobs between her lips as she speaks. I watch the ash, which miraculously doesn’t fall. “Who’d ever take the two of us for recovery types, huh?”

I gently take her elbow and lead her on. An Anti shadows us as soon as we reach the sidewalk. A new guy, I think Karma said his name is Paul. He has that “something-to-prove” eagerness of a new recruit trying to impress the rest of the platoon. “Excuse me ma’am, do you know that the doctor you’ll be seeing today has no hospital privileges in this city? Do you know how many women have suffered complications and hemorrhaging under his care?” But Alice

just ignores him. I've been doing this so long that it's all white noise to me. We keep walking silently until we reach the clinic parking lot.

We reach the front door of the clinic and I do something I never do. I walk her all the way inside. She checks in at the desk and I walk her to the security doors. We stand very still and wait for them to open. She says, "I fucked up."

"What?"

She shakes her head, "I can't believe I'm back here again."

The doors open and we step inside. We stand very still again, waiting for the second set of security doors to open. I take her hand and she lets me. Trying to be nice, I say, "We all make mistakes."

She looks at me, "*We* certainly did." The second set of doors open.

"Good luck in there. Maybe I'll see you on the other side."

She goes inside. I almost follow.

The night Alice threw me out of the apartment, she'd come home several hours late from band practice. She was drunk and had a beer in her hand when she walked in. I yelled at her and she hurled the bottle at me, barely missing my head. I snatched her by her hair and threw her against a wall. I'll never forget the look on her face when I cocked my hand and said, "I want to hit you so bad I can taste it."

"Oh yeah?" There wasn't a drop of fear in her eyes, "And how does it taste?"

"It's delicious." Then I put my fist through the wall.

I didn't know at the time that she was pregnant. She wasn't sure if it was mine or Devon's or someone else's, so she didn't tell me. After we broke up, she went to the clinic, the same one where I now volunteer, and "had it taken care of." This is what she'd called me to apologize for, back in November when she'd reached her ninth step.

I don't know what upset me more: that she hadn't told me at the time or that she was telling me after the fact. Or maybe it was that she was telling me, not because I had a right to know, but as a function of her sobriety. The fact that I might not have been the father only made it worse. It was the paternal equivalent of being on a firing squad not knowing if your rifle was the one loaded with blanks.

It hit me on my next shift at the clinic: volunteering there didn't feel quite so noble once I had a dog in the fight.

"Who was that?" Karma asks as I come back out.

"My ex-girlfriend."

Karma weighs her words before she speaks, "It's not..."

"Mine? No." I sit down on the steps, "Not this time."

She gives me a sympathetic look, "You mean?"

"Yeah," I say, picking up little bits of gravel and throwing them at the ground, "It happened some years back, but she didn't tell me until a few months ago."

Karma sits down next to me and puts her arm across my shoulder, "That explains a lot."

"Hey," I say, defensively, "I still make my shift every month."

“I know. And each month we’re surprised.”

The doctor arrives around 8:30 a.m. The Anti’s all greet him by name. “Hello Kevin.” “How are you today, Kevin?” They take a perverse pleasure in watching him sprint, literally sprint, from his car to the front door, by-passing the stairs, running up the wheelchair ramp, hugging the wall the whole way. I’ve watched him do this once a month for almost two years and it still makes me sad.

I always watch the rooftops of the nearby buildings when the doc gets here. They didn’t teach me this in training. I’ve just seen too many movies.

“Where do these people come from?” I ask. “I’d like to follow them home and see what they’re doing when they’re not yelling at us.”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know,” Karma says

A mother and daughter pull in shortly after the doc arrives. Their car has Indiana plates, so they’re definitely here for the procedure. Despite my personal opinion of Indiana, I’m pretty sure they have birth control there. Adele asks them how their drive was and the mother, who looks like someone you’d see being interviewed on the news when a factory closes, says, “Not too bad. Just a couple of hours. That bridge construction got me turned around, though.”

“Wasn’t on MapQuest,” the daughter says, eyes to the asphalt. She looks all of sixteen, wearing fuzzy green slippers and clutching a stuffed frog. ‘Long drive?’ is a popular ice breaker around here, just like ‘did you have any trouble finding the place?’ or ‘some weather we’re having.’

Then the church folks show up. “Here come the Catholics.” Karma says.

“Do you know they get a police escort?” I ask.

“Our tax dollars at work.” They walk in a procession from St. Joseph’s church, about a quarter mile away. The church where I was baptized, confirmed, and received my first communion. Karma always asks me to do the head count for the incident report, since they’re “my people,” and I always do.

The Anti’s always congregate on the south side of the fence, closest to the entrance, but as the morning wears on, they spread out across the west side as well. When the Catholics arrive, the Anti’s cede the west side to them. The two factions are far from simpatico; the enemy of the enemy is still the enemy. The Anti’s, mostly Protestants, seem offended by the Catholics’ peaceful, prayerful presence and their appalling lack of huge signs with dead fetuses on them. Quiet as it’s kept, I kind of like the Catholics being here. They just pray, no taunts or insults, though I can tell some of my fellow Baby Killers are annoyed by them just the same.

I walk to the west side fence where a small army of parishioners - two thousand man-years of Christianity between them - are Hail Marying me. Enough of them, praying loud enough, could bring down the clinic like the Walls of Jericho... if one were to take the Bible literally. And these people certainly do.

Two, four, six, eight - Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee - fourteen, sixteen, eighteen... For a moment I lock eyes with a woman I remember from church. She confessed to me in an awkwardly candid conversation last year that she’d had an abortion. And now... here she is. We don’t acknowledge each other. I always start off looking them in the eye, but somewhere before I reach Monsignor McDonough, I’m counting shoes. Loafers, topsiders, saddle shoes. Then, just off from the crowd, a pair of Birkenstocks under the cuffs of jeans. I look up and see a fifty-something woman in a denim jacket, more handsome than pretty, with a

strong jaw and salt and pepper hair. Her skin has had too much exposure to the sun, she's been too busy saving the unborn to moisturize. She's smiling at me, "Hey, sugar. You're too good looking to be on the wrong side. You need to come over here with us." She pushes her sunglasses up on her forehead, staring at me with steel gray eyes. Her t-shirt, in big red letters, says "Lifeguard."

I've never seen her in person before, just in the paper, but I recognize her immediately, even though she looks different when she's not shouting something. It's Gwendolyn Owens in the flesh. I look at her with mock surprise, like a host greeting an unexpected party guest, "Why, Gwendolyn Owens! To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"You've got me at a disadvantage, sugar. You know my name, but you haven't given me yours."

"Just call me what you always call me, "Baby Killer."

"Don't take it personal, sugar."

"I never do. Even when it is."

She's not with the Catholics. Far from it. She's not really with the Anti's either, but they're definitely with her. If she gave the word, they'd probably tear me into bite sized chunks, Fed Ex my remains to my mother, and justify it all with some verse from the book of Leviticus. I walk away, but she's not done with me.

"I'm on to you, you know."

I turn around, "What's that?"

She's still smiling that I'm Going To Heaven Smile, "You play for the big team. How did those Godless lesbians ever get their hooks into a good Christian boy like you?"

I can feel my eyes narrow at her even as I try not to give anything away.

She's still smiling, "I saw you mouthing the Hail Mary and the Our Father while you were pretending to do the head count. You're one of ours."

I narrow my eyes at her, searching for a response and not finding one. I walk back across the lot.

"So, Gwendolyn did show up. And she brought that hideous bus," Karma says. I look across the street and sure enough there's Gwendolyn's Crisis Pregnancy Bus, covered from roof to wheel-well with a stock photo image of a young, smiling, light-skinned African American girl, with naturally curly hair and a green cardigan. Her teeth are as white and straight as meticulously arranged Chiclets. I've seen the same photo on the place mats at Arby's and in an ad for the Missouri Lottery. I'll bet when the model posed for it, she imagined being on a billboard for a local dentist, not the mobile face of the Right to Life Movement. Karma looks from Gwendolyn's bus to me, "I don't think it's a good idea for you to talk to her."

"Have you ever seen one?" I ask her.

"One what?"

"The procedure."

"Oh God, no. Have you?" she asks. I nod.

I'd seen a video of a doctor dilating a woman with a speculum and inserting a suction tube that emptied into a glass cylinder. Going through the tube, it all just looked like blood and

comfortably anonymous tissue, but when the doctor poured the contents into a pan, body parts could be plainly seen. Little hands, little feet, a head that looked like it could still go either way between human and amphibian: Baby Malachi's little brother. Once I'd started volunteering at the clinic, my vehemently pro-life sister had given me the DVD and insisted I watch it. It was almost like she was issuing a dare. It sat unwatched on my shelf until last November, a couple of days after Alice called with her big confession. I bit my bottom lip as I watched, not allowing myself to look away. I tried not to recall the images during my shifts at the clinic, but you can't try not to think about something without thinking about it.

When my sister gave me the video, she said if I was going to fight for something, I should know what I was fighting for. She said it's all abstract until you see it, but she was wrong. It's all abstract until it's yours.

A car starts to pull into the lot and the Anti's block the entrance and speak to the diver. Before Karma and I can get to it, the car backs out, makes a u-turn and parks behind the Crisis Pregnancy Bus. A woman gets out of the car and gets into the bus. Looks like they got one. "Damn it!" I say, with fake anger, "I really wanted to kill that baby!" Karma ignores this. She's used to me by now.

Things are slowing down. Patients going in and out are few and far between. I walk down to the parking lot where Karma and one of the clinic nurses are discussing a PBS documentary on the Iraq war. There's nothing more boring than a bunch of liberals aggressively agreeing with each other. "There has to be a better way to do this." I say, to no one in particular.

"Do what?" Karma asks.

“Prevent unwanted pregnancy. Prevent abortion.” I look over at the Anti’s, “Even they’d have to admit that what they’re doing is a stop gap measure, at best. You don’t wait ‘til someone’s on the Nissan lot to try to sell them a Ford.”

Karma narrows her eyes and shakes her head, “Did you just compare family planning to selling cars?”

“Why not? Family planning is our product and we’re missing a huge chunk of our target demographic. We just have to know how to market to them.”

“I don’t know, Jack.” Karma still looks skeptical, “I don’t think the capitalist model applies here.”

“Well,” chimes in Adele, who seemed not to be listening, but always is, “I think you make a valid point.” She smiles at me and I smile back.

The Anti’s are getting restless for lack of patients to harass. “Your day will come!” Patton warns us, “Just like Nuremberg!”

“Did you hear that, Adele?” I call back to her, “She wants to tell you a thing or two about Nuremberg. If she only knew.”

Adele shrugs it off, “Even if she knew, she wouldn’t know.”

The door opens behind me. Alice is walking slowly and deliberately but trying not to let the discomfort show on her face. “Need any help?” I take her arm. She says no, but doesn’t let go. “Come on, I’ll walk you to your car. You should let me drive you home.”

“I’ll be fine,” she says.

A young Anti, Paul, runs up to us excitedly, “Excuse me ma’am, did you have an abortion today?”

“No she didn’t. I did.” I ball up my fist, shift my weight and bend slightly at the knee. I’m spring-loaded. The rest is the easy part: push off my back foot, twist at the waist and throw the right hook. If I catch the sweet spot at the hinge of his jaw, he’ll probably go down with one punch. Yeah... and the cell phone camera footage will be uploaded to the internet before I reach the holding cell. As I hustle Alice past him, not punching him in his big dumb face feels like holding open a mouse trap that hasn’t been set.

“You really got an ultrasound in that thing?” Alice calls to Gwendolyn Owens as we pass the Crisis Pregnancy Bus.

Gwendolyn is standing outside the bus, she looks Alice up and down, “Why don’t you come in and see.”

Alice places her hand on her belly, “Too late. Nothing to interest you here.” I walk Alice to her car as quickly as she can keep up, in her condition. She looks at me. There’s something uncomfortable and familiar in her eyes. She says, “You seem different.”

“I am different. So are you.”

“Don’t be so sure.” She opens her car door, “I was a drunk bitch. Now I’m a sober bitch. People can improve, but we don’t really change.” It’s not until she puts on her sunglasses that I realize how much I miss her eyes.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to drive you home?”

“You forget... I’ve done this before.”

We do that stutter-step of two people who don't know if they should hug or not. She gives me this palms-up gesture of impatience and surrender that allows us to embrace without pretending it isn't awkward. "Thanks," she says, getting in the car. She rolls down the window, "Maybe I'll see you around."

I tell her, "Don't forget the bridge is closed."

I'm watching Alice pull out of the lot when I hear Gwendolyn's voice behind me, "An ex-girlfriend?"

"Something like that." I turn around.

Gwendolyn's leaning on the door of the bus, standing on the corrugated metal steps, drinking from a travel mug. "She's obviously at war with herself," Gwendolyn says, turning to the door and opening it, "if you want to talk about it, I've got coffee." She gives me a little 'come inside' head gesture, then gets on the bus and closes the door behind her. If she had stood there and waited for me to come, I probably would have walked away, but there was something in the audacity of her turning her back on me and expecting me to follow that compelled me to do that very thing.

I open the door and Gwendolyn says "Come on in!" before I step inside. The interior is light brown and the upholstery matches the carpeted floor. It's clean. It still has that new car smell. A young woman in a lab coat and scrubs sees me and scurries away to a room in the back. Gwendolyn says, "What do you think?"

"I feel like Luke Skywalker getting a guided tour of the Death Star." She's sitting in an office chair at a little desk. She hands me a small black and white photo. An ultrasound image. "Let me guess," I say, holding it up, "You? When you were younger?"

“That’s the baby we rescued today.” When people at the clinic use the word “rescue,” there’s an edge to it, like they’re talking about Santa Claus, or UFOs. Coming from Gwendolyn’s mouth, it sounded like a different word entirely. I guess I’d never heard the word from someone who believed it. “This baby is going to live because her mother didn’t go into that awful place,” Gwendolyn cut her eyes toward the clinic. “You might see this child on a playground someday. How would you feel if that was your baby, Jack? What if that ex-girlfriend of yours had been killing your child today?”

“You know, I never told you my name.”

“Sure you did.”

“No. I didn’t. And I’m not naïve enough to ask how you know it, but I am curious enough to ask what else you know about me.”

