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# Lessons in Betrayal

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# Lessons in Betrayal

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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An Abstract on the Thesis of  
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Title: Lessons in Betrayal

Each of the selected works in this thesis share one common element, as they attempt to explore the nature of betrayal as a thematic element, and each story depicts a different aspect of this theme. *Cold Hearted* is a coming-of age story, as a young boy discovers what it can mean when family cannot be trusted. *Threads* can be viewed as science fiction or magic realism, but at heart it concerns itself with a man whose own nature has led to time itself turning against him. Then the collection jumps back to a realist story with *Sleepwalker*, as the main character discovers how badly his own mind can work against him. *Remnants* shifts to a dystopian future as a man must decide to be true to his noble ideals, or give in to a more savage past. The last work is a unique form and genre, the first act of a screenplay, a format for story-telling that has its own set of rules and challenges. *Omega Watch* is only the first act of a super hero tale in which forces unseen turn against those trying to save the world.

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## Cold Hearted

As a child, I lived my life between the pages of books. I peeked over the shoulder of Charlie as he roamed the vast halls of a chocolate factory, spied on Tom Sawyer as he convinced a group of boys that whitewashing a fence was a good time, and hid from pirates with Jim Hawkins. For me these were grand adventures and, more importantly, provided an excuse not to interact with the neighborhood children who liked to bully me, simply because my love of books made me stand out from the crowd, apparently a grave sin to commit. Even my sixth grade teacher pulled me aside once, so that she could encourage me to consider leaving my copy of Edgar Allan Poe at home, so that I would get teased less. As a boy I never questioned her words of caution, I merely ignored them since I was used to my classmates' torments. I continued with my enjoyment of August C. Dupin while enduring unending verbal abuse in the days that followed.

I never worried about someone questioning my choice of books to read at home. My parents encouraged my reading, provided I agreed to participate in seasonal sports such as baseball, football, and swimming lessons during the winter months. My father travelled for work a lot, and so I would drag his chair across the living room on Monday afternoons after getting home from school. I would position it in the reading nook where it would remain until Thursday, when my father would return from his sales' trips, and I had to drag it back. I always lined up the legs with the indentations in the carpet, pretending that no one knew I had moved the chair.

I treated that chair as my throne when my father was on gone. Anyone who watched me as I read likely thought that I was bored with the book in my hands. I would

sit normally one minute, the next I might shift to sit with my legs laying across either arm of the chair, constantly in motion as I read. But this never distracted me, my mind was always focused on the story I held clasped in a tight grip, so much so that I was usually unaware of anything occurring around me. About the only thing I was ever aware of was the sunlight streaming through the large window of the nook which faced our front lawn. The sun's rays would warm my book, and the motes of dust that were stirred by my turning of pages would drift upwards, swirling and glittering in the process. I always thought it gave the book a false sense of being alive, the motes being similar to a person breathing in and out.

That nook was my favorite place, my personal sanctuary. But in August of 1980, even the nook couldn't protect me from the worst bullies. Those, I learned, tend to hide in plain sight.

I was sitting inverted, my back on the seat cushion while my legs were thrown over the back of the chair, reading *Animal Farm*, dimly aware of the sound of Donna Summers' voice echoing down the hall. My mother and two aunts were in the kitchen playing dominos. It was a weekly ritual for them to gather and play some type of game at the kitchen table, usually my grandmother would join them but that day she was visiting relatives out of town. The get-togethers were an excuse for more important work, the exchange of gossip. They would tell each other the juiciest tidbits gleaned over the last week; who in church was caught cheating on their spouse, which of the locals had been fired from their job, which of the PTA moms was pregnant again. They all presumed that I was too involved with my books to eavesdrop on their conversation. They were mostly

right, but they never acknowledged that I might know what they were talking about, or the likelihood that I simply didn't care about the topic.

My Aunt Zoe had given me the copy of *Animal Farm* that I was reading that day, and she kept poking her head around the corner to see how much of the book I had finished. Zoe was a big fan of horror novels. The year before she had come over to watch *Salem's Lot* every night the mini-series aired, which scared me almost as badly as an episode of *Night Gallery* (never, ever force an old woman who is an exceptional gardener to vacate her home) I had watched when I was five. Afterward she gave me copies of Stephen King's first novels to read, a fact that horrified my mother.

She was much happier with my Aunt Tabitha's contributions to my library, all of which were science fiction novels. Robert Heinlein's books were a particular favorite of my mother and Tabitha, since Heinlein wrote most of them during the forties and fifties. They presented a *Leave It to Beaver* morality framed in space adventure, something my mother could tolerate. Even in 1980, both of them still sported a variation of Jacqueline Kennedy's classic hair-do, their sense of style frozen in time along with their moral compasses.

Of course, I never admitted to reading my mother's selection of books that lined the upper shelves in the living room. They sported flamboyant covers of pirates and swashbucklers, all with buxom women in their arms. At the time, I thought they would have made decent adventure novels, provided the various authors were willing to hack out the unnecessary (in the mind of a twelve year old) romantic elements and sex scenes. I simply flipped passed those sections to get back to the pillaging of townships.

I had just gotten to the part of the book where Boxer is sent off in a van belonging to a 'knacker', a word with which I was unfamiliar. I've never liked not knowing what a word means, so I had to pull myself upright to retrieve a dictionary from my room. Downstairs the screams of my cousins, all female, echoed up the stairs. I had rejected their pleas to play with them, and so they had all retreated to the basement. My only male cousin at that time was Zoe's infant son, Jacob, and I often found myself having to devise my own entertainment.

When I returned from looking the word up (knacker: noun – a person whose business deals with the disposal of dead or unwanted animals, verb – tire out, exhaust - if you are interested) I heard the loud roar of an ill-kept engine outside our house. The roar was so loud that the window in the nook began to vibrate.

I stepped over to the glass and peered out at the old, beat up Mustang which had pulled to a stop in front of our house. I recognized it instantly from the handful of times I had seen its driver. My Uncle Pete slid himself out of the front seat, a sinuous process of unfolding his legs, which made him appear much taller than his five-foot four-inch height. Once out of the car he stretched, and I imagined I could hear the crack of his back popping in several places. Before he walked up to the house he turned to reach into the car. When he stood back up he held a small cooler in his left hand, his right cradling a can of beer which he lifted to his lips. From the window I could see his throat working as he drained the entire can before crushing it in his hand and tossing the empty into the backseat. Only then did he kick the door shut with his foot as he started towards the house.

Looking at him from the window I could see the cracked, weather-beaten lines of his face. It was hard to believe, but I thought the rusted out Mustang was in better condition. I knew that my father was only eight years younger than Pete, but Pete could easily be mistaken for my father's father. As he walked towards me he opened another can of beer, and I realized that I was looking at the living definition of knacker now.

"Mom, Uncle Pete's just pulled up in front of the house," I yelled from where I stood. I could hear the scramble of chairs from the kitchen as the three women hurried to the front door. I kept my eyes glued to Pete, always intrigued by his walk. His legs had a perpetual outward-seeming curve to his thighs; my father called it Pete's 'Roy Rogers walk'.

