

STOLEN HEROES

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts

and Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree

Masters of Arts in English

By

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Dayton, Ohio

April, 2005

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2005

## ABSTRACT

### STOLEN HEROES

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The following document is the culmination of my entire training in creative writing in fiction. In a sense, the purpose of the document is to delight and instruct; however, a more specific goal of the document involves its readiness for publication and possible commercial success thereafter.

I have written a novella, or short novel. It is by far the best thing that I have written to date, and I hope that anyone who reads it enjoys it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Prof. Joseph Pici for his role as not only my thesis advisor but also for his role as my academic advisor. His expertise as an author, editor, and as a teacher has been invaluable during my time at the University of Dayton, specifically during the writing of this thesis.

I would also like to thank my faculty readers, Dr. Stephen Wilhoit and Dr. James Boehnlein for their advice and efforts on this project.

I would also like to thank my mom, my dad, my grandma and grandpa Houchins, my grandpa Carr, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins. Furthermore, I would like to thank the following, listed chronologically and not in order of importance: Philip, Mike Jensen, Marty Stough, Tony Frame, Tim Burkhart, Matt Craft, Eric, Becca Bielski, Kevin, Quintin, Chris Freytag, Dave Murray, Mike Saccone, Nick Saccone, Nick Kelsh, Andy, Mike Neuman, Sarah Lewis, Dave Odom, Kevin Baumier, Sarah, Julie Cooper, Felicity Powers, Katie Mihaly, Josh Connors, Kathy, Katie, Pete, John, Kristin Begg, Andy Nichols, Maureen O'Connell, Jason Perkins, Alyssa Ladd, Jenny Zellars, Beth Tebbe, Amanda Tebbe, Jenny Bachelor, Jacob Tebbe, Kevin McGrady, Garrett Rayfield, Megan Rayfield, Grant Rayfield, Ben Torma, Mike Grote, Chris Slott, Matt Koneval, Gutzy, Katie Spicer,

Shannon Driscoll, Karen Fisher, Laura Fletcher, Lauren Weiss, Liz Marsh, Anne Hilbert, Scoty, Lis Weiser, Steve Abrahms, Dan Cho, Kartik Rajju, Erin, Mike Waltz, Kristin Stinnett, Dr. Herbert W. Martin, Ben Montler, Erica Prigg, Andrew Munafo, Denise, Kristin McGee, Aaron Rotsinger, Chris Field, Tonya Firestone, Anthony Fulton, Heather Pristash, Brad Peppo, Ryan Bloyd, Denis McGlothin, Jessica Gibson-James, Hillary Wilson, Julie, Dave, Jared, Sonia, Lucy, and anyone I might have missed. They are numerous, they have all supported my work in some way or another, and without a doubt, they were all essential in the completion of this text. Once again, I thank you all.

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## PROLOGUE

Hamilton woke up. He scanned the room as his mind ambled towards consciousness, remembering where he was. The room was lit by moonlight filtered through tree branches and again through the blinds on the window, but through the darkness, he could still see the cream colored walls with flowered trim and the pale green sheet that covered his mid section on down. Next to him in bed, the breathing form of a woman was curled up, her hair stuck out from the top of the sheet like a small blonde waterfall, which, in the darkness, appeared to cascade down from the pillow where her head might have been when she dozed off.

The sleep lifted completely and he remembered Mindy. This was her room. Why did her hair look blonde? Did she change her hair color without him noticing?

Then, the important questions flooded in. How long had he been there? What day was it? Did he have work tomorrow? Was it tomorrow already? Was he planning on sleeping over, or did he just fall asleep after their routine of mediocre love?

He looked over at a digital clock radio on the stark wooden nightstand. Yes, he had only been asleep a few hours. It was technically Friday, the Friday



before Fourth of July weekend. He had many things to do, much to plan. He needed to leave. He needed to leave now. He needed to go to work and talk to Sven. The band would practice tonight.

It had to be tonight.

Hamilton thought about the past two and a half months while he looked at the floor for his clothes. Mindy had been wonderful for him, uninspired as she was. He wondered if he loved her. He kept thinking back further. Why did the band need to play tonight? He remembered. The heroes, it was their time. He needed to end the business with the heroes once and for all. This was the first time he realized it. All he wanted was to be rid of them. Hamilton hated the stone goose as much as they did, but their means were often too cruel for his liking. The end was at hand for the stone goose. He thought about what people would think if they knew what he thought, about what he knew must be done. He hadn't slept for more than an hour in for too long. It was wearing away at him.

Hamilton imagined the heroes and stone goose and clenched his fist in a comically cliché fashion, like a character in a movie cursing a petty theft. He remembered the sound of a thousand, million cellos over the other noise, the bad noise. He remembered the smile on the old man's face, the look of joy in the old man's eyes. He thought about the Dragon, the man who he knew followed him, spied on his every move. Hamilton was sure that the Dragon was outside now, watching, waiting for a sign to strike. For the first time Hamilton truly knew that the time was now. Things needed to be done. Hamilton couldn't stay awake forever.

Hamilton moved silently, trying not to wake Mindy. He shifted to an upright position with his legs hanging off of the bed onto the floor. He was large. At 6'5", he towered over most people, his sturdy frame, that of a one-time athlete in disrepair, forging the muscle into what would someday, no doubt, become a mighty beer gut, a mass of fleshy goo bulging over his waistline, providing shade for his legs and toes at noontime. But that was many years away. He didn't look too bad now. But someday, he thought, someday, shade for his knees and toes and toe hair, like his father before him. He looked good now, or good enough anyway.

He slid on his socks first, then his boxers, standing up from the bed, oblivious to the half-asleep groan from the covered ball of woman, whom his motion disturbed. Then he got the shirt, shoes, took off the shoes because he forgot his pants, put on the pants, the shoes, the navy blue suit coat he wore everywhere, and searched the nightstand for his keys, wallet, and wristwatch. These last three items made enough noise to disturb Mindy enough to arouse a mumble, something that sounded like she was saying the word "hedges" a half dozen times.

He leaned over and whispered, "Sorry I woke you."

She mumbled something that sounded to Hamilton like "Where's the dinners the shoe sampler. Shoe sampler?"

"Listen. I have work tomorrow. I forgot. I didn't mean to fall asleep that long. I'll let myself out."

The mumble from under the sheet replied "Less job no pay for."

“Call me tomorrow evening, okay? Sven’s having a party at my dad’s place on Saturday. Sort of a housewarming thing. I’ll talk to you later.”

He assumed that the next mumble was “Goodnight, love you, lock the door on the way out,” but that was a bit of a stretch. It was closer to some guttural groan, which signified that she wished the conversation to be over so she could go back to sleep.

He leaned over and kissed her lightly through the sheet on what he assumed was her forehead. He whispered goodnight to her again and turned towards the bedroom door as she removed the sheet from her face. Her eyes still shut, she made tight kissing motion with her lips so that they would smack the air, kissing the place where Hamilton would have been if he were still in bed. She covered her head again and rolled so that she was curled up and facing the window, where the moonlight shifted with the tree branches outside in the July breeze. Hamilton left for his apartment.

It was time for him to go back one last time before the charge.

## CHAPTER I

Thoughts of the weekend washed away as 9:27 became 9:28 on the pocket watch of James Randolph Smythe IV. He was a walking caricature of a 1980s CEO, but it was April 12, 2004, and he wasn't in charge of a multinational corporation. His office betrayed his position. There was no window. His desk was the standard metal frame instead of the elaborate wood crafted behemoth underneath an antique quill pen seen in so many movies involving heads of corporations. Bookshelves lined the fluorescent-lit walls. Old leather bound law tomes collected dust year after year, groaning under the nibbles of silverfish and mites.

The coffee cup on the top shelf covered the same ring it made fourteen years ago when he stopped drinking coffee. The "#1 Granddad" cup was lined with the brown powder that was his last cup, misplaced and lost on the bookshelf, watching over his every Monday morning from nine until noon, the only time he came in to work each week.

James Randolph Smythe IV sat in his black, ergonomically designed Office Depot chair. Tiny glasses sat on the tip of his nose, appearing gold rimmed, but not. Wisps of white hair wreathed his mostly bald, speckled head. A Men's Warehouse suit covered his short and equally speckled body. He opened his laptop and read the sticky note he had placed there last week. He

followed its directions, opening the bottom drawer of his desk, and removing the top manila folder. Opening the folder, he read the other sticky note he had written and placed there for himself last week. The note read "Hire the first one in!!!" Each exclamation point was larger and more hideous than the last.

His tiny finger held down the intercom button on his desk phone and said, much too loudly, "Gracie, could you send in the first applicant."

There was a sigh in response and then, "My name is still Josh, sir. I'll send the first one to you now."

The seconds ticked and the door opened. James Randolph Smythe IV stood and reached up to shake the hand of the young man who entered. The handshake was awkward. At 6'5" the youth leaned down, his once muscular build hidden under the sports coat that matched neither his shirt nor his pants nor his tie. The youth's enormous hands enveloped James Randolph Smythe IV's tiny, flaccid paw.

"Thank you for seeing me." He glanced down at the nameplate at the front of the desk. He squinted a little, "Mr. Smaethy, um Smithe, um."

"It's pronounced 'Smith.'"

They sat down, each slightly disappointed in the initial exchange. James Randolph Smythe IV held up the folder on his desk again, the sticky note falling to the floor.

"It says here, Julius, that you're from Indiana. It must be quite a change to be in a big city like Toledo."

“My name’s not Julius, sir.” He paused, staring blankly for a moment before he realized that etiquette demanded that he help his prospective boss. “It’s Hamilton, Hamilton Burger. I’m actually from around here.” He pointed his index finger to the ceiling and circled his wrist as if to say that the confines of that office represented the entire northwest Ohio city or at least the portion of the city nearest to the building.

James Randolph Smythe IV looked disappointed and shuffled through the other two résumés to find the right one. He was hoping to wow the applicant with his vast knowledge of Toledo eateries. He also had a joke planned out about Julius Caesar. Now, he would just hire this blonde ogre and never get the chance to tell it, tucking away the punch line for some unknown future date when he might finally meet a Julius.

“Ah, yes. Here we are. Hamilton Burger, like the guy on ‘Perry Mason?’”

Hamilton didn’t sigh, but he wanted to. “Yes. My dad was a big fan of the show. And since his last name was Burger, I suppose he just thought it was easier than changing his name to Mason.”

“So, you grew up in Toledo?”

“Yes. Actually, my dad’s house is a few minutes walk from here, and I live a few blocks away from him.”

“So transportation won’t be an issue with you?”

“No. It’s a ten minute walk, if that.”

“Splendid. I always enjoy a good walk in the afternoon myself. It’s one of those luxuries of life that I think every great mind for the past thousand years or

so has enjoyed from time to time. I suppose, if you prefer a good walk here every morning, then who am I to argue for the afternoon, and if you had the job, you wouldn't have the afternoon for walking, I guess, since you would be working in the afternoon, but on the weekend, I suppose you could get a good walk in around two or so, and that would be just splendid, wouldn't it?"

Hamilton's face was a mix of confusion and worry. "Right. I suppose."

"And you said your father lives near here. That's splendid. You should always put family first. Nothing you want to keep closer to you than family. I say, these days there's nothing more important than family, what with all the violence and drugs and crime. I swear, all of this nonsense could be fixed if people stuck close to their families. You know, no one would rob a bank or kill their crack dealer, or even have a crack dealer for that matter, if his mother were watching over him a few feet away with her wondering why she's out in the evening, at midnight, with her son buying crack and trying to shoot policemen. Yes, mothers. Very important. Families in general and mothers specifically are vitally important to ensuring the well-being of the community at large. Without them, we would all be lost. Your mother lives with your father, does she?"

"No, she's dead. She died when I was eighteen." Hamilton worried about how poorly the interview was going and would most likely continue to go. Briefly, he philosophized to himself about the humiliation of the interviewing process in a bad economy. A slight feeling of hopelessness arose briefly in him, replaced almost immediately by fear that this, his only interview since graduation, would end in the same failure as all of his other application attempts.

“Some horrible accident or illness, I’m sure. The end of a happy life with your father. Well, God rest her soul, and you visit her grave for me and tell her you’re trying to make something of yourself and that you might get this job.”

“She was cremated.” Hamilton remembered it all in an instant, the ashes pouring out of the urn, the urn falling out of his father’s hands into Lake Erie, his father shrugging his shoulders and walking back from the end of the pier. His father shrugged his shoulders the same way when Hamilton got to the house three days before to find his mother dead on the couch with a cereal bowl on her lap and a spoon in her hand. She had eaten a breakfast bowl of Advil doused with over-proof rum. Her eyes were closed and her face tilted up to the white ceiling. Cold saliva ran from her empty smile into her now disheveled light brown hair. Accident indeed, but his father was convincing enough with the insurance people, and the coroner just didn’t care. Hamilton remembered it all in that instant and snapped back to the interview, the fluorescent lights, and the tiny bald man in front of him who was now fumbling for another question.

“So you went to school at UT?”

“Yes. I majored in accounting.”

“And you went to high school around here too.”

“Yes sir. Never been out of Toledo.” He thought about how technically this was a lie. He had been out of Toledo for upwards of a week and a half on family vacations when he was a child, but had never taken up permanent residence anywhere else.

“Big fellow like you probably played football in high school, no doubt.”



“No. I was injured my freshman year. There was a car accident and my friend died, and I have a titanium rod in my hip now. I don’t really walk with a limp anymore or anything, but it was kinda lonely in high school since I didn’t fit in with anyone. There wasn’t a people-with-titanium-rods-in-their-hips club at school or anything. But I guess I got by okay.” Hamilton realized how stupid he sounded then and throughout the interview thus far.

He smiled and James Randolph Smythe IV smiled too, but only out of politeness. “So you didn’t play football for long then. Right. It says here that you graduated in May of 2003, but it doesn’t say what you’ve done since then. I mean, you have some nice internship experience, and your summer jobs in high school are all well and good, but what did you do last year?”

Hamilton looked down at the floor and his shoes. He answered overly loud, “I didn’t do anything, I guess.”

The answer startled them both, since Hamilton hadn’t meant for it to sound the way it came out. He continued, “I applied everywhere after graduation but there wasn’t anything available, anywhere. I never even got an interview.” Despair. He wouldn’t even hire himself with this interview.

“Well, it was a rough year to be looking for a job.”

Hamilton nodded. He thought about the last year. His mother’s death gave him enough money to pay for college and an apartment, and it kept him alive for the last year. But now the money was running low, and he had spent the last three months living off of food from his father’s kitchen. He applied everywhere within reason and even a few places that would never have hired

him, but before this horrible, horrible interview, he always had that slight hope in the back of his mind that he would get a job somewhere.

“Do you even know what we do here?”

Hamilton realized he was grinning stupidly and stopped. “Well, no. Not exactly.”

“Good.”

Hamilton looked a little surprised. “I’m not sure that I follow you, sir. Why is that good?”

“Because I want you to not work here.”

Even the part of Hamilton that was pessimistic in hope of being proven wrong bent under the weight of the last exchange. He was confused and tired and hungry, and all he wanted was a job. Why couldn’t this pompous little man give him a job?

Before Hamilton’s fist could clench in anger and disappointment, James Randolph Smythe IV explained, “That isn’t to say that you don’t have a job here. You do.”

Hamilton was still confused and tired and hungry, but now, he was curious.

“Hamilton Burger, let me be the first to welcome you aboard here at J. R. Smythe and Co. I’ll explain everything in a moment. First, let me show you your new office.”

The little man got up and wandered out of the room. Hamilton followed him down the hall towards the reception area and the exit. The hall was lined

with eight doors, four on each side. The door across from James Randolph Smythe IV's office was open. It led to the restroom. The other doors, which Hamilton had passed on the way in, were all shut except for the last one. James Randolph Smythe IV went into that office.

"Here you go." He closed the door behind Hamilton and pressed a finger to his lips. James Randolph Smythe IV whispered, "This is your new office. Your job will be to look like you're working. Do you think you'll be able to handle it?"

"What?"

"Your job will be to look like an employee here. You'll get paid fifty thousand a year and you'll get medical and dental. I think that's more than fair, don't you?"

Hamilton whispered now, "I'm a little lost at the 'not actually working' part sir."

"Well, let's see if I can clear things up for you. I own this business, and I have six employees and a receptionist. Well, soon to be six, hopefully." He winked at Hamilton and continued, "Now, three of those employees are vital to my company's survival. They do all of the actual work. But, if they knew that they were the only ones working, they would just go into business for themselves. That's why I have people like you here. I pay three people to act like they work here. They have offices. They come in on time. I yell at them sometimes. Once a month, one of them stays late, until all of the other employees have left. They all wander around here talking about the file or project they're working on, but really, they sit in their office at their computer

doing whatever they please, so long as they have a spreadsheet full of numbers or a lengthy document ready to cover the computer screen in case a real employee comes in. And as far as that goes, just know that I can't tell you who the real employees are. I couldn't risk the actors talking about their craft and have a real employee overhearing by chance. So, be friendly, but not too friendly, and you'll do well here. Raises every year if you can hack it."

Hamilton was delighted and frightened all at once. The small man shook his hand, told him to show up at nine tomorrow and to have a nice afternoon. Hamilton thanked him for the opportunity. He said he wouldn't let James Randolph Smythe IV down.

Hamilton left his new office and walked out past the receptionist, a thin young man with black spiked hair, a nose ring, and a tee-shirt that read "Skaters do it best...with your mom!" The young man looked up from his copy of *War and Peace* to smile. Hamilton smiled back and nodded as he left the building.

The sky had clouded over during the interview, so Hamilton walked quickly down Sylvania Avenue, a tree lined street with two lanes going each way flanked with a mix of houses and miscellaneous storefronts from one block to the next. Every building looked well maintained but still had a fine layer of dust that a person could only notice when it was sunny, which it rarely ever was. He turned onto Douglas toward his apartment. What Douglas lacked in Sylvania Avenue's trees, it made up in streetlights and two story concrete apartment buildings. The few houses on Douglas marked the corners of the block where side streets twisted past rows of almost suburban houses along streets canopied by maple

and birch trees. He walked a few blocks and considered turning down Charlestown, towards his father's house, but he would have had to cross Douglas to get there and didn't want to be caught in the rain on the way back. In the yard of the corner house on his side of the street, he saw a pair of children, one boy and one girl, both possibly between the ages of four and six. They were arguing over something one of them had or hadn't done. As Hamilton walked closer, the argument was settled when the little boy kicked the little girl between the legs and ran off behind the house laughing. The little girl screamed, clutched her injury, and started crying. She hobbled onto the porch of the house and then went through the front door.