She walks over and gets so close my nostrils burn from the mixture of her sweat and perfume. She’s so tall that I’m staring at her sunburned chest and have to look up to see her face. “I know you have violence in you, son. So much you can barely contain it at times. And I know I don’t make you nervous, so the reason your hand is shaking is because you’re trying so hard not to hit me with it.”

I glance down at the ultrasound photo in my left hand. It’s trembling so hard that the poor unborn child is having an epileptic seizure. She’s wrong, though. She does make me nervous.

“It’s not working, Jack. Not the anger management classes and not this. That rage is still inside you because deep down, you know what you’re doing is wrong. You think that protecting these women from us will make up for all the years you couldn’t protect people from yourself.”

I'm trying not to let her inside my head. Positive Visualization. Wings. "Congratulations, you found the Office of Public Records. Don't over play your hand, Gwendolyn."

"Fair enough." She walks back to the table to get her coffee, "The original plan on how to handle you was--"

"Excuse me! How to *handle* me?"

She calmly opens her thermos and pours in more coffee, "The original plan on how to handle you was to provoke you to assault one of the youth ministers." She lifts her head from her coffee to look me in the eye, "Paul, as a matter of fact, volunteered to bait you into attacking him. But I think they had you pegged wrong." She's right in front of me now, tapping the ultrasound photo with her manicured finger. Her nails are short and buffed to a high shine, but bear none of the Devil's lacquer. "We're making more and more saves like this every day. Can you imagine how that feels? Saving lives instead of destroying them?"

I toss the ultrasound photo on the desk, "I guess we're just going to have to agree to disagree."

She places her hand on my cheek. I instinctively grab her wrist, but she doesn't flinch, so I leave her hand where it is. The sadness in her gray eyes comes on so suddenly that it's either completely genuine or a total put-on, "Oh son, there's no room for disagreement about murder."

We stare at each other in silence. I'm worrying that she can feel my heart beating through my cheek. I've got nothing. I gently slide her hand from my face and back away from her, "I'll see you around, Gwendolyn."

"I don't doubt that. I just wonder which side you'll be on when you do."

I go back to the clinic. I try to walk past Karma before she can say anything.

“Jack, did you just come out of the Crisis Pregnancy Bus?”

“Yeah. It’s really nice. They have cable in there. Look, is it cool if I leave now?”

Karma looks at her watch, “I guess Adele and I can handle it from here. Are you okay?”

I’m looking at the knot on the tie for my vest. I try to undo it, but my hands are shaking.

“I just want to go home.”

“Will I see you next month?”

I give up on my vest and massage my temples, “I’m not sure.”

Karma reaches out and gives my shoulder a squeeze, “Just let me know.”

On the top step, I bump into a husband coming out of the clinic. He gives me a nod, “Got a light?”

I’m startled for a second, but man, could I use a cigarette. “Can I get one of those?”

Salem is wheeling up and down the south side fence, pointing at me and chanting, “Witchcraft.”

I tell the husband that if I knew any witchcraft I’d abracadabra my ass back in bed.

The husband asks, “Are they always here?”

“Just on Saturdays. The day we offer the procedure.”

He’s surprised. “They know the schedule?”

“Sometimes I think they know this place better than I do.”

He leans over, resting his elbows on the rail, looking down his cigarette like the scope of a rifle, "Man, we're just trying to put our thing back together." He tells me how he and his wife had decided to give their marriage one last shot. They had just moved back in together after a long separation when she realized she was pregnant. They'd married young and had three kids already. "Imagine me trying to feed another one. One that ain't even mine." He stares up at the sky, skeptically, like I had just offered him a good deal on a cloud. For the first time I notice the prison tattoo on his neck, "Ashley" in blue cursive. Aside from me wearing the bright orange vest, we're just two guys smoking. A photo-negative of a maternity ward waiting room.

He stabs his cigarette out on the rail and flicks it into the parking lot. "Hey, thanks man." he says, on his way back inside.

"Can I ask you something?" Adele is pacing in front of the stairs with a clipboard, filling out the incident report.

I climb down and sit on the bottom step. "Sure, Adele."

"Why do you call us Baby Killers?"

I wave my hand toward the Anti's. "That's what they call us. I'm just taking it back."

"Oh, I see," she says, though I can tell that she doesn't. She sits down on the step next to me, "The Nazis called us many things, but we never 'took them back' as you say. Gandhi once said, if someone offers you a gift and you refuse it, it's the giver that must carry the gift on. If someone insults you and you refuse to accept it, who then must carry the burden of the insult?" She's smiling at me the way old people do when they feign anticipating an answer to a rhetorical question.

I smile back, "I hate you, Adele." She leans over and puts her head on my shoulder. I wrap my arm around her, "I'm not even kidding. It's no fun arguing with an adorable Holocaust survivor. It's a lose-lose."

We sit for a minute. Everyone else is going back to wherever it is they came from. I imagine them all stuck in traffic together; a bird's-eye-view of them all lined up in the single open lane. Monsignor McDonough on foot, choking on Uber Alice's exhaust fumes, flicking holy water at her back window with his army of Christian soldiers marching behind him. Then Patton futilely honking the horn of the Anti-van while Salem rides shotgun. The construction workers wear fluorescent vests, so Salem accuses them and their orange safety cones of witchcraft. Granny steps over Baby Malachi and exits the back of the van, hopping into Gwendolyn Owens' Crisis Pregnancy Bus, using the down time to get training on the mobile ultrasound. Karma zips by on a scooter that runs on recycled, kosher vegetable oil while the mother and daughter from Indiana curse themselves for trying to reverse engineer their MapQuest directions.

I'm floating overhead – no, I'm being carried by Adele who has sprouted wings and is flying low over the traffic. I'm trying to tell them all to turn around, that the bridge is out, but no one listens, so I just wave good-bye to everyone. Go easy Salem, go easy Gwendolyn, go easy Mr. and Mrs. Putting Your Thing Back Together. Go easy Baby Malachi. Sleep well. See you next month.

HARMLESS

The day that most people's suspicions about Anthony Daily were confirmed began with his two mile trek from his North St. Louis neighborhood to Zero Henderson's house in Hemdale.

He had lain awake in bed until he heard his mother's car steal out of the driveway. He made himself a bowl of cereal, brushed his teeth, and set off walking. He eyed the adults going about their morning routine, the union workers at the fabrication plant taking their cigarette break, and Charlie's Tavern, already open and serving drinks. He stopped in front of the bar's picture window, his focus pulled by a dark skinned, middle-aged man in a shabby suit he'd probably owned since the Civil Rights era, about to down a shot of whiskey at 10:17 a.m.

It had occurred to Anthony, shortly after his eighth birthday, that he might one day meet his father. He sometimes obsessed over where and when this might take place, and whether he would even recognize the man if he saw him. Recalling every clue his mother had ever inadvertently let slip, Anthony studied the man at the bar: broad nose, long delicate fingers raising the shot glass to his lips. The man cut his eyes toward Anthony, who pretended to be

watching the TV suspended over the bar, where some white lady with a helmet of hair was silently mouthing and gesturing in front of an animated weather map. Icons that reminded Anthony of the Morton's Salt logo floated from west to east behind her, broken diagonal lines for rain and black half moons with handles for umbrellas.

An image flashed in Anthony's head so quickly, he had to grab it before it fled. As he concentrated, the picture grew more vivid, like a Polaroid developing in his mind. It was Anthony, twirling around and around, arms outstretched in front of him, clutching an open umbrella and crooning the lyrics to "Singin' in the Rain" in his high school cafeteria. The feeling of air rushing around him, the picture of the room revolving over the horizon line of his black umbrella, it was so real. He couldn't tell if this was an actual memory, or something he had constructed with the help of eyewitness accounts after Vice Principle Howard ordered him down from the empty lunch table he had been standing on top of. When Mr. Howard asked Anthony just what he thought he was doing, dancing on a table with an umbrella, Anthony confessed to having no idea, that his last clear memory had been sitting in a window overlooking the athletic field, eating cheese fries and drinking Orange Crush.

Outside the bar, Anthony looked up at the sky, as blue and clear as a portrait studio backdrop. In the humidity, his shirt clung to his back like a waterlogged fur coat. His armpits were already sticky, with a mile yet to go. Rain would be nice.

It was the 5th of July, 1990 and the faint smell of gunpowder clung to the air. Every fifteen or twenty minutes Anthony heard the forlorn, defeated pop of a lone firecracker which, had he been closer to his mom's house, he might have mistaken for a .22 being fired.

Anthony washed the Henderson's dishes. This had been his daily ritual since school had let out. He'd get there after Zero's mom had left for work, but before any of the revolving cast of

half a dozen or so kids, who treated the Henderson's house like day camp, arrived. Things just happened like that. Without any official sanction, the home of some kid, some kid with absentee parents, became Command Central over Christmas break, spring break, or summer vacation. The summer after their sophomore year in high school, it was Zero Henderson's house.

They'd all lie on Zero's bedroom floor or on his bed, listening to music. Zero seemed to have every CD ever pressed: N.W.A., Eric B and Rakim, En Vogue. When they had enough kids to justify it, they might catch the bus to the mall and see a movie, turn off all the escalators, or shoplift things they didn't need just to say they'd done it.

But each day started with Anthony finding something to clean. Zero's house was notoriously filthy. The first time Anthony had come over, month's worth of newspapers and magazines had taken over the dining room table. Days' worth of lipstick-stained, half-finished cups of coffee sat growing velvety film. Video game console innards spilled across the living room rug from the disemboweled entertainment center. When Zero offered Anthony some water, he replied, "Yeah, I'll take a slice."

"So what's up for today?" Anthony asked.

Zero sat at his the kitchen table with a stack of new comic books. "Alice's coming over when she gets done at the natatorium and she's bringing fine ass Ericka with her."

"That little light skinned girl?"

"Yeah, you know, Ericka Letts... as in Ericka *Letts* you fuck."

Anthony hadn't seen Ericka Letts since the frat party they'd crashed at Washington University in April when he'd first met Zero. Zero had the body of a linebacker, but personality-wise was more likely to be the guy scoring drugs for the team. He was so big and gregarious that, with his fine black hair, he was often mistaken for Samoan. Zero's drunkenness had been the

chief form of entertainment the night of the party, and Anthony, as a joke, had decided to test his strength against him. Even though Zero was a head taller and fifty pounds heavier, Anthony was able to take him to the floor with a single flourish that was part Judo throw, part ballroom dancing twirl. As the frat boys high-fived and raised their beers to Anthony, Zero stormed out without his ride, determined to walk home.

Twenty minutes later, driving his mom's blue Oldsmobile, Anthony saw Zero staggering down the street in the wrong direction, heading out of Hemdale and into the city. Fearing that a drunken boy from the suburbs would get picked clean in the ghetto at two in the morning on a Friday night, Anthony pulled over and, after apologizing, coaxed Zero into his car.

After a few wrong turns, Anthony pulled up to Zero's subdivision where all the houses looked identical and ominous in the dark. Every morning when Anthony arrived at Zero's, he tried to reconcile the haunted mansion that had swallowed Zero up in the darkness that night with the one story, prefab with vinyl siding that he now knew as well as his own house. Memories of that night usually paraded through Anthony's head while waiting on the front porch for Zero to get the door: the drunken frat boys with their blonde girlfriends and (no doubt) rich fathers, the chubby white kid who'd asked Anthony, "What song is this?" every time the DJ played rap music, even the sad sight of Ericka Letts being led into one of the back bedrooms by two college guys and the acidic realization that Anthony had not seen her come out. In his mind, she was still in that room, servicing the brothers of Alpha Theta Douchebag.

"That girl's fifteen and she already has a city-wide rep." Anthony looked at Zero over his shoulder while stacking the dishes on the drying rack. "I wouldn't fuck her with City Mike's dick."

Zero peered at him over his copy of *The X-Men*, "You wouldn't fuck anybody with anybody's dick."

Anthony turned and considered how to respond. He and Zero had spent most of their days together for a month, but they still had not quite navigated their friendship. Tension rose quickly between them. One wrong word and they were like boys circling each other on the school yard with rolled up jacket sleeves. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t try to stop me from making it hot for myself just ‘cause you scared of the pussy.”

Anthony held up his clenched fist, slowly unfurled his middle finger and kept it prominently displayed even after giving Zero his back. “Besides, she looks like she’s 12 and I like ‘em full grown. How come you never tried to get with Alice?”

“What? And cock-block my boy?”

“Who’s your boy?”

Zero balled up a dish towel and threw it at him, but it didn’t quite reach. “You, nigga! We see the way you look at Alice. You ain’t slick.”

The doorbell rang and both boys looked at each other, waiting for the other one to answer it, when Alice let herself in. The moment she walked into the kitchen, Zero seemed to be looking past her. “Where Ericka at?”

“Damn. Can’t you be happy to see me for five minutes?”

Anthony shook the dishwater from his fingers and wiped his hands on his jeans. “*I’m* happy to see you.”

“See there,” Alice swatted Zero’s comic book. “At least I know Anthony’s here for me.”

Anthony placed his hands on her hips and pulled her in for a hug. His voice dropped an octave, “Oh I’m here for you, alright.” Her hair smelled like Herbal Essences shampoo.

“You’re here for me,” she took his face in her hands with mock seriousness. “But are you *there* for me?” She had an inch or two on Anthony. Her limbs were long and lean, like the swimmer that she was. Her hair was dark brown and her skin was a carefully cultivated shade of bronze. When there had been nothing better to do that summer, she’d lain out in Zero’s back yard in her bikini and worked on her tan while simultaneously trying to ignore Zero’s lustful stares.

“Yes... I’m here and there for you.”

“But are you there *with* me?”

“Yes... I’m here and there with and for you.” They went through this routine every day.

Zero rolled his eyes and waved them off with his hand. “So what’s up with your girl?”

Alice spoke to Zero over Anthony’s shoulder, still hugging him, “I never said I was bringing her, I said I’d call her. She can come or not on her own.”

“So what did she say when you called her?”

Alice let Anthony go, passing Zero on her way to the phone mounted on the kitchen wall, “You worr’some.” She cradled the receiver between her head and shoulder and dialed, “Hey Ericka, what’s up?”

Anthony kept stacking dishes and didn’t comment. There was something vaguely sacrificial about this process that didn’t sit right with him. It was like Alice had to offer up her friend to Zero to maintain her place in his house, while all Anthony had to do was the dishes.