Once, when she thought I was out of earshot, I heard my mother say, "More likely it's his 'crabs walk'." I thought this funny, picturing him scuttling from side to side, only when I was in high school would I come to understand what she had meant.

The living room connected to the foyer, and I watched my mother and aunts huddle together. Tabitha had a wide-eyed look that I had read about, but which I usually associated with horses. It was fear, pure and simple; the whites of her eyes exposed to ludicrous extremes as she struggled to control her emotions, I expected her to start pawing at the ground with her right foot at any moment. Since my mother was the oldest of the three, and Pete was her brother-in-law, she was the one her sisters turned to for guidance.

"I didn't think he could leave Texas," Tabitha said, her voice pitched higher than normal, more the sound a mouse might make when it encounters a hungry cat.

My mother had her eyes locked on the front door. “He’s not supposed to, it’s a violation of his probation.” She looked at me then, concerned that she had revealed something I hadn’t known. “He’s definitely not supposed to drop by unannounced or come here when David isn’t home.” She raised her thumb to her mouth, and I could see her lips tighten as she bit down hard on the nail.

“Maybe,” said Tabitha with a glassy smile now on her face, “if we don’t answer the door he’ll go away.”

“There are three cars in the driveway, Tabby, you really think he’s that stupid that he’ll think no one is here?” snapped Zoe.

My father had talked to me about his brother after Pete’s last visit, but I had never realized he had such a powerful effect on my relatives. The last time he had been in town, I had developed a case of hero worship for Pete after a visit of only a few hours. My father was a talkative, but soft-spoken man who never cursed. Pete had the mouth of a sailor and never concerned himself with who was listening. After his last visit I laced one sentence with the words ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’, learning after it was too late that such words were not suitable vocabulary for a boy of ten, and forcing my father to address the issue.

“My brother has . . . problems,” my father said then. He had looked at me, and I thought he was going to cry, something I had never witnessed. “Do you know what an alcoholic is?” he had asked, then explained a few things about his brother. His voice grew quieter as he talked, as if he were revealing great secrets that I would not understand until I was older. He was, but I was too young to understand or recognize the regret that colored his words.

So caught up in my mother's nervous reaction to Pete's arrival, and Tabitha's fear, I took my eyes off Pete's approach to our house. A sudden rapping began on the window next to me, making all of us jump. I turned to see Uncle Pete banging on the glass.

"Hey, Julie Jewel, look who's in town," said my Uncle, his voice soft and raspy, a trait I found cool at the time, not knowing it was due to cigarettes and far too much whiskey.

My mother looked at each of her sisters, but both were too busy staring at the scarecrow of a man outside the window. My mother moved to step to the door, and had to shake off her sisters' hands. Right before she opened the door I saw her paint a smile on her face, something I had witnessed before many times. It was the same look she had worn when our family went over to console our neighbor, Mrs. Hudson, when her husband had died the year before.

My mother opened the door a few inches as she looked out at Pete. "What brings you here, Pete?"

It was clear to me, and I think now that it was clear to Pete, that my mother did not want him coming into the house. But the moment she opened the door he pushed passed her and stepped into the foyer, his cooler and beer held firmly in hand. He looked from my mother to her sisters, "Just decided to hit the road, ya know?" He turned back to my mother, "I see you have company." He didn't wait for a response as he looked towards the hallway that led to the rest of the house, "Is Davey home?"

His eyes fell on me then, and he grinned wide and took a step closer. My aunt's fear must have been contagious because I started to take a step backward, before I

stopped my motion and waited to see what he would do. I smiled, not yet prepared to dislike my uncle, before he surprised me by pulling me into a hug, something only the women in my family did.

“Jimmy! Kid, you look just like your dad when he was your age,” said Pete.

As he hugged me, he spilled his beer and soaked the back of my shirt in the process. I reluctantly hugged him back as I found myself overpowered by the sweetly sour odor of sweat, and the pungent nature of his breath which reeked of tobacco, beer, and what I presumed was vomit. I returned the embrace, despite my sudden revulsion, while wondering how he could possibly see a resemblance between my father and me. If anything, I resembled my mother’s side of the family. At twelve I was already three inches taller than my dad, and I had the blonde hair and pale skin of my mother’s family. Pete and my dad both had dark hair and complexions as a result of their Italian background.

“Hey, Uncle Pete,” I said, trying to keep up appearances.

He released me, and turned his eyes to the three women in the foyer. He eyed them each in turn, as uncomfortable seconds ticked by. Pete saved my Aunt Zoe for last, his smile turning to a leer in the process. “I haven’t seen you since David and Julie’s wedding,” he said.

Zoe dropped her eyes for a moment, then she looked over at me. Seeing me standing there seemed to affect her, she stood up straighter and looked Pete in the eye, daring him to challenge her. “I remember. You wanted to go fool around in the parking lot.”

Pete barked laughter, “You missed out.”

“You were married.”

Pete waved his hand in the air, “Details.”

“And I was only fourteen.” Zoe’s tone was ice cold; I had never heard my aunt so angry before. Then again, this was the first time I had witnessed any of the three women in a frightened state.

Pete waved his hand again, “Grass on the playing field and all that. The offer still stands.” But instead of waiting for a response from my aunt, who was turning red as I watched, he finished his statement by downing the last of his current beer. The empty can disappeared into the cooler, even as Pete retrieved another. By the time he had popped the tab he had dismissed Zoe entirely and turned back to my mother.

“So, is David home?”

My mother shrugged, “Pete, it’s only one-thirty in the afternoon. He’s working.”

Tabitha decided at that point to join the conversation, her voice rushing through the words, “But we’re all having dinner at my house tonight after the men get off work. You’re welcome to join us.”

I listened as my mother and Zoe scrambled to agree with their sister. “Yeah, we’re going to Tabby’s later,” said my mother.

Zoe chimed in with, “Mom’s coming over. She’s making lasagna.”

“Really?” Pete let his eyes look them over before he looked at Jimmy. “You like lasagna, kid?”

I looked at the women; my father and Uncle Roger, Zoe’s husband, were at a medical convention in Chicago and were definitely not joining us for dinner. But I also

knew when to play along, even though the current question required no lies on my part. “I love lasagna.”

“Then that’s something we have in common,” said Pete, his hand rubbing his stomach.

My mother ignored his response. Now that a plan seemed to be in motion between her and her sisters she tried to regain control of the situation. Her hand reached out and touched Pete on the elbow, subtly directing him towards the kitchen. As they moved down the hall, my aunts and I followed them, my aunts afraid to leave my mother alone while I was curious to see what would happen next.

“In fact, we were going to head over to Tabby’s right after we finish our game of dominos,” I heard my mother say as they entered the kitchen.

When I entered the room, Pete was idly looking at the pattern of dominos. He reached down and turned the score sheet so that he could read it. “You seem to have a way to go before someone wins. Maybe I can visit with the girls while you play.”