Hamilton could still hear the little girl sobbing as he passed the yard. He looked down and saw a Superman action figure on the lawn. He couldn't explain it, but for some reason Hamilton wanted justice for that little girl more than anything else. He knew that he didn't know what started their fight, but whatever the little girl might have done, Hamilton believed the little boy's reaction was wholly uncalled for. He wanted to punish the little boy for what had happened, and it was most likely that the Superman belonged to the little boy. There was a chance that it belonged to the girl, he thought, but most likely the boy. Cars drove by, and he felt strange standing and staring at an action figure, the sobs and gasps still coming from somewhere in the gut of the house. Hamilton bent over as if to tie his shoe. He slipped Superman into his jacket pocket, stood up, and started walking again towards his apartment. He looked around nervously as he went.

On the other side of the street, he saw a man with a bright green mohawk wearing a leather vest, tattered jean shorts, and large black boots, smoking and leaning against a light post that had faded from sky blue to a chipped grey speckled pole. The man had a tattoo going up his left arm, and as Hamilton and the man passed on the street, Hamilton noticed the tattoo looked like a dragon such that the entire arm was the dragon's body and the hand was the head. The man couldn't have been too much older than Hamilton, but Hamilton got an odd feeling that the man might be staring. He was. The man was smoking a Clove and was definitely staring, and Hamilton realized he was staring back.

Hamilton kept walking and congratulated himself on having gotten a job and on dispensing some sort of greater cosmic justice by stealing the toy of a mean little boy, but he couldn't stop thinking about the dragon man. He knew the man had seen him, maybe even noticed him stealing the action figure. Hamilton wondered if there was any reasonable thing the man could do. Hamilton imagined the dragon man walking up to the house with the crying girl, knocking on the door, and announcing that a toy had been stolen from the yard by a large man in a suit. Hamilton laughed a little to himself at the possibility of such a scene. No one would believe some punk in a mohawk with a dragon tattoo covering a whole arm.

Hamilton looked over his shoulder from time to time. He wasn't being followed, but he wanted to be sure. He made it back to his apartment building, went inside, climbed the stairs to his apartment, and opened his door.

He sat on the old, orange couch in his clean, sparsely furnished living room and watched his small television that sat atop a cardboard box covered with a blanket. He did this for a while, dozing off from time to time, a few minutes here and there. Eventually, he drove to McDonalds and brought dinner back to his apartment. He ate McNuggets drowned in barbecue sauce but couldn't finish his lukewarm fries or watered down coke. He continued to watch television. When it was exactly five in the evening, he thought that he had already called his father and left a message on the answering machine to say that he had a job and that he would stop by later in the week. He didn't. He dozed off again.

He dreamed of his friend who had died when he was a freshman in high school. He relived the night when his friend's mother had picked them up from practice, drunk and singing Grand Funk Railroad's "American Band." He remembered the dog running out of the old woman's arms and into the street, his friend's mother swerving to avoid it and hitting the mailbox and light post, the sparks as the light exploded and fell onto the car, crushing the roof of the SUV like a Dixie cup, his friend's mother screaming and crying and shouting "My baby, my baby" as he bled in the back seat. He could have sworn she was screaming for the SUV, but it got fuzzy, and he awoke, and it was now eight in the evening.

He had slept through a phone call from his father, and he was hungry again. He listened to the answering machine message until he recognized his father's slurred voice. He deleted the message and sat down to watch television again. The rain tapped on the apartment windows. He was the only tenant there now. Usually there were college students, since it was so near the University,

but this semester, the only people who lived there were him and another couple on the ground floor who had left for Easter and had not yet returned. His bedroom shared a wall with the couple's headboard. He had started sleeping on his couch soon after he moved in because the hollow thumping from below through the plaster and insulation made him uneasy. Out of habit, he slept on the couch even when they were gone.

He could hear the cars driving down Douglas, sloshing rainwater against the curb, driving to the expressway entrance either towards Detroit or Findlay. He thought about driving to his father's to tell him the good news, to bask in some small accomplishment, and perhaps to have a celebratory meal, but it was already too late. His father would be passed out by now, and it seemed a waste of gasoline to drive only a few blocks.

He imagined the drive in the rain and the permanent dusk of streetlights. He would pull up the driveway and look down the street at the house where his friend lived before the accident. Through the dimness, he would see the porch where he once played with his friend, only two driveways away from the house where he grew up. He would squint at the porch, which looked like it belonged to some sweet elderly couple. He would scowl at the stone goose that sat on the porch, a concrete reminder that his friend's family was no longer there, that the neighborhood had changed. The stone goose was the death of his friend, the end of the time when he could ignore his parent's fighting and find solace in early teenage camaraderie.



In his mind, he could hear the “1812 Overture” played on cello. It was just one cello playing the song loudly, the chords, the vibrations of the strings, and behind it, a sound not unlike glass shards being poured into a ceramic bowl. He didn’t know whether or not he was dreaming, but it all seemed real.

He was no longer in his apartment. He was sitting on a swing set in the playground across from where he went to grade school. The trees were twisted black shapes writhing empty branches into the dark orange sky splotted with black clouds. The houses too were black and lifeless, but for some reason, everywhere, the grass was deep green. The dreamscape seeped into Hamilton’s senses, and he felt a growing anxiety as the sound of the cello got softer and the sound of glass shards poured into a ceramic bowl became almost deafening.

Hamilton looked at his hands and realized that he was in his body when he was younger. He winced in pain and watched as his thin arms moved up to cover his ears just before the noise stopped.

Superman stood before him in all his red and blue majesty, not a cartoon superman or Christopher Reeves but rather, a life size version of the toy he had stolen from the front yard. The enormous plastic Superman hovered a few inches off of the ground with his disproportionately enormous arms hanging at his side.

Superman did not move his mouth or plastic lips, but he spoke. “You okay there, champ?”

Hamilton was confused, because the nightmare seemed real enough not to have alerted his sleeping self that this was, in fact, a dream. He sat there frightened and in awe of the life-sized floating plastic Superman.

“Don’t be afraid there, little guy. I only hurt the bad guys. You’re not a bad guy, are you?”

Hamilton paused as if he were actually considering it.

“No.”

“Well, you are, you liar.”

“What?”

“You’re going to be seeing a lot more of me and my friends before you’re done, but for right now, it’s punishment time. Liar, liar, leg on fire.”

Superman’s unmoving eyes glowed red and shot lasers at Hamilton’s right leg. The burning sensation Hamilton felt was amplified by the return of the cello and the glass noise. He fell out of the swing as the heat vision burned him and the noise swelled up into a mass of aural agony until he could feel neither his leg nor his head. He could feel nothing but numbness as the world around him faded into darkness.

Hamilton awoke with a gasp. He clutched at his right leg. It was twisted into an awkward position with his other leg and the end of the couch. The leg was asleep. He stood up from the couch and comically attempted to pound blood into the limb as the needle sensation burst around everything from his knee down. When the pain subsided he sat on the couch and checked the digital alarm clock next to the couch. It was three seventeen in the morning.

The dream played over and over again in his waking mind as Hamilton tried to sleep again with no success before the alarm went off at seven. He felt as if he hadn't slept at all.

## CHAPTER II

On his first day, he left the door of his office open. Every so often he would hear someone open their door and walk down to the restroom. He would try to count the number of steps, to guess which office the person came from. It helped pass the time.

James Randolph Smythe IV had introduced him to everyone earlier that morning in an unprecedented Tuesday appearance. In his mind, Hamilton tried to pick out the people who really worked there as opposed to the other “actors” like himself. He failed miserably. After polite hellos and being shuffled past all six coworkers, catching names briefly and then forgetting them, he only guessed that the receptionist with the spiked black hair was also not really working. He remembered that the receptionist’s name was Sven. This seemed like a point of interest, because he thought it was Josh for some reason. Sven was wearing the same shirt as the day before. Hamilton gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed he had done laundry last night, or perhaps he owned an entire closet of the same clothes like Superman did.

At noon of his first day he pulled out the brown paper bag that contained his lunch. By 12:05 he had watched everyone in the office, except Sven, file past his door for the exit. He made a note to himself reading “buy your lunch

tomorrow” and placed it in his pocket. He didn’t want to seem different from the others. By 1:30 everyone was back in their respective offices, and he was hip deep in another game of computer solitaire, which was all he had really been doing since his introduction. At the end of his first day, Sven stopped by Hamilton’s office, closing the door behind him.

“Hey, new guy.”

Hamilton was a little startled. Since Sven was the only name he could remember, he had assumed that Sven remembered his. Hamilton quickly clicked on a spreadsheet to cover his computer screen so that it appeared as though he was really working, just as James Randolph Smythe IV had told him the day before. Hamilton waved and said “Hi.”

“Yeah, listen. You’re the youngest guy to be hired here ever, so I know what you’re getting paid to do. You might have guessed from my winning personality and the fact that today you never heard a phone ring or anyone enter this place who didn’t work here that my job’s just for show too. You wanna go grab a beer? I mean, it wears me the hell out to just sit there all day just looking handsome. So yeah, beer?” He made a drinking motion.

“Sven, right?”

“Sven Murphy.”

“Yeah, Sven. Are you even old enough to...? Wait, did you say Murphy? How does someone with the last name Murphy end up a Sven?”

“My mom’s a quarter Swedish. My great-grandpa Sven on her side was really great or something. Anyway, I’m going down the street to The Orchard. My fake I.D.’s good there. You coming or not?”

“No. Thanks though. I’m a little short on cash right now. Ask again after I get paid, and I’ll go. Thanks.”

“No prob’ man. Just so you know, you’ll wanna keep the door shut. Nobody keeps the door open so no one who’s not working has to worry about looking busy by surprise.”

Hamilton thanked him for the advice and told him to shut the door on the way out.

That evening when Hamilton went home, the same thing happened as the night before. In fact, every night followed the pattern of television, McDonalds, and sleep on the couch. A disturbing nightmare always followed, involving the giant plastic Superman who used heat vision on a different part of Hamilton’s body while a single cello played the “1812 Overture” under a nearly deafening cacophony of glass shards poured into a ceramic bowl. When Hamilton would wake, the heat vision would have affected whatever body part he had been sleeping on. He could never sleep afterwards. His mind would race with explanations of why it was happening. Before his alarm clock would sound, he would settle on the excuse of stress, but that never seemed right. During the weekend, he would lounge around his apartment all day, alternating between television and an all day process of attempting to sleep followed by the same nightmare, again and again.

The next eight days went pretty much the same. Hamilton kept his door shut and played solitaire on his computer. He kept packing a lunch because no one could tell if he was really there when they went to lunch now that his door was always closed. The only real exception was the eighth day, payday. At noon, a blue envelope containing his paycheck slid under the door. He picked up the envelope and checked it against his calculations. He had previously spent a few minutes figuring out how much he made every paycheck, week, day, hour, and minute. He could have figured for second too, but that seemed sort of silly at the time. He left to deposit his check during lunch break, since he could eat in his office any time he felt like it.

He walked down Sylvania Avenue to his bank, the Fifth Third in the half empty plaza of stores and eateries on the corner of Douglas, and he deposited exactly half his check, taking \$223.07 in cash. He had nearly an hour before he would be missed at work, and even then, he wasn't sure about being missed at all. His door was shut just like it had been for the past few days, so he thought about just going home for the rest of the afternoon. He decided to go back eventually and make up any lost time at the end of the day. He could act like he was putting in a fevered attempt to finish up his "file" before the weekend. He laughed a little to himself and kept walking down Sylvania towards some of the little shops that were always going out of business and opening with new owners a few weeks later. As a boy, he went to a few of the shops where they sold comics or magic tricks. There was a used toy store that had been a constant

there, buying collectibles and selling them off at absurd prices. He decided to wander into that store before going back to work.

Inside the store, there was a thin haired man behind the counter at the front of the store with big, thick glasses. A woman, about the same age, between fifty and sixty, was at the shelves with a clipboard and a pen. It looked like she was doing inventory. It looked like she was a little upset. The man watched Hamilton slowly walk through the aisle. Hamilton was careful to pick out only the toys that he knew were his at one time. When he moved off to college, his father had taken all of his old toys to this shop and sold them. Hamilton didn't realize this until a few weeks before when he had been poking around in his father's attic looking for the toys to sell them for grocery money. Now, he guessed that five years ago his dad had come in here and hocked them for beer money. Five years ago, his dad had done that sort of thing often while Hamilton's mother was still alive. Then, beer money couldn't come out of house money unless Hamilton's dad wanted to hear about it for the rest of his days. But once Hamilton's mother died, the old man was free to do as he liked, especially since some of the insurance money went to him too.

Hamilton gathered up about seven old action figures that he swore were originally his and took them to the counter to pay. He was excited to find all of them, but the Spiderman was particularly precious to him, as it was a gift on his twelfth birthday from his dead friend. The man behind the counter rang up the toys slowly smiled. "So what do you want these for anyway?"

"Nothing really. Just nostalgia I guess."



The man stopped smiling. "Nostalgia 'eh? Boy, I don't so much like that answer. I ain't sellin' you shit."

The woman in the back of the store looked up from her clipboard and piped up "Glen, you givin' that nice man trouble up there? He just wants to buy something. Why you always gotta keep people from buyin' something."

Hamilton was confused. He was hopeful that the woman would talk some sense into Glen, but Glen responded, "Dammit woman, this here's one of them pedophiles you hear about on the news all the time. He's gonna take these here toys and lure little boys into his van and have his way with them and maybe even kill them too."

The woman shouted back, "You're a damn fool. You think everybody who comes in here's a pedophile. You drive off anyone who might want to actually buy somethin' and this ain't even your store."

"Woman, it's my store as much as it's yours. You made sure of that when you slapped this here ball and chain on me." He pointed at his ring.

"When I married you, you promised you would help run my father's store and now look what you've done. You ran it into the ground, you never read up so big items just walk out of here for nothin', and you've been selling drugs out of the back storage room to get by."

Glen came out from behind the counter and Hamilton took the opportunity to place the Spiderman action figure up the sleeve of his jacket. He knew he couldn't make it out with everything, but he wasn't going to leave without Spidey. Glen called his wife several things relating to her gratitude, parentage,

faithfulness, and nosiness all in the same sentence. She retaliated by saying that she knew about the drugs all along and was just waiting to turn in Glen to the police. Hamilton mumbled something about needing to get back to work and shuffled towards the door as the couple shouted at the top of their lungs, mere inches from each other.

As he left, Hamilton wondered if he was doing the right thing, stealing again, but he justified it. Obviously, an operation used to deal drugs, especially one where the most of the clientele are children, should lose some money. If anything, Hamilton considered himself a hero for taking a small but satisfactory stab at a criminal organization. He walked back to work with his chin up, knowing he did the right thing.

When he arrived, Hamilton was surprised to see Sven locking the door. It was only 12:45. Sven told him that the office closes at lunch on paydays, because it keeps the employees from overexerting themselves. Also, a while back, everyone agreed that what James Randolph Smythe IV didn't know about every other Friday afternoon wouldn't kill him. Sven also apologized for not letting Hamilton know sooner. He also apologized for skipping the beer they agreed on two weeks ago. Sven played drums in a thrash/punk band and they had practice every Friday afternoon so they could warm up before shows, which hadn't ever really happened, because the band had only been together two months. The entire time, Hamilton kept his hand on the Spiderman action figure that he had moved to his jacket pocket during the walk back.

The two went their separate ways, Sven on his drive back to Perrysburg, a suburb south of Toledo, where he would meet his band in his mother's pool house, and Hamilton on his walk home. But a block into it, Hamilton decided not to go to his apartment. It was Friday afternoon, it was Spring, and it wasn't raining. This sort of rare weather deserved a walk. He decided to go to his father's house. It had been almost two weeks, and he still hadn't told the old man the good news about the job. He didn't want his dad to get his hopes up if it didn't work out. Precious little was worse for Hamilton than the eldest Mr. Burger's disappointment, because the disappointment lead to a general sort of sadness. The sadness would cause considerable drinking, and the drinking would inspire Mr. Burger to recall other sadnesses, which would, undoubtedly, lead to more drinking. The cycle would continue as such until Mr. Burger would call his son at some later time to let him know just how much he meant to his dear old dad. In the past four years, Hamilton had tried to do everything in his power to avoid such an occurrence at all costs, but sometimes, bad things happened, and he couldn't lie to his father.

Of course, if his father were happy at any point in the day between when he woke up and when Hamilton got there, the old man would be drinking out of celebration. And, if he were sober or still sleeping when Hamilton arrived, the news of a job and paycheck would cause drinking for joy on the part of Mr. Burger, to celebrate his accomplishments vicariously through the son. This wasn't a great outcome, but it was the state in which Hamilton preferred to see his father.

On the way there, Hamilton saw a woman sitting in a lawn chair, smoking, next to a box and a sign that read "Free Puppies!!!" as if to connote that the woman smoking was actually shouting instead of smoking, half asleep in a lawn chair. He assumed that the puppies were in the box. She couldn't have been older than forty, but she couldn't have smoked fewer than three packs a day since she was about fourteen years old. Her hair was cut into a blonde, feathered mullet, and if Hamilton had to place money on it, he would have bet that she was missing no fewer than three teeth. In her driveway was a Harley, and in her heart was an Iron Maiden song.

When Hamilton approached the box to see if there actually were puppies, he was pleasantly surprised that he was right about her teeth. She was missing five of them. He knew this because when he looked into the box, which only contained one puppy, she smiled and said, "Well shit, looks like you're a man who knows dogs."

He ignored her and looked at the puppy in the box. It was a Chihuahua, and it was shivering. He felt bad for the poor furless little dog, and he felt even worse for it when the woman continued, "Had to drown most of the last litter, but hoo boy they're going this time. You take that one, and I won't have'ta drive down to the crick tonight and get my arms all wet."

She took a deep drag and smiled again, pushing smoke through the gaps in her teeth. The dog and its shivering and huge eyes and this woman's sheer vileness drove Hamilton to a quick decision. He didn't know if his apartment allowed pets. He couldn't remember, and he didn't care. In a matter of seconds,

the dog was his, and he was walking as fast as could down Charleston towards his dad's house.

The plan had changed. He was carrying a Chihuahua puppy in one hand and walking as fast as his large frame would carry him. He wanted to skip a meeting with his dad, which would have only been likely had his father gone to the store for beer, passed out already, or not woken up yet that day. Hamilton wanted to raid his father's garage, taking the food and water dish that used to belong to his once pet Rolf, the cocker spaniel who died when he was eight, when his mother sat him down and first explained what death was. He also wanted the harness from his pet guinea pig, who his father bought to replace Rolf and who never lived long enough to have a name. That time, his father sat Hamilton down and explained what death was and apologized for the mistake with the lawn mower. At the time, Hamilton was urged to be more careful with his pets, since Rolf had lived for several years before Hamilton had been born and had died of old age, and Hamilton hadn't ever actually seen the guinea pig until minutes before it got out of his grasp and ran outside toward his father's waiting mower.

At any rate, Hamilton needed the harness and leash that his father had bought for the guinea pig, so he could use it for the tiny, shivering animal in his hands that urinated, as if on command, just as Hamilton turned up his father's driveway. The plan had changed again, and now Hamilton desired paper towels, soap, and running water, which would all be inside the house and not in the garage like the other items.