“You still coming over?” Alice said into the phone. “Just me, Zero and Anthony, right now... No, Anthony Daily.” Alice looked over her shoulder at Anthony, “Why? What have you heard?” Alice smiled at Anthony who was trying to act like he wasn’t listening. “No, you don’t have to worry about Anthony. He’s harmless.”

She tried to hang up the phone twice but the receiver wouldn't reach. The cord was wrapped about her neck. She was being strangled.

“So, I'm harmless, huh?” Anthony yanked the phone cord on either side of Alice. A sound like a car exhaust sputtered from her mouth and was snuffed out like a match by lack of air. They wrestled back and forth, threatening to topple on to the kitchen table before Anthony got her to the floor. The receiver smacked Anthony in the jaw as the force of their fall caused it to unravel from Alice's throat like a struck tether ball, then dangle below the telephone, gently bouncing off the kitchen wall.

Alice's face contorted as she braced her back against the floor and repeatedly drove her knee into Anthony's ribs as if trying to wedge out enough space to mule kick him off her.

Anthony held Alice's wrist pinned to the floor above her head and tried to maintain his straddle over her, but she rocked violently back and forth and almost threw him off. He looked over his shoulder where Zero sat frozen at the kitchen table watching. “Well, don't just sit there,” Anthony's commands came out keen as a drill sergeant's, “help me hold her down!” Zero sat motionless for another full second as Anthony's eyes bore into him, then he leapt from his chair like it was on fire and leaned all his weight on Alice, freeing up Anthony's hands to unbutton her shirt and unhook her bra.

Alice closed her eyes and set her jaw as her breasts spilled out. Zero's dead weight might as well have been a boulder pinning her to the floor.

Anthony was stung by the mixture of body lotion and chlorine when he leaned in close enough to smell her, “I've got your harmless right here,” he said as he slid his hand under her skirt.

Anthony opened his eyes and scanned the room like a cop arriving at a crime scene. He was on Zero's kitchen floor. Zero's massive fists were wrapped around Alice's slim, muscular left forearm, pressing it to the yellowing linoleum. His fat knee pressed her left leg out and open. Alice was breathing through her clenched overbite and pulsating nostrils. She stared at Anthony, face tight with confusion, as if he had stopped speaking midsentence and she was waiting for him to finish a thought. He was on top of Alice. He was fucking Alice on Zero Henderson's kitchen floor. A fact presented itself to Anthony as plainly as if read aloud from a newspaper headline: He was raping Alice Neufeind.

The details unfolded in his mind the same way they had when he was twelve years old, the time when his mother had knocked him unconscious. He'd open his eyes and seen nothing but sidewalk. He'd rolled over and seen his mother's silhouette against the light blue sky. A voice in his head had told him: you just got knocked out.

Alice's body was taut like a slingshot ready to hurl a rock, but her free arm and free leg were lifeless on the kitchen floor. She was no longer fighting back. Anthony, with the heels of his hands pressed into her collar bone, kept thrusting weakly because he didn't know how to stop. How did one stop mid-rape? What would he say? *Sorry? My bad?* When the incident was over, he'd have to answer questions, but as long as it was still happening, he wouldn't have to explain himself. So he kept going, hoping for an interruption, a distraction, any excuse to stop. He had never raped anyone before. How was it supposed to end?

He looked to Zero for help, but Zero was focused, like a man holding one end of a two-by-four that was being sawed in half, waiting for it to sever and fall. Anthony saw in Zero's eyes what he was waiting for. What Alice was waiting for. They were waiting for him to come. Anthony panicked because he knew that he couldn't. This could go on all day. Then he realized he could fake it.

He collapsed on Alice and mimed some orgasmic back spasms. He rolled off her and Zero recoiled from Anthony's still erect penis as it swung free. Anthony turned to Alice with forced satisfaction on his face, but her eyes had fallen on Zero's crotch. He unbuttoned his shorts and unzipped his fly, "My turn." He said to Anthony over Alice's head.

Anthony slid his arm around Alice's shoulders without taking his eyes off Zero, "She's done."

"That ain't fair. I held her down for you! You hold her down for me!"

Alice was shaking. Even her teeth were chattering. She reached behind her and held her skirt against her leg, covering herself. She looked up at Anthony, who draped his other arm across her body like a seat belt. "I said she's done."

"Fuck you, Ant." Zero got up, yanked the refrigerator open and got himself a beer. He sat at the kitchen table, stared at his shoes for a second, then looked at Alice, "You're completely shaved."

"Shut up, Zero." Anthony said.

"I have to," Alice said. She was shaking so violently in Anthony's arms that her voice sounded like a traffic reporter in a helicopter.

He was craning his neck low, like he was trying to look up her skirt, "What's that?"

"I have to. I'm on the swim team."

"But the season's been over for a month."

"Shut the fuck up, Zero!" Anthony started to say something, but was distracted by the sound of a car pulling up. All three of them looked in the direction of the Henderson's garage.

"My mom."

Alice's shirt was still unbuttoned and her bra was undone. Her panties were around her right ankle. Anthony stood up, "Get dressed." He grabbed her firmly by her elbow and marched her into the living room, still buttoning her blouse.

The doorbell rang and Zero opened the door. Ericka Letts bounded into the house like a paratrooper landing. "What's up, bitches?"

Anthony dropped Alice's arm and she gave a limp wave, "Hey Ericka."

Seeing Alice, Ericka stopped short like a running dog snapped back by its leash, "What's wrong with you, Al?"

"Kevin?" Zero's mother appeared in the living room behind them.

Anthony and Alice Hi Ms. Hendersoned her.

"Mom? You're home early."

"It's slow. They gave me the day off." She sat on the couch, "Kevin, honey, why don't you take your friends into your room so I can watch my stories."

Zero sat on his bed with his back to the wall, a lazy grin on his face as he watched Ericka dancing. Alice and Anthony sat on opposite sides of the room, alternately staring at each other and the floor between them. The CD player changed disks and "Freaks of the Industry" by Digital Underground snaked through the speakers. Ericka rolled her hips like a belly dancer, looking at Zero over her shoulder, "Aw shit, you done done it now," she said as she walked over to Zero and placed her hands on his knees.

"Anthony," the way Alice said his name was like clearing her throat. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"Yeah, you guys do that." Zero never took his eyes off Ericka. "You can use the garage."

“Ericka, you come with.”

Zero’s face snapped toward Alice, “I think Ericka’s good right here!”

Alice turned off the music. The silence was like a sudden, unwelcomed dawn. She grabbed Ericka by the bicep and pulled her off Zero, “Anthony, come on.” She pushed them out of the room ahead of her, giving Zero a dirty look before she walked out.

“Al, what the fuck am I supposed to do in this nasty ass garage?”

“I just need to talk to Anthony, then we can leave, okay?”

“Leave? I just got here. What the fuck is going on?”

Ericka rummaged through boxes of Zero’s childhood toys while Alice led Anthony toward the back of Zero’s garage. They sat between the exposed two-by-fours that framed the unfinished wall, looking straight ahead. Alice’s voice was soft, halting. “You didn’t have to do that. I would have let you if you had just asked.”

“I know.”

“You knew?”

“No.” Anthony stared at his leg.

“I guess I should thank you, I guess.”

Anthony tried to look at her, but the wet gleam in her eyes made him turn away. “For what?”

“For keeping Zero off of me. I wouldn’t want to do it with him, even under good circumstances.” They were quiet for a moment. Alice watched Ericka playing with an old yo-yo she’d found. “So why’d you do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” She sounded angry for the first time.

“I don’t know why I do a lot of the things I do.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard.”

Anthony looked up from his leg, “What did you hear?”

“About the time you showed up on April Hilliard’s front porch at two in the morning and told her parents you didn’t know how you got there. And the time you chased Mrs. Weinstock around her desk in Advanced English and told Mr. Howard you didn’t remember any of it.”

“I guess I blackout sometimes.”

“What’s it like?”

“I’ll be thinking about doing something, something that doesn’t make any sense. Then I just realize I ain’t thinking about it. It’s happening.”

“When did it start?”

“When I was little. I never told nobody, ‘cause I thought I was just imagining it. They were far apart back then.” His bottom lip quivered as he spoke.

“And now?”

He looked up at the ceiling, at the track the guided the garage door when it opened, “This is the third one this month.”

“What the fuck is up with you two?” Ericka walked past them playing with a Rubik’s Cube, “I’m sick of this... is that blood?”

Alice looked down at Anthony's thigh and saw that he had jabbed Ms. Henderson's paring knife into himself. The blood spreading across the denim looked like red Magic Marker pressed to a paper towel.

Most moms in the neighborhood would have taken Anthony to the bathroom, made him drop trou, dabbed his leg with hydrogen peroxide, and sent him home to his own mother. But this kind of maternal intimacy was hardly Delores Henderson's beat with her own son, and certainly not with someone else's. She threw Anthony into her car to take him to emergency, only stopping long enough for Alice to insist on going along and then insist that Ericka come with them. By this time, Zero figured he should go too. Had she thought about it, Ms. Henderson would have put a towel down, not one of her good towels, to keep Anthony's blood off her upholstery.

In the emergency room they cut off Anthony's right pant leg. Zero joked that Anthony looked like Olympian Florence Griffith Joyner in her one-legged track suits, but by this time Anthony had picked a spot of the wall to stare at and gave no response.

Most of his wounds were superficial and just required cleaning and bandages. "Oh! We have a winner," the Filipino nurse said when her latex fingers discovered the one cut that needed stitches. "You got yourself pretty good here."

For a moment it looked like Alice was going to say something, but she didn't. Anthony was worried she might rat him out, but he didn't let it show. Zero remained silent and oblivious.

When they finally arrived back at the Henderson's house, there were notes taped to the front door from kids who'd come by and found the house empty. Ms. Henderson stood on the porch and regarded the slips of paper flapping against her door in the wind, "Kevin," she said, "I

think it's time you said goodbye to your friends." Which Anthony and Alice took to mean not only for the night, but for the remainder of the summer.

Ms. Henderson offered Anthony a ride home, due to his leg, but sensing that she'd just as soon wash her hands of the hold thing, Anthony declined, offering instead to walk Alice and Ericka home.

"I guess we burned Zero's house down," Alice said as Ericka waved goodbye to them from the other side of her living room window.

"I guess we did."

"I'm not mad at you, you know." She took his hand for a moment as they ambled down the sidewalk. Then let it go.

"It would be better if you were. I think that's why I did this." It was his first acknowledgement of the self inflicted wound in his leg. At the hospital he'd communicated with the nurse mostly through head nods, letting Alice and Ms. Henderson speak for him.

They reached her house, "Do you want to come in. I've probably got some sweat pants you could wear."

"Are you serious right now?" He asked. "You should be trying to get away from me."

"I'm worried about you being alone. I don't want you to do anything crazy."

"I'll be alright," he said, right before she surprised him with a sudden, violent hug. He watched her walk away, waiting for her to go inside and close the door before finalizing his decision to go home.

Anthony's plan was simple; when he got home he'd sneak in the back door, stash his mutilated pants and change clothes before his mother saw. She might wonder about the cuts on his leg and who bandaged them and stitched them up, but she would be furious about Anthony ruining a brand new pair of jeans. Jeans she'd put on her credit card. Jeans that weren't even paid for yet. His jaw clenched at the thought of his mother repeatedly smacking him in the face while his eyes dug a hole in a spot on the wall behind her, not blinking as hot tears poured out.

When he reached the middle of his block, he could see that all the lights were on in his house. An army of silhouettes moved back and fourth in front of the windows like shadow puppets. Hugging the edges of the driveway as he drew closer, her could hear Earth, Wind and Fire on the stereo. The air was wet with the funk of shrimp gumbo and marijuana. He had forgotten that his mother was throwing a party. There were people in the living room, the dining room, the kitchen. No door was safe.

He needed a place to stash his corpse until the coast was clear. He stood on top of the little brick wall around his back patio and boosted himself onto the flat roof of the garage. The weather had cooled a bit, but the roof was still radiating heat collected throughout the day. Out of his t-shirt and his one-legged jeans, Anthony fashioned a crude bed. He lay on his side in his white cotton briefs and went to sleep.

It was the honking of car horns that brought Anthony back out of the void. He stopped running and looked around. An old man in a passing car slowed down, "Are you alright, son?" But Anthony just stared at him until he slowly drifted away. On the block where he was standing, front doors opened, lights came on, faces darkened windows. The sun was just going down and people could still make out Anthony's dark silhouette.

Anthony walked with some difficulty, favoring one ankle. He was barefoot. He couldn't remember when, where or why he'd taken off his underwear or the bandage that had been on his leg. He had a vague recollection of his destination: Alice Neufeind's house. He looked around and saw the red brick buildings, some with plywood where their windows should have been, "NO TRESPASSING" stenciled on them in white spray paint. He was still in the city. He broke into a run, despite the pain in his leg. This couldn't go on all night. He would be put a stop to. Someone would call the cops, and if he was going to get arrested, better to do it in Hemdale and get taken to the county juvenile center than whatever archaic facility the St. Louis Police Department used.

He kept running. The long promised rain began to fall and he had to pick his knees straight up once the soles of his feet got wet on the slick sidewalk. He was just a quarter mile from the city limits.

Anthony never heard a siren (in retrospect he couldn't be sure there was one). He'd seen the red and blue light reflecting off the buildings in front of him and slowed his run to a walk. A casual walk at that, shoulders relaxed, arms swaying at his sides. He looked over his shoulder nonchalantly and when he saw the police car creeping up behind him, he stopped, got down on his knees and put his hands behind his head like he'd seen in the movies.

By the time the officer reached him, Anthony had leaned all the way over and rested his head on the sidewalk. The officer pulled Anthony's hands behind his back, cuffed them together and pulled him to a standing position. He leaned Anthony against his squad car and shined a flash light in his eyes, "Are you on drugs?"

Anthony squinted and turned away. He didn't answer. He didn't want to talk. He was completely naked with fresh stitches in his leg. Why would he have to say anything?

The officer seems exhausted with the whole situation, "Is this some kind of fraternity prank?"

Anthony feared that they would just stand there until he said something, so he nodded toward his leg, "I cut myself."

The officer shined his light on Anthony stitches. There was a look of genuine concern on his face when he clasped Anthony by the shoulder and opened the back door of the squad car. "Come on, son."