“No,” snapped Zoe, her voice sharper than I had ever heard. “I mean, they’re in the middle of their game.” She looked at my uncle, gauging her next words carefully. “And I’m sure you’re not the kind of man who plays with dolls.”

Pete seemed to mull this over for a moment, “No, you’re right. Plastic girls are not my thing.” His gaze drifted meaningfully to Zoe, who settled backwards in her chair in a futile attempt to avoid his roaming eyes. “I guess I could sit in here with you ladies though.”

My mother’s eyes sought me out; they had taken on a glassy sheen that I found disturbing. “I have an idea,” she said. “David’s told me that you were the one who taught

him to play baseball, right? Jimmy's a great ballplayer, why don't you two go in back and play catch?"

I tried shaking my head at his mother, playing catch was the last thing I wanted to do right then. They were all obviously scared of him, why should I be the one that had to keep him entertained I thought. But my uncle responded before I could protest.

"That would be cool. I could teach the kid a thing or two his dad might have forgotten."

My mom used her guilty stare on me then, to make certain I went along with her. "Pete can use your Dad's glove. You know where it is, right?"

"Fine," I said, then turned and headed down the hall to my parent's room. Behind me I could hear the sound of Pete crushing another can, and the metallic ring as he tossed it into the sink rather than the trashcan. Then the telltale sound of yet another can being opened, followed by the chunking noise our refrigerator made when it was opened.

"Gotta, refill the cooler. You don't mind, do you Julie?" I heard my uncle ask my mother, but I was out of earshot for her response, if there had been one.

I hated going into my parents' bedroom, always feeling like a trespasser. I walked over to my father's closet, which was a fourth the size of my mother's massive walk-in. His mitt was on the top shelf, next to a Hustler magazine that had been there for years. My father had once listed me up to get some item from the top shelf, and I had seen it then for the first time. When I questioned him about the scantily clad girl on the cover he told me the magazine was off-limits, and that Tabitha's husband had left it in my father's car after a fishing trip. It was covered by a layer of dust, which told me that my father seldom, if ever, took it out of the closet, and that his story was likely true.

After removing the glove from the closet I stood there for a long moment. It felt wrong to let Pete, or anyone, use this glove. My father was the only one who had ever worn it, and it had been with him all through high school; even now the leather was supple and I could smell the resin he rubbed into it every year before baseball season began. The palm of the glove had a darkened circle resulting from the impact of hundreds of ground balls he fielded as a second basemen, yet the webbing showed only the most minor evidence of fatigue and the hand-stitched Rawlings symbol was only slightly faded. Only the tips of the fingers began to reveal the glove's age, frayed as they were along the edges from repeatedly scooping balls out of the dirt.

I walked out of my parent's room and across the hall to mine. My mitt was stored in my closet as well, the difference being the worn baseball tucked into the webbing. As I took them down I came to a decision. I slipped my father's glove onto my hand, deciding that Pete would have to settle for using mine instead.

I walked back to the kitchen, the quiet click of dominos being laid on the table the only sound coming from the room. As I entered I saw that Pete had moved to sit next to Zoe, his arm draped over the back of her chair. She was leaning forward, trying to avoid his advances. She smiled when I entered, grateful it seemed to know that Pete would be out of her way for a moment.

"Hey, good, now you can go out back and play catch." The relief in Zoe's voice was evident to all, and brought a look of triumph to Pete's face.

My stood, stretching like a cat, this time I could hear the bones crack. "C'mon, kid. Let's go throw the leather a bit."

I led my uncle out the back door, handing over my glove in the process. Pete slipped it on, quickly snapping it open and closed, which created a staccato beat. Pete brought the leather to his nose and inhaled the pungent aroma, before his eyes dropped to the glove I was wearing.

“I bought that for your Dad, y’know. Before I left for the army.” Pete’s voice had lost all of the smarmy charm that he’d used when talking to my mother and aunts. He seemed to have retreated within himself, like I did when engrossed in a riveting part of a new story. “Your dad took good care of it.”

“Really? I figured Grandma and Grandpa bought it.”

Pete had been in the process of lighting up a cigarette, a risky maneuver with only one hand free, when I responded and his laughter nearly blew out the flame of his lighter.

“Mom and Dad? Hell, kid, they could barely keep food on the table as it was. No, I bought the glove for your dad right before he hit high school, just like I sent him money every time he needed a new pair of cleats. Lucky he’s so short, his feet never grew much.” He smiled, “And you know what they say about guys with small feet . . . ,” his voice trailed off as he realized he was talking to his twelve year old nephew. “Never mind. Why don’t you head to the other side of the yard there?”

I flipped the ball to my uncle who caught it neatly, then trotted to the far end of the back yard. Pete reared back to throw, and released the ball in a low arch which thudded to the ground ten feet in front of me. I couldn’t help laughing, and Pete grinned.

“Ouch. Guess I’m a bit rusty.”

I ran forward and threw a laser back to him, the ball’s impact creating a solid *thwack*.

“Damn, kid, you got a cannon there.” He threw the ball back to me, and this time it at least bounced to a stop at my feet.

After a few more tosses Pete was able to more or less hit the target, although I had to retrieve a few that went over my head once he got some steam going on his throws. Whenever I ran back to get the ball I’d look up and occasionally see my mother or one of my aunts peering out at us from the kitchen window. But as time passed, we fell into a relaxing game of catch, much like my father and I.

It occurred to me as we threw the ball that my father had once admitted that Pete was the one who taught him to play baseball. I knew they grew up in the Missouri foothills, poor as dirt my dad usually said, but they had been very close as boys, according to my father. Pete always let my dad hang around him, and defended him from anyone who tried to bully his younger brother. (“He was a great guy, when we were kids,” my father had once told me. “Now . . . ,” his father’s voice had drifted off then, as he looked at me, perhaps realizing that I was not ready for that particular conversation yet.) But when Pete turned eighteen he had surprised everyone by dropping out of school and enlisting in the army. Six months into his term of service he had gone AWOL, and earned himself a dishonorable discharge. He had elected not to return home, instead drifting from one low-paying job to the next as his decline continued.

My dad told me about multiple occasions when Pete rescued David from trouble, the perfect older brother. Whenever he told these stories I was aware of sadness in him, but was unsure if it was a matter that was safe to question. When I’d try to turn our discussion to what Pete was like now, my father always changed the subject. I suspected,

but couldn't prove, that my father wished he could rescue his brother and be the hero now.

After all, my dad had excelled in school and received an athletic scholarship for college. He had completed college in three years and was married less than a year after graduation. He'd given up playing baseball then, but he still loved the game. He'd gone to work for a large pharmaceutical firm where he was currently a regional manager, a level of success that had seemed to insult my grandparents, who we rarely visited even though they lived only a few hours away.

After twenty minutes of throwing the ball, Pete's lack of physical fitness became apparent. Even the relative ease of throwing a baseball had him huffing and puffing. He gestured to an empty bucket that was lying in the grass to the right of where I was standing.

"What's that there for?"

I shrugged, "Dad sits there when I practice pitching. Says he can monitor my form better."