Unfortunately, as Hamilton went through the front door, he heard the television on at full volume, which meant that his father was most certainly awake. Hamilton walked through the front hallway and past the entrance to the living room where his father watched television with a beer on his lap and a mini-fridge half-full of beer next to the Lay-z-boy recliner in front of the large television. There were no actual lights in the living room, aside from what daylight might filter in through the drawn blinds. The ceiling light had burned out two years ago and the lamps had been removed when Mrs. Burger died. It was only the mini-fridge, the chair, the TV, and Mr. Burger, who slept in the chair after turning off the television. Hamilton thought about how his father never would have moved if the old man could get Coors delivered and have a bed pan emptied from time to time.

Hamilton continued on past the old man watching television and entered the kitchen without saying hello. Surely his father had seen him but didn't want to be troubled with getting up. Hamilton would take his time washing the dog urine off of his hands hoping that maybe, just maybe, his father hadn't noticed his uncommonly large son walking past the living room door. Hamilton sat the dog on the kitchen counter and washed his hands in the sink, thinking he might escape without an encounter, but he heard the leather shift and the floorboards creak. If Hamilton had visited more often in the past few weeks, he was sure that his presence wouldn't have warranted his father getting out of the chair. Hamilton rinsed his hands and cursed his luck. He picked up the dog again and

got a smile ready for his father who was just then walking into the kitchen from the hall.

He was wearing a stained undershirt stretched nearly to its limit in several places, and he had a can of Coors in his hand. He shouted, because he always shouted, "What the hell you got there? Looks like someone shaved a rat and sold it to you." Once, Mr. Burger had been near the same build as his son, but now after years of nothing but beer and television, he waddled about his house everyday checking for new signs of disrepair before eventually settling his nearly quarter ton girth in the chair. But the old man was loud, and the initial greeting made the Chihuahua shake harder. It started barking, but Hamilton couldn't hear it over the television.

"Dad, there's no reason to shout."

"I can't hear you son, speak up."

Hamilton realized the irony of repeating himself loud enough to be heard over the television in the other room. He said as loud as he could without shouting, "Turn off the TV dad."

"What?"

Hamilton sighed and went into the other room, turned off the television and returned to the kitchen. "Dad, there's no reason to shout."

"I can't hear you son. I think I'm going deaf."

"Dad, you're not deaf. How many times do we need to go over this? You can hear fine, but you turn the TV up all the way because you think you're deaf. You aren't deaf, dad. You aren't deaf."

"Is the TV still on? I think I'm going deaf. I can't hear it anymore."

"I turned off the TV, dad. That's why you can't hear it."

"I'm gonna go check to see if the TV is on. Hang on a second, would you?"

The man trundled out of the kitchen, and when he returned, still shouting, he continued, "The TV's off. It must have shorted out or the fuse might have blown. I don't know what's wrong with it. I'm going to maybe go to Best Buy and get a new one. Do you want to come with me?"

"Dad, the TV isn't broken, and you aren't deaf. Settle down and listen to me for a minute. I have good news."

"You were on the news?"

"No, I have good news. Listen to me. You aren't deaf, and you can hear what I'm saying. Stop being an ass."

Wiping the sweat that had formed on his brow when he was walking from one room to the next, in a normal voice, Mr. Burger said, "Alright fine."

"Thank you. I don't know why you always do that. What would you want to act like you're deaf for anyway?"

"It's great kiddo. When people call on the phone trying to sell me stuff, I have the TV up already, and they can't do a damned thing. It's hilarious because I can hear them just fine, and they can't hear shit."

"Why not just hang up politely like a normal person, and why do you do that every time when I come over?"



“Okay, first off, I think it’s fun. I haven’t got a lot to keep me happy in my age, what with your mom passing away four years ago and you never coming to visit me. You wouldn’t deprive an old man of his last few hours of fun would you?”

“You didn’t even go to mom’s funeral.”

“Your mother didn’t have a funeral, remember. A shame that those poor souls who take their own life can’t have a proper service. I loved her, too much perhaps, and she left this sad, sad world. She seemed so happy then, I thought she would live forever.” At this, the man fluttered his eyes to give it an extra hint of sarcasm.

“Dad. There was a funeral. You told people it was an accident because you wanted the insurance money.”

The old man snapped back, “So what if I did? It put you through school and it paid for your apartment where you and your friends sit and do drugs and have sex all the time.”

Hamilton sighed again. He did that a lot when addressing his dad, always with a certain degree of exasperation. Many of his bodily movements while listening to his father might be interpreted as sighs, but Hamilton only gave breath to his frustration after nearly twenty-five percent of the time that his father spoke, which is a lot by most people’s standards. The other seventy-five percent of the time, Hamilton was far too furious with his father to create an actual sigh when he exhaled. Since this was a conversational path that Hamilton’s father had taken several times in the past six months, Hamilton was used to it and was

able to actually sigh. He accepted the fact that he was about to be accused of whatever the most recent exposé about America's troubled youth had been about on the last news show that the old man had watched. The highlights of the current accusations included drugs and sex and stealing car stereos for money to buy booze.

Hamilton just shook his head and when his father was done, Hamilton sighed again, as if to clear his thoughts, and he spoke in a clear and even tone. "Dad, I'm not on drugs, or having orgies, and I do not steal things with my hoodlum friends. I don't have any hoodlum friends. I don't have any friends and haven't really since high school. But you know that already. I live in the apartment because I'm used to living alone, and I have been since college. But you know that already too. Nothing goes on in my apartment of any sort of devious nature, which you also know to be true. I have come here to tell you that I have a job and a dog. The job, I've had for a couple of weeks now, and it's good. I'm going to keep it. The dog, I picked up on the way here to tell you about the job. I need some things from the garage, and I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't mention mom to me again, but you knew that already too. Now, stop acting like you're deaf or you're afraid of America's violent youth or whatever it is this time and please, settle down."

"You got a job?"

"Yes."

"Is it union?"

"No."

“Well that’s shit. You need to start one there, man. The man is gonna walk all over you and your coworkers if you don’t unite and get rights and benefits and keep those fat cats from scratching away at the company profits, only giving you and the boys out there the leftovers.”

“It’s not that sort of job. It’s...” and he stopped for a moment to decide which story to go with, since this was the first time he had ever had to tell someone what he did. “It’s an office job. It’s accounting work, but I do some other stuff too. It’s good pay, and there’s health care.”

“Yeah, but what about dental and eye care and a 401K. Those fat cats are gonna screw you but good.”

“No, dad, listen, it’s a small business. It’s okay. There aren’t any fat cats.” He thought about James Randolph Smythe IV and remembered that there was indeed a fat cat, but it was a job, and he didn’t mind lying to his father just this once, if only to make the conversation less awkward and further from the truth about the job where he did nothing.

His dad squinted for a moment and then chugged the rest of his beer. After a hissing sort of belch, the old man said, “Well, don’t let them catch you getting together with other employees, you know, meetings about getting your fair share and all. You’re smart. You’ll keep your head and figure out how to get the other workers together with you. It’ll be one hell of a union you start there boy. One hell of a union.”

Hamilton gathered the now stabilized Chihuahua and petted its disproportionately large head. The old man wandered off to the living room to

fetch another Coors and came back taking the first sip. He let out the hissing burp again and wiped his mouth with bare arm. "So when are you going to get a wife and make some grandkids for me."

"What?"

"Family's the most important thing a person can have, and I'd sleep better at night knowing my name would live on with my grandkids. Every man should die a grandfather, if he's any man at all."

"Really now?"

"Oh yeah. Grandkids are a delight, and you need a woman to look after you. Why when I was your age, I had been married for three years. Your mother took real good care of me, and considerable years after we were married, my dad was so proud the day I called him up and told him you were born."

"You hated your dad."

"I will not have you speaking ill of that great man in my house, you understand me boy?"

"Sure, whatever."

"Now your mother and me were so happy when you were born, and I swear, I've never been more in love with your mother than on that day."

Hamilton was holding back a flip response about why his dad was arrested for soliciting prostitution the day after his son was born. He thought better of it and tried steering the conversation away from his mother again. "So, why would you keep the stuff for the dog and sell all my toys when I left for school?"

"I never did such a thing."

"You did."

"Nope, never."

"Then where are they? Why aren't they in the attic where I left them?"

"Maybe your mother gave them to Goodwill or Salvation Army."

"You sold them dad."

"Have you even looked at that thing you've got there, that dog?"

"What are you talking about?" He looked down at the dog in his hands.

Its mouth was open, and its eyes were shut like it was barking, but no sound was coming out.

"You bought a mute dog."

"I didn't buy it, okay. It was free."

"Some watch dog you got there. When people break into your place it'll scare 'em real good with the no barking and the being kicked across the room like a football."

"I didn't get it as a watch dog. I'll be fine dad."

"I know how dangerous it is out there. I'll go with you back to the pet store, and you can return this rat for a real dog that'll scare away burglars and murderers."

"Dad, I got the dog from a woman down the street. There aren't any murderers out looking for me because I don't know anyone who wants to kill me. There aren't any burglars casing my apartment because I don't have anything to steal."

“All the same, you should march right back down the street and get your money back for that dog.”

“It was free dad. I’m going to take care of it.”

Hamilton went for the kitchen door that led to the garage. His father followed. The old man was going on about a scam he had heard about on *Sixty Minutes* where people smuggled drugs into the country through animals and how maybe the Chihuahua had a pot brick in it’s stomach. Hamilton knew this was an absurd idea, but he didn’t want to argue with his father anymore. Around the time that Hamilton found the dog dishes and the harness-leash, Mr. Burger was quite certain that Hamilton ought to contact the police about the pure, Colombian cocaine in the Chihuahua’s stomach. It was at this point that Hamilton told his father goodbye and thanked him for the use of the dog things.

Mr. Burger finished his beer. His face crumpled like he was trying not to cry. “You know, you’re lucky you have a father who cares about you. You know, there are lots of kids out there with parents who don’t even care about their kids. When I was your age, I had a good job. Job security is the best thing in the world. It’s great to have a good job and be young and in love with your wife. And, it’s good to have a family, even when God takes things away from you like babies.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. In my age, I can’t bear to talk about such things. You do good at work and get that union together to get a dental plan. You take care and stop by sometime again okay?”

Hamilton held the dog in one hand so he could shake hands with his father before he left. The walk home was excruciating, but he hooked the harness and leash up to the Chihuahua and walked it back to his apartment. He thought he saw the man with the dragon tattoo and mohawk again on Douglas. Hamilton assumed the Dragon man must live around there and it was just a coincidence. After going to the store for dog food and newspapers for housetraining and carpet cleaner for where the housetraining had already failed, Hamilton took the Spiderman action figure out of his pocket for the first time since earlier that afternoon. Everything had happened so fast. Hamilton waited until the dog fell asleep on the couch, which was covered with newspapers.

He didn't realize it at the time, but he had dozed off watching the tiny dog sleep. He found himself sitting on the rusty swing in the nightmare playground again. The music and noise were faint, and this time, instead of just Superman, Hamilton was also face to face with a life-sized version of the Spiderman toy he had stolen earlier that day. Superman hovered there like he always did, and Spiderman stood upright, perpendicular to the support pole of the swing set.

Spiderman began, "It's nice to see you again Supes. So, this is that guy I've heard so much about."

Superman responded, "Yeah, he's a real lost cause this one, but I think he'll do okay."

"You sure? He looks a little young to me. Little kids like this are nothing but trouble."

"But to his credit, he did bring you here."

“True, but he didn’t have the foresight to hide the hammer.”

Hamilton sat quietly and looked puzzled, but he was secretly happy that the noise was barely noticeable under the conversation and the heroes weren’t torturing him.

Superman turned to Hamilton at the mention of the hammer and said, “He’s got a point, you know. I mean, it’s one thing to do good by bringing me stalwart defenders of justice to further the cause, but it’s another thing entirely to fuck up and forget about the hammer.”

Hamilton decided to plead his case. “What hammer?”

Spiderman moved. His arm, which had been at his side like Superman’s, was now out in front of him, pointing his red plastic fist at Hamilton. The hero spoke. “Next time you’re there, hide the hammer in the bushes. Until then, beatings as usual.”

With this, the giant plastic Spiderman began moving forward, floating off of the rusted metal bar as if he were going to punch Hamilton in the chest.

Hamilton awoke with the impact. He had rolled from the couch onto the floor in his sleep. The Chihuahua had jumped onto his chest, and it was motioning like it was barking at him to wake him up, its tiny mute body shivering, mouth open and eyes closed.



## CHAPTER III

Over the next month, most nights ended with Hamilton awaking from a nightmare where Spiderman and Superman exchange remarks about a hammer and the need for action against the forces of evil. As the month wore on and the ranks of the heroes grew, there would be more and more cellos in the background and the noises would get louder. He would receive a small reprieve every time he brought another hero home. Again, Hamilton spent the early morning thinking instead of sleeping, attempting to come up with a logical explanation for the nightmares. There had been three exceptions, all of which were times that Hamilton and Sven had gone out drinking.

They would walk down the street to the bar after everyone else had left the office. The two would sit at the bar at least four seats from the Vets and the bikers who stayed as far from the door as possible, a clique of middle aged men huddling towards the darkest corner of the darkest bar in Toledo. Hamilton and Sven would sit by themselves near the door, always trying not to call attention to themselves and always drinking until they had a good beer buzz when Hamilton would walk home while Sven drove back to his parent's house in the suburbs.

They talked. They talked about high school, and Hamilton talked about college. Sven had never been, because he got the job when he graduated from

high school. He said there was no reason to get a degree when he could get paid to sit and read and pretend to answer a phone that never rang.

Sven talked about books. He was working his way through translations of the Russian masters, keeping a notebook full of ideas for songs for his band. He claimed that Russian literature was best suited for his band's purposes. He said that his band would be big someday, once they got a half-hour set down and agreed on a name. Sven talked about his band, how they were great and how lucky he was not to have to work a real day-job like the singer-guitarist and bass player who had to work at Jiffy-Lube.

They talked about comics, how Sven had watched cartoons and read *X-Men* and *Wolverine* religiously since sixth grade and how Hamilton had gotten into comics of all sorts in high school after his injury. Hamilton explained that since he had a titanium rod in his hip, *Iron Man* seemed like the natural comic of choice, but he could never get into it. It was too brooding and focused too much on Tony Stark's injury. Hamilton read various titles until he settled on *Superman*. At the time of his injury, there were about four or five Superman titles out there and Hamilton read them all through high school and into college when he had to stop for lack of funds. Before then, he would rummage through the back issues and try to collect them all, greedily reading each panel, each dialogue bubble like a scholar pouring over some long forgotten text. His dad threw out the box where he kept them after his mother died. Sven would ask how Hamilton got injured, but Hamilton would dodge the question by cursing about his father throwing out the box of Superman comics.

Once, and only once, Hamilton told Sven about the injury. It was after football practice one night. He had caught a ride home with his best friend who lived two houses over from him. They had been inseparable since they could walk, and they did everything together. That night, after practice, the guy's mom came to pick them up and on the way home, there was an accident. Hamilton never went into details, but as he told it, he thought about the metal and the glass shattering around him as the telephone pole came down into the car, pinning him under the crumpled roof. He couldn't feel his leg, and he was screaming, and he was covered with blood, and the sirens came, and he couldn't hear anyone else because his best friend and his best friend's mom both died right away.

Telling the story, even the lie at the end, sobered Hamilton up a little. He and Sven stayed longer that night and sipped down Buds at a dollar twenty-five a bottle until they both forgot that the story had been told at all. The next day would be the last Friday of May, and they both felt like calling in sick the next day, but neither one would. The beer tasted cold and good, and Summer was coming, and that was all that mattered.

Of course, this wasn't the only variation in Hamilton's life since April. Since getting the dog, he had successfully litter trained it to the point where it would only mess up the carpet once a week. He named the dog Dr. Dissolvo, after the brand of carpet cleaner Hamilton used on the stains. Shortly after getting the dog, Hamilton had taken Dr. Dissolvo to the vet for shots and to be checked out. The vet told Hamilton that in some rare cases, dogs were just born mute and that Dr. Dissolvo was otherwise a very healthy Chihuahua.

Having an excess of money after his second paycheck, Hamilton bought several things for Dr. Dissolvo and the apartment. He bought a large blanket for Dr. Dissolvo to sleep on. He bought dog treats for when he came home and the carpet was clean. He bought a bigger television to fall asleep in front of in the early evening. He kept the TV box in his bedroom, which he never used, and he kept the action figures in there. He had picked up three more from front yards and driveways in the area, the Green Lantern, Captain America, and Raphael-the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. He also picked up five more assorted action figures from the front yard of the little boy who kicked his sister. He kept them in the TV box when they weren't being used. He bought an answering machine and a phone with caller ID.

This last purchase wasn't just to help avoid calls from his dad. For the past week or so, his phone would ring at odd times, like two in the morning during his nightmares or seven in the evening when he was trying to sleep. When he would answer, the only sound on the other end was a sort of hissing noise that reminded him of breathing machines on television during hospital scenes. The hiss would ebb and flow with the natural rhythm of breath, and every so often in the back, he could hear a beep. Hamilton would talk into the receiver and tell the sound that it had reached Hamilton Burger, and it had three seconds to talk before he hung up. The noise just continued at the rate of natural breath strained through a life support system. He guessed that his number was similar to someone's at a hospital, but to be sure, he bought the caller ID.

Hamilton changed his hypothesis once the caller ID was set up. The ID system brought up the name Grace Evans when the phone rang. He answered, but again, there was only the hissing noise. On his next day off, he called himself from an empty room in Toledo Hospital. The ID read "Toledo Hospital Call," so he assumed that Grace Evans was just some person on a respirator who called his number by mistake. He checked the phonebook for Grace Evans and there wasn't one. There was no G. Evans. There was no Evans matching the number on the caller ID. He would have spent more time and effort trying to figure out who it was and far more time drinking with Sven if things hadn't changed on the last Sunday of May.

Hamilton was walking Dr. Dissolvo around the neighborhood. He thought about stopping by his dad's house, but it was Sunday, and his father would bring up religion. Even though the closest the old man had come to going to church in the last ten years was to watch a televangelist for fifteen minutes by mistake, the old man would claim that he'd raised his boy to be a good Catholic. Hamilton hadn't been to church since his mother died.

He walked close to the block where his father lived but would always keep a block in between himself and the house. After about three blocks he decided to start back to the apartment. The Chihuahua's tiny legs couldn't keep up, and Hamilton would stop for a few minutes while the dog lied down in the grass. He looked a little silly, wearing a dress shirt and tie and suit coat, which he always wore no matter what day it was. He would lean over wherever the dog was and look down and look back and forth as if the dog's resting somehow conflicted

with some greater schedule. While he was looking silly, a young woman approached, jogging.

She was thin and short, about five three. She had dark brown hair in a ponytail and wore thin rimmed glasses. Hamilton guessed that she was probably about twenty, and he smiled and said hello as she ran towards him. She jogged in place for a second looking at Dr. Dissolvo napping in the grass and then stopped.