Anthony laughed to himself a little in the back seat of the squad car. The officer looked at him over his shoulder, "Something funny?" But Anthony didn't answer. It was what the officer had said, "Come on, *son*." He was old enough, and the right color, but Anthony knew this couldn't be his father. Still, he indulged in the fantasy all the way to the police station.

The next several years would be a parade of jail cells, courtrooms, and hospitals, fingerprints and forms, handcuffs and I.D. bracelets. From that day on, when people of a certain age said they'd gone to Hemdale High, the next question was inevitable: Did you know Anthony Daily? The boy who stabbed himself. The black kid who raped that white girl. The boy who killed his own mother by drowning her in a pot of gumbo, then got picked up running naked in the street.

But, for the length of the ride, Anthony imagined that one day he'd tell the story of how on July 5th, 1990, he'd finally met his dad.

JIMMY THE KING

Having the wrong name could be a bitch.

That's what Stacey King was thinking, sitting in the passenger's side of his big brother Jimmy's car on the parking lot of JD's Package Liquor one afternoon in September, reading a Power Man and Iron Fist comic book. Normally, Stacey, fourteen years old and skinny, would imagine himself as Luke Cage, the big, black hero, Power Man, whose muscles always threatened to tear through his shirt. But this time, he sympathized with the villain, also called Power Man, as he battled Luke Cage for the right to the name. Growing up in the Rose Hill section of North St. Louis in the 80s, wearing the name King, Stacey knew the burden a name could be.

Stacey's mother had told him that she always knew one day she would have a son, and that son would be named James, and one day he would grow up and walk among presidents and kings. So when she met a man named James S. King, she took it as a sign, and she was not about to let the fact that he already had a son named James keep her from fulfilling prophecy. Less

than a year later, James Stacey King III was born. The King side of the family called him Stacey to differentiate him from his father and older brother. There was James Sr., Jimmy and Stacey. He hated being called Stacey. He only knew girls with that name.

Jimmy came out of the liquor store; breaking the seal on a fifth of Canadian Mist that was mostly obscured by a brown paper bag. "Hey girl! Did you spread those jeans on with a knife?"

The woman in the tight jeans and the big earrings whipped around like a cobra ready to strike, but when she saw James King Jr., Jimmy the King, she softened and smiled. "Oh Jimmy, it's just you. I was about to say..."

"You wasn't about to say shit, girl." He tossed the rolled up newspaper from under his arm through the passenger's side window, on to Stacey's lap, "What you doing tonight?"

"Going to the club. What else?" she said.

He took a swig of whiskey, "What time do the clubs around here close anyway?"

"You know damn well they close at one-thirty, just like last week and the week before that."

Stacey looked up from his comic book. Jimmy wore a black and gray vinyl jacket with lots of useless stitching and piping, a mesh tank top that showed off his pecs and six pack abs, and skintight cream colored linen pants. The rim of a condom showed through his back pocket. Stacey tried not to look at this spectacle, but his eyes were drawn to it, just like his tongue to the seam in his mouth where his busted lip had recently healed.

In the two years since Jimmy had moved back to St. Louis, this was the first time he and Stacey had done anything with just the two of them. It hadn't taken Stacey long to see that the

brother he got back in 1986 was not the same as the one who had left for New York in 1979. The brother he barely knew, but had pieced together from fragments of memories, family stories and pictures in photo albums: Jimmy, with a huge afro, in the dojo wearing his karate gi; Jimmy stripped to the waist, flexing his biceps on the scale at the weight-in; Jimmy, sitting on the edge of the ring holding up his championship belt. Stacey would stare at the photos and try to imagine himself in them.

“One-thirty? In New York the clubs don’t even get live till one-thirty. You can’t even call what you got around here clubs. More like pubs.” Everything Jimmy did was presentational, even the way he opened his car door and got behind the wheel had a theatrical flair, like he was aping the hero from a 70s cop show.

“Then take your ass back to New York, then.”

“I got New York for you right here, baby girl.”

She was leaning on the passenger’s side door peering past Stacey. “You coming out tonight?” She was pretty, if a bit too hood-rat for Stacey’s taste. He tried to imagine himself talking to the girls at school the way Jimmy talked to her. He smiled at how unbelievable that seemed, like flying or turning invisible. Jimmy’s super power. He turned back to his comic book.

“I’ll be there.” Jimmy waved her off and sped away. He saw Stacey staring at the floor mat. “What’s wrong?”

Stacy tried to hide the disappointment in his voice, “I thought you said we were going to the movies.”

Jimmy smiled, “My brother, my little brother, you think I would ditch you for that little broad?” Stacey looked back out the window at the girl in the tight jeans, “I ain’t studying her. I’ll

tell her anything. I done already hit that and quit that. Look in the movie section and tell me what you want to see.” Stacey flipped to the movie section. He was happy that the plans hadn’t changed, but the look on Jimmy’s face, the smirk, the way we leaned back in the driver’s seat with one hand on the wheel and looked down his nose at Stacey, so satisfied at having made him think he was going to be abandoned. It almost wasn’t worth it. “You really thought your big brother was gonna’ play you? And over a piece of ass? C’mon, we the Kings! You know better than that. Later for these little broads.”

Just riding shot gun in Jimmy’s car felt like being at the console of the Starship Enterprise or in KITT from Knight Rider. When the ’79 Volkswagen Beetle with its black ’65 Corvette body kit had pulled up in front of Hemdale High, even Kevin Henderson, the 9th grade’s premier car enthusiast, had been impressed. He didn’t know the half of it. Stacey wanted to tell the guys that the tinted windows were bulletproof. That it had a police scanner. That it had a phone in the dashboard and a TV in the backseat (both rare in 1988). But he thought better of it. They wouldn’t have believed him anyway. They would have thought he was overcompensating, trying to impress them after having his ass handed to him by Terrell Greene the week before. Stacey had been quiet and tried not to draw too much attention to himself in the days since the fight. His friends had, mercifully, not said much to him about it. But he could sense they were thinking about it. Whenever there was a lull in a conversation, it felt like someone was going to bring it up.

But Stacey knew there was no need to embellish. The guys were already impressed. Kevin stood up, eyes wide, mouth agape and said, “Wow! Check out that Vette!”

Stacey tried to sound nonchalant, “Yeah, that’s my big brother.”

The R&B station cut out and was replaced by a staticky police call. Jimmy craned his neck toward the car radio and dramatically shushed his brother, even though Stacey hadn't said anything. He was staring out the window, watching Jimmy's neighborhood go by. It was still the ghetto, but the further they went North West the more it felt like an amusement park version of the ghetto. There was too much sky, too many trees, even if they were still hanging over the same assortment of liquor stores, pawn shops and check cashing joints. Stacey could see for blocks in any direction without a single multi-story redbrick building to obstruct his view. Maybe this neighborhood was just a higher elevation than Rose Hill. Maybe the unease he was feeling could be written off as altitude sickness.

Jimmy cocked his head toward the newspaper in his brother's lap. He was still wearing dark Aviator sunglasses even though it was past dusk. His shirt was see-through, his pants were see-through, but his blood shot eyes were completely obscured. "So what's playing?"

"I don't know," Stacey said. "I can't read while you're driving. I get car sick."

Jimmy patted his little brother on the head and forced a chuckle that was all nostril breaths and shrugs, "That's alright. I'll be making another stop in a minute."

They pulled into a parking lot behind an apartment complex not far from the liquor store. Jimmy stopped the car in front of a man in a blue baseball cap, a sweatshirt and jeans who was waxing an IROC Z28 Camaro with four cans left in a six pack of Budweiser on the hood. "Tommy C! Holla' holla' holla' at me!"

"Jimmy the King!" Tommy peeled two cans from their plastic rings and went over, handing one through the passenger side window to Jimmy and drinking the other himself when Stacey said no thanks.

“Tommy this is my little brother Stacey. Stacey this is Tommy C. You have any problems with these little punks around here, you let Tommy know and he’ll handle it for you.”

Tommy smiled, “And if it’s a white boy, I’ll do it for free.” Stacey looked at his brother as if for confirmation. Jimmy nodded gravely. Stacey let out a deep exhale and went back to studying the movie listings.

“I got to make a run over to Fat Pat’s tonight. You want to come with?”

“I can’t,” Tommy raised the visor of his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow, “I got my daughter tonight. You should come over after and watch the game.”

Jimmy killed the last of his beer and handed Tommy the empty, “Bet. I’ll catch you later tonight.” He pulled out of the parking lot back onto the street.

Stacey looked up from the paper, “Was he serious?”

“As a heart attack. They never should of let that nigga out of prison. You figured out what movie you want to see yet?”

“Die Hard is playing at the dollar show.” Stacey said.

“Dollar show? What the fuck is a dollar show? You rolling with Jimmy the King, son. We can afford to see new movies. And not no rush hour shows neither.”

“But I wanna see Die Hard,” Stacey was trying to keep the whine out of his voice, “Mom wouldn’t take me and Dad never goes to the movies.”

Jimmy smiled as he turned the corner, “I know that’s right. Dad never goes anywhere. Alright, my little brother wants to see Die Hard then that’s what we’ll see. We’ll stop at my place and get something to eat first.”

Stacey instinctively covered his smile with his hand and looked out the window. He hated showing his excitement.

Stacey followed Jimmy into his modest new apartment. Jimmy turned on the lights and among the mix-matched furniture and unanswered mail, Stacey quickly fixed on a life-sized Barbie doll head lying on the living room floor. "Uh... Jimmy, is there something you want to tell me?"

Jimmy scanned the room for what Stacey was looking at then smirked and smacked him in the back of the head. "That's Lindsay's"

"I figured." Stacey got down on the floor and picked it up, "April had one of these when we were kids. It scared the shit out of me."

"Scared? How come?"

"I go into my toy chest and there's a severed head! I thought Dad had decapitated a white woman. I just wanted to play G.I. Joes and all of a sudden I had to bury the evidence."

Jimmy laughed so hard he almost spit out his whiskey, "You got jokes! Just like Dad."

Stacey set the doll head on the coffee table, distracted by a cluster of medals, plaques and trophies haphazardly grouped in a corner. He used his finger to wipe the dust off the engraving on the tallest trophy – Police Athletic League Kickboxing Championship 1978, the year before Jimmy moved to New York where they had stiffer competition and mandatory drug testing. "Oh, you like that, huh?" Jimmy took a drag off a cigarette, "I was thinking about getting back in the ring. Reclaiming my title." He exhaled a cloud of smoke with an exaggerated

cough, eliciting a laugh and a sarcastic “yeah right” from his brother. “I got to make some calls. Help yourself to whatever’s in the kitchen. It ain’t much, but I’ll get dinner started in minute.”

Jimmy went to the bedroom and Stacey went to the kitchen. The refrigerator was empty except for ketchup, mustard and a couple two liter sodas. The pantry was stocked: instant oatmeal – just add water, instant mashed potatoes – just add water, instant noodle soup – just add water. Stacey looked over his shoulder to make sure his brother wasn’t in the room before going to the sink and turning the faucet on and off, just to make sure. He had been seized by the fear that there was no running water and that they’d both starve to death.

“You getting any pussy at that school?” Jimmy was pulling a couple of overcooked frozen pizzas from the oven.

Stacey sat at that dining room table sipping Vess cola from a huge tumbler with a fading Six Flags logo on it. He stared at the image of a new roller coaster that seemed to be receding into the plastic, hoping his brother wouldn’t repeat the question.

“I said are you getting any pussy at that school?”

Stacey rolled his eyes, “No.”

“Well, you need to take a look at yourself and see what you’re doing wrong. Could be your walk, your talk, your dress.” Jimmy was cutting their pizzas into fourths at the kitchen counter. He looked at Stacey over his shoulder, “And at your age you need to start washing your face a three or four times a day with dish washing soap. Take care of that acne.” Jimmy set the pizzas on the table and sat down. “You need to get it while you’re young. Before you know it, you’ll be married. Laying up with the same stank, nasty bitch night after night.” Jimmy looked

off, almost wistfully. He poured some whiskey in his tumbler of Vess. "So, Dad told me you got beat up."

"I didn't get beat up! I got into a fight."

"Sure, to let you tell it. I hear that boy beat the sleeves off you." Jimmy took a sip of his drink, "I'm thinking of taking you on as a student. I trained some good fighters in New York."

Stacey stared at his plastic cup and wished he could go back in time and beat Terrell Greene's ass into the ground.

Terrell was a transfer student with no friends, looking to establish himself in the Hemdale High pecking order. He'd bragged to his classmates, telling them that he was a blue belt in karate and a hunger had grown among the ninth grade boys to see Terrell and Stacey go toe to toe with each other. No one had seen Stacey fight yet, but they'd heard he's grown up on the mean streets of Rose Hill and came from a family of karate experts.

Thumbs wrapped in his fists, Stacey threw a couple solid but ineffectual punches before giving up and letting Terrell pummel him. Terrell was so disgusted by Stacey's lack of resistance that he just dropped his hands saying, "You ain't no competition," before walking away triumphantly.

Jimmy's voice had gotten louder, but he sounded more concerned than angry, "I shouldn't have to hear about my little brother getting his ass kicked. If anything it should be the other way around, Dad should calling me from the job site like 'Go down to Stacey's school and get him. He done tore off and whooped another nigga's ass.' I should be all like 'Stacey, I ain't training no bullies. You start one more fight at that school and I ain't teaching you no more.'"

Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Stacey thought about all the pictures of Jimmy from his fights and how he didn't have any pictures of his own. He saw his father, ringside, with a camcorder the same way he'd been at Jimmy's fights with a super-8 camera, until Jimmy's voice cut through his daydream.

"I can't have niggas thinking you the nigga to fuck with. How would that look on me? You're my brother!"

"Instant brother," Stacey said under his breath. Just add water.

"What was that?" Jimmy's voice was suddenly sharp. Stacey just stared at his pizza. "See that's your problem, right there. You always got something smart to say. Always gotta' make a little comment. You heavy in the mouth, but you light in the ass. You need to learn to let some shit slide. You can put your pride in your pocket, but you can't put your teeth back in your head."

Stacey got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Was this a set up? Had his father been embarrassed about him being picked on and put Jimmy up to taking him under his wing? Maybe it was his mother's idea. She'd been complaining about Stacey spending too much time alone in his room, reading comic books, playing video games and talking to himself. Stacey hated the way she called Jimmy her son and let him call her "mom" even though they weren't blood. She still saw Jimmy as the kid he was when he left, not who he had become.