"That sounds perfect. Gonna sit me a spell too."

He plopped down onto the bucket and cracked open another beer, my father's brand I noticed, not the Pabst he had been drinking. I squatted next to him, at ease with him after the last twenty minutes. I glanced at the kitchen window, where Zoe stood looking down at us. Pete followed my stare, and chuckled when he saw her face pressed close to the glass.

"Your aunt is one distrustful bitch," he said.

I guess my look of shock was evident, because Pete laughed again. Maybe his comment had an influence on me, but when he laughed it sounded sinister.

“She not a . . . ,” I stopped, reluctant to use the same word my uncle had uttered.

He sniffed. “Sure she is, all three of them are. They’ve been watching us ever since we came outside, afraid bad old Uncle Pete is going to flip out and hurt you.”

I looked at him, wondering how he could accuse my aunts, my mother, of sending me out here with him if they thought he might hurt me.

He crushed another empty can, and pulled out two more and offered one to me. I quickly shook my head ‘no’, eliciting laughter from Pete. He had rolled his sleeves up during our game of catch and, as he popped the tab of another can of beer, I noticed a bandage peeking out of his shirt sleeve, high on his upper arm.

“What happened to your arm?”

Pete glanced at his arm, “Oh, that’s nothing. A misunderstanding.” He looked at me, seeming to understand that I wanted more information, the unasked question lingering in my mind. “You really want to know?”

I wondered what could hurt my uncle, a man who seemed to make others react in fear all the time. I nodded.

“Then take a knee in front of me and I’ll tell you the story.”

I knelt in the grass, our height difference eliminated now. My uncle placed his beer in the grass, resting it against the bucket to keep it from tipping over, and peeled back the bandage to reveal a jagged, three inch scar running up his bicep. He seemed to relish the pain that arose from peeling back the bandage to reveal the wound, and my

quick flinch from the sight of the wound brought another quick flash of a smile to his face.

“That, my son, is the result of a man trying to exceed his reach.”

Unaware of the garbled moral, I looked at my uncle while wondering what Pete had done. He correctly interpreted my unvoiced question and responded before I could speak.

“Oh, not me. Some big buck in a bar outside Tulsa. He pulled a knife on me during a friendly card game, accused me of cheating. He got in the first slash, but you know what I did?”

Pete’s voice had taken on the tones of a snake charmer and I, lulled by my uncle’s demeanor over the last twenty minutes, found myself disregarding the warning signs inherent in my mother and aunts behavior in regards to my uncle.

“What did you do?” I asked the question in reverential tones, my eyes fixed on the ugly wound.

“Well, first I knocked the knife out of his hand, then . . . ,”

I had no time to react as Pete’s left hand shot forward like a piston and grasped me behind the neck, an iron grip, drawing us face-to-face. Meanwhile his right hand emerged from his jeans pocket, flipping open a small blade in a fluid motion, and placing the sharpened edge against the swell of my neck.

My body went numb then, except for the four inches of skin that were in contact with the blade. That section of my neck began to burn and itch, and I wanted nothing more than to pull away. In that moment, accompanied by the burning sensation of the knife to my throat, I had my first truly adult thought. I knew that if I pulled back or

showed fear in any way, my uncle *would* hurt him. Not badly, but Pete would have considered a scar a good learning exercise.

I fought every instinct that urged me to retreat, as I considered instantly what the heroes of my books would do in this situation. As the ghosts of a thousand novels ran through my mind, I forced myself to lean closer to my uncle. I knew that neither my mother nor my aunts could see what he was doing, from the window it would simply look like I had stepped closer to him.

“. . . and then I did this.” Pete moved the knife against my neck, “You feel that, kid? Even a big sumbitch like you are gonna be knows better than to mess with a man that’s got a knife to his throat.”

“So, he backed down?” I held onto my voice, knowing it was a bad time for my voice to crack, hoping this was nearly over.

Pete turned the knife, letting the tip indent the bottom of my chin, his eyes probing for weakness.

“Oh, yeah. He backed down. And forked over three hundred bucks to finance my trip.” He eyed me carefully for one last, eternal moment before letting me go. He slipped the knife back into his jeans, picked up his can, and gulped down some beer. “You did better than he did too kid. He pissed himself, you didn’t. Got some of your dad in you despite them looks you got from your mom and her sisters. Some of me too I guess, though that ain’t necessarily a good thing.”

I watched silently as he polished off his beer and started another. How he could talk without slurring his words I could not understand. My hands were beginning to quiver as the adrenaline left my system, and I pressed them to my sides, reaching up to

rub at my neck might lead to another outburst from Pete. My uncle glanced at me now and then, but the easy camaraderie we had shared during our brief game of catch had fled.

“Hey, guys! We’re done, we’re gonna all head over to Tabby’s,” called my mother, leaning out the back door, waving us into the house.

Pete flipped the borrowed glove to me. “Thanks, kid. Haven’t played catch since my son. You run along.”

I ran up to the backdoor, my mother gripped my shoulder quickly as I passed, “Grab your cousins and get them in your aunts’ cars, please.”

After the encounter outside, I didn’t even pause to ask questions. My cousins were in the living room, each of them barefoot while their shoes lay tossed haphazardly about the room. “C’mon guys. We need to get going.” My attempt to take charge met with the typical response.

“You’re not the boss of us!” “Only if you agree to play at Aunt Tabitha’s!”

The cries from them were a link to a routine summer day, causing me to smile despite the seriousness of the situation. I looked out the window and saw a police car pulling up in front of the house. After the encounter outside, I knew that I didn’t want to see how Pete would react to their arrival. I had to get the little kids out to the car.

“Fine. I’ll play ‘School’ or ‘House’ or whatever. Let’s just go.”

My sisters and cousins stopped and looked at me, surprise and disbelief running across their faces. But my agreeing to play later got them moving, and within moments I had all of them walking out to Zoe’s station wagon, where she had opened up the hidden rear seats, a rare treat. After getting them all inside, I tumbled into the front passenger seat of the car, not wanting to ride with my mother at the moment. When I had walked

passed her in the kitchen my neck had flared with heat along the same patch of skin that had been home to Pete's blade for a brief, but infinite, moment.

I watched from the car as my mother and Tabitha rushed down to lawn to speak to the police officers, who entered the house alone. I wondered what they had told them. Had they told them how they had sent me out to occupy him, to keep a man they were afraid of away from them and my cousins? My fingers scratched at my neck now, trying to remove the skin that still remembered the feel of the razor sharp edge.

Zoe hurried to the car, and she wordlessly backed out of the driveway. As we sped away from the house, I continued to run my hand along the skin of my neck. I knew I was never going to forget the sensation, just as I would remember the look in my uncle's eyes when he pressed the knife to my throat.