A little out of breath she said, "Your dog's cute. How old is it?"

"It's probably about a month or so."

"You don't know how old it is?"

"Well, no. Not exactly."

"You're not a very good dog owner. How will you know when to celebrate its birthday?" She smiled politely.

"About eleven months from now, I'll rent a clown or something and bake a cake and there'll be a party with those uncomfortable pointy hats." At this, he made a triangle with his index fingers and thumbs to signify the shape of a party hat.

"But you won't know what day it is. The other dogs will call your dog a bastard and say 'Woof woof' which will be translated as 'You're a dumb bastard and no one cares when your birthday is.'"

"He is not a dumb bastard. He's nearly litter trained."

"You can't litter train a dog."

"Sure you can. Dogs are smart. They can learn all sorts of things. My dog knows, for the most part, not to mess up the rug or the couch."

"So the dog's will make fun of him for not knowing his own birthday and for pooping like a cat. They'll call him cat-pants, and it'll stick, and for such a small dog, that's the end of the social ladder."

"He's mute too. Do you want to call him dumb for that?"

"Aw. He's adorable." At this she picked up the dog and cradled it like a baby and scratched its stomach. It closed its eyes and looked content, but it could very easily have been growling without making any sound. "What's his name again?"

"I didn't tell you yet for it to be an again."

"Well, what's his name?"

"Dr. Dissolvo."

"Okay, it's settled. All the dogs in the neighborhood are going to make fun of you for calling him that."

"He's very smart. I think he deserves a Ph.D."

"I don't care if he can use the toilet and pays rent, no dog deserves a Ph.D."

"It's in sociology. He did a study of the conditions of litter trained dogs. His thesis was huge. You should have seen him up all night at Kinko's, making copies. The thesis weighed twice as much as he did."

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

“Well, I’m not the one making the other dogs make fun of him. That’s your doing.”

“At least I make sense about it.” She huffed a little after that and mumbled something that Hamilton couldn’t hear.

Things continued like that for another ten minutes, until Hamilton realized he was actually flirting with her. He became a little tense, but she didn’t notice, and when she left, he knew several things about her. First, her name was Mindy. He didn’t get her last name. He knew that she was a senior at the University of Toledo, majoring in chemistry. He knew that she was renting a duplex on Georgetown, about two and a half blocks from his father’s house. He knew that she was renting the duplex with two of her friends, but they were co-opping during the summer, one in Georgia and the other in Maine. He knew that from time to time she would mumble to herself quietly enough so that what he heard sounded like nonsense but could have actually been any number of actual statements. He knew that the mumbling was a little annoying, but otherwise, she seemed wholly agreeable to him. He knew that her favorite color was orange and that she liked to watch television, but just for the sake of having it on when she was bored. He also knew that on Thursday of that week, she had a date with him.

He knew her phone number, written on a scrap of paper from the pocket of her shorts with a pen from his suit-coat. He had it in case there was going to be a change of plans, but as it stood, there was to be dinner somewhere and



possibly some event to be named later. The option of a movie was strongly hinted at by both parties.

As Mindy waved and continued jogging in the opposite direction of where Hamilton had been walking, Hamilton continued after her at a slower pace, walking his dog towards his father's house. He was too excited to wait until the next day when he would tell Sven. He wanted to be cautious and see how the date went before telling his dad, but it was too exciting. Hamilton now had, with little effort on his part, some degree of female companionship for the first time in his life. It was strange and fascinating all at once, and his father was the only one who he could tell right at that minute.

As he saw Mindy turn left at the corner of Roanoke where he would turn right, he noticed the young man with the mohawk and dragon tattoo out of the back corner of his eye. It seemed like he appeared out of nowhere. He could have been sitting across the street the entire time that Hamilton had been talking to Mindy, or he could have just happened there now that Hamilton's attention was no longer otherwise occupied. At any rate, the man seemed to be walking deliberately slow so as not to pass Hamilton, and Hamilton, out of politeness, couldn't turn around and stare like he wanted.

Hamilton was uncomfortable just knowing that the man was behind him. He decided that he would most definitely refer to the man as the Dragon from henceforth in conversation. He imagined a scenario where he would tell Sven the next day that there was a guy who he called the Dragon in his neighborhood. It would be interesting enough to fill some conversation time just describing the

tattoo and the hair. Hamilton thought that figuring out why the Dragon would follow him would take he and Sven almost until lunch.

Hamilton picked up Dr. Dissolvo and walked faster to get to the corner of Roanoke and turn. He noticed that the Dragon walked faster to keep up, but at the corner, the Dragon turned left instead of right after Hamilton. And then, the Dragon took off running. Hamilton turned around to look, but in a few seconds the Dragon had covered the next block and turned right up the next street, disappearing into the late Spring afternoon shade of the tree lined side streets.

For a moment Hamilton thought about following the Dragon, but then he remembered Mindy and continued on his way to Burger house. The neighborhood was quiet, and he felt warm in his suit-coat. He set the dog down and kept walking.

Before entering the house he looked down the street at the stone goose on the porch two houses over. He thought about how he hated that it was there, a concrete symbol of how the world had a tendency to spin in a way that he didn't like. He wondered if it was the evil the heroes had been talking about all this time. He chuckled a little that his nightmares might have something to do with someone's porch decoration.

He snapped back to the present and remembered his almost fanatical joy at having a date. He could hear the television from the porch, but he didn't care how annoying his father would be. He went inside.

He looked in the living room, but his dad wasn't in the chair. Hamilton turned off the television and shouted hello. There was no answer. Hamilton

closed the door and let his dog wander the house freely as he searched around for his dad. Dr. Dissolvo ran into the living room and found something under the recliner to chew on. Hamilton walked towards the ground floor bathroom and noticed that the door was shut, light seeping out through the space between the door and kitchen floor.

“Dad, you in there?”

There was no reply.

He knocked on the door, which wasn't shut entirely. Hamilton opened it the rest of the way to look inside. He quickly closed the door halfway upon seeing the contents of the bathroom. His father was there, pants and briefs around his ankles with his head resting on the side wall. The man was snoring a bit and a thin trail of saliva ran from his mouth, down his chins, stopping at his white, greasy undershirt. Hamilton closed the door all the way and thought about a way to wake his father that wouldn't be too embarrassing for either of them.

He shouted, “Dad, you in there?”

He heard the sound of his father waking with breath caught in his throat.

“Someone there?”

“Dad, it's me. I stopped by. I have news. Good news. Come out.”

His father opened the door, his pants still down. Hamilton covered his eyes and looked away. The old man made himself mostly decent and said, “Alright, it's nothing the world hasn't seen before. You can look now.”

Hamilton looked and then turned back around. “Dad, close your fly.”

He waited for the zipper and turned back. He was about to begin talking, but his father put his hand over his mouth and started coughing. The old man wiped his hand off on his shirt, creating a wet red streak.

“Dad, you’re coughing up blood, are you alright? Do you want me to take you to the doctor’s?”

“Ha. That. It’s nothing. I do it every so often. Means I gotta change my shirt in case people come over.” The old man smiled. His teeth were outlined in red as if more blood had come up, and he had swallowed it back.

“I’m pretty sure you ought to see a doctor. Come on dad, let’s get you dressed and then I’ll get my car.”

“It’s Sunday. Doctor’s office is closed.”

“Then I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“Nope, I’ll be fine.” He went to the fridge and got a beer.

“Are you sure? It’s not like it’s any trouble or anything. At least call tomorrow to make an appointment, will you?”

“Yeah, sure.” He drank some of the beer.

“You’re sure there’s nothing I can do to help?”

“I’m fine. It happens all the time. I don’t tell you because I know you’ll go crazy like you are now, trying to get me to a hospital.”

“Okay. Fine. I won’t ask about it anymore.”

“So what the hell are you doing here anyway? I don’t hear from you in a while, and all of a sudden you show up and want to ruin my week by taking me to the hospital.”

"I won't try to take you to the hospital any more. Really."

"Good."

"Anyway, I have good news."

"You got a union job?"

"No."

"I been doing some thinking son, and it occurs to me that you oughtta be working for the union. Nobody likes a scab. How can you expect to get hired for a reasonable job if you spend all your time working as a scab? I mean, are you even applying for a real job?"

"Dad, I've told you already. I'm not working as a scab. I do accounting work for a small business. We're non-union. It's not a big deal."

"Ha."

"What?"

"Now you know how I feel when you barge in here and demand that I go see some doctor every time I get a little under the weather."

Hamilton sighed. "I was just concerned for your health dad. Honestly."

Mr. Burger repeated what Hamilton had just said, only in a high pitched, mocking voice. When he was done, he finished his beer and got another. "So what are you here for?"

"Oh, um, I met a girl, I have a date this week. She seems really nice."

"You do her yet?"

"What?"

“You deaf? I asked if you boned her yet? You score?” He coughed again, and this time, he closed his hand. When he realized blood was about to drip out, he wiped his hand on the underside of the kitchen table.

“Dad, she seems nice. I just met her. I’d really prefer it if you didn’t...”

He was interrupted. “You know, your mother was a firecracker in the sack. She did things they don’t even know about in those porno movies I’ll bet.”

“Oh God, dad. Do you have to talk about mom that way?”

“What way? She was a wonderful wife, so vibrant and alive before your... never mind. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“My what?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it any more. You’re the one who should go to the doctor, get your hearing fixed.”

“I just wanted to stop by and tell you about the girl I met. That’s all. I’m going to go now.”

“Fine.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Fine.”

Hamilton went to the living room to find Dr. Dissolvo. The dog was vomiting on the carpet. Mr. Burger came in and saw the mess. He let out a bellow and some curses, but he started coughing again before he could really get into it. Hamilton said he would take care of it, and he went to the garage to get the carpet cleaner.

While he was looking through the boxes of random discarded items, he noticed the one handed sledge on the wall. He went over to it and took it down from the hook. He held it, as if to weigh his strength. It felt good in his hands and swung easily, as if it were a small metal fist connected to the wooden handle. He twirled it a bit and flourished it a couple of times before he realized how long he had been there. He went over to the garage door and lifted it just enough to slide the hammer outside.

When he came back with the carpet cleaner, his dad was sitting in his chair watching television at a reasonable volume. He had the dog in his lap and was playing with it a little, laughing and every so often coughing. The dog kept licking his hands afterwards, but Hamilton didn't notice, and he cleaned up the mess on the rug. His dad was in better spirits when he left with Dr. Dissolvo. After the door of the house was shut, Hamilton walked over to the garage door, and he kicked the one handed sledge behind the shrubs in front of the house. The space behind the shrubs hadn't been cleaned for several years, so there were plenty of dead leaves and assorted sticks to kick over the hammer so it would be hidden from everyone but him.

He continued home, carrying Dr. Dissolvo most of the way. The dog kept trying to sleep, because the afternoon had tired it out so much. Hamilton noticed the Dragon again, this time walking on his side of the street, but when the Dragon saw Hamilton, the mowhawked young man crossed the street and kept walking, purposefully trying not to make eye contact. Hamilton definitely noticed this and decided that it was especially odd, but pushed it out of his mind to recall

how well things went with his father that afternoon and how excited he was for Thursday to come. He found a Batman missing a cape, a GI Joe character, and a miscellaneous ninja holding a sword all on the lawn of the boy who kicked his sister. He scooped them up and hurried home.

When he got to his apartment, he un-harnessed Dr. Dissolvo, who quickly jumped onto the couch and turned around three times before lying down to sleep. Hamilton checked his answering machine, which had four messages. All four were the noise of the respirator lasting the full duration that the answering machine would allow. It was odd that there were four messages at all, because when Hamilton checked his caller ID, he noticed that Grace Evans had called seventeen times. Hamilton erased the messages and the caller ID and wondered why the respirator person, perhaps actually named Grace Evans, would call so often in one day and why she would only leave a message four times.

He watched television a while and forgot about it, falling asleep from time to time. The last time he fell asleep he had the nightmare, only this time it was slightly different. Superman was the only hero there. The chorus of cellos playing the "1812 Overture" sounded distant and only rarely could Hamilton hear the sound of glass falling into a ceramic bowl.

Superman said, "Don't think that this means that we like you, but you did good today kid. You've still got a lot of work to do, but for now, take some time to relax. We still don't like some of the company you keep, but you were dead on about the hammer. Take it easy for now and tomorrow we'll be back."



With that Superman vanished and for the rest of the night, Hamilton dreamt that he sat on the nightmare playground swing, rocking back and forth from time to time.

When he awoke, it was around five in the morning. The phone had been ringing and had stopped the instant he was conscious enough to understand what the noise was. Somehow, all of the action figures from the TV box in the bedroom were on his living room floor. He rationalized it by saying that he must have sleep walked and brought them out there. He put all of the action figures back into the TV box in his bedroom closet. The phone rang and again, the only sound on the other line was Grace Evans's respirator. He hung up quickly but the phone rang again and again. Finally, he disconnected it. He went to sleep watching television on the couch after setting his alarm clock. Tomorrow he had work.

## CHAPTER IV

Monday at work, Hamilton arrived an hour late. He slept through his alarm, and since it was the only day that James Randolph Smythe IV came to work, Hamilton was an impromptu example of his boss's authority.

James Randolph Smythe IV came waddling down the hall about ten minutes after Hamilton arrived. The little man smiled the entire time he bellowed about the importance of promptness, especially in this business. He railed against the laziness of the younger generation, using a choice example about a bag boy at the store who couldn't have been more than a year younger than Hamilton. Hamilton stared past his boss the entire time, and later, he really only remembered the old man shouting something repeatedly about milk being placed on eggs.

Before the tiny man finished, he placed a sticky note on Hamilton's desk. The little man emphasized his point by yelling "And I hope that will teach you a thing or two" before he slammed the office door on the way out.

Hamilton read the note. "Nice job!!! Keep it up!!!" At the end of both sentences, each exclamation point was larger than the last.

An hour later, Sven opened the door and walked in, closing the door quietly after himself.

“So, you got it this morning. He must like you.”

“Does he only do that to people who he likes?”

“Just the ones he thinks are good enough not to yell something back that would give it away. You’ve got a job here for life, man.”

Hamilton glanced at the ceiling, and looking back at Sven, shrugged. “I don’t know. I never really imagined myself doing nothing for a living until I died. I mean, what happens when our boss dies? He’s not that young you know.”

“No shit. I didn’t notice.”

“Seriously. What happens when I have to apply somewhere else and they ask what I’ve done here? Can I even put this place on a résumé?”

“No one’s ever had to as far as I know. Since I’ve been here, only two people ever left and they retired. One of ‘em was really old too. She would bring in apples from the tree in her back yard in Monroe, and I’d sit and talk with her. She would just tell stories the whole time and I’d eat apples. It was a sweet deal.

“Anyway, she tells me one time about how she worked here when James Randolph Smythe IV was across the hall from her, and his father was the boss. Then, James Randolph Smythe III died some how. I’m not sure, don’t remember. Maybe it was a boat that sank or he got sick. Anyway, James Randolph Smythe IV takes over, and the place never misses a beat.”

“So does our boss have a kid to take over if he goes?”

“Not his kid, his grandkid. The Smythes are stupid rich, and the whole family lives off of the money from this place. No lie, the grandson and his mom don’t even have to act like they work here. It’s all set up, though, so the

grandson takes over when our boss kicks it. I've met the guy too. He's a real peach that one. Went to high school with him out in Perrysburg. He's a year younger than I am. You'd love the guy, always hilarious. He lives with his grandpa because his mom sold the house in Perrysburg and just travels now without him."

Hamilton smiled. "Is his name James Randolph Smythe VI?"

Sven laughed a little. "Yeah, but everyone at school used to call him Troll. His mom collected those troll dolls, with the hair." He made a hand motion over his head to show where his hair would be if he were one of the dolls.

Hamilton closed his eyes and imagined Sven with the hair of a troll. He laughed through his nose and said, "Yeah, I remember those."

"Well, it got out that the kid's mom collected the things, and no matter how rich you are, if you're crazy or your parents are crazy, you're fair game in high school."

Hamilton didn't think so. No one ever messed with him in school. Of course he was bigger than almost everyone else, and everyone left him alone after the accident. But Hamilton nodded anyway as if he recalled being bullied or having witnessed it in school. Since Sven had connected with this Troll kid, an outsider, Hamilton assumed that Sven was an outsider of sorts as well.

Sven went on for a while about high school, mostly complaining about students and teachers, and usually ending his anecdotes with the phrase "And that's why I dropped out." Hamilton was more or less appreciative of the company, although the morning slipped into the afternoon, and the afternoon

became quitting time, and he had forgotten to tell Sven about meeting Mindy. It slipped Hamilton's mind some time during James Randolph Smythe IV's rant. Hamilton walked home that afternoon and realized that he had forgotten all about it. He tried to remind himself to tell Sven the next day.

Around seven that evening, Hamilton decided to drive to Toys R' Us. He wanted to check the dumpster behind the store to see if they had thrown out anything interesting that he could add to the ranks of the heroes. He didn't know why any of it was happening, but he could use another good night's sleep, and the short drive to check the dumpster was worth it.

Hamilton drove a beat up white Ford Taurus. He had bought it the summer after high school but before his mother died. It would break down from time to time, although never before his mom died, so he always had enough money to fix it.

He planned on taking the long way there, driving down side streets to get to the street that the mall and the Toys R' Us was on. Everything was normal until about half way down Berdan Avenue.

As Hamilton waited at a stop sign, he noticed an elderly man in an obnoxious plaid bathrobe next to the side of the road two blocks up. The man inched his way down a driveway using a walker with wheels. He dragged some sort pole on wheels that held up a medical bag attached by a thin tube to some point inside the robe. It was possibly an I.V. bag, but Hamilton wasn't sure.

As the old man neared the end of the driveway, Hamilton noticed that the man was staring at the front of the car. Just as Hamilton neared, the elderly man

smiled a semi-toothless grin that gave Hamilton the chills, his empty eyes met Hamilton's, and he threw himself into the street in a head first dive like a vintage baseball player sliding into home.

Hamilton swerved and stopped the car to miss the man's dive. The old man began getting to his feet, setting his walker and medical device upright and using the walker to climb up. Hamilton debated whether or not to get out to help the guy, to get out and yell, or to keep driving. He thought, if he stopped and helped the man up, then he would have to ask why the codger wanted to kill himself so badly, which was the only logical explanation for what happened. It really didn't seem like anyone's business, let alone Hamilton's. If Hamilton stopped to yell, then the old man would just feel awful about what happened, more so than having failed to be crushed by Hamilton's Ford. It seemed bad enough to Hamilton that the guy wanted to die so badly. Any sort of confrontation would just be awkward for both of them. Hamilton's final option, to drive away, seemed like the only reasonable choice, especially since by the time Hamilton had thought things through, the old man was now up and inching his way back up the driveway, away from the street. Any sort of confrontation or help now would really seem silly, and the old man seemed to be moving at about the same speed as before. The only damage appeared to be the dirt on the front of the bathrobe, which looked awful before the would-be accident. Hamilton kept going.