The pizza was backing up in Stacey's throat. He drank a big swig of Vess and tried to think of ways to change the subject. He looked at the microwave. "Is that clock right?"

"A dope dealer's clock is always right." Jimmy looked at his watch. "We better go."

Stacey laid his head on the passenger side door and stared out the window. He could see the marquee of the movie theater getting closer. He loved the dollar show. His favorite thing was to go on a Thursday night and see a movie on closing day. It was so cheap that kids who didn't have cable TV or VCRs would go to the dollar show several nights a week. By the time a movie closed, half the audiences had already seen it two or three times. They had the dialogue memorized and would say it right along with the characters. They'd yell jokes at the screen they'd spent all week coming up with like it was a ghetto Rocky Horror Picture Show. The crowd was so rowdy that the management had off-duty cops, who doubled as security, selling the tickets and the popcorn on weekends. If you didn't know which movie you wanted to see by the time you got to the ticket booth, the officer would make you go to the back of the line. The screen in the main auditorium wasn't even a perfect rectangle. One side was longer than the other so there was always a scalene triangle of white underneath the picture. Sometimes the frame was off and you could see the boom mic in every shot. As the movie theater got closer he was getting genuinely excited. Jimmy had been this person he'd seen pictures of and occasionally spoke with on the phone at the tail end of long distance calls to their dad, and now they were going to the movies together, just like real brothers.

When he watched the movie theater whiz by through his window, he didn't say anything. Maybe Jimmy was just going to the Walgreen's down the street for Milk Duds or Sno-Caps so not to get ripped off at the concession stand. After they passed a second Walgreen's, Stacey silently accepted that there would be no movie.

Jimmy knocked on the door of a nice house on a hill in a cul-de-sac, carrying a suitcase he had gotten out of his trunk. Stacey scanned the block for landmarks and decided he had never been there before, "Whose house is this?"

"A friend. Just sit tight. It won't be long." The door opened. "Fat Pat, what's up dirty!"

"Jimmy the King! You're late." Fat Pat saw Stacey standing on his porch, "Yo, who this?"

"That's my little brother, Stacey. Say hi, Stacey." Stacey waved without making a sound.

"Your brother? You didn't say nothing about no brother. "

"I got my brother tonight, what do you want me to do?"

Pat waved them both in and sat down. Stacey and Jimmy remained standing, both sensing that they were inside on a probationary basis. Pat studied Stacey. "My man, you really his brother?"

Stacey nodded.

"How old is you?"

"Fourteen." Stacey's voice was just a bit quieter and about half an octave higher than it had sounded in his head when he had rehearsed his response. He looked to Jimmy to gauge his reaction, but couldn't tell.

"Fourteen? Nigga, you look about twenty-two." Pat looked back at Jimmy, "How the fuck you twenty-nine with a fourteen-year-old brother?"

Jimmy just shrugged, "You know how we do it."

"Yeah, I do." Pat looked back and forth from Stacey to Jimmy. "Y'all don't look nothing alike."

“He’s my half brother.” Jimmy said, getting annoyed.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa,” Pat leaned forward like cop ripping into a lying witness, “five seconds ago he was your brother now all of a sudden he’s your half brother?”

“He’s my father’s kid. What?”

“Alright. Sit your asses down.” Jimmy sat on a couch across from Pat, a big screen TV in between them. Stacey sat on an easy chair off to the side where he could see both of them. Fat Pat wasn’t fat. He was solid, stocky like a linebacker. Brown skinned and clean cut with closely cropped hair. He wore a green and grey paisley print shirt tucked into to black cargo shorts that went past his knees. He looked like one of Stacey’s older cousins. The pager clipped to his right hip pocket was the only thing that telegraphed he was a drug dealer. He wasn’t flashy. This probably had something to do with why Jimmy was coming to him and not the other way around. “You want a soda, my man?”

“No. I’m good.” Stacey wanted to leave and didn’t want to commit to anything that could mean staying longer than he had to. He had a feeling of dread being in Fat Pat’s apartment. Pat was leaning forward, feet planted flat, arms bent at ninety degree angles, forearms resting on his thighs. He was wound tight and ready to pounce. Stacey looked to Jimmy for any indication that he was picking up on this, but Jimmy was sinking into the couch, heels resting on the floor, one arm cocked lazily up on the sofa.

Stacey had seen Pat once before. Coming out of a hotel party that summer, he’d seen a man standing outside, arms folded with two women on their knees in front of him, one woman lacing each of his shoes. Stacey had looked him in the eye and got a thousand-yard-stare in return. He quickly looked away and when he glanced back the man was still staring him down, completely oblivious to the kneeling women at each of his feet.

“Damn. Now that’s gangster,” Kevin had said, breaking Stacey’s trance and giving him a much needed motivation to look away.

“Who is that?”

“That,” Kevin had said, “Is Fat Pat. Fuck Freddy Krueger. That nigga scares me.”

Pat cocked his chin toward the suitcase resting on the couch next to Jimmy. “Is that my money?” Jimmy picked up the suitcase and sat it on his lap. He worked the dials on the combination locks until it open and handed it to Pat. Stacey craned his neck to get a fleeting glance of the neatly stacked and wrapped bills. Pat called over his shoulder, “Yo, Ro!”

In walked a mountain of a man. Dark skinned in a black jeans and a black Polo shirt, he was more of a silhouette than a person. He had round puppy dog eyes, a protruding jaw and no discernible sense of humor. Only when he got close could Stacey see that there was a gun blatantly tucked in his waist. “Everything okay?”

“City Ro! What’s up, dirty?” Jimmy sounded like he was trying to lighten the mood by sheer force of will. Ro just gave him the up and down with his chin by way of greeting.

Fat Pat closed the brief case and handed it to Ro. “Hit him off. We ain’t doing that other thing.” Ro took the briefcase and disappeared down the hall.

“What other thing?” Jimmy asked, trying to sound casual.

“You Barbara Walters, motherfucker? Then pump the brakes on them questions.”

There was an awkward silence, then Jimmy spoke again, “You hear anything about that New York situation?”

“Naw, but if there’s something worth hearing, it’ll come through me. I’ll let you know.”

“Good looking out.”

Ro came back in and handed the briefcase to Jimmy who quickly inspected the contents.

Stacey didn't look. “All good?” Pat asked.

“All good.”

“Alright.”

Stacey could tell that by “alright” Pat meant “get out,” but it took Jimmy a second to catch on. They stood, said their goodbyes and left. As Pat was closing the door behind them he called to Stacey, “Hey, my man, you still in school?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Stay there.”

Jimmy pulled into traffic. “Don't worry. It ain't all mine”

“What's that?” Stacey said, still putting on his seat belt.

“The coke. It ain't all mine. I ain't the man. I'm just the man sitting next to the man. Let's just say I know some people that don't know Fat Pat, and Fat Pat don't know them. That small but important distinction is what pays for the car you're riding in.” Jimmy took a swig of whiskey, “That fat nigga thinks he's so hard. We'll see about that,” he said with a smile. “He don't get bitches like I get bitches... I can stroke my dick and come away with more pussy on the palm of my hand than that nigga will see in his life.”

Stacey shook his head, “You sound like Dad.” It had only been four months prior that they had been sitting around their father's kitchen table after a day of helping him clean his

garage. James King Sr., fueled by whiskey and beer chasers, had said to his sons, "I could scrape my hand across my dick..." he brought his hand down hard, rattling the empty beer cans around his plate, "and slap more pussy on this table than the two of you will have in your lives, put together."

"Congratulations," Stacey had said under his breath, into his glass of soda. He rolled his eyes at his father and went to share a knowing look with his brother. He was brought up short by the wounded expression on Jimmy's face. James King Sr. had been a legend in Rose Hill in the 60s and 70s, a big man who cast a long shadow. By age fourteen, Stacey had already given up trying to live up to his father's reputation, but in that moment, he realized that his brother hadn't.

Jimmy looked at his watch, "Aw shit. We were supposed to go to the movies. I tell you what, we'll pick up Lindsay then go to Blockbuster and get some videos. How's that sound?"

"Cool."

"Cool." Jimmy said, making an illegal u-turn.

Stacey leaned on the front porch rail at Jimmy's old house. Jimmy stuck his head in the door. "Jesus Christ, Jimmy!" Stacey heard Jimmy's wife Denise shout from inside. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"You dressed? I got my little brother with me."

"The doorbell works."

“Yeah, so does my key.” Jimmy walked in and waved his brother behind him. “Is Lindsay up?”

“She’s at my mother’s. Hi, Stacey.” Stacey waved to her. She was wearing an old bathrobe. Her hair was wet. She was smoking a cigarette, but the room smelled like marijuana. Jimmy walked by her and down the hall, poking his head in each room. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, but Jimmy ignored her. “How are *you* doing, Stacey?”

“I’m alright. How’s Lindsay?”

Denise sat at the kitchen table and massaged her forehead with the heel of her cigarette hand, “She’s good. Loves school. She’s smart, like you.” She looked at Jimmy, conducting a room to room search like a narcotics officer, “Lord knows where she gets it from.” Stacey’s eyes fell on a one-hitter pipe and Denise quickly grabbed it and slipped it in the pocket of her robe.

Stacey glanced from Denise to a picture of her and Jimmy on the wall. The picture was only a couple years old, but in it Denise had been a good fifteen pounds heavier. She was still pretty but on the verge of being cocaine skinny. As the sleeve of her bathrobe crept down her forearm, Stacey could see the protruding bones in her wrist.

Jimmy stomped back into the room, “So where is he?”

“Where’s who, Jimmy?” She got up from the table and tried to walk past him, but Jimmy blocked her.

“The nigga you been fucking.”

“Do you see anybody?”

“Okay, *who* is he then?”

“You really want to know? It’s Fat Pat. Yeah that’s right, so what are you going to do now?”

“Is it true?”

“Yeah, Fat Pat and City Ro just pulled a train on me, but they high-tailed it out the window when they heard you coming ‘cause everybody’s so scared of Jimmy the King!”

“Anyway, I know you’re lying ‘cause I just left Fat Pat’s and City Ro was there.” Jimmy was in her face now, leaning forward with his arms out from his sides like a teenage thug challenging someone to a fight.

Denise was against the wall, unable to back up, so she held her ground by not looking Jimmy in the face. She tossed her cigarette in the kitchen sink, leaning past Jimmy to grab another off the counter, but not using it as an opportunity to get away from him. “You know the truth Jimmy; you just don’t want to admit it.” She looked at the floor and lit her cigarette. “There’s no one else. I threw you out cause you’re a drunk and a snitch,” She could feel Jimmy dismissing her, so she looked him in the eye. “And you were going to get us killed just like you almost did in New York!”

Jimmy was right on top of her now, staring at her so hard it looked like his eyes were straining, “You watch your fucking mouth, girl!”

“Why? Cause he’s here?” Denise waved toward Stacey, dropping ashes on the floor, “Like he hasn’t figured it out yet!” She pushed Jimmy away just enough to give him her shoulder and turn to Stacey, “You know your brother is a police informant, right?” She turned back to Jimmy, staring him down and taking a drag. “Everybody else does.”

Jimmy snatched Denise by the throat. She dropped her cigarette on the linoleum, little puffs of smoke choked from her mouth as she gulped for air and grabbed Jimmy's wrist with both her small hands. Jimmy pulled his fist back to hit her.

"JIMMY!"

Jimmy and Denise froze. They looked to the front door, both expecting to see James King Sr.'s silhouette in the doorway, but all they saw was Stacey with his hand over his eyes. He was as shocked as they were to hear his father's voice coming from inside him. He peeked between his fingers to see them still staring at him. Jimmy's fist still cocked near his head, he smiled at his little bother, "You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right." He jerked Denise by the throat and stuck a finger in her face, "You lucky my little brother's here." He released his grip and she fell forward, bracing one hand on her knee and rubbing her neck with the other. "Come on Stacey, let's go."

Stacey picked the cigarette up off the floor and held it out to Denise. She took it from him without looking up. Her face was pinched into a frown as she tried to catch her breath. When she realized he was still standing there, she said "I'll tell Lindsay you came by."

They drove in silence except for music on the radio. Finally, Jimmy said, "Don't trip off what Denise said. She don't know what she's talking about. I only tell her what I tell her."

More silence.

Then, "It's okay. I already knew. Dad told me."

“Dad told you, huh.” Jimmy shook his head, disgusted. Unscrewed the cap on the whiskey bottle between his thighs and brought it his lips, but Stacey gently covered the bottle with his hands before Jimmy could take a sip.

“Come on, Jimmy”

Jimmy stopped the car in the middle of the street. “You’re absolutely right.” He put the cap back on the bottle and tossed it in the glove compartment, where Stacey could see his chrome plated .38 snub-nose. “I’m drunk,” he said. “Move over.” Jimmy crawled to the passenger side motioning for his brother to get behind the wheel. “You drive.” Stacey nervously started the car, forgetting to adjust his mirrors. He tapped the accelerator and the car lurched forward. He quickly hit the brake with his other foot. “Calm down, calm down, just give it a little gas,” Jimmy said, lighting a cigarette. Stacey barely pressed the gas pedal while easing up on the brake. The car crawled at a glacial pace. “Little more, little more, quit riding the brake.” Stacey gripped the wheel with both hands like it was the bridle of a horse. He leaned into the windshield keeping a careful eye on the deserted road as if a car could miraculously appear at any minute, like he was playing Pole Position. Stacey started to relax. The tension in his back eased up and the car reached speeds of up to 15 miles per hour. He reframed this moment in his mind, not as Jimmy forcing him to do something, but as a moment any pair of brothers might have: the elder teaching the younger how to drive. “Now you’re getting it. Speed up a little. Take this next left.” Stacey’s father never let him drive on the street, only around empty parking lots. It was almost like having a real brother, Stacey thought, like in the movies. Jimmy didn’t even care that Stacey had no learner’s permit.

“That’s right; he doesn’t care if you have a learner’s permit.” Stacey could hear his father’s voice in his head, listing everything that was going wrong. “He also doesn’t care that his

own license has been suspended or that he's drunk with an open container and a loaded pistol. He doesn't care about the suitcase full of cocaine in the truck and most importantly he doesn't give a damn whether or not you're legally allowed to drive in this state between now and your freshman year of college."