While I had been in the moment, I had taken the look on Pete's face to be a combination of cruelty and superiority. Yet now, with the image ever-present in my mind, I began to see other aspects to my brief time with my uncle. I remembered his sudden change when we had been alone, and his lack of an attempt to shock me with inappropriate jokes about my father. I considered his decision not to make a joke at the expense of my father. The clear nostalgia when he'd seen that my dad had kept the baseball glove even after its prime days were over. My uncle clearly remembered buying a glove for his younger brother, and teaching that my dad to play baseball. It was a skill that had allowed my father to leave behind the poverty he'd grown up in, yet at the same time it had created an unbridgeable gap between them. This rush of understanding, one I would not have been capable of hours earlier, nearly overwhelmed me. In its wake I realized that I now felt pity for my uncle rather than the fear I'd felt earlier, yet I also

knew I would never forgive him for placing his knife to my throat. Nor could I forgive my mother or aunts for letting it happen. As we drove, Zoe turned to me.

“You ok?” she asked. “Did anything happen while you were with your uncle?”

I looked at her, seeing her differently than I had two hours earlier. I didn't think she really wanted to know the truth, she was just looking for me to make her feel better after her part in the afternoon's dark turn. I was used to people turning a blind eye when classmates taunted me, used to seeing people make excuses for letting bad things happen. I let my mother's false smile work its way onto my face for the first time.

“No,” I said. “We just played catch.”

She looked at me, searching for the lie in my words. I turned, and watched as the road rolled by.

## Threads

Dan stood in front of his bureau, his hands moving with precision as he buttoned his shirt, starting with the lowest button until he had the collar secured. The shirt felt tighter, leading him to wonder if he had gained weight. But a quick touch of his fingers along his neckline indicated no sag or increase in the fold of skin there. It was more likely, he decided, that the dry cleaner had made an error and used too much starch.

He continued dressing, no variation in his morning ritual. Afterwards he performed a final touch-up of his hair, and then performed a quick sweep of the top of the bureau as he retrieved the items he carried in his pockets. He finished placing his keys, wallet, money clip, and business card holder before his fingers fell on empty space. He looked down expecting to see that his pen had perhaps rolled an inch or two to the side, but the only item still on top of his bureau was the alarm clock and four quarters for the toll. His eyes fell to the carpeted floor in front and to the sides of the bureau, nothing. He took off his suit jacket, which he laid on the bed, and slid the bureau away from the wall. He did not find the pen waiting for him along the base of the wall.

“Dammit,” he muttered under his breath.

Dan loved his pen, a gift from his mentor at the firm, a custom Pelican that he’d received after a settlement months earlier. (“A top-tier lawyer needs a top tier pen,” Jeffrey Donnelly had told him then.) It weighed three grams and had an eighteen karat gold-plated iridium nib. It was one of a set of thirty, irreplaceable. He liked to think of it as his own version of a gavel until the day he received an appointment to the bench. He especially liked that it made the loop of the ‘y’ at the end of his last name look like a

noose. He liked to point out to those that opposed him in the many, lucrative corporate lawsuits he handled that – in a display of his very bad sense of humor – he had left them hanging out to dry.

He put his jacket back on, his mind replaying yesterday's events as he tried to determine the possible moment when someone might have stolen his pen. Dan made his way to his front hall closet wondering if he had, though the idea was ridiculous he determined, forgotten to remove the pen from the front pocket of the suit he had worn the day before. The front closet was the repository for all of his outgoing dry cleaning, and he slid the door aside expecting to see Monday's navy pinstripe and yesterday's charcoal grey.

The closet was empty except for his overcoat and winter jacket.

He looked at his front door, the chain was still engaged. Unease entered him, rising above the tide of annoyance at the loss of his pen. Someone had been in his house, he decided. Dan was used to controlling every aspect of his life, the possibility that someone else was manipulating him left him with the taste of ashes in his mouth.

But a quick walk through the apartment revealed nothing else of value to be missing, except for the two suits and his fountain pen. He picked up the phone in the kitchen and dialed a nine and a one, before his eyes fell to the calendar. He placed the phone back in its cradle. Dan knew it was April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013, but the calendar – one he remembered not just throwing out, but ripping in half - insisted it was still the previous November. He had disliked the month's photo then, a lone mountain climber on a peak with a caption proclaiming the merits of achievement, and he liked it even less now. He fumbled for his cell phone, hoping that the modern technology would refute the growing

strangeness of his morning. To his dismay, the display supported the calendar's argument, showing the date to be November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

It was a joke. It had to be.

He stood in the center of his apartment, and saw his briefcase laying on the kitchen table, when he knew it should be sitting in a far, dark corner of his closet. He hadn't taken his briefcase to work in weeks, not since making partner in late December. It opened once he set the combination and, sure enough, the Anderson v. Johnson Corporation case file – which he had settled two days before Thanksgiving - was in the briefcase.

A nervous laugh escaped him. The Anderson case had been his highest profile win to date. It had netted him the Pelican pen, and was the deciding factor in convincing the partners that he deserved to buy into the firm. He had bought the two missing suits as a reward for himself in the wake of the both occasions, sometime in January, a fact that did not escape him.

He stood trying to make sense of things, and his eyes fell to the calendar again. It was April 10<sup>th</sup>, he was sure of it. Then it came to him. Of course. It was so simple. This was Hightower's doing.

John Hightower was a named partner at the firm, and an elaborate prankster. He had also been the lone dissenting vote in making Dan a partner. Because of Hightower, the firm dreaded April Fool's Day; those that with enough rank in the firm found excuses to be out of the office, while the rest of the staff spent the day waiting for the sky to fall. But this year John had seemingly decided to forego the holiday, now Dan knew why. This must have taken a while to set-up.

Not to mention, he thought, hiring a hacker to alter his phone.

Dan walked through the doors of Blake, Donnelly, and Hightower at nine in the morning, and headed for his office. He was not surprised to see the words “Daniel Grey - Senior Associate” on his door, that alteration being the easiest step of this hoax. The surprised look on his assistant’s face was, however, an unwelcome sight

“Dan, what are you doing here,” asked Jason, scurrying after Dan.

“I’m not laughing, Jason,” replied Dan.

Jason looked at him, pausing to weigh his words. He had worked for Dan for a year, twice as long as any other legal secretary had lasted. “But, you were due in court at 8:30.”

Dan looked up, a scowl growing on his face. “Jason, you work for me, not Hightower.”

“Did you already deal with the suppression hearing?”

Dan sighed. He had been in court on November 12<sup>th</sup>, true, and it had been to deal with a suppression motion to keep a disgruntled, former employee of the Johnson Corporation from testifying. It had been the linchpin of the settlement in fact. Hightower had pulled out his bag of tricks to rope Jason into playing along, and Dan was almost impressed. Hightower was exceeding his usual flair.

“Get out, Jason.” Dan swiveled his chair to look out his window, letting the view of the cityscape calm him. The more he considered things, the angrier he was that Hightower felt the need to flex his control over Dan’s status as a junior partner. He

decided to get some actual work done, but when he opened his desk drawer all he found were old case files, nothing he was currently working on. He swiveled his chair to look out the window again.