Hamilton had never actually seen the dumpster behind Toys R' Us before, and when he got there, he was disappointed to learn that it was only filled with

garbage. What was worse, a few employees caught him rooting through the trash. He ran off to his car, which he had kept running, and drove back to the front parking lot.

He sat in his car and thought about how he could get the toys without paying for them. He discounted the option of shoplifting because if he were caught, he assumed that he wouldn't be allowed back in the store. He considered buying the toys, but they were so expensive, and he didn't want to come into contact with the employees who had chased him away from the dumpster. He felt like his entire day was an attempt to avoid one awkward situation after another.

His final option was to just go home. Being the least difficult of the three possible courses of action, Hamilton opted to shrug his shoulders and drive away. He took the same way home, only this time, where the elderly man had previously appeared, there was now an ambulance, a police car, and a dark green Honda Civic with its hazard lights on. Hamilton slowed to see the entire scene.

A policewoman talked to a middle aged man who leaned against the Honda, its windshield cracked in the middle like the veins of a leaf. Inside the car, a small child cried, silenced by the windows of his car, and a woman whom Hamilton assumed was its mother tried to comfort the child in vain. The walker that the old man had used before was now crushed under the passenger side tire of the Honda, but the I.V. bag and stand stood upright in the center of the driveway. The old man must have unhooked himself this time before he jumped.

The ambulance drivers were waiting for the policewoman to finish with the man from the Honda before they left for the morgue. The back of the truck was open, and the drivers sat there, in front of the blanket-covered corpse, the taller of the two smoking. Hamilton imagined the deranged smile and empty eyed stare that must be under that blanket in the ambulance. He wanted to get out and tell the driver what had happened earlier. He wanted to tell the policewoman that the crazy old bastard had been at this all day.

But, he couldn't bring himself to stop the car this time.

He worried about what might happen if the policewoman asked him about the accident earlier. She might ask why he didn't stop to help the man up. She might ask why he didn't call the police when it happened. He imagined her face becoming sterner and angrier with each question. He imagined her accusations. If he had stopped, the old man would be alive and the windshield would be fine and the child would stop crying. Why couldn't the child stop crying? Why couldn't Hamilton have done the right thing earlier? Why did he let the old man die?

Hamilton kept driving, predicting the nightmare he would have that night for not getting any other action figures. The policewoman kept talking to the man who drove the Honda. The ambulance driver kept smoking in front of the dead man, waiting to leave.



## CHAPTER V

The three other days leading up to the date on Thursday night were uneventful. Hamilton went to work. He talked to Sven about things that had nothing to do with his date on Thursday night, even though every morning he tried to remember to get advice from his friend. After work, Hamilton would walk home. And everyday that during that walk, Hamilton saw the Dragon. The Dragon leaned against the same rusted sky blue light post that Hamilton saw him leaning against the first time he spotted the young, tattooed man. Everyday, the Dragon would smoke a Clove and watch Hamilton walk by, almost sneering. Hamilton pretended not to notice, but it was hard when the Dragon started flipping Hamilton off in creative ways.

At first, Hamilton thought he was just imagining it, but every time he passed him, the Dragon would find a new way to raise his middle finger in Hamilton's direction. The first time, the Dragon was wearing sun glasses for the sole purpose of letting the black, plastic rimmed glasses slide down his nose so he could adjust them with only his middle finger, pointing it at Hamilton. Wednesday required a different black plastic prop. The Dragon had a pocket comb that he ran through his bright green mohawk, pinching the plastic with his thumb and index finger and leaving the middle finger outstretched towards

Hamilton. Hamilton noticed the Dragon laughing that time. The Dragon's joy was uncontainable as he snorted smoke out his nostrils with every escaping giggle. Thursday was the most elaborate though. The Dragon employed some random person to ask for directions just as Hamilton walked by. The Dragon motioned emphatically while naming off numbers of blocks the person would travel down a given street before turning, all with only his middle finger extended.

By then, Hamilton knew that the Dragon's actions were no accident. Hamilton considered anything that he could have done to warrant that kind of childish malevolence, but he came up with nothing. Hamilton was now of the mindset that the Dragon was clearly either mentally ill or stalking him. Hamilton opted for the former, because of the harmlessness of the Dragon's actions and because stalking would require some sort of secrecy, which was clearly not happening in this case. But, Hamilton did not discount the slight possibility that the Dragon was in fact an incompetent stalker whose only goal was no more harmful than an occasional obscene gesture. However, the possibility that the Dragon was something greater prevented Hamilton from walking Dr. Dissolvo that afternoon before the date.

Instead, Hamilton stayed inside and cleaned his apartment. He thought it would be unlikely that Mindy would see his place that evening, but he cleaned with the hope that he would be wrong. He had cleaning supplies that he had bought when he moved in almost a year ago, but he hadn't used them except for the bimonthly toilet and tub cleaning. This time, he dusted. He cleaned cobwebs out of corners long abandoned by spiders for lack of food. He dusted off the

television set with a dry paper towel. He swept the carpet. He scrubbed the few feet of linoleum floor that made up his kitchen. He cleaned the toilet and the tub because it had been more than two months since the last time. He replaced the litter in Dr. Dissolvo's box. He even sprayed the open spaces of the apartment with Febreze to mask the almost moldy smell that usually hung in the rooms. He placed his laundry in a basket that had been unused since the last time he did laundry. He even made his bed, fluffing the pillows in case they might be needed later. Lastly, he placed the action figures in the television box in his bedroom closet. If Mindy saw them, she might ask about them, and he would have to lie. He wanted to avoid that sort of thing if he could.

He had time to feed Dr. Dissolvo, shower, shave, and put on a clean shirt and tie before he walked over to Mindy's house. The walk was not unpleasant. The Dragon must have gone home, because his usual spot at the light post was empty. The lack of something strange during the walk struck Hamilton as strange in and of its self. Hamilton spent the walk wondering why the bizarre seemed so ordinary to him now and why the ordinary seemed so odd. The streets were busy enough with the last cars of people going home before dusk. The leaves that fell from the canopy over the side streets were still green after they sat on the sidewalk for days. It was quiet and peaceful in a way that made Hamilton wish he hadn't spent so much time inside over the past year. Toledo wasn't half bad right then.

He knocked on Mindy's door and after a lengthy pause and a thumping noise from inside, the door swung open and a winded, disheveled Mindy stood there in blue jeans and a black tank top, gasping for breath.

"I...fell...down the stairs..."

Hamilton looked concerned even though he really wanted to laugh a little at the thought of her falling down the stairs. "Are you okay?"

She smiled, took a step back from the doorway, and said, "Yeah, come in."

From underneath one of the strands of brown hair that stuck to her forehead with sweat, a tiny spot of red soaked through, bigger and bigger until a thin stream of blood trickled off down her cheek. She wiped at it, checked her hand, because she didn't know it was blood and not sweat, said "Shit," and ran back up the stairway near the door. She shouted down "Make yourself comfortable. I'm going to put something on this."

Hamilton closed the door behind him and went through the entrance hall to the living room. The room's furniture, a couch that was obviously bought used from a thrift store and two recliners that were most likely family hand-me-downs, faced a chipped wooden coffee table in front of a small television on a chipped wooden television stand. On top of the TV and on the walls were various pictures of Mindy, some other girls who Hamilton assumed were her roommates, and other people who Hamilton assumed were Mindy and the other girl's friends and family members. The picture frames were each a different color, although all of them looked like they were bought at the same store, and were noticeably the

newest things in the room. Hamilton sat in one of the recliners, looked around for a second, got up, and then sat on the couch leaving an open space next to him closest to the entrance where Mindy would come from the stairway.

After a few minutes, Mindy entered the room through the kitchen entrance and plopped down in one of the recliners. Hamilton guessed that there must have been some sort of second stairway. She held a wad of toilet paper to her head with her left hand and motioned with the right as she spoke.

“Sorry about that. I fell down the stairs when I went to answer the door and my head started bleeding a bit, which makes sense if you think about it, since I fell down the stairs, but I’ll be fine in a few minutes. It’s nothing really, just a scrape where I hit the banister on the way down. I’m a little clumsy that way. People are always commenting on how I’m a little clumsy that way because I drop things or trip over things or fall down the stairs, but since it happens so much I don’t really seem to notice now because it’s happened so many times before. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No. I’m okay.” He blinked trying to catch up with everything she had just said.

“Are you sure, because we have pop in the fridge and V8, which I don’t think is very good, but I offer it to people because Lisa left it here when she went to her internship, and I want it out of the fridge, but I’d feel bad wasting it by dumping it down the sink. I’m sorry, I do this when I’m nervous or jumpy or nervous and jumpy. I talk really fast, and sometimes, it’s hard for people to understand me...when I’m nervous and jumpy.”

“I’m okay. Really. Are you sure you still want to go out tonight? I mean, you’re bleeding and all.”

“Yeah, but it was just a scrape. And now that you’re here, and I’m here we might as well just wait for me to compose myself and then we can be off. So, what do you want to do?”

“It seemed like a really nice night outside, so I was wondering if you wanted to go for a walk. I mean, if you had something else in mind, we can do what you want.”

“A walk would be great. Have you eaten diner yet? I haven’t, but I had a late lunch, so I could eat now or later or not at all if I needed to.”

“I’m not particularly hungry, but no, I haven’t eaten diner.”

“Great. Then we can stop somewhere while we’re walking.”

She got up and went into the kitchen where she threw out the blood stained toilet tissue compress, splashed water on her face, and dried off with a dishtowel. The two left the house and wandered through the Toledo side streets, stopping eventually at Netty’s, a hotdog and ice cream place on Sylvania. The first time either of them had spoken was when they ordered their food. Hamilton offered to pay and Mindy accepted. They ate in silence, smiling.

The couple went from there to a small park across from Blessed Sacrament grade school where they sat on the swing set. There was an awkward pause and Hamilton considered that all children everywhere are bad sometimes and the area around the park must be filled with toys set out on the

lawn, waiting for him. The idea was fully developed in the back of his mind by the time she spoke.

“So Mr. Hamilton, what’s your last name?”

“Burger. My dad really liked Perry Mason. Hamilton Burger was the prosecuting attorney. I think he wanted me to be a lawyer when I was a baby. But he never got the joke. The name stands for Ham-Burger, like the food. That’s why I stick to Hamilton and don’t use my last name often.”

“That’s hilarious. I mean, it’s not hilarious, but it’s funny in a coincidental way. I’m named after Mindy from *Mork and Mindy*, but my last name is Wallace. My parent’s didn’t know what her last name was though. It was just what they watched at the time. They stopped watching TV after I was born. They wanted to set a good example.”

“They sound like good people.”

“Yeah, your parents do to.”

“Now that’s hilarious.”

Hamilton explained at some length how his mother had a miscarriage when he was five, and his father started cheating on her while she was pregnant. The two of them fought all the time, usually while they were drunk, so Hamilton hung out with his friend down the street. In high school, when his friend died in the car accident, Hamilton became completely introverted; he spoke to no one. To get out of the house, he would go to school-sponsored events like concert band performances and plays, even those of other schools. Shortly after he moved out for college, even though he went to a school not ten minutes away

from home, his mother killed herself. His dad took this as a sign to retire and drink all day.

Mindy responded after another awkward pause, "Wow. That makes my family seem pretty normal." They both laughed, a little uneasy.

They talked about her then, how she had been interested in science since she was young, how her friends from high school never kept in touch anymore, how she had dated awful men in college. Hamilton tried to lighten the mood a bit by mentioning how he had never dated anyone before. Mindy didn't believe him and took the opportunity to compliment him until he blushed. He clarified his statement.

"There was a girl I was in love with once. I guess. I mean, I guess I had a crush on her. When I went to the band performances in high school, I went to the ones at Anthony Wayne, on the south side of town. There was a girl in their band who played cello really well. They would change the music just to showcase her playing. But she would just sit there while she played with a look like she was concentrating on nothing at all except for the way her fingers held down the strings, and afterwards, she would sit there by herself while all the others would talk and congratulate each other. I always wondered if they didn't talk to her because she was so much better than they were or because of some other reason. Maybe she was just mean or she drowned kittens in her spare time. I don't know. I never worked up the nerve to talk to her. I would just leave."



He was about to say something about this being the first real date he had ever been on, because he was so shy, but he never got the chance.

Mindy blurted out, "That's cute," and reached over, pulled him close by his shirt, grabbed his face, and kissed. Hamilton's first kiss was etched in his mind like an explosion of emotion. If he'd ever been asked what it was like, he would have said something about the first big raindrop before a thunderstorm. When it was over, he mumbled for a second trying to gather some semblance of composure. He couldn't decide what he wanted to say first, but before he could decide Mindy stood up from the swing where she was sitting.

"Forget about her. Come on, I'll walk you home," and she just started walking away.

Hamilton followed, mumbling from time to time, but they both stayed otherwise silent the entire walk.

When they reached his apartment, she pulled him down to kiss him again. He would have described this one like waking up in spring in a place where it's warm in the sunlight from a window. When they moved from the doorway to sit down on the couch, the phone rang. She made a joke about it being one of Hamilton's other girlfriends, and he laughed. She told him to answer it and to tell the girl on the other end that he was hers now. He answered the phone and the smile straightened from his lips. All he could think about was the one breath message.

"Hamilton Burger? This is Glen from the Toledo Hospital. Your father is dead."

## CHAPTER VI

It was 1:12 A.M. July 2, 2004 when Hamilton left Mindy's for his apartment. The waves of wind rustled the thick side street canopy, which sounded like a calm ocean. He was relaxed. He was awake. It was as if everything that had happened since April was being remembered all at once in his mind. Every fact, every smile, every meal was recalled simultaneously, and then, as if focusing on only the most pressing details of those months, everything unessential washed away. A handful of memory stuck in his consciousness like wet sand in a child's grip.

He couldn't recall if Mindy had been at the hospital when he drove there to view the body. He remembered the loneliness, a snow-covered hillside lit by street lamps. No one was left. Evolution had measured the Burger family and found them wanting. Not a gene fit to live in his bones. Mindy? She must have been there. She must have been the one to drive, since he remembered that he couldn't find his car keys in his pockets after he put down the phone. They were right there in his pockets. Too stupid to find keys in his pocket, that's what he thought when he found them while he was already in Mindy's car on the way to the hospital.

She was so kind. She never stopped talking the entire drive there, and it was wonderful. Hamilton didn't remember what she had said, because he wasn't paying any attention. Without the constant noise, the constant sounds of a voice from another person, he swore he would have melted through the car door and slid out onto the street, down the gutter into a drain, clogged since autumn, dripping piece by piece into the sewer and out to sea.

The streets and lights blinked by as she spoke. He and his loneliness blinked at the streetlights. Disbelief, expressed through blinking seemed to be most appropriate, and that was alright with him. He couldn't remember the walk from the parking lot to the hospital, only the lights in the hospital, the antiseptic white, blinding him. He thought back to grade school anatomy and imagined each part of his eye, retina, cornea, and lens, being burned by the light, the sun, the Sun God in each polished tile, in each fluorescent bulb screaming for sacrifices of vitreous humor.

Mindy did all the talking while Hamilton did all the blinking. A doctor approached. Hamilton remembered the doctor, fresh from a coffee break because of the small plastic cup still in his hand. Fresh coffee smell and the vaporous heat swirl arose from the black sap in the cup. The doctor, spoke.

"Mr. Burger. I am terribly sorry. Your father is dead. His neighbors were walking by and saw his silhouette through the curtains fall over as they heard a gasp through the open front door. We got there as fast as we could, but this was something that had been growing inside him for a while. Worst we've had here all spring. Your father, he died of a heart attack technically, but he also had

several other illnesses. He had the makings of a fine lung cancer, which was spreading gently to his throat. He had the liver of an alcoholic twenty years his senior. He had diabetes. I mean, he hadn't been diagnosed with it until tonight, but the man was definitely due for the blooming of insulin shock with the sort of things we found in his stomach. I mean, I don't want to bore you with this, since I see you're yawning, but your father was fascinating to us. The man even had gout. It's not fatal, no, but gout, with everything else. There was also a nonfatal bladder infection. But the motherload, the best part was the colon. I want you to imagine tree roots for a second. You got it? Good. That's the sort of thing he had there. Polyps that looked like tree roots. We checked his files, it's all okay with him. He donated his body to science and science will be forever grateful. We don't even know if they're polyps, but I think they are. You should rest easy knowing that his passing will produce so much knowledge, so many publications on the way anatomy and diseases, and I'm sorry, do you need to sit down?

Yes. Hamilton needed to sit and soak up the idea that his father was dead and had given his giant body to science. It was grotesque only because Hamilton felt relieved that there would be no funeral. He imagined the strain on the poor pallbearers as they waddled down the church aisle, inching forward to organ music, the undoubtedly enormous coffin crushing their hands and shoulders. He imagined them now relaxed and watching from the crowd at the funeral as doctors wheeled the body in on a gurney. But wait. Who would have been there anyway? What poor souls could Hamilton summon up for his father's funeral? Would he even attend? Surely he could think of something better to do

with the hypothetical hour or so. But no, he would have had to attend his father's funeral, alone, for lack of anything more interesting. He was relieved at the thought of never having to make that choice. He was happy that no backs would break under the old man's weight and that the closest to a church service his father's corpse would see was right now as the doctors thanked God for the find.

The insurance check came a while later. After fees and outstanding bills, the total was \$47,222.18. To him, it was an absurd sum of money. Hamilton dispersed it into his checking account and savings account, never really grasping the idea that he had more money now than he knew how to spend. He had been living so well in his apartment off of cheap food bought with his constant paycheck for doing nothing. More money just seemed like a passing thought. The number was so random that he just couldn't remember having received the money at all. This was not the case when he sold the house.

It was never a question as to whether or not to sell the house. Once the deed was transferred to Hamilton, he started using his work hours to search the internet for step by step ways to sell a house. He found this research tedious, more so than doing the usual nothing, but more importantly, he found the research wholly unnecessary.

Half way into his second day of researching, during one of many breaks to talk to Sven, his good friend and coworker made an offer on the place. Hamilton remembered it very clearly. Sven was at Hamilton's desk. They were discussing the movies that would be coming out over the summer, since Hamilton needed

date ideas for what to do with Mindy, and out of nowhere, Sven asked if Hamilton would keep the house.

The answer was a quick “no” followed by a curious “why” with furrowed brow. Sven wanted to retire. He was sick of working for James Randolph Smythe IV, or not really working in his case, and he wanted to make life simpler.

“Simpler?” Hamilton asked, as if nothing could be more absurd.

“Simpler. I’m going to move out of my parent’s house into my own. I’m going to rent the place out to my band mates, and the rent money will be enough for me to live off of for the next few years, at least until my band makes it big.”

“But you can’t know that you’re going to become rich and famous.”