The car crawled to a halt. "I don't want to drive any more."

"We're here," Jimmy pointed down the street. "That's my apartment right there."

Jimmy came in and sat on the couch. He picked up the Barbie head off the coffee table and stared at it, brushing the hair out of its face with his fingers.

"Alas poor Yorick," Stacey said closing the door behind him.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

"Come here," Jimmy turned the Barbie head around to face Stacey, "Hit her."

"You want me to hit Barbie?"

"Yeah, didn't Dad ever do drills with you? Let me see your stance." Stacey spread his legs shoulder width apart, one in front of the other, knees bent. He held his forearms in a pyramid, leading with his left hand. "Take your thumbs out of your fists. Now show me a backhand strike." Stacey gave a tentative swipe that glanced off Barbie's cheek. "Come on; hit her like you got a pair." Stacey threw another that barely disturbed his brother's grip on the doll's head. "You hit like a little bitch."

Stacey took a deep breath, sank back in to his stance and took a moment to focus on Barbie's jaw.

Wham! Barbie went flying out of Jimmy's hands and rolled into the hallway.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Jimmy said with a huge smile, "That's what you need to show them punks at school." He ran to the hallway and leaned over Barbie, taunting her, "How you like that? We're gonna call that 'The Stacey King Stunner!'"

Stacey smiled. His knuckles hurt, but he was proud of himself.

Jimmy kicked the doll's head. It bounced off the wall and he caught it in mid air. "You nasty bitch!" He slapped Barbie and sent her sailing down the hall. "You stank bitch!" He kicked it more. It bounced between the walls like a soccer ball. He snatched her out of mid air by her golden locks and flung her to the floor. "Stank bitch!"

"Jimmy... bro, you're scaring me." Stacey approached his brother, who was still kicking and slapping Barbie in a frenzy. "Jimmy, stop it!" He tried to lay a hand on Jimmy's shoulder and caught a wild swing right in the mouth, "Fuck, Jimmy! Asshole!"

Jimmy stopped dead. He was out of breath. "What did you call me?"

"You busted my fucking lip, Jimmy."

Jimmy shoved him, backing him up as couple feet. "You watch you mouth, boy."

"Back off Jimmy. I ain't your wife."

The next thing Stacey knew, he was on his back with Jimmy's knees pressed into his biceps, pinning him to the floor. Jimmy's face was screwed so tight with anger, he looked like a stranger. Stacey never saw a fist, just the occasional peripheral elbow before the blows landed,

knocking his head into the floor, making him hot and dizzy with pain. He was able to un-wedge his right arm from under Jimmy's knee and put everything he had into a punch that landed awkwardly on the side of Jimmy's head, allowing Stacey to wrestle himself free.

Stacey scrambled to his feet and stumbled a few steps back. He pressed his left hand against his throbbing head and vigorously shook his right hand as if trying to get something sticky off his fingers. Once he got his footing he instinctively backed up against the wall on the opposite side of the hallway to put some distance between him and his brother.

He heard a whimpering sound and saw Jimmy laid out, flat on his back. "Jimmy? Jimmy?" Stacey knew that it was the alcohol as much as the punch, but still, technically, he had knocked his brother out. Stacey looked at Jimmy unconscious on the floor. Jimmy the 1978 Police Athletic League Kickboxing Champion. Jimmy the Drug Dealer. Jimmy the Police Informant. Jimmy the King. Knocked out by a fourteen-year-old kid. It wasn't even worth being proud of. For the first time, he felt sorry for his brother.

Stacey examined his swollen face in Jimmy's bathroom mirror. He looked like a Klingon. He could keep his mouth shut about the gun, the drugs, the drunk driving, but there was no way to hide the huge welts on his forehead from his parents. What would his mom think of her "son," Jimmy, when she saw what he'd done to her baby boy?

Stacey turned his bottom lip inside out and inspected the damage in the mirror. He could taste blood in the pink saliva that pooled at his gums just like he had when Terrell Greene punched him in the mouth on handball court the week before.

He stared himself down, "You ain't no competition," he said in a mocking, sing-songy tone to his reflection, "you ain't no competition." In this moment of quiet he could dwell on a fragment of memory that had been triggered by seeing his brother's trophies earlier that night.

It was his clearest memory of Jimmy from childhood: holding his father's hand and being led into a small, crowded sports arena to see Jimmy in a kickboxing match. It had been scheduled for three rounds but Jimmy had broken and bloodied his opponent's nose in the second. "White boy didn't know what hit him," Jimmy had said through a mouthful of salad, winking to his little brother at the victory dinner. Their father had never fought in the ring, only in the street. He had looked so proud that night. Stacey had quietly mapped out his future sitting at that Red Lobster, eating popcorn shrimp: how he would train under his father and continue the fighting tradition of the Kings – The Kings of Rose Hill. But that was before his parents divorced. Before Jimmy knocked up Denise and moved to New York. Before his father remarried and moved to Hemdale Heights and Stacey stayed in Rose Hill with his mother.

Stacey heard a car horn honking and quickly tip toed past his brother, still unconscious in the hallway, hoping to make it out the door without waking him up. Jimmy, still lying on the floor, called to Stacey just before he got away, "Who's that outside? Is that Dad?"

Stacey crouched down over him, "My mother is here to pick me up, okay. Go back to sleep."

Before Stacey could stand up, Jimmy grabbed him by the arm. "Remember, we're brothers, we got to stick together. Blood's thicker than water."

Stacey gently pried his forearm from his brother's weak grasp. "Lots of things are thicker than water, Jimmy. Lots of things."

"Don't be like that, Stacey"

"Don't call me Stacey. Stacey's a girl's name."

His mother honked her horn again. Stacey reached for the door.

“The fuck I’m s’posed to call you then?” Jimmy’s voice was weak. His eyes seemed ready to close again, at any moment.

“Jack. That’s what my mom calls me, anyway.”

“Where you get ‘Jack’ from? Your name is James.”

“There’s enough James Kings in the world already,” Stacey said, closing the door on his brother behind him.

MADISON
LOUISIANA

Abigail hadn't even wanted a bridal shower.

Her fellow parishioners had insisted on throwing her one, anyway, and she felt she had no choice but to go along with it. She started to reach for the bottle of red wine, but poured herself another glass of cranberry juice instead. She leaned on the drink table in the parish rec room and braced herself.

"You sure I can't get you something stronger?" Cody asked. "You might need it to get through this." The closer it got to the date, the more tolerant Abigail grew of the subtle negativity in Cody's humor about everything related to the wedding.

Pastor Rick had popped in to say hello, and Abigail knew that Sister Greene would use the opportunity to challenge him on the church's mission trip to New Orleans. Abigail almost asked Cody who had invited Sister Greene to her bridal shower, but stopped herself. No one had to invite Sister Greene to anywhere. She was one of those elders of the church who seemed to have an all access pass to everything.

“New Orleans ain’t nothing but the devil!” Sister Greene shouted.

Pastor Rick took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose, “Sister, this trip is in no way an endorsement of any of the city’s less savory activities.” He was wearing a white button down and khakis, but to Abigail his voice sounded like he was going into a sermon, the same as if he’d had on his vestments. “The Lord calls us to bring His good news to broken places, and few places in America are as broken as New Orleans, even all these months after the storm.”

Sister Greene hissed, “Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Abigail had to kick Cody in the shins to keep her from laughing out loud.

Sister Greene was an elderly black woman, not a nun, but everyone just called her “sister.” Abigail didn’t even know her first name. At 70 something years old, she held the record for the most committee memberships in the church. Cody was a 46-year-old lesbian who ran her own contracting business. She had only recently joined the Outreach Committee and had taken an immediate liking to Abigail, in whom she saw a younger version of herself. They’d both been field hockey players in high school, and neither of them wore make-up. When Cody found out that Abigail was dating the most eligible bachelor in the parish, she’d said “You and Evan? And all this time I thought you were *family*.” Abigail knew that by “family” Cody meant “gay,” but she’d pretended not to understand.

St. Joseph’s had the most ethnically diverse congregation of any Catholic church in St. Louis, straddling the border of a trendy, affluent, predominantly white neighborhood and an impoverished, mostly black one. With its unstated, unwritten policy of tolerance towards homosexuals, it drew a number of gay and lesbian parishioners, second only to Saint Theresa’s, where they only used gender neutral pronouns in reference to God.

Pastor Rick's legendary calm was already starting to fade, "No one will hold it against you if you change your mind about going, Sister."

"No, I'll go, if only to make sure others are not led into temptation." Sister Greene scanned the room and let her eyes settle on any woman that she felt had drunk too much wine. "I guess if there's an earthquake in Las Vegas, we'll be rebuilding casinos."

Pastor Rick let out a heavy sigh, but everyone else laughed. For a fleeting moment it occurred to Abigail that she could play the "about to get married" card and not go on the trip herself, but the Parish Outreach Committee had specifically scheduled the trip around Abigail and Evan's wedding, so she felt obligated.

Abigail had been thrilled to get assigned to the Social Justice Office at St. Joseph's for her year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Due to her father's illness, she had stayed in Omaha for college, and attended church with him every Sunday that he was well enough. After he died, her sophomore year, she still attended most Sundays with her mother. She'd sit in church surrounded by her straight, white, middle class brethren (with the exception of Hector, the young boy the Millers had adopted from Honduras) and want desperately to feel something. For years, she couldn't get through a single mass without being reminded of that Eddie Izzard joke: "Catholics are the only people who can say 'hallelujah' without it sounding like '*hallelujah*.'" But when the folks at St. Joseph's shouted "HALLELUJAH!" Abigail could feel it in her spine.

Once while doing work in the community, she'd overheard an elderly woman referring to "those St. Joseph's Catholics" the way Viet Nam war veterans might refer to draft dodgers. She didn't get insulted. She wore it like a badge of honor. It was fun to be outside the mainstream for once.

“You think Evan will make the trip?” Cody asked Abigail as she walked her back to her office.

“I hope so,” Abigail said, not sounding too optimistic. “Probably not, though. His job.” He was a hospital administrator. He’d proposed to her on New Year’s Day with a diamond so big she was embarrassed to wear it. When doing needs assessments on homeless clients, she would take it off or keep her hand behind the desk.

“Well, even if he can’t make it, I’ll be there, so it’ll be fun.” Cody’s smiled and nudged Abigail with her shoulder. “You want to get lunch tomorrow?”

“I can’t,” Abigail said, grabbing a bottled water from her desk, “tomorrow’s the day clinic, and I promised Pastor Rick I’d help with intake, so I’ll be working through lunch.”

Cody put her muscular hand on Abigail’s shoulder, causing Abigail to tense up a bit. “You know what your problem is, Bright Eyes? You’re too nice. You do everything anyone ever asks you to do.”

Abigail squirmed out from under Cody’s hand as politely as she could, pretending to be distracted by a pile of paperwork that was consuming her cubicle. “Got to keep busy. The devil never sleeps.”

Evan came in to the living room with a non-alcoholic beer in each hand and his dirty little secret under his arm: a shoebox of photos from his college days that he kept on a shelf in his closet. “So, would *three* kids be a deal breaker?”

“Three!” Abigail took her beer from him and sat cross legged on Evan’s couch. “What happened to more than two kids being irresponsible? About not growing the population?”

Abigail had let Evan talk her into having children. Well, Evan and her mother, who never let Abby forget how much she counted on her only child to give her grandchildren. Abigail's mother had been trying to marry her off since shortly after she'd started college. Abigail wasn't even sure she wanted kids. She hadn't even made up her mind about whether or not to return to school when her year at St. Joseph's was up.

"I know, I know. But my parents had three kids and if they didn't have me as a go between, my bothers would never speak. What if we have two kids and they hate each other?"

In her mind she saw herself chasing three young boys around Evan's living room, waiting for him to come home from work. The image quickened her pulse and made her worry that she might say something she would regret, initiating a conversation she did not want to get into the night before a twelve hour road trip and several days of separation, "Weren't you going to show me some pictures?"

Evan gave her a disappointed look, then picked up his shoe box with a flourish to show that he was switching gears. "You probably don't know what these are, but when I was your age we had this thing called 'film' that you had to take to a drug store to get 'prints'."

She punched him in the arm. "You're only nine years older than me." She took the shoe box from him, quickly engrossed by the stacks of photos: Evan with long hair, Evan with a mustache and goatee, Evan still wearing an earring in his left ear. She fixated on a photo of him outside a nightclub with his arms crossed in an X in front of his chest, big black Xs painted on both of his fists.

"It's the Straight Edge symbol," he said, "The hardcore kids who didn't drink, smoke or do drugs used to wear them."

Try as she might, she just couldn't picture him in a mosh pit. She stroked his closely cropped hair and looked into his eyes, searching for the young intellectual, the campus radical inside. She pictured him sitting on a park bench on the quad wearing a black pea coat, reading Kant and drinking Starbucks coffee from a paper cup. It made her smile.

When it was her turn, Abigail opened her laptop and logged in to her online photo album, which sparked even more age related teasing from Evan who was all of thirty-two. She clicked on a folder marked "College." "Who's that?" Evan asked, pointing to a redhead with flowing, curly locks, slender hips and long, elegant fingers that seemed to be holding a drink in almost every photo.

"That's Sarah," she said, as if he should have known.

"*That's Sarah?* You told me she was beautiful, but damn." This caused Abigail to punch him in the arm again. "Did you invite her to the wedding?"

Back to the wedding. For the past few weeks, Abigail had taken a perverse pleasure in not thinking about the wedding. She'd even caught herself, several times, absent-mindedly daydreaming about her future and imagining herself as an unmarried woman. "I don't think it would be such a hot idea."

That night they slept in the same bed for the first time in the three weeks since Abigail had not-so-innocently asked if oral sex would be a violation of his Secondary Virginity. At first, she couldn't believe her good fortune back in October when, at Pastor Rick's insistence, she'd attended the monthly Christian singles mixer and met Evan. She'd almost given up on finding a guy she was attracted to who would be cool with the fact that she was a virgin and planned to remain one until marriage, let alone a handsome, educated, guy like Evan who was abstinent himself. They made jokes all the time about how they might not make it through the reception.