He was still in the same position twenty minutes later, pondering his choice of response to Hightower's actions against him. His reaction needed to be both friendly and respectful. At least his public response needed to be those things. The intercom on his phone beeped, cutting off his thoughts.

"Dan, Judge Markaway's clerk is on the line."

Dan looked at the phone, "All right."

How had Hightower gotten Markaway to play along? The two hated each other.

Dan answered the phone, "Daniel Grey speaking."

"Mr. Grey, this Janet Sims calling on behalf of Judge Markaway."

"What can I do for you this morning, Janet?" Dan used his best schmoozing tone. He didn't want to risk angering any of the potentially useful pawns in Hightower's prank.

There was a pause on the line, as if the speaker had been expecting a different response. "Judge Markaway wanted me to inform you that, in light of your failure to appear in court, he has ruled against your motion to suppress."

"Of course he has," replied Dan.

"Ummm," her confusion was apparent. "Yes. And he's issued a contempt order for your failure to appear this morning, along with a fine. The paperwork will be couriered over later today."

"Excellent! I look forward to it," said Dan. He hung up the phone, cutting off any further comments from Janet. He had more important matters to deal with than this minor

annoyance. How much longer was Hightower going to drag this out? Dan propped his feet on his desk and went back to admiring his view as he waited for the architect of his morning to make a timely appearance.

He didn't have long to wait. At ten, John Hightower's voice boomed behind him. "Just what the hell were you thinking?"

Dan lowered his feet and turned to face John. But the smile on Dan's face fled as he saw that John was accompanied by Harold Blake and Jeffrey Donnelly, the other named partners. Dan felt his world splintering like glass, the shards falling around him. His mind felt torn by the impossible sight in front of him. Jeffrey Donnelly had been dead for two months, his last act with the firm had been to cast the deciding vote establishing Dan as a partner.

Dan sat on his sofa later than evening, an empty glass on the table in front of him. He was drinking straight from the bottle now, trying to come to terms with the impossible. His father had given him the bottle of Glenfarclas, a twenty-five year old bottle of aged Scotch, when the firm hired him, it seemed fitting to drink it now. On the floor next to him were his personal possessions from work. It seemed that failing to appear in court, with an eight figure settlement in the balance, had led to the loss of the Johnson Corporation as a client. The senior partners were – upset – with the loss, since the client's billings had been worth several million each year. Dan had found himself without a client or a job. The joyful look on Jason's face as he helped pack up Dan's things hadn't helped his mood.

All of which were small items on Dan's list of concerns now. The first was to determine if he was crazy. He knew, *knew*, that it was April 10<sup>th</sup>, the way he knew he was right handed, disliked butter pecan ice cream, and that his all-time, favorite movie was *Silence of the Lambs*. Unfortunately, no one else knew it.

After being escorted out of the building, he had taken the time to ask six different, random passersby for the date. Three had told him in colorful terms that they were uninterested in answering his question. The others had been under the delusion that it was actually November 12<sup>th</sup> of the prior year. In his drunken stupor he wondered if they had come out of Central Casting, the same place Hightower must have found the Jeffrey Donnelly look-alike.

He took another long pull on the bottle. It had been unopened when he started drinking, yet now there were barely three fingers remaining. He consoled himself with the idea that if it were 2012, he might be able to make some money on the stock market to offset his new status as unemployed. He held the bottle to his lips and drank the rest of the Scotch. He stood to retrieve a fresh bottle, but the world spun off its axis beneath him. He sank onto the couch, his eyes closing as he waited for the world to right itself.

When he opened his eyes it was dark, and he'd managed to stumble into his bedroom. A look at the clock showed it to be six am. But since he had nowhere to be on this, his very first day of unemployment since he was sixteen, he didn't care that the alarm hadn't sounded at five. He rose to his feet, and the realization hit him that he had somehow evaded the hangover he deserved.

He walked out to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, and his eyes darted to the calendar. He stopped in his tracks, coffee forgotten as when he saw the picture of a grey

tabby playing with two balls of navy blue yarn. This calendar had been a Christmas gift from Tiffany, a pilates instructor he had dated for a short period of time. Two years earlier.

He stepped closer to look at the calendar and read, November 2011. He had no doubt that if he turned on his computer or looked at his phone he would find that it was the 12<sup>th</sup>. On a hunch he picked up the phone and dialed his office number. The voicemail picked up and he heard the voice of Darcy Tyler asking him to leave a message. Darcy had been his assistant that year. He hung up the phone, a fleeting happiness that he was no longer unemployed filling him. Blackness started to darken the edges of his vision and he walked over to his liquor cabinet. He opened it and grabbed a bottle at random, opened it, and took a long drink. He nearly choked at the taste of Scotch, and had to look down at the bottle. Glenfarclas, the same bottle he had emptied the night before. His father's gift was proving itself to be worth the price. Dan walked back to his bed with the bottle in hand, and drank himself to sleep.

He woke up an hour later, though he would not hazard a guess as to what year it was pretending to be until he saw his calendar. He walked into the kitchen and saw the photo from a distance. This time it was a picture of Kurt Warner with his arm cocked back to throw; the calendar commemorated Super Bowl XLIII, and was a gift from Alexis who had been from Pittsburg. The only reminders of the women he dated were calendars, but at least he actually liked this one.

He walked over to his liquor cabinet and, sure enough, there was the bottle of Glenfarclas. He took the bottle out, but this time he poured the contents into the sink. No

drinking another day away, he needed answers. Something was unraveling his life, and it needed to stop.

His briefcase was in its customary position, and he withdrew his laptop and sat at the kitchen table. He opened up the browser and typed in the words ‘time travel’ – still not believing it was possible, despite the evidence – and hit the search button. He frowned when his search resulted in over two billion hits. Seeing that the third entry was on a page declaring itself science.com, and hoping it was true, he started his search there.

Four hours passed quickly as he followed every link, trying to familiarize himself with the numerous theories regarding time travel, none of which helped explain his condition. He knew he was running out of options when fictional stories of time travel began to pop up; books by Mark Twain, Robert Heinlein, and Kurt Vonnegut would do nothing to help him solve his problem. He looked at the calendar again, at the date which was haunting him.

Then he understood. He had been letting himself think of the date as the one he knew it should be, not the one every shred of evidence pointed too. An important date in his life, but lost in the context of his current dilemma.

November 12<sup>th</sup>, and Amy Francis.

Dan and Amy had been inseparable once they started dating in high school. Freshman year had been a dream, as had the first few months of their sophomore year. Dan’s last, really good memory of them was the Homecoming Dance, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1996. Three days later she had died, the victim of a home invasion.