Hamilton looked worried as he thought through how very little Sven would make off of only a reasonable rent.

“Sometimes you just know. Besides, I have plenty saved up from the past few years working here. I’ll give you \$125,000, cash once I get it from the bank.”

It was more than the house was worth in that city, in that neighborhood, so Hamilton was happy to take the offer. He didn’t think about it until later, how Sven could have so much money to live in the house off of only rent and savings and pay so much for the house in the first place. Hamilton didn’t give it much thought, but considering that Sven only made a little more than Hamilton, at two years of working for James Randolph Smythe IV, Hamilton wondered where all the extra money would come from.

A few days after the deal had been signed, finalized, and all money had changed hands, Sven was set to officially move in on June 30. They would both

take off work to move Sven's few belongings and rearrange the house to Sven's liking. By that time, it was far enough away that the two would have plenty of time to throw out his father's things, go through looking for any objects of value, pawn or give away those things, and make enough space for the new owner.

Hamilton only remembered finalizing the agreement because that was the first that time Sven had met Mindy. It happened briefly. Sven was arriving at Hamilton's apartment to sign papers, and Mindy was leaving. Sven made a comment later about knowing her from somewhere but not knowing where. Hamilton asked her a few days later if she knew Sven from anywhere. She said no.

But Mindy, May and June were made of Mindy. He saw her almost every night after the death of Mr. Burger in the way that young lovers with too much time often do. Their relationship aged quickly as a result of the tragedy. He couldn't remember all of his time with her, but he thought about a list of high points that stood out.

Their first time sleeping together, spooning on the couch, just sitting across from her at dinner, these were the moments that bled together in his mind. In the week after his father's death, Hamilton spent the days with her when she wasn't in class. In the evenings, they would have dinner together, a tradition that carried over even after Hamilton went back to work. He didn't remember exactly when she had told him she loved him, but he remembered saying it back without a thought. It seemed so natural that once it had been said, it became some sort of immutable truth. He never really thought about her while

she was around, and she was around all of the time. At work, he would figure out what he would like to do that evening, but if she had a better idea, or any idea for that matter, he would concede to her. There was plenty of time to do anything.

She rarely came over to his apartment, and they never slept there, as was Hamilton's preference. Somewhere at the end of May, they decided to sleep together regularly. He was disappointed with sex after the first time that he tried it. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy it. He did. However, he thought that all of the public hype about it, television, movies, Victorians, ruined it for him. He wondered how people even managed to have hormonal responses to experiences anymore. Television was full of better sounding lovers, although he realized later that the price of prophylactics was well under what it was worth. It wasn't uncommon for him to leave in the middle of the night so he could get enough sleep for work the next day. He claimed that she threw elbows in her sleep, and she did. It seemed all the more romantic that he stayed over all night on the weekends, but he never slept through the night, there or at his apartment.

He remembered the time he had lied to her. It was one of the rare occasions when they were both at his apartment. She rummaged through his things while he was in the bathroom. She asked if there was anything in the TV box in his closet. He told her nothing of value, some old baseball cards that weren't worth anything because they had been in the basement when it flooded when he was younger. The mildew never left the box, but he claimed to want to keep the cards for sentimental value.



Of course this was absurd. It was the story he had thought of at work when he knew that eventually he might have to explain the place where he kept the action figures.

The action figures: Hamilton's army had nearly tripled over the last two months. While Mindy sat through class, he would walk Dr. Dissolvo, even after the dog had become completely litter trained in mid-May. The first time, he went to the park where he had his first date with Mindy. He would bend over as if he were tying his shoe, or he would pull Dr. Dissolvo closer as if he were adjusting the leash. With a quick hand, he filled the pockets of his suit coat after three yards, picking up two Green Lanterns, a Wolverine, and three miscellaneous G. I. Joes. On the walk back he contemplated the value of stealing G. I. Joes, since they were just soldiers and not superheroes. Although he never really resolved the issue, he decided that they were close enough to buy him an hour or so more of sleep.

So as not to draw suspicion, the next time, he went to a different area, one where he wouldn't be recognized. In fact, after the death of Mr. Burger, Hamilton walked a total of seventeen miles and four hundred and thirty seven steps. He felt better physically than he had since his injury in high school, even when too much walking made the injury flare up.

At night, when he wasn't with Mindy, he suffered. He would only sleep walk some of the time and place the figurines in the middle of the floor. Every night during the nightmare he was always on the rusty swing set. The only change that ever happened was when he would bring more heroes. The new

forces would meet the heroes who were already there. Hamilton would be rewarded with some amount of peace until something startled him awake. When he didn't bring more heroes, he was punished, usually by Superman, but on occasion by one of the others. They would beat upon him or use their powers and the noise of glass falling into a ceramic bowl would grow louder. Always, the "1812 Overture" played, but the amount of cellos would go up exponentially with each new hero. By the middle of June, it seemed like there were hundreds of thousands of cellos, all playing the same song at the same volume.

He wasn't really sure why, but he knew that getting more heroes made the noise stronger at the price of a few hours of peace. By that time, the urge to sleep for three hours uninterrupted was all he hoped for at night. By succumbing to the urge, the urge became stronger, and by this point he never considered fighting it. He wanted rest at the price of insomnia. But, that sort of thing never seemed to bother him very much at all.

Every time that he went to his father's old house to clean or rearrange things or to find things to throw out, he would check to make sure that the hammer was still in under the dead leaves behind the shrubbery in front of the house. The heroes would demand it of him. He didn't know or care what his subconscious was doing. He just wanted it to end so he could rest.

Even with that, Hamilton recalled the most recent event he could remember clearly. On Wednesday, when Sven officially moved in, he and Hamilton discussed the sort of people that lived in the neighborhood. He neglected to mention the Dragon, because his would be nemesis hadn't been

around at all after the death of Mr. Burger. The lack of someone taunting Hamilton from afar every day never registered as unusual to Hamilton, much in the same way that he had become used to the Dragon after the pattern was established. The end of the pattern meant nothing to Hamilton like the pattern itself.

Hamilton told Sven that there were mostly old people, a few young couples starting families, all in all a quiet neighborhood. Sven laughed and asked if Hamilton knew what kind of acoustics the garage got. The band was apparently enamoured with the thought of living under one roof and paying Sven rent. It would be a nonstop noise-fest. Sven commented on how Hamilton should drop by for a practice. Hamilton declined for the first practice, Thursday night, because of a previous engagement with Mindy. He hadn't planned anything yet for Friday, so that was it.

Sven also mentioned that there would be a housewarming party that Saturday night. Everyone that Sven knew would be all in one place. He should bring Mindy too. Sven had seen her somewhere before, but he still couldn't remember. He wasn't even sure if she was good enough for Hamilton to be dating her. He mentioned that Hamilton should get out more, meet more people, live a little.

Hamilton just laughed and said "Yeah. I'll be there."

When Hamilton had finished remembering everything he could from the past two months, he was just entering his apartment. He checked the answering

machine out of habit. He never usually found anything other than a hang-up or two. This time was different.

Seventeen messages. The number blinked into the dark room. He pressed play and listened. After the first four, he assumed that the other thirteen were the same. He checked the caller ID and he was right. While he was out with Mindy that evening, Grace Evans had called seventeen times between the hours of 8:45 and 9:12. Each time that the answering machine would cut off the message, Grace Evans would call again. The first three messages were all the same, and he deleted the rest before listening. The respirator sound with the soft background beeps played for thirty seconds and then stopped when the machine stopped recording. It was then that Hamilton remembered.

Over the past two months, Grace Evans had not called at all. Like the Dragon, the end of the established pattern never registered as unusual. The normalcy of hanging up the phone on respirator noises became so commonplace to Hamilton before his father's death that only when they returned could he appreciate their absence. And then, everything else came back too.

The Dragon, where had he been? Hamilton could not imagine someone so dedicated to standing outside at a certain time to flip a person off would be dissuaded by a mere family tragedy. Something seemed so wrong that Hamilton didn't even take the time to stop the answering machine from playing the rest of Grace Evans's messages.

He attempted to sleep.

The nightmare overtook him. All of the heroes were there. They spoke in unison. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow night, when you hear the music it will be time. Rest, rest up this once before you do what you have to. When the time comes, you will take the hammer and you will strike down the foe of all. Our foe will be vanquished and the war will be won. You want that, don't you?"

The noise was deafening and Hamilton, in his dream, smashed his hands against his head as if to wake himself.

When the noise died, they spoke again. "The goose will die by the hammer. Rest. Tomorrow you will triumph."

When Hamilton awoke, his alarm was sounding for the first time since all of this began. He found himself in the middle of the floor covered with the action figures. Dr. Dissolvo was chewing on Spiderman.

Hamilton didn't care about work or the toys or anything. It was the most sleep he had gotten in months. He turned off the alarm and curled up on the couch to enjoy a few hours of peaceful, dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER VII

Having had three and a half more hours of sleep, he showed up around eleven. He wanted to show up, hang out for an hour, and be back at home in time for a long afternoon nap, if he could have one, before Sven's band practice. It was Friday, the day everyone left early, and with Fourth of July weekend coming, he didn't think that he would be missed much.

He was wrong.

In an unprecedented act, James Randolph Smythe IV came in to the office that Friday, at his regular time of 9:00. He spent the entire time waiting in Hamilton's chair. Hamilton realized that something was wrong before he entered the office, but went in anyway. Later, he would realize that it would have been in his best interest to call in sick, stay home, and sleep.

Hamilton opened his office door, and although surprised, he greeted James Randolph Smythe IV. The latter, whom Hamilton noticed had a red bump on his head from some odd accident or another, did not reciprocate.

"Sit down Mr. Burger." James Randolph Smythe IV stood up from Hamilton's chair.

Hamilton sat down and furrowing his brow and looking serious as best as one can when preparing for a fake reprimand, he asked, "Is there a problem sir?"

"I'll say there is. You've become quite the inconvenience."

Hamilton was unprepared for this sort of confrontation. There was real anger in the old man's voice and Hamilton knew it. Hamilton was too calm before to hide any animosity that was now bubbling up inside of him and because of that, let his anger show, slightly. "Excuse me?"

"You. An inconvenience." James Randolph Smythe IV shut the door. "I don't suppose you know what you've done, do you? No, that would take intelligence far beyond your ken. It is because of your ignorance that you still have a job here. Your ignorance and my generosity."

Hamilton hoped that his boss was only pretending to yell, like last time. He was most discouraged when the tiny man's face became red with rage.

James Randolph Smythe IV took Hamilton's hopeful look as an insult. "Do you think that making my life a hell is funny?"

"No sir."

"Then why the devil did you do it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I mean, if it's about my being late this morning, I'm sorry. I overslept again. I'll try not to do that again in the future."

"Overslept? Hardly. I don't care when you show up, or if you show up at all. No. You have made my life nearly unbearable. I suppose I should explain though, since your best guess was so very far from the truth of the matter, and the truth is really all that matters as far as this is concerned."

It took Hamilton a minute or two to process the last part of James Randolph Smythe IV's word, but he nodded while he thought enough to give the illusion of comprehension before comprehension arrived.

The old man continued, "I am not a hard man to please, Mr. Burger. I ask very little of the community in which I live and ask even less of those particular employees who share that burden you must carry of showing up for a few hours every day and pretending to be valuable in some way. I mention the community and my business because the two are so intertwined, yet separated in such a way that it is rare when my employee's lives should affect the community I love so dearly. That is my problem. Your actions have unwittingly affected my community in a negative capacity such that I must now take action."

"I'm sorry. What did I do?"

"Where to begin? You sold your father's house to a group of derelicts whose infantile and masturbatory noise kept the neighborhood up all last night. You did not return any of the phone calls that I made to your residence to complain even when the messages I left on your answering machine were quite clear. I called at nine o'clock sharp, a perfectly acceptable time for someone to be home and well before an indecent hour for phone conversation. Although, the savage noisemakers you sold your patriarchal estate to played well past a decent hour when all good people are sound asleep."

"Is this about Sven?"

"Sven? You mean my former secretary Josh, whom I encountered at ten o'clock when I requested, perhaps too amicably to my former employee, that he



and his rascallions desist at once. He is now the owner of your late father's house, and he responded in a manner that I found most impolite."

"Really, his name is Sven."

"I don't care what you think his name is. His name is Josh because I say it is Josh."

"Sir, you seem upset. I am sorry that Sven's band kept you up last night, but it's his house now. There's nothing I can do about it."

"His name is Josh. What don't you understand about that?"

"There's no reason to shout, sir."

"I will shout in my office if I please. His name has always been Josh. I am still good friends with his mother. She was the nurse of my presently incapacitated wife, Grace."

Hamilton realized now why he hadn't gotten the messages from the answering machine, but the probability involved with the coincidence was too staggering to believe.

"I'm sorry, sir, but did you say that your wife's name is Grace?"

"Yes. Grace Rebecca Evans-Smythe. She lives with me in the house that was in her name before we married. A few years ago she suffered an accident with an open manhole. She nearly died. She stays at home now hooked up to her machines. Joshua's mother takes care of her while I am out in the mornings because she tends to get into trouble when she is unsupervised."

Hamilton thought about the phone calls. How would she have even gotten his number? He thought that the most likely explanation was that his number

was written somewhere in her house with the phone numbers of every other employee there. Did everyone else there get the respirator noises, the unsettling mechanical breath through the receiver? He wanted to ask Sven about it that night.

“I’m sorry, sir, but why do you keep calling him Josh?”

“His name is Joshua. He goes by Josh. Have I not made myself clear on this issue? Do you need to see his résumé and the photocopy of his driver’s license? I still have them on file.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir.”

“I should hope not. And another thing, your stupidity cost me one of my best employees. He knew everything about this place. It will take days before I can hire a new fake secretary. Do you know how much work I have to do for that?”

Hamilton thought about his interview. He tried not to laugh.

“If you would like, I could hire someone for you. I know how precious your time is.”

“You don’t even know the first thing about this place. I would have to explain how this business functions and then I would have to draw up the silence contract. Do you even know how much it cost me to pay Joshua’s severance pay?”

“I can learn very quickly, and I would love the opportunity to do actual work here sir.”

"You've had enough opportunity here. I do not intend to give you any more knowledge of what I do here. People of your generation don't understand how well they have it, how everything is just given to them."

Hamilton thought about the year before he was hired, sneaking into his father's kitchen while the old man was asleep to steal a sandwich or to drink milk from the carton. He thought about how he sent his résumé to everyone hiring. It took him an entire year to find this job. He had money now, it was true, but he remembered the hunger and wondered how hungry James Randolph Smythe IV had ever been, inheriting the company that could afford employees who did nothing.

The old man continued, "You have inconvenienced me greatly. If you cross me once more, rest assured that you will only inconvenience me once more by having to find your replacement."

"I understand."

"I realize that you have no control over what Joshua does, but it is your responsibility as someone who grew up in your father's house to take care of the neighborhood. You should have given more thought to whom you sold his property. You wouldn't want that sort of riff raff across the street from you, so have some inkling of consideration the next time you come into real estate. The rest of the world will not tolerate people like Joshua and his friends. I know, because I am the grandfather of one of his hoodlum cronies."

Hamilton remembered the time that Sven had told him about Troll, James Randolph Smythe IV's grandson. Maybe Troll would be at the party on Saturday.

Hamilton was interested to meet the sort of people that Sven knew. At any rate, Hamilton was becoming rather less and less interested with James Randolph Smythe IV's tantrum. He realized how precarious his job was at that moment, but in a flash of brilliance, or at least what he considered to be brilliance, he decided to speak up.

"Sir, with all due respect, none of these things are my problem. I understand that you don't like loud music, and you don't like your grandson. That's fine. The problem is that you've decided to take it out on me, someone who is neither responsible nor sympathetic to your cause."

James Randolph Smythe IV's face turned red as if he were holding his breath and were about to burst, or red and puffed out like that brief moment before a baby cries. "I'll tell you what the problem is you insolent little..."

"No, you won't. You'll yell some more about things that I have no power over. If you want to fire me, that's fine. It's your company. You can do what you want, but I don't have to sit here all day and be yelled at. I am grateful for the job you have given me, but outside of this office, I am in no way beholden to you." He tried not to smile when he said "beholden," because he wasn't quite certain that he was using it correctly. He waited a moment to see if his bluff had worked.

It had. James Randolph Smythe IV seemed to have returned to his normal color but also seemed to be mulling over some way of announcing some sort of response to Hamilton's last statement. Hamilton decided that it was time to enact a brilliant solution to this problem.

“Sir, allow me to make it easier for you. I will continue to do my job as efficiently as one can do the job of pretending to work. You can continue to employ me for as long as you would like. If you do that, we’ll both be as satisfied as we can be, given the circumstances of this little meeting. If you choose to fire me because you don’t like the music that your neighbors play,” and he stopped for a moment as if he realized something and then continued, “I will have no choice but to ruin your business in as many ways as I can.”

“You can’t. You don’t know anything.” James Randolph Smythe IV looked worried for the first time in many years.

“No. I can. It’s true that I don’t know everything about your business here. I don’t think that I’ll have to. I know enough. I know that you would prefer that some people here didn’t find out that other people were not actually doing anything. Now, that group of people includes my coworkers, but it is not limited to them. For example, I’m sure that some news reporter somewhere would absolutely love to know about a place where people are paid to do nothing. It strikes me as a sort of public interest story that could turn into something bigger if, say for instance, you were doing something illegal here.”

James Randolph Smythe IV laughed. “Are you trying to blackmail me? It won’t work. I’m not doing anything illegal, and all you’ll accomplish is getting yourself and all your coworkers into the unemployment line.”

“I don’t want to lose my job. But if I do, I will tell anyone who will listen. That’s why there’s a silence agreement attached to what you made Sven, I mean Josh, sign. Isn’t that right?”

“Don’t think I won’t fire you and retire from this as soon as you blow the whistle. I will. I’m old, and I’m looking forward to retirement. I have enough saved up to last. So my punk grandson won’t get a job. I’m fine with that.”

“No, I don’t think you are. You don’t like to be inconvenienced. If your grandson doesn’t take over this place when you leave, then he’ll be around your house more often, a great inconvenience to you indeed. Oh, and I suppose that his mother won’t have enough money to travel. She’ll be under your roof too.”

James Randolph Smythe IV looked defeated and after a long pause declared, “I just want things to stay the same.”

“Good. That’s what I want too. I will see you Monday.”

“No, you have Monday, off for Fourth of July. I’ll see you the week after. This has worn me out considerably. I think I’m going to go home now. Good day to you Mr. Burger.”

Hamilton wasn’t sure, but as James Randolph Smythe IV left the room, he was almost certain that he had won. As the next hour or so ticked by, he became more and more sure. He went home at 1:45 that afternoon and took a nap.