She'd have to wear a Velcro wedding dress and he'd get a tuxedo with tear-away pants like a Chippendale's dancer. After three months of chaste engagement, she thought he'd be excited, or at the very least, flattered by the offer of a blow job. Instead, he'd seemed disappointed, almost betrayed.

She wouldn't have even suggested spending the night if she were not leaving for New Orleans the following morning at 5 a.m. After a night of spooning (with Evan in front and Abigail behind, because, as Evan was fond of saying, "the devil never sleeps") he dropped her off at the church parking lot as the parishioners were gathering and loading their bags into the rented vans. "You know," he said, pulling in to a parking space, "the crime rate is almost back to pre-Katrina levels, and that's with only half the population, so it's effectively doubled."

Abigail spotted Cody getting out of her pick up truck and greeted her with a head nod. "I'll be fine. Cody will protect me."

Evan and Cody locked eyes for a moment, but didn't greet each other. "You guys aren't sharing a room are you? Good." He opened the trunk and threw her bag over his shoulder. "What did your mom say when you told her?"

She didn't answer.

Evan sighed, "You did tell her, right?"

"You know she wouldn't approve of this."

"And what am I supposed to tell her if something happens?" Evan's asked through a fake smile while waving to Pastor Rick.

She took her bag from him, "Nothing's going to happen. Besides, if it comes to that, just tell her the truth." She kissed him goodbye.

“Abby!” he gestured with his head toward Pastor Rick and the elders of the church when she tried to slip him the tongue.

“I stink so bad, I can smell my nuts without bending over,” Big Lex, the foreman from Habitat for Humanity said, tossing Abigail a bottle of water. They were putting in a hard day, gutting a flood-ravaged house in the Lower 9th Ward.

“Wow,” Abigail said, “You’re worse than Cody.”

“What?” Lex asked, pouring some water over his head. “Her nuts smell bad too?”

Abigail laughed so hard her lungs burned. Several hours of back breaking labor in the dark, damp, mold infested house had made even breathing a chore. It was a humid New Orleans day, but all the workers wore long sleeves, long pants, and hats or bandanas, along with goggles and dust masks to protect themselves from the debris. Abigail’s clothes were shellacked to her body by sweat. She smiled at Lex, “So this is what you do every day?”

“Yep.” He was a barrel-chested, black man with round eyes and a big grin. He’d lost everything in the flood. The first thing he’d said when he’d led St. Joseph’s parishioners through orientation was, “Y’all folks come from St. Louis? Is it true that everyone has a basement there?”

He and Abigail collapsed on opposite sides of a cooler in the backyard. The median age of the church volunteers was somewhere in the mid 50s, so much of the heavy lifting had fallen on Cody, Abigail, and Big Lex. He poured some bottled water over his hands before opening a bag of barbequed Krunchers. “When my brother came back from Iraq, he had that PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But I wasn’t in Iraq. My mom wasn’t. His wife wasn’t. See what I

mean? He had people to lean on.” He made a sweeping gesture with his bag of chips, “Who do you lean on when a whole city has PTSD? Even the shrinks in this town survived a hurricane.”

Big Lex was used to navigating the detritus of the Lower 9th Ward and the parishioners quickly learned to keep their limbs inside the vehicle. He weaved in and out of lanes like a maniac, narrowly missing piles of debris, jagged pieces of wood and stacks of discarded furniture that were almost as tall as the van. Houses had been blown right off their foundations. A speed boat had been thrown on top of someone’s garage. “Oh, my word! Would you look at that!” Sister Greene said.

Abigail looked up to see a roof that had been sheared off a house and had landed on top of an overturned pick-up truck whose back wheels pointed to the sky, like the feet of the Wicked Witch of the East.

Big Lex held court from the driver’s seat, “New Orleans don’t know who she is anymore. This city is gonna have to redefine herself,” he shook his head. “And she could go either way.”

The highways were above sea-level so the ride on I-10 gave Abigail the feeling that she was flying over New Orleans in a hovercraft. The city was an ocean of blue tarp covered buildings, “FEMA roofs,” Big Lex had called them. The idea of redefining one’s self stuck in Abigail’s head. It made her think about Evan. What kind of “flood” had drowned the scruffy, Nietzsche reading philosopher who had resurfaced as a clean cut, mutual fund investing Christian? It was probably a woman. A woman he hadn’t told Abigail about. But that was okay; she hadn’t told him much about Sarah. Sarah again. She made a mental note to delete Sarah’s picture from her photo album.

There were an odd number of women on the trip which meant one would get a single room at the hotel and the other would share doubles. When Pastor Rick jokingly asked if any of the ladies snored, Abigail had lied and said yes, in hopes of not having to share a room with Cody. After soaking for an hour in a bath of Epsom salts, Abigail met Cody, Sister Greene and a few other volunteers in front of the hotel to walk to the French Quarter for dinner.

On Canal Street, they passed an old man with a trumpet who'd stationed himself against a wall, "Evening, ladies! What do you wanna hear? I can play jazz, blues, swing. Whatsanever you want!"

Sister Greene raised a hand dismissively and kept walking, "We're in a hurry," she said. "But I'm sure you're quite good."

"I ain't out here for my health, lady."

After dinner, they were heading into Pat O'Brien's for Hurricanes. Abigail, while holding the door for them, saw a woman standing outside a bar half a block down the road. She had long, curly, red hair and wore black Capri pants under a tight pink t-shirt with silver writing on it. She carried a huge bag with a strap slung over her shoulder and something about her, the way she stood, the way she held herself, pulled Abigail's focus. It felt daunting and familiar. "I'll catch up with you guys at the bar."

"I don't think we're going to be here long," Cody said.

"Well then, I'll see you back at the hotel." Abigail could feel Cody about to protest, but she ignored her, making her way down the block.

She was still several feet away from the redhead when she called out, "Sarah?"

The redhead turned, "No, honey." The voice was wrong and she wore too much make-up. Plus, she lacked Sarah's long, slim fingers as she reached out her hand for a shake, "Madison."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else." Abigail was already turning to go.

"Oh, I'm definitely someone else, child. You got a cigarette?" She really looked like Sarah. It was creepy.

"Sorry. Don't smoke."

Madison, arms akimbo, pressed her palms to the sides of her flat stomach, "Nasty habit, I realize. But I got to do something to keep my girlish figure."

There was something about this woman, behind her poise and manners. The cosmetically concealed bags under her eyes, a slight tremor in her hands that matched the weariness hidden in her voice that reminded Abigail of the battered wives and homeless mothers she worked with at the church. Stuck for something to say, she went into Jesuit Volunteer Mode, "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, but it's something I like to do more than once." Madison waited for a laugh that didn't come.

"Can I buy you something to eat?"

"You sure can, darling. Is that all you're looking to buy?"

Abigail looked around, nervously. She felt her cheeks getting warm, "I don't know what you mean."

Madison took Abigail's hand and traced her lifeline, like a palm reader, "Where you from, child?"

"Omaha, Nebraska."

"Shit!" Madison laughed, "Maybe you *don't* know what I mean." She clasped Abigail's hand, "Come with me."

. They walked a few blocks out of the French Quarter to an all-night diner that looked like a cruise ship with its white walls, round windows and brushed chrome doors. The walk had been a bit awkward, with Madison doing most of the talking, "So this church that's trying to rebuild New Orleans, they sending white girls into the Quarter alone to buy strangers dinner?"

"No."

"Good," She noticed Abigail's diamond engagement ring, "cause you might not leave here with all that you came." She took Abigail by the wrist and regarded the ring in the light. "Bling! Bling! Danm, child, he must *loove* you." She had a slight N'awlins accent, but she talked fast, faster than the locals.

"Did you lose your home in the hurricane?" Abigail was drinking black coffee, watching Madison tear through a burger and fries with an almost theatrical daintiness, wiping the corners of her mouth with her pinkie between bites.

"No, sweetie, *that* hurricane blew through years ago. Katrina was just the icing on the cake."

"So, how did you..."

“End up on the street? Do you really want to hear this story? Kicked out of my parents’ house for being gay. Kicked out of my grandma’s house for being a tranny. Lather. Rinse. Repeat...”

“I’m sorry, a *tranny*?”

“Transgender. Transsexual. You knew right?”

“You used to be a man?”

“From the way you were hawking me, I thought you’d made me on the street. I figured you were into it.”

“I thought you were someone else.”

“Right, this Sarah person. Was she your girlfriend?”

“My best friend in college.”

“You know, you can call me Sarah if you want to. Tell me what she was like. I can be Sarah for you.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Wasn’t meant to be. Hey, don’t look like that. I’m sorry. It’s just - I get all these straight guys. They tell me how much I remind them of the ex-wives or some cheerleader they had a hard-on for in high school. I’ve been so many Susans and Beckys, I’ve lost count.”

What was Abigail doing? Who was this woman? This... man? She reminded herself that the woman sitting across from her could be Jesus. Was Jesus.

As they walked west on Canal, Abigail tried to listen to Madison over the voices in her head. Her father’s voice sounded the way it did when he convinced her not to go out of state for

college. Her mother's voice sounded the way it did when she'd convinced Abigail not to leave their church after her father's death. Evan's voice sounded the way it had that other morning in the church parking lot, warning her about the rising crime rate. They were all beside themselves with the fact that Abigail was about to take a transgender hustler she'd picked up on the streets of New Orleans back to her hotel. Whenever she expelled one voice from her head, another cut in like a scratchy frequency on an AM radio. But none of them could persuade her to change her mind. "So where will you sleep tonight?"

Madison shrugged, "The bars are still open. There's always someone who wants to take me home." Madison stared into Abigail's eyes. They stood a few feet apart, but Madison slowly closed gap between them as Abigail spoke.

"It's just, they're putting us up in this nice hotel and I almost feel guilty having a room to myself..."

"What's your angle here, honey?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I your good deed for the day?"

"No. It's not that."

"Listen, if you're trying to get me in a room with a bunch of holy rollers who are gonna' try and pray the gay out of me, been there, done that, wrote the musical." When Abigail didn't answer, Madison places her hands on Abigail's hips, their pelvises almost touching. She leaned in and spoke softly, "Look girlfriend, you're not buying what I'm selling. And I'm nobody's charity case. So either ask for what you want, or let's part ways now as friends." Abigail couldn't meet

Madison's gaze. She stared at the ground and said nothing. "Thanks for dinner, sugar."

Madison pinched Abigail's chin, then turned and walked away.

"I want you to spend the night with me."

Madison stopped and swung her head over her shoulder to look at Abigail.

"I'm asking you to spend the night with me because I want you to."

Madison smiled. "Turn around." When Abigail balked, she said, "Come on darling, give us a twirl." Abigail turned. When her back was to Madison, Madison said "Stop." Abigail stopped. "Now bend over."

"Madison!"

"Alright, alright, I'll go with you." Madison clomped her high heels back over to Abigail, taking her hand, "See what you can get when you use your words?"

Madison emerged from the hotel shower in a wrinkled pink baby doll nightgown with her huge "gypsy bag" slung over her shoulder. The room was already dark and Abigail was lying on her back pretending to be asleep, but listening to every sound as Madison felt her way to the bed. They lay a few inches apart, both facing the ceiling, but they inched closer and closer in their sleep until they were spooning with Madison's arm around Abigail's waist, and her face buried in Abigail's hair. They stayed that way for a few hours before Abigail awoke. "What is that?"

"What's what?"

Abigail rolled over and moved away from Madison, "You have a thing?"

Madison rubbed her eyes, "A thing?"

"I figured you'd had one of those operations."

“Are you kidding me? Those operations cost twenty grand. It’s all I can do just to keep myself in antidepressants... I’m freaking you out. Maybe I should sleep on the floor.”

“No. No, it’s fine.” Abigail rolled back over and waited for Madison to put her arm around her again. When she didn’t move, Abigail reached back and took Madison’s hand and pulled her in close.

“Am I part of your project?” Madison asked.

“What project?”

“Your whole ‘Catholic-do-gooder-rebuild-New-Orleans’ project.”

“Oh, God,” Abigail reached behind her and stroked Madison’s cheek, “I get enough of that at work. Can’t I just like you?” She pressed her body against Madison’s and went back to sleep.

Abigail hustled Madison out of her room early before any of her fellow parishioners had woken up. Madison was helping herself to the hotel’s free continental breakfast and couldn’t hide her surprise when Abigail asked if they could see each other again. Madison suggested they meet at a drag bar in the French Quarter called Big Daddy’s at eight. Abigail, thinking she’d need an extra hour to shake Cody and the others without arousing suspicion, pushed it back to nine.

The water line was just over Abigail’s head. She had a two-handed grip on the crowbar and swung it with everything she was worth. She smacked the curved end into the drywall, or sheet-rock as they called it down south. Once she’d made a few decent sized holes, she used the crowbar to pry huge chunks of the wall off their studs.

“Damn, girl!” Big Lex called from down the wall. “I know you couldn’t see your fiancé last night, but there’s no reason to take it out on that poor wall.” Some of the other volunteers

chuckled through their dust-masks as the white power in the air settled on their clothes. It was a much easier day with most of the waterlogged furniture already piled up just off the curb, and everyone was in a better mood. Abigail waved her crowbar at Big Lex in a mock threat.

In the hallway along the wall were things salvaged from the house. Sister Greene and Pastor Rick were rummaging through them trying to decide what the family would want to keep and what was damaged beyond saving. "I'm sure they'd want this," Pastor Rick said, holding a scrapbook. The cover was etched with mold, but most of the photos, remarkably, had survived. Abigail paged through it. The pictures were thick and hard and the colors were dull, a generation removed from the vivid and flimsy prints Evan kept in his shoebox. The owners from the house must have been her parents' age. The wedding photos looked almost identical to her mom and dad's except the faces were all black and brown. Abigail looked up and saw Pastor Rick smiling at her. "We'll be taking pictures like that of you pretty soon," he said.

Abigail was soaking in the bathtub of her hotel room when her cellphone started vibrating on top of the toilet seat. She sat up and saw Evan's face on the screen. For a moment, she thought about letting it go to voicemail, but the guilt that followed propelled her to dry one hand on the bath mat and answer.

"How's the trip going, sweetheart?"

"Fine. Exhausting."

"You sound tired. I won't keep you. Just wanted to tell you my cousin Brenda called and said the bridesmaids' dresses you and your mom picked out were beautiful. She was afraid you'd stick her in something frumpy so not to be upstaged."