He went to his closet and pulled a large box off the top shelf. Dan was not one for sentimentality, but even he had a few items from his past that he held onto. Inside the box

were his high school yearbooks, some pictures, and a couple of trophies. He took the box out to the sofa, poured a glass of the bottomless Glenfarclas, and opened the box. Inside were dozens of photos and knickknacks from his past. For the next several hours he looked at the old images, remembering himself at sixteen. The football and baseball team. A photo of him and Jake Danvers, his best friend from kindergarten until Amy's death. After Amy died, he had cut off all his ties to those he was close too. But most of all he looked at pictures of Amy. The two of them at the beach. Amy in her cheerleader uniform. Amy posed this way and that way, always smiling, always with her life ahead of her. He found an envelope inside the box, sealed and unopened, which he set aside to

Dan spent the next day, or 2008, getting used to his new (old) apartment. He had gone to bed, and barely fallen asleep when he opened his eyes to find himself at the firm. But instead of his office he had been in his junior associate's cubicle. He had faked being sick, seeing no point in working if he was only go to wake up a year earlier, and headed for home. He sadly remembered that he was still making his junior associate salary and wouldn't get his senior associate position until May of 2009, which meant he was living in his old studio apartment rather than the luxury Manhattan residence he would buy.

It had taken the last three days to convince himself that this was happening, that he was suddenly living his life backwards a year at a time. Or rather a year and an hour, since he had woken an hour later in the day each time. That too seemed purposeful, and he had done the math quickly. His lawyer's mind remembered the police stating that time

of death was around ten in the evening, and if he kept jumping back at this pace he would 'wake up' the night Amy died at nine pm. He found he was eager to get there.

That was when whatever force that was toying with him decided to change the rules.

In his preparation for bed that night, his vision twisted, the sudden vertigo causing him fall backwards. He landed on a hard wooden pew surrounded by a large crowd. Looking around he recognized it as St. Vincent's Cathedral, and as he looked towards the altar, he felt his world coming apart again. This was not November 12<sup>th</sup>, it was July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, his father's funeral.

"No, no, not this day, any day but this one," he thought.

He watched as the priest stood up to deliver the eulogy, a speech that had bored him to the core the first time around. He turned and looked to his right, where his mother sat at the end of the pew, silent and still, shedding no tears for the man she had been married to for forty-two years. He craned his neck around, his father's best friend sat directly behind Dan's mother, going over notes of the words he planned to say regarding Dan's father. "Daniel was my best friend," the speech would begin before Robert talked about all the great times he had gone through with Daniel Senior.; the hunting trips, the Saturdays at the golf club, and weekly canasta games with their mutual friends.

Dan stood up in the front pew, the priest going quiet at the unexpected movement. Dan slid out of the pew, took a step towards Robert and punched the man in the face without warning. Several mourners moved to pull him off, but Dan still got two more blows in before they could restrain him. Then he heard his mother crying, not for the man in the coffin, but for Robert.

Dan stopped struggling then, and looked around at the faces of the crowd. They were looking from him, to his mother, and then to Robert. The truth of the situation was dawning in several eyes, but Dan wasn't worried about that.

He shook himself free of the arms that held him, and strode towards the doors of the church. He saw no reason to mourn a man twice, even his father. Especially when his father would be alive again in the morning, whichever morning Dan was headed for next. There was a loud gasp from the assembled crowd when he started whistling before walking out the door.

The other side of the door delivered him seamlessly to another memorial, this one for Amy. It had been in 2006, ten years after her death. Looking around he saw Amy's sister, Lauren, talking to other guests. The party was Lauren's idea, since both of her parents had died in the years since her sister's death. It was a somber affair, intended to be a reminder to the community that the killer was still at large, and as such no one was enjoying themselves. Lauren held an ever-present tissue in her hand, so she could dab at her eyes every now and then.

Dan saw her look his way and he smiled, remembering how this had ended the first time. The drinks after everyone else had left save for the two of them. The first, gentle kiss as they both drunkenly gave into shared feelings of loss. Her soft hands rubbing his chest afterwards, before it had gone bad. Dan could remember the encounter vividly, especially the sex, but he had little memory of what occurred after she started crying.

"I miss her so much," Lauren had said.

He had tuned her out then, not interested in reminiscing, simply eager to make his excuses and leave. Lauren had been ten when Amy died, asleep in the house when the intruder killed her sister, and police had claimed it a miracle that she had survived. Looking at her across the room, Dan had the same thought now as he had the first time he lived these events. She hadn't survived. She walked, she talked, but she had left her spirit in the house with Amy's.

It was her resemblance to Amy that had led to their brief encounter. She had dyed her hair black as she had begun to explore the Goth scene at the local community college, and to hide the natural blonde hair she shared with her sister. But Dan remembered thinking that it was her eyes that truly marked her as Amy's sibling. Looking into them as they tumbled into bed had reminded him, all those years ago and again today, that he and Amy had never shared this particular intimacy.

An hour after later she would claim their night together a mistake, and he would not see her again. Two years later he would find himself a pariah at his own high school reunion as the story of his pursuit of Lauren at her sister's memorial service had made the rounds. He didn't mind, he had only gone to brag about his status as an associate at one off the top law firms in New York. As for Lauren Francis, she had disappeared years ago. Probably into the anonymity of a suburban housewife, thought Dan.

She met his eyes now, saw the smile on his face. Lauren reacted much differently this time than she had before, when he had donned the demeanor of the heart-broken former paramour of her sister. Lauren interpreted the smile, not as a friendly greeting, but as a heartless gesture from someone who should know better.

“Having a good time, Dan? Glad to see my sister’s memorial is keeping you entertained,” she ranted, her words slurring in the process.

All eyes were on Dan now, and he grinned again, then laughed. The room went dead silent, everyone turning to stare at him. He reached down and grabbed a handful of baby carrots off the vegetable tray on the table next to him, still laughing – nearly hysterical - at the absurdity that his life had become over the last several days. He raised the carrot to his mouth wondering how they would react to the loud crunch. Instead his teeth crashed down on empty space.

His teeth clicked loudly as they crashed together, startling the woman sitting next to him on the couch in his apartment.

“What was that?”

Dan looked at her, struggling to place the redhead’s name. Carrie? His head spun as he tried to place her, so he resorted to looking across the room towards the kitchen, but he couldn’t see the calendar.

“You ok, babe?” she asked.

“Fine. I’m fine,” he mumbled. He stood, shaking off her arm which had been entwined around him, her hand grasping his as they watched television. What was her damn name?

She was looking at him hard now, a look he remembered, and it triggered his recall.

“Jerry!” He exclaimed he name triumphantly. “Sorry,” he said, lowering his voice to normal tones. “Just the movie had me freaked out for a minute.”

“*Legally Blonde 2* had you freaked out?”

Now she was looking at him in amusement, which was much better than the judgmental look she had worn a few moments earlier. Much better, much safer. He turned and looked at the TV, wondering how to cover his foolish statement.

“You know how I feel about the law,” he said, knowing it was a lame impromptu explanation. He dropped back to the couch, “Maybe there’s something else we can do instead,” he said, lowering his voice as he tried to be seductive.

“What did you have in mind?”

Dan blinked, looking at his father sitting across from him in their family home. On the table was the bottle of Glenfarclas, a ribbon taped to the neck, haunting him like Jacob Marley. At least he didn’t have to work hard to determine that the year was still 2006. The shifts were happening much faster now, but they also seemed to be making him relive events from the same year.