Around five, he woke up and called Mindy. Their conversation was short but still affectionate. He told her that he was going over to listen to Sven’s band play that night and that he would take her out to diner someplace nice before the housewarming party at Sven’s the next night. She said that she had some homework to do that night and the next day. She guessed that it would take her until the evening, so he should stop by to pick her up for dinner around seven or

eight. He agreed, repeated the information, dinner at seven or eight and the party after, they exchanged sentiments of love, and they both waited until the other hung up the phone first, which resulted in that strange silence, characteristic of so many college-aged lover's phone conversations.

After they did hang up their respective phones, Hamilton went to the box in his closet where he stored the heroes. It was all clear to him now. To get rid of the heroes, to get to sleep every night like he had for the last night, he knew what he had to do. He went over the plan in his head a few more times and closed the closet. He ate some dinner, brushed his teeth, and left for Sven's.

When Hamilton got there, Sven was sitting at his drum set in the garage, drinking cans of cheap beer that he got from a faded red cooler in the corner. The other members of the band hadn't arrived yet. Sven told Hamilton that they would move in at the end of the month, when their respective leases were up. Hamilton sat on a folding chair next to the guitar amp and drank with Sven, waiting for the rest of the band to arrive.

Sven finished his beer and spoke, "So, how was the boss this morning?"

"He was a mess. He was in my office waiting for me. I was late, and he was pissed about your moving in here."

"Yeah. He stopped by last night to tell us to quit it, but it was way before eleven when we have to stop playing, so I told him to leave."

"How'd he take that?"

“Not well. He started shouting about how inconvenienced he was by the whole thing and then he threatened to call the cops. I told him to go ahead and try.”

“Did he?”

“He came back a little later saying how even though the police wouldn’t come, he was going to rally the neighborhood and call the owner of the house to get me kicked out. I told him I owned the place and that I thought he should leave if he knew what was good for him. He tried grabbing Mike’s guitar, Mike’s the guitarist by the way, and when he wouldn’t let go I threw a drum stick at him.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, hit him right in the head. He deserved it. He was being an ass, and Mike’s guitar is sacred to him and stuff, you know? I mean it’s a cool guitar, and he had to work for a year and a half saving up so he could buy it. It’s really a cool guitar, and I know Mike wouldn’t fight back against some crazy old guy to protect it. He’s a pacifist, Mike is, and Smythe is crazy. I had to throw the drumstick at him. It’s not like I don’t have about a hundred of them somewhere around here. Drumsticks are cheap, but that guitar took Mike’s soul to buy it, you know? He had to work all sorts of overtime and stuff so he could replace the beat-up old thing he used to play. They didn’t even give him anything for a trade-in for his old one. The people at the place just laughed and told him he’d have to pay for them to take it, so he kept it and saved up more for the new one he has. I couldn’t just let that crazy old bastard come over here and mess it up. I mean, Mike’s a pacifist. You have to look out for people like that.”



“Easy there killer.”

“I know. It just makes me mad when people pick on him. That happened a lot at school when we were growing up. I’m a little guy. I couldn’t stick up for him then. But now, now I have my own place where he shouldn’t have to worry about shit like that happening and in walks James Randolph Smythe IV thinking he can just touch whatever he likes because I used to work for him. It pisses me off.”

“Yeah. He totally yelled at me this morning. He didn’t mention the drumstick though. He just mentioned how he told you guys to stop playing. He’s mad as hell at me for selling you the house.”

“It’s not like he was best friends with your dad or anything was he?”

“Not that I know of. My dad kept to himself. The police came out a few times because neighbors complained about the noise though. Does Smythe live next door or something? My dad used to turn TV up real loud, and the next door neighbors complained.”

“No. Smythe is two houses that way.” Sven pointed in the direction of the stone goose.

“Wait, two houses that way?”

“Yeah, the one with the goose on it. I walked by yesterday, and Smythe was out there trying to put a tiny yellow raincoat on it. It was hilarious because for the type of goose statue he has, there is no way he could put that raincoat on it. The wings are out like it’s about to fly. The coat was made for the kind that are still. I mean, the goose is still. It’s a statue, but it’s in an action pose, like it’s

flying. The ones that look like they just sit there, those are the ones that can wear raincoats.”

Hamilton stared off into space a bit and mumbled, “That’s interesting.”

“You feeling okay.”

Hamilton mentally returned to the garage. “Yeah. Smythe mentioned something about your name being Josh. What’s the deal with that?”

“Josh is our bass player. He’s a year older than I am. He’s my brother.”

“So Smythe thinks you’re him, why exactly?”

“That’s easy. I pretended to be him when I got the job.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I was under eighteen when they hired me, so I pretended to be Josh on the résumé. I took his driver’s license and social security card the day I went for the interview. Didn’t matter though. He never asked. I just typed up the checks to myself instead of Josh on payday.”

“You typed up the checks?”

“Yeah. I used to show up around seven on Fridays when no one was there. I’d do all the banking for the week. It was a good gig.” Sven looked down at his shoes as if he were either lying or pretending to lie so Hamilton wouldn’t ask anything else.

“So you know what Smythe actually does there?”

“Yep.”

“And?”

Sven looked up from the ground. "Hey Mike. Hey bro." Mike and Josh had arrived. They both carried guitar cases, although Josh's case was slightly larger to account for the bass. Sven introduced them to Hamilton, who was now a little angry that Sven hadn't answered his question. The two newcomers made a comment to Hamilton about being woefully overdressed in his sport coat, khaki pants, and button down shirt. Sven stuck up for Hamilton by saying that Hamilton had probably come from work and hadn't had time to change. Sven knew that Hamilton always wore that sort of thing, but he lied anyway.

The band set up their instruments and checked the sound just as dusk fell over the quiet street. The garage light, which was set on a sensor, turned on just as they finished tuning and went into the first song. Hamilton thought that they had timed it that way. The music was loud and fast. Their songs bled together through a flurry of power chords and solos. Most of the lyrics were unintelligible, screamed too fast and too close to the microphone for anyone to understand. Hamilton thought that Sven was right about Mike's guitar. It was black with lightning decals at the bottom of the body. Hamilton imagined that people who liked this sort of music would really like the band, even though punk wasn't his cup of tea. He didn't really listen to real music anymore.

The band took a break after playing all of the songs they knew, which took them about half an hour. They all drank beer from the cooler and talked about how they decided last night that their band name should be Puma. Hamilton said that he liked it, even though he didn't care. That was about the time that James Randolph Smythe IV walked by.

He looked into the garage and shook his fist. The entire band broke out into laughter. They were completely unprepared for that sort of cheesy defiance from the old man, especially after his open aggression the night before. Hamilton couldn't quite see James Randolph Smythe IV completely because of the shadows from the trees that blocked the street lights, but Hamilton was almost certain that he saw the old man mouth the words "You will regret this."

James Randolph Smythe IV walked away as quickly as he could, given his age and the condition of his legs. Hamilton noticed that the old man was walking away from his house. Hamilton waited until James Randolph Smythe IV would be near the corner of the block before he looked outside of the garage. The old man had definitely walked away from his home, and now, he was nowhere to be seen.

The band started playing again. Hamilton stood in the entrance of the garage and mouthed to Sven that he was going for a walk. Sven nodded, if not in comprehension of what Hamilton had said, then in time with the music as he usually did. Hamilton didn't care one way or the other if Sven had understood. The time for action was now.

Hamilton turned and leaned down at the corner of the garage pretending to tie his shoe. Just like the times when he stole the action figures, Hamilton reached into the pile of dried dead leaves and grabbed the one handed sledge he had buried there months ago. He didn't bother hiding it. He just stood up and walked towards James Randolph Smythe IV's house. He knew that the band would be too absorbed in the music to stop him.

He walked over the grass and the two driveways that separated his father's old house from the porch where the stone goose sat, wings outstretched like some sort of stone dragon. Hamilton looked up and down the street to see if he was being watched.

He wasn't.

Hamilton listened to the band, which was still quite loud from two houses away. The song was at a guitar solo and the barrage of piercing high notes steamed out of the amplifier like a swarm of hornets. Hamilton raised the hammer and swung it at the stone goose once.

He looked down to survey the damage and waited to see if the music continued loud enough to even remotely cover the noise of impact. He saw that the hammer had chipped the chest of the goose, and he noticed that the music still seemed loud enough. He listened as the guitar solo continued. He thought about how appropriate the lightning on the guitar seemed because all he could think of now were flashes of electricity in the summer sky. He provided the thunder.

All totaled, Hamilton hit the stone goose in a barrage of continuous swings twelve more times, each time doing more and more damage. When he had finished, his nemesis was headless. The body of the stone goose was hollow, and the back and sides of the now open shell still supported the two outstretched wings. The neck and head were in pieces on the porch as were chunks of the front of the once proud stone bird.

The guitar solo was over and the song had segued into the next. Hamilton walked back to the house, leaving the hammer inside the shell of the stone goose. He was sweating, but he didn't care. He returned to the garage and the music stopped. He told the band that he didn't feel well and that he was going home. They said goodbye and before he left, Hamilton got out a hundred dollar bill and offered it to Sven saying, "If Smythe comes by wondering what happened to that goose of his, offer to pay for a new one and tell him it was some of the other neighbor kids who did it."

Sven laughed and looked confused for the first time that Hamilton had known him. Hamilton went home. As he walked, he couldn't have possibly seen the Dragon walking towards J. R. Smythe and Company to meet his grandfather. Hamilton was oblivious to the world spinning against him.

When he returned to the apartment, Hamilton went to his bed for the first time in over a year and tried to sleep just to check if the heroes would keep their end of the bargain. He slept for two hours and nothing, nothing happened. He didn't sleep walk. He wasn't confronted by an army of giant plastic toys. He wondered what he would do with his spare time now that he could sleep whenever he wanted.

He sat down on the couch next to Dr. Dissolvo, who was sleeping peacefully. Hamilton scratched the dog's head gently with his index and middle finger and wondered what he was going to do with the heroes now.

If he gave the heroes to charity, other children would enjoy them, but would eventually do something bad, as is the nature of all people. He took the

toys away from children who were acting badly in the first place, so it seemed silly to give them to new children who would behave badly in the future. He considered returning the heroes to their rightful owners, but by now, he couldn't remember where he had gotten them all. Further, what would happen if he gave them away to children and they were cursed, causing other people to have nightmares that forced them to commit petty acts of vandalism? The best solution would be to throw them all out, and that is exactly what he did.

He placed all of the action figures into a black plastic trash bag and tied the top. Carrying the bag downstairs and out to the dumpster behind his apartment building, he could hear the married couple that lived on the ground floor through the walls. They were at it again.

Hamilton walked slowly towards the dumpster, pretending he didn't hear his neighbors' moans or the empty thud of their headboard against the wall. He lifted the dumpster top and dropped the bag gently inside. It all seemed sad to him. At least, he thought, he should feel sad, but he felt happy then, happier than he had been in quite some time.

He returned to his apartment and called Mindy. She struggled to get a word in while Hamilton just talked nonstop about how he didn't know why, but he was happier than he had ever been. She laughed at him, because much of what he said didn't make sense, but she agreed to go over to his apartment and talk to him.

Twenty minutes later she was there and they were half-asleep on his couch. Dr. Dissolvo slept on the floor. The night went by and Hamilton and Mindy just stayed on the couch together smiling and dozing off from time to time.



## CHAPTER VIII

Mindy left early that morning to do homework and Hamilton spent Saturday sitting in his apartment watching television and thinking about nothing in particular. By the time he actually had an idea, getting flowers for Mindy, it was already five in the evening. He figured that he would have enough time to walk to the nearest florist, but he misjudged the time. He spent an hour and a half walking from his apartment to the flower shop on Monroe Street and another hour and a half walking back. He arrived at Mindy's house ten minutes after eight with what would have been a lovely bouquet of assorted flowers had he not gotten anxious about being late on the walk there and squeezed the stems too hard. The flowers were wilting slightly and a few of the stems had snapped.

To make matters worse, Mindy hadn't noticed how late it was. She was deep in study and made Hamilton wait once he arrived so she could shower and get dressed. When she noticed the flowers, she was appreciative in the way one appreciates a gift one doesn't particularly want. She told him that the flowers were nice, but he didn't have to go to the trouble of getting her flowers all the time. They left without putting the bouquet in a vase, because she had no vases there. She could have used a large plastic cup, which her kitchen had in

abundance, but neither of them thought of it, and the flowers sat on the kitchen counter, wilting more and more as they left for dinner.

Dinner proved disastrous. As Hamilton had walked and Mindy had a headache and didn't want to drive, their options were severely limited. They walked to the Friendly's near Douglas and Sylvania and waited for nearly an hour for their food. The conversation seemed strained because she was tired and didn't feel well from reading all day, and he couldn't tell her about what had happened the night before. It made the hour wait seem longer and once the food arrived, they ate quickly in silence.

During the walk to Sven's, Mindy blurted out "So, do you think I should take a job back in Cleveland when I graduate?"

They were still two blocks away, but they stopped.

"I don't know. Why?"

"No real reason. I mean, I could move there after I graduate. I've been working so I can be out of here a semester early. I don't know where I'm going to end up."

"You could stay and work where you had your internship last summer. Where was that again?"

"Dow Chemical."

"It's not like Cleveland is that far away. Once you get a real job at Dow, you can drive there on weekends whenever you feel like it."

"I don't know. I miss my family a little. Not much mind you, but enough. Or maybe, I could move somewhere better than here."

"What's wrong with Toledo?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. I just don't have any reason to stick around when I could get a job somewhere better or back home."

"So you'd just leave in December?"

"Yes. I mean, if I'm in Cleveland, you can visit me if you want."

"I could move there with you."

Silence, then Mindy mumbled something that Hamilton couldn't hear.

"What?"

"Nothing. It just seems sudden, too sudden, to move somewhere over somebody else. I mean, it would seem that way for me. I mean, I love you and everything, but I don't want you just picking up and leaving because of me."

"It's not like I have anything else here, you know?"

"Right, but I'm not sure that I want you to just follow wherever I end up. That isn't fair to you and your career."

Hamilton tried not to laugh when she said "career."

He said, "I can just leave work anytime I want. It's not a big deal."

"But it should be, shouldn't it. I mean, your leaving your job for me should be a big deal. How do you know you'll be okay wherever I am?"

"I have plenty saved up to live for a while and not worry too much. I can find a job doing almost anything, and I'll be okay."

"I don't know. I'm just tired. Sorry. I don't want to talk about it now, I guess."

"Okay. I love you."

“Yeah. I know. I love you too. I’m just tired, I guess.” She mumbled something after that. Hamilton couldn’t understand it, but he tried to kiss her. It was bland and unaffectionate, and they both noticed. Hamilton covered any concern and started walking to Sven’s house. Mindy followed a few steps behind.

There was no mistaking the house from the outside. On the quiet street shaded even from the streetlights, Sven’s was the only house with lights on, music playing loud enough to hear outside, and silhouettes of several people through the curtained windows. As Hamilton entered, he realized exactly how much had changed in the once familiar house. He could hardly comprehend the group of about forty people roaming around his late father’s house drinking, smoking, and participating in other acts generally seen at parties with people that age. He was the oldest one there and looked it, wearing the sports coat, shirt, and dress pants that made up his daily wardrobe. Mindy pushed past him in the swarm of people, and taking his hand, she led him from room to room in search of somewhere to sit down that wasn’t overcrowded already.

Eventually they settled in the basement where they sat on a lumpy, mildewed couch. The basement was dimly lit and the concrete floor was cracked in a few places. The drab decorum kept most of the crowd upstairs, although about five others sat on similar couches and chairs throughout the room, conversing quietly.

After sitting and staring around the room for a few minutes, Mindy asked Hamilton to get her a drink. He went back upstairs to the kitchen where he found

a rather intoxicated Sven sitting at the kitchen table. Around him were nearly a dozen people, waiting in line to fill red plastic cups with the cheapest keg beer Sven could find that day. Sven looked up from the table, which was a mess with crushed and half-empty cups, which floated on thin puddles of staling beer. When he saw Hamilton he shouted hello. More subdued than his friend and host, Hamilton waved and mouthed the word "Hi."

"Yes. Very."

"What?"

"There is some killer, killer shit in the bedroom upstairs, and I will not, I repeat will not let you leave until you get some of it."

"What?"

"I was saying. Um. Right. How the hell are you, my man?"

"A little tired. How did things go last night with Smythe?"

"Never better. Never showed up. Showed uppance."

"You aren't making sense. He didn't stop by?"

People trying to push through to get beer jostled Sven. "Ow. Watch it. Wait, what did you want to know about with that guy and the other guy?"

"After I left last night, what did Smythe say about his goose?"

"His goose is cooked my man, my main man man. Man, he was never here last night, that man my main main man my big old boss man. Dude. That was totally funny."

"What was funny?"

"All kinds of things."

“What was funny about last night?”

“I did a tricky thing to old Smythe, and that tricky thing was funny my man.”

“What did you do?”

“I cleaned up your mess. It’s in the garage now, the rocks and stones and bird-parts made out of rocks and stones. Tiny stones.” Sven began laughing hysterically.

“Why did you do that?”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me. Smythe is gonna be mad at you if he finds out what happened. It was a great idea to smash his goose thing that I should have done anyway. I needed to take care of it for you. Stones.” He began laughing again.

“Listen,” Hamilton was practically shouting, “I don’t know why you did that, but thanks.”

“I know. I know. You go have a good time there. I’ll be up in a minute to see how things are going.” And with that Sven smiled a big toothy grin and went back to the tabletop, where he rested his head and shut his eyes.

Hamilton joined the line for the beer and returned to Mindy on the couch in the basement. By this time she wasn’t alone. As Hamilton surveyed the scene, he noticed that next to her on the couch was the Dragon, who appeared to be leaning over and whispering things to her. She seemed upset and kept pushing him away.

Hamilton wondered what the hell was going on as he walked over and asked if there was a problem. The Dragon stood up and answered, “Yes.”

Mindy arose too. "No. Not now. Hamilton, this is my ex-boyfriend."

The Dragon said, "That's news to me."

"No, it shouldn't be. We talked about this several months ago. I said I didn't want to see you anymore, and you said fine. That makes people ex's."

"That is not how it went. You said you needed time to think about things."

"Right. And having thought about things I told you I didn't want to see you again. Why is that unclear to you?"

"I don't know. I just don't know why."

Hamilton could tell that the Dragon was becoming agitated. He tried to calm the mohawked man by introducing himself. Handing Mindy her beer, he extended his free hand and said, "My name is Hamilton."

"I know who you are. My name is James Randolph Evans, but my friends call me..."

"Troll!" Sven was behind them and stumbling towards their group from the stairway at the other side of the room.

The Dragon grabbed Hamilton's outstretched hand hard. Hamilton was surprised by the smaller man's grip as the Dragon twisted Hamilton's arm.

The Dragon whispered to Hamilton, "I'd like a word with you outside. It concerns my grandfather and your job."

The Dragon released his grip just as Sven made his way to them.

Sven spoke to Mindy, "You. I needta talk to you fora minute. See, I needta talk to you, find out if Hamiltron's doing okay. He keeps giving me the slip."