Abigail felt like she should respond but had nothing to add, so she chuckled softly to let Evan know she'd heard him.

“Don’t forget we have the cake tasting day after tomorrow. Should I pick you up at church?”

“Sure.” She said. As Evan spoke she felt bathroom walls were slowly receding as she lay in the tub. She was on a conveyor belt toward holy matrimony. The gears were turning and all she had to do was remain perfectly still and in a few weeks she would be Mrs. Evan MacDonald.

“Honey? Honey?” Evan’s voice was like a hand feeling around for a lost item in the dark.

“Evan... I love you.” She sounded almost apologetic.

“Well, I hope so. You’re marrying me.” They were quiet for a moment. “Honey, is something wrong?”

She tried to imagine Evan with someone else, someone better than her. “I think all this devastation has got me emotional, that’s all.”

“It will be over soon.” He was calm, fatherly, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

A Mariah Carey song seeped through the walls of Big Daddy’s, competing with a rock cover band at a bar across the street and live jazz that spilled on to sidewalk every time the door of the neighboring club opened. This mixed with the chatter of people waiting on line with her and Madison made Abigail feel dizzy. Her final night in New Orleans was swirling around her and she just wanted to follow the current.

“How much is the cover charge?” Abigail asked.

“Oh, it’s free to get in,” Madison said, “but you have to pay to get out.”

Most of the staff at Big Daddy’s seemed to know Madison. Some greeted her by name; others coolly regarded her without speaking. Abigail was blown away by how beautiful all the drag queens were, as they milled around talking to the customers, regal in their evening gowns

and hyper feminine in the same way that Madison was. They got a table near the front and an older woman, the manager and only “genuine girl” working that night, came to take their drink order.

“Oh, I don’t drink-” Abigail stopped herself, looking around the room. Who was she looking for? Evan? Did she really think one of her fellow parishioners would be in a place like this? “I’ll have a beer. Whatever you have on draft.”

“Two,” Madison said.

The show started and Abigail spent as much time watching Madison as she did the performers. Madison seemed to know all the words to every song and mouthed them right along with whichever drag queen crisscrossed the stage in high heels and fabulous gowns. Like most of the patrons in the front, Madison stood at least once during every song, holding out neatly folded dollar bills which the performers came over and took, each one artfully incorporating the act of taking the money in to her routine. “Don’t forget to tip the performers,” the host, who wore a wig with black bangs and vintage lingerie, had said, “A lot of the breasts you’re ogling tonight ain’t been paid for yet. Feel free to ask anyone on staff about our Tips for Tits program.”

One performer, in a skin tight silver jumpsuit and Japanese Kabuki make-up, seemed to be singing a Eurythmics song directly to Madison. Madison in turned closed her eyes, raised her arms above her head and sang along with gusto and gave her the biggest tip she would give that night.

“Where’d you get all this money?” Abigail asked.

“You be amazed what tourists will pay for hand jobs these days.” Madison leaned into Abigail, squeezing her knee, “Don’t worry your pretty little head about that, child. Just relax and let me show you a good time.”

Abigail tried not to imagine Madison turning tricks to finance their last night together. A waitress offered them a second round of beers, but Abigail requested “something stronger” and insisted on paying.

The next performer was a redhead, like Madison. She was dressed in a cheerleader outfit and performing to “Hollaback Girl” by Gwen Stefani. Madison saw the way Abigail looked at her, “You’ve got a thing for redheads, huh?” Madison slid a dollar to across the table her, “Go on, go on.”

Abigail shyly stood, holding the dollar away from her the way a dolphin trainer might hold out a fish. She had locked her elbow and her arm soon became tired but she didn’t move, keeping it rigid until the cheerleader found the right moment in the song to bound over and take the money. She shook her pom-poms in Abigail’s face before seductively sliding them down her chest.

Madison hooted and hollered, slapping the table as Abigail turned bright red and quickly sat back down. When the show was over, the two biggest queens, all biceps and shoulders in their sleeveless dresses, stood on opposite sides of the door with cashboxes, collecting the cover charge as the audience filed out. “Your money’s no good here, child,” one of them told Madison when she tried to pay.

They stopped in an open air bar in the French Quarter for Hurricanes. Abigail took one sip and slapped her hand to her head like she had taken a punch.

“You’re such a lightweight,” Madison said. She took a sip herself, “I stand corrected. The bartender certainly ain’t trying to make the owner rich, is he?” She reached out and playfully massaged Abigail’s shoulder. “I know you put in a hard day today, but you finish that and you’ll be feeling no pain.”

Through her own tipsy haze, Abigail watched the alcohol wash over Madison, who was swaying back and forth in her seat to the Journey song that played over the wall mounted speakers. She wanted to ask if Madison had any photos of herself as a man. She wanted to ask her when she decided to become a woman. She was fascinated that someone could so completely reinvent himself. *Herself*. She could only manage the nerve to ask how Madison had chosen her name.

“When I first came to New Orleans I had this guy, a veterinarian,” Madison began, “he was kind of a tranny-sniffer, but he was good to me. He loved to dress me up and take me to drag shows. So one night, this queen, Amanda Hugginkiss, the Grande Dame of the scene at the time, sees me and says, ‘You’re a super-star. The first super-star I’ve seen all night. What’s your name, honey?’ And I was so shy, I said, ‘Bryan Gilliam.’ And she said, ‘Not anymore! Where are you from?’ ‘Wisconsin.’ So she kisses me on both cheeks, ‘I hereby christen thee: Madison Wisconsin!’ And I said, ‘But I’m from Milwaukee.’ And she said, ‘Darling! No one cares!’ And I’ve been Madison Wisconsin ever since.”

Abigail had no idea what name she’d pick if she could choose any. She couldn’t even say she’d ever thought about it. She’d even let her mother pick her Confirmation name.

“That’s what’s so great about coming to New Orleans, “Madison said, “You can be whoever you want.”

Abigail felt droplets of water landing on her arm. She took a deep breath. The cool air smelled like rain and beignets from the Café Du Monde. “We better go.”

Madison sucked up the last of her Hurricane and wiped her mouth. “I do believe the sky is about to open up on us.”

“Are you going to stay with me?”

“You know what I like about you, child? Most men I meet just want to use me. Most church types want to save me. I think you want to do both. I just might let you try.” Madison stood, “C’mon. ‘Fore it rains on our head.”

They walked down Decatur Street, hugging the buildings to let the balconies protect them from the rain. Abigail had wanted to take Madison’s hand, but even in the dark, even in the permissive atmosphere of the French Quarter, she balked at public displays of affection.

Beneath the drumbeat of rain on storefront awnings, they could hear music. At first it sounded like a stereo, but as they got closer to the source, they could tell that it was someone singing *a capella*. Near the corner, they saw a blonde girl who looked even younger than Abigail, 21 or 22 maybe, obviously drunk and propping herself up with one hand on a light post. Her tiny little shirt exposed her soft belly and her navel piercing as her hips rocked back and forth to the rhythm, oblivious to the rain. Her eyes were closed.

Madison and Abigail walked a few more feet before they could see an old black couple, probably in their early sixties, standing in the doorway of an antique shop, clapping and two-stepping side by side as they sang. They looked dressed for church; he in a three piece suit, tie and pork pie hat, and she in a beautiful sundress and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a flowered hatband.

"I guess you see stuff like this all the time?" Abigail said, quietly so not to disturb the scene. This would never happen in Omaha, or even in St. Louis.

"Hmmm... Not all the time." Madison said, looking up and down the street, then smiling at the couple.

"I can't imagine this happening anywhere else in the world."

Madison wiped the corners of her eyes. The rain was ruining her make-up. She caught Abigail staring at her, "I must look a hot mess."

"You look beautiful." Abigail had her blonde hair pulled back in her usual ponytail. As the rain washed over her tanned, freshly scrubbed face, she looked like she had just stepped out of the shower.

Madison took Abigail's hand, "C'mon. We're getting soaked."

Abigail craned her neck to watch the couple singing as Madison led her off. Without missing a note, the man took off his hat to them as they walked away.

Abigail's hotel room was dark and almost silent. There was the faint hum of the mini-fridge, the lights from Barrone Street coming through the window reflecting off Madison's cheek as she leaned in and kissed Abigail's neck.

Abigail closed her eyes and leaned back in the bed, her heart still fluttering from the adventure of sneaking Madison into her room unseen. She had kissed so few people in her life that kissing itself still felt foreign. It wasn't like the way Evan kissed her. It was softer, slower, as if Madison was afraid to press too hard, less Abigail float away. For a fraction of a second she was reminded of the one and only time Sarah had kissed her.

She felt Madison reach under her shirt and every part of her tensed up, then relaxed. No way could this have happened back in St. Louis. No way. But in a strange city that was now a stranger to itself, with a strange woman, all the stranger for having once been a man, in a strange hotel room that she would never see again. The walls fell, the bed disappeared and the city sank into Lake Pontchartrain.

At first, Madison couldn't penetrate Abigail. She was tense, almost resistant, "Are you sure you want to do this?" Madison asked.

Abigail's "yes" felt caught somewhere deep in her throat, so she just pressed Madison's hands to her cheeks so that she would feel her nodding.

Madison bore down as hard as she could and Abigail's face tightened with pain, then relaxed. Abigail closed her eyes again and soon got back to that place, that void. A place where she could leave behind anything she didn't want to carry home with her.

The next morning, as Abigail was toweling off from her shower, she could taste the vomit inching up the back of her throat. She tried to throw up as quietly as possible, but Madison was still awakened by the faint sounds of retching coming through the bathroom door. "Are you okay in there?"

"I'm fine," Abigail said, but her words were glottal and coming out in between labored breaths. "Be out in a minute."

Abigail emerged from the bathroom, hair still damp, wearing nothing but a Creighton University Blue Jays sweatshirt and lay on the bed next to Madison.

“You’re the first person I’ve made love to in three years.” Madison said, not yet making eye contact. “Now, don’t get it twisted. I’ve had plenty of sex. Sold it, gave it away. But that wasn’t making love. Not by a long shot.” Madison sat up and propped her pillow against the head board, “It’s the way you touch me. Most people treat me like I’m made of Nurf foam and rubber bands, but you...” She took Abigail’s hand and rested it on her thigh, “When your hands are on me, I feel like a glass figurine in one of those shops on Magazine Street.”

“You were my first.”

“I kinda guessed that, sugar. So you and that Sarah girl, never...”

“No.”

“Okay, out with it who was she?”

“I told you. She was my best friend in college.”

“She was a damn sight more than that. I could tell that by the way you looked at me the first time on the street. I wanted someone to look at me like that. Even if they thought I was someone else. Were you in love with her?”

“I guess.”

“Was she in love with you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well?”

“She went her way and I went mine. Last I heard she was running a vegan food co-op in San Francisco and spelling her name C-E-R-A.”

“Maybe you should look her up.”

Abigail got up and picked her jeans up off the floor.

"I guess I should be getting out of here," Madison said.

"No," Abigail sat in a chair by the desk putting her clothes on. "Check out time isn't until noon. You're fine until then."

"So I guess this is it."

Abigail moved to the bed, sat next to Madison, and took her hand. "I want you to have something." She pried her engagement ring off her finger and pressed it in to Madison's palm.

"Does this mean we're engaged?"

Abigail looked away from Madison, staring intently at the door. "Sell it. The money should be enough to get yourself situated."

Madison regarded the ring in her hand. She looked at Abigail, confused, "What are you going to tell your fiancé?"

"I'll pay him back."

"That's not what I meant. Are you still getting married?"

"I'm too young to get married," Abigail said, still looking at the door but now with her shoulders slumped over and her head down as if this was an admission of defeat that had taken the wind out of her.

"When did you decide that?"

Abigail met Madison's eyes, "I guess I decided a while ago, but I didn't decide to do anything about it until now." She looked at the digital clock on the nightstand, "I better go."

Madison grabbed her wrist before she got away, pressing the ring into Abigail's hand, "I can't take this." She slid off the bed, pulling the sheet over her breasts and wrapping it around herself as she stood and faced Abigail. "It's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me, but I just can't."

They hugged. Abigail slid the ring in to her jeans pocket and kissed Madison on the lips before pulling herself away and walking to the door.

"Abby," Madison called out, just as she was about to close the door behind her. When Abigail turned, Madison said "This was real."

"I know."

"I've done this before – but ... this was different." Madison sighed, about to give up, then "You're not a trick is what I'm trying to say."

Abigail still had a hand on the door. "I don't even know what that means."

"Sure you do. You're not in church any more, sugar; you don't have to pretend to be innocent with me." Madison went to her and they kissed again. It started sweet, another good-bye kiss, but it grew. They rolled through the open door and Abigail pushed Madison against the hallway wall.

They didn't break the kiss until they were startled by a sound. They turned to see Sister Greene with her suitcase and a freshly opened Pepsi, having just come from the vending machine room. Abigail smiled, "Morning, Sister Greene." She put her arm around Madison's bare shoulders, "This is Madison. Madison, this is Sister Greene." Sister raised her empty hand to them, then turned and deliberately walked away as the two of them resumed their kiss.

Abigail had just come out the front door of the hotel and was greeted by Cody, who was standing outside the van in a dark gray hoodie, surrounded by luggage, "Good morning, Bright Eyes." She looked Abigail up and down, "Where's your engagement ring?"

"I'm not wearing it." She could see Cody about to ask something else, but she took Sister Greene by the arm and said, "Sister Greene, why don't you ride back with us? I've been meaning to ask where you'd like to see the parish committee go from here." And that cut off any further discussion of her engagement. She wasn't sure what she was going to tell Evan, but whatever it was, he'd hear it before Cody did. She owed him that much.

Cody took the first shift behind the wheel, annoyed to have Sister Greene in her van. In the seat in the middle, Sister Greene talked and talked. Abigail, in the seat next to her, nodded politely, but her mind was elsewhere. She looked out the window and as they flew up I-55. Near Memphis she watched road crews clear branches and downed trees from a storm that had blown through. She wondered what would happen when she got back.

The caravan pulled into a rest area at the top of a short hill in southern Missouri. When Abigail came out of the bathroom and walked past the structure the wind seemed to come from all directions, felt like it could topple her over. She felt the engagement ring in her pocket. She stared off at the distant trees and the roads winding north, south, east and west.