“Daniel? What did you have in mine?” asked his father, Daniel Senior.

Dan blinked, and bit down on his tongue to stop himself from speaking. Again his actions in one time had followed him, creating their own echo as he arrived in his past. His hands groped for the bottle, ripping the ribbon free.

“Why don’t we share a drink of this Scotch, Dad? We’ve never had a drink together before,” said Dan.

“Since when are you sentimental?” asked his father.

Dan rose and went to the cupboard and took down two glasses. “I don’t know, it just seems you paid for law school and college . . . .”

“Which you are paying me back for, one glass of Scotch won’t change that,” said his father, as stern as Dan remembered.

“. . . so this job is as much a win for you as it is for me,” finished Dan, ignoring his father’s statement. He had finished paying his father back six months before his dad’s death. It was one of the reasons that discovering his mother’s relationship with Robert Sanders had angered him so badly. He loathed the idea of them spending his money on their illicit affair, when his father never had a chance to enjoy his retirement.

He turned back to the table, noting with amusement that his father had opened the bottle of Scotch. His protest was merely for show between the two of them. Dan set the glasses down, and sat as his father poured them both a healthy shot. He took his glass in hand, and raised it up in the air.

“To your good health, sir,” he said, watching as the room wavered and shifted before he could finish the toast.

Dan’s hand now held an ice cold bottle of beer, something he had not had since college. The pounding bass line from the song blasting out of the speakers next to him let him know he was back in college. Until this moment he had hoped the shifts would stop before his life’s work was completely undone, this latest shift had sent him back to sometime before 2002, when he and his fraternity brothers had practically lived in

McSorley's Pub in D.C. That meant he had yet to graduate college, much less law school. He was no longer a lawyer, he didn't know what he was.

He put the bottle to his mouth and tilted it back, letting the cold, bitter fluid calm his suddenly racing heartbeat.

"Dude, slow down, we just got here."

Dan turned to look at the speaker, one of his brothers, a man he had not spoken to after he graduated. He let a plastic smile cross his face. "I was thirsty." His voice sounded alien to him, and far too young.

Across the bar a blonde coed walked in, and Dan recognized her from his past. Her name was Rachel, and they had met in this bar. Was it today, he wondered, watching as she greeted her friends. Rachel had been the first girl he dated after Amy's death, the only woman he had ever considered proposing to. But in the end his father's insistence on putting law school before personal desires won out.

Maybe this was why he was moving backward, he thought. To get this right for once. He stood, trying to remember how he had introduced himself all those years ago. He was walking across the bar when her eyes met his, and the world fell apart for the last time.

He opened his eyes, the gentle purr of his car engine sounding in his ear, the auburn glow of the stoplight greeting him. He looked down at himself, he was wearing his letterman jacket, the one he had thrown away two weeks after her funeral. The same

jacket he refused to wear after she died. A quick, unnecessary, glance at the car clock: nine pm. He was right on time.

He looked at the street signs, he was stopped at the corner of Elm and Watershed. He hadn't driven the streets of his hometown in over six year, but he knew that his destination was two blocks down to the right. He turned right and drove the two blocks, watching as the houses appeared in the old, familiar order.

He parked in front of one of the Francis' neighbors and made his way around to the back door of Amy's house. They kept the front door locked at all times, but the back door and garage entrance were always open. He slipped inside quietly, the sounds of conversation drifting down the hallway. He had been in this house hundreds of times between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, and that knowledge allowed him to follow the sounds unerringly to the family room.

He smelled her first, the cloying odor of the mango-scented shampoo she insisted on wafted down the hall. He turned the corner and saw her, asleep on the couch, the glow of the television bleaching the color from her face. He toggled the light switch with his elbow, wakening her from a light sleep. She blinked as she saw him standing over her.

“Danny? What time is it?”

He'd forgotten how beautiful she was, how much he had loved her. Never been that open or honest with anyone. Only Rachel had come close to the making him feel the way Amy had. But always there was the fear of being manipulated, being betrayed the way Amy had betrayed him.

“Why Homecoming night? Why Jake?” He heard the words coming, playing off the reel of his memory.

Now the color did drain out of her face. She stood, her hands reaching out to him in a gesture of apology. “Oh, god. Danny, I’m . . . .”

He heard her voice but ignored the words, just as he had then. He reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulling out the small .22 automatic he knew was there. The tiny gun looked like a toy, but it still held eleven real bullets. Ten in the clip and one in the chamber. Two were more than adequate as he fired twice, creating ridiculously tiny pops that were absorbed by sounds on the television.

She crumpled back against onto the couch, and he turned his back to her. He had already watched her die once, the memory had kept him warm during cold nights. After her there had been others.

The first had been Rachel, when his father told him to end the relationship. But the idea of her being with anyone else had gnawed at him for months after their break-up, until the night he came by unexpectedly. The rush of killing again had been lessened, but was still an act to be savored. He had taken her calendar off wall as a reminder, looking at it over the next few months. He had found himself needing to relive the moment, and so he had, each commemorated by a calendar, but never on the same day.

He walked up the stairs and down the upper hall, stopping in front of the door to Lauren’s room. If he was going to keep bouncing backwards, he might as well kill her too, he thought. But as he reached for the handle he stopped.

The first time, Lauren had lived, and he had taken a great deal of pride knowing that he had gotten away with murder. Then when he had seduced her at the memorial, why that had been sheer revenge for Amy’s betrayal of him. If time did start flowing forward again, and he killed her now, then he wouldn’t get to experience the

deliciousness of that betrayal this time. Nor would he relish the idea that he had been the cause of her years of anguish and loss, and he had always prided himself on destroying Amy's family that night.

If his life moved forward after this, he knew everything of importance that would occur over the next two decades and could take advantage of it, provided he didn't change anything. He could live like a king, and he would have more time for his favorite hobby. Then when it came time to wake up on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013, if he found himself back at November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012? With time unspooling again? This time he could expect it, this time he could be prepared.

And he could kill Amy and Jake over and over again, his life a closed loop as he lived in luxury and basked in his own superiority.

So there were two possibilities; life as a god, or he could enjoy the pleasure of killing Amy's sister while she bled out in the other room.

His hand hovered over the doorknob as he made his decision.

## Sleepwalker

I was able to count the ceiling tiles in my room by the light of the fluorescent bulbs that lined the walls of the corridor outside. There were sixty-four (tiles, not bulbs) arranged in a perfectly square eight-by-eight pattern. They tallied the same this time as they had the last dozen or so times I'd ticked them off. I kept hoping the number would change, give me a reason to justify the mundane task, rather than using the count as an excuse to pass the time.

It would have been easy to blame the bed for my restlessness. The bed's springs had long since given up the claim to their function; time had seen them compressed into tangled, unforgiving masses of metal. The pillow was paper-thin, and I'd long since pushed it off the bed rather than make some futile attempt to obtain comfort from the damned thing. I resorted to folding the blanket into a small, tight ball to provide a cushion to support my head. The snores emanating from the room across the corridor, however, told me that at least one of my fellow patients was finding the bed to