Hamilton looked confused, but Sven continued, "He's a sloppy guy, and I'm the sloppy guy, and I need to make sure you are good enough for him." He looked at Hamilton. "You go away you sloppy guy. I'm gonna talk a minute. You go away."

Mindy whispered to Hamilton, "I'll take care of him. Don't worry about it. Don't leave me here for too long though and try to get creep job over there to go home if you can." She nodded towards the Dragon.

Hamilton whispered back, "Done," and turned to the Dragon and said, "Let's go have that chat."

Hamilton and the Dragon climbed the stairs as Mindy struggled to get Sven to sit down and keep his head propped upright. They waded through the nameless partygoers and after the Dragon's lead, they both stepped outside to the front porch. Hamilton inhaled and noticed how pleasant the Summer night was.

Then he turned to the Dragon who said, "Yeah. Mindy. She's a piece of work and an easy lay."

"What did you say?" Hamilton took a swing at the Dragon, who dodged and countered by punching Hamilton in the guts such that it appeared as though the dragon tattoo were actually biting Hamilton's stomach. Hamilton gasped for breath.

"Sorry about that. Just knocked the wind out of you. Could have been worse though. Could have been higher and harder and broken that bone that supports your lungs. You'd be dead."



Hamilton was debating another swing while he tried to concentrate on getting his breath back and standing straight again.

The Dragon said, "I don't want to fight you, and if you knew anything, you wouldn't want to fight me." Hamilton didn't like being told what to do and considered that he did in fact want to fight. The Dragon continued, "You see, I'm a third degree black belt in Tai Kwon Do."

Hamilton reconsidered fighting. He was getting his breath back and decided to listen to what the Dragon had to say.

"I'm here to tell you not to bother coming in on Monday."

"I know. We have the day off because of the Fourth."

"Shut the fuck up. That's not what I mean."

Hamilton was silent.

"I went with my grandpa and cleaned out the place. He told me all about how you threatened him. We moved the stuff to another building of his. He thought it would be okay if he just told everyone else there where to go come Tuesday and left you wondering why the doors were locked."

"What?"

"Yeah. You're fired asshole."

"I wasn't going to do anything. I told him so. Why didn't he believe me?"

"He never trusted you. That's why he had me spy on you."

"You sure did a hell of a job with that. Never noticed you once."

"Shut the fuck up when I'm talking, douche bag."

Hamilton was silent but smiling now.

"I know you don't believe me, about the place being empty, but go ahead and waste your time on Tuesday."

"Why would you tell me this."

"Cause I feel like it shit-hole. He's an ass. You're an ass. I do what the fuck I feel like."

"No, I mean, why would you spy on me for your grandfather? What actually happens at the office?"

The Dragon laughed a little. "I spied because he asked me to. I do what he says because he took care of my grandmother. I don't give a shit about him now because she died yesterday. Yeah, I could tell you what happens there, but I don't feel like it right now."

"Okay. I mean I'm just curious."

"Shut the fuck up. Listen. I'll tell you about the place when I get some straight answers from you." At this, he lifted his shirt a little to show a gun neatly tucked in the front of his pants. "Don't try anything okay. I was shitting about the Tai Kwon Do shit but I'm fucking serious now. I will fucking kill you right here if you fuck with me. Now I want answers."

Hamilton didn't know what to do. The blood drained from his face. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"First off, I want to know why you had to steal my girlfriend you sack of shit?"

The Dragon was crying a little now. Hamilton knew that the gut-punch was lucky but felt sorry for the skinny little guy. Hamilton sat down on the porch,

stretching out his legs because sitting cross-legged made his injury flare up.

“Honest. I didn’t steal her. She asked me out.”

“So you didn’t try to steal her from me when you found out I was spying on you for my grandfather?”

“What? No. I didn’t know who you were until tonight.”

“Sorry about the phone calls.”

“What phone calls?”

“The ones where I put my grandma on the phone. She was hooked up to an iron lung. Has been since I was a kid. My grandpa raised me mostly because mom was out travelling. I was just trying to mess with you a little. It was what my grandpa wanted.” The Dragon regained his composure.

“And he told you to follow me?”

“Yeah. He’s really paranoid about his business. I don’t suppose it would hurt to tell you what happens there. It’d piss him off a bit, the old cocksucker.”

“Well, it’s not like I still have a job, unless you were lying.”

“Yeah. You don’t have a job anymore. He’s all paranoid and shit because he makes money from the government and from drugs.”

“What?”

“Yeah. In the fifties, the government paid to have a bunch of neighborhood watch organizations set up. You know, those old lady’s with the stickers on their doors who are always spying on people.”

“Yeah.”

“Right. Well, my great-grandfather was in charge of coordinating how the City of Toledo spent the neighborhood watch funds. They got all sorts of money from the government to give to local groups, but the thing is, there were only like four local groups made up of about seven people each, so there was all sorts of money left over. To keep getting funding, he had to lie on request forms, and he would hire people in to pretend to be the neighborhood watch leaders for certain neighborhoods.”

“So, I was a neighborhood watch leader?”

“Technically, yes. He also increased the funding by lying to the actual people involved by telling them that they were the ones who had to buy the equipment and stickers and pay for meeting dues.”

“So he scammed the people who wanted to help their community. Nice. Real nice. Your great grandpa’s a real piece of work there.”

“Shut up, it’s not like that. My great grandpa scammed people, but he also hired about eight people to distribute the money to. He couldn’t keep it all or else people would get suspicious. That’s why we have to live here and not somewhere better.”

“And that’s why you have to hire people?”

“Yeah. My grandpa looks for people who would be broke otherwise so they won’t try to pull shit like you did. He never trusted you man.”

“Well, it’s not like he wasn’t scamming the city.”

“Yeah. But he made jobs for a few people so they could live alright. That’s good. That’s really good.”

"You mentioned drugs too?"

"Well, he also brings in money contracting a few people out to work with drug runners on designing new ways to transport shit into the city so they don't get caught. It's like freelance engineering for smugglers. That was my grandpa's idea."

"Wow. You're family's really a mess."

"Shut the fuck up man. They do what they have to."

"And you're just going to help them?"

"Yeah. I gotta make a living too."

"So I'm unemployed and my last boss used to be a drug smuggler? Nice. That'll look great on my résumé."

"Yeah. One more thing though. I'm not gonna get to see Sven again after tonight, because of the move. I'd really appreciate it if you left so I could hang out with him a bit. He was cool to me in high school. I owed him a good time."

"So you paid for all this?"

"Yep."

"And if I don't leave."

"I'll blow your fucking brains out."

"Great. Well, I'll just head back inside and get Mindy and we'll go."

"Yeah. I'd like it if she left too."

Hamilton stood up slowly. He thought about attacking the Dragon before he could pull the gun, but Hamilton wasn't completely sure if the Dragon was really bluffing about the Tai Kwon Do. He also didn't see the harm in letting this

poor, whiney guy with the mohawk have a night saying goodbye to his friend. Hamilton went into the house and went downstairs. The Dragon followed him.

Hamilton found Mindy sitting on the couch with Sven. Sven was talking about comics with her and was making loud whooshing noises to signify the power of flight or lasers. This was something that Hamilton was used to from their conversations at the bar earlier that year. Hamilton went over to Mindy and whispered "We have to go."

She seemed a little disappointed at first, probably because Sven was amusing when he could sit upright, but when she saw James Randolph Evans tapping his foot and checking his wrist for a nonexistent watch behind Hamilton, she understood that something had happened. Hamilton and Mindy left together and began walking back to her house.

Along the way, she asked what happened, and Hamilton told her about everything except for the gun. She was concerned about him not having a job and a little more concerned over leaving Sven in his house with James Randolph Evans, but they kept walking. When they got to her house, she stopped and said, "I'm sorry about earlier. I've just been overworked lately, trying to graduate early. I'll make it up to you, but not tonight. I have to get an early start tomorrow."

She reached up and pulled him down to kiss him. It was better than the last one, but Hamilton was still slightly worried about their future.

He walked home alone after he said goodnight.

When he got to his apartment he laid down in his bed for the first time since he moved in. He went to bed fully clothed and exhausted by the evening's events. His eyes shut, and he drifted off to sleep listening to the dulcet tones of his downstairs neighbors.

Hamilton dreamt that he was driving a car on a highway somewhere. The car didn't seem like his, but it seemed familiar in some way. As he drove, the road in front of him was being built by hundreds of construction workers moving so fast that it looked like a blur unless Hamilton focused on them. The road would twist and turn as they built it, and Hamilton had to drive where the road went, but he wanted to get off for some reason. He sped up as much as the car would allow, but the road only appeared faster to go underneath the wheels. The road inclined up, until eventually Hamilton was trying to drive off of a road that was hundreds of feet in the air. He drove through clouds and the blue sky just trying to drive off of the road. The car was going so fast that it caught on fire and disappeared into smoke. Then, it was just him, running. He ran faster than the car had gone, and he caught fire too. His clothes and skin and sinew burnt away until it was his skeleton running as fast as he could down a highway. The skeleton pulled a metal rod out from its hip and jumped. It drove the metal rod into the road, and the asphalt crumbled away. The dream-skeleton Hamilton fell from the skyway through the hole and fell so fast that it caught fire and burnt away into dust before it hit the ground.

## CHAPTER IX

Hamilton woke up to a ringing phone. He got up and went to the living room and answered. It was Sven. He sounded slightly less lucid than earlier that night but also sounded as if something horrible had just happened.

Sven kept repeating, "Man, you need to get here right now. Man, it's urgent. It's an emergency. You need to get here now please help. Oh, God help."

Hamilton told him he would drive over right away. He hung up the phone and checked the alarm clock he still kept next to the couch. It was three in the morning. Hamilton checked his bed-stand for his wallet and key, but they were still in his pockets.

He got in his car and drove to his dead father's house as fast as he could.

He parked in the driveway and went in through the front door. The only light came from the kitchen, so he headed straight there. When he got to the doorway, he surveyed the scene.

Next to the doorway, Sven was huddled up against the wall gripping the phone, having not hung it up since he called Hamilton. The table was still a mess with red plastic cups and spilt beer but it had a darker tint to it now. The



chair that Sven had sat in earlier was now turned on its back and in that chair, lay the Dragon.

His eyes were open, unblinking at the ceiling. The smile looked eerily familiar, like when he would flip off Hamilton months before. In his right hand, he still held the gun he had showed Hamilton earlier. From the side of his head facing the doorway, a thick stream of dark red blood still dripped into a large drying puddle on the floor. Along the sink and kitchen counter, large flecks of blood and chunks of what Hamilton assumed was brain tissue dappled the metal sink basin, the wooden cabinets, and the further places of the linoleum not encompassed by the enormous crimson puddle. The room smelled like smoke.

“What happened?” He crouched down to where Sven was huddled, crying, and mumbling to himself.

“Man, oh man, oh shit, oh fuck man. Man I’m glad you’re here man. Fuck! Man. This sucks.”

Hamilton put his hands on Sven’s shoulders. Hamilton’s injury shot with pain from crouching, and he winced, but he kept his hands steady on Sven, trying to comfort as best he could, given the unpredictable circumstances.

“Would it help if we went to the living room?”

“No. I need to not move for a while, man. I feel sick.” And with that, Sven retched into the corner for what Hamilton assumed was not the first time in the past few minutes. Sven’s pants were soaked.

Hamilton picked Sven up and carried him to a couch in the living room. He brought a trashcan from the upstairs bathroom in case Sven got sick again.

He brought some blankets from Sven's bed, in case Sven was in shock. Sven just curled up sideways on the couch staring at the entrance to the kitchen. Sven shivered and gasped in between sobs and coughs that could have been dry heaves.

After a few minutes of trying to calm Sven down, Hamilton asked again, "What happened?"

"Man, it wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't."

"It's okay. You can tell me."

"The party died off around midnight and people left and it was just me and Troll, and everything was cool, and we were talking about the old days. Man, it was just me and him and he kept saying how cool it was."

"Right. So, how did that happen?"

"He kept going to the bathroom and sniffing and I'm pretty sure he was doing coke in there, and eventually, he just started crying about his mom and his grandma and how shitty his grandfather was. I tried to calm him down, and I thought I did, and then he pulls out this gun from the front of his pants, like out of nowhere, and says we're going to play Russian roulette."

"But it's not a revolver."

"That's what I said man. You should have been here to say that. I tried telling him to stop and I couldn't think of the word revolver and then it happened and time just sort of went all slow for a second."

"So you couldn't stop him. That's awful."

“No. It was beautiful man. It was like the dragon on his hand, breathed fire, and then, the noise. It was loud. It was sick loud. I felt sick from the loud, man. And then it happened. It was like the side of his head just filled up with so much and just burst out, and from the hole and the dark emptiness, there were these butterflies. The butterflies weren’t there right away, but then the red dots grew wings and flapped and landed on the kitchen counters and everywhere, everything was covered with these red butterflies. Then, when they landed, the butterflies would melt into these tiny puddles. Tiny red dot puddles from the butterflies that flapped out of his mind were everywhere. And shit, he fell over and these other butterflies tried to escape from the hole but they just jumped out of his head and fell onto the floor and melted right away, and Jesus, it was crazy.”

“You need to call the police.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There’s all sorts of shit all over the place. Help me hide it.”

“There’s a guy dead on your kitchen floor. He’s the one who brought the drugs. Tell them that.”

“I don’t wanna go to jail.”

“You won’t. Just call them and explain everything.”

“No.”

“Then I will.”

“Man. You suck. I thought you were my friend.”

"I am, but I'm not going to help you hide drugs so you can call the police about the dead guy on your floor."

"Fine, you call them and tell them what happened."

"No. You need to tell them yourself. This is your house."

"So you're going to leave?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because. I'm a mess. I'll just make the police think I'm dumb like those people on Cops who are all fucked up and wearing their boxers and screaming shit at hookers."

"If he killed himself, then there's nothing to worry about. I'll go call and you stay here."

"No. You can go. I'll be okay. I'll call."

"And what are you going to tell them?"

"I'm going to say what happened. He killed himself. The drugs are his."

"Good. I knew you'd do okay."

Hamilton wanted nothing more right at that moment than to reassure his friend. He had to get Sven's mind off of things a little and get a little more time for Sven to sober up before talking to the police.

Hamilton decided to try to make him laugh a little. "Hey, there's a joke I've been meaning to tell you."

"Huh?"

“No, this is good, it’ll cheer you up some.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Okay. Back when the Twin Towers were still up, there were bars on the twenty-third floor of both buildings with balconies that faced each other so people could go out and look around.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know. Probably. Anyway, it’s two in the afternoon and there are just two guys in the one bar. One of them has been there for a while, and he’s totally wasted, and the other guy hasn’t been there long. So the one guy, the drunk one, calls the other guy over and says ‘Hey, you know if you jump off the balcony the updraft will carry you over to the balcony on the other side. It’s great. You should try it.’

“And the other guy is like, ‘No way,’ and the drunk guy says ‘Fine, I’ll show you.’ So the drunk guy gets up, walks out to the balcony and jumps, and sure enough, he falls for a second and then just floats up and over onto the balcony on the other building.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Shush. The drunk guy waves and jumps off again and the same thing happens. He falls for a second and then just floats over to the balcony and gets put down on his feet. So the other guy comes out to the balcony and says, ‘Wow, that’s amazing let me try it.’ The drunk guy goes in to get another drink while the other guy jumps off the balcony. The second guy though, he falls and

falls and falls and splat. And the bartender looks up and says, 'You know Superman, you're a real asshole when you're drunk.'

Neither of them laughed, but Sven said, "That was funny." Hamilton felt a little awkward just sitting there, but he tried his best and now, he wanted to leave, to be done with this whole thing.

After a few seconds, he continued. "I'm okay now, really. I'll call the cops now."

Hamilton helped Sven to the phone. Sven dialed the numbers and told the operator everything. Hamilton helped him back to the couch, told his friend goodbye, and left.

Hamilton's mind was uneasy about leaving Sven there alone, but Sven would be okay. He had to be. Hamilton wanted to sleep, but he was too awake from what had just happened and from sleeping too much the day before. He wanted to sleep and escape so badly.

## CHAPTER X

The sun was rising on Sunday July Fourth and Hamilton Burger drove the length of I-475 for the third time that morning. The road looped around Toledo in an ellipse like electrons circling the center in the old atomic model. Hamilton thought about that as he imagined his Ford Taurus as one of those electrons, racing around the center, never pulled into the middle and never escaping into space.

He drove slow in the passing lane, always thinking of getting off at one of the exits for I-75 to Detroit or Findlay, or taking 80/90 to Cleveland or Chicago. As he circled the city, again, he tried to piece together the last few months again looking for where everything could have been stopped.

He knew that he shouldn't have left Sven alone, but what could he have done? He didn't want to talk to police officers, especially when he would have to tell them how he knew the deceased. He imagined himself in a dimly lit interrogation room saying, "Yes sir. I worked for his asshole grandfather, who by the way, was helping to smuggle all sorts of good stuff into the city, not to mention the fraud. Well yes, I understand that my working for James Randolph Smythe IV makes me guilty of everything too. I'm just sick about the whole business." Hamilton knew that if he were thrown in jail, he would lose Mindy.

But what about her?

She said that she was just overworked but was there something else?

She seemed so affectionate, so loving. He wondered if his relationship with her would end up the way that her relationship with the Dragon did. He wondered if he would go crazy too, stalking her and never realizing it was over. He wanted things to work out so badly that he knew he wouldn't understand why it would end when it did. It was no longer a matter of "if."

And what about Sven? Hamilton wondered how his friend would do when he sobered up and found himself in jail because some asshole blew his brains out in a dead man's kitchen. Sven might go crazy too, just like the Dragon.

Hamilton thought that there was clearly no way to live in Toledo and keep his sanity. He had to escape. He had to break from his orbit and go.

Hamilton took the next exit into the city and snaked his way through side streets to the nearest bank. He drove through the empty parking lot, stopped the car and realized his error.

It was Sunday. The bank was closed. He wouldn't be able to empty his account and drive away in some cardinal direction and start over alone. Maybe he could come back tomorrow. It would be Monday after all.

No.

Tomorrow was the day off for Fourth of July. Everything would still be closed. If he waited until Tuesday, he knew that he would never leave. He would check on Sven, and he would be okay. He would see Mindy, and she



would say she loved him, and he would try so hard that he would never want to leave until it was too late and she was gone.

He would have to stay. He knew it. He would fall deeper in love with the woman who would leave him, and he didn't care. He would keep a distant friendship with a man who would go mad because of one night in a house with blood stained linoleum. And he too would slowly go mad; he knew it. He would stay in Toledo and never leave. His last chance for escape had been thwarted by the way the calendar fell that year, and the days would continue to march on with him in that city, always falling just right so he would never leave, never think about escaping again.

He noticed the way the early morning sunlight turned his hands translucent. He started the car and drove home. He wanted to sleep, to let tomorrow, horrible, inevitable tomorrow arrive as soon as it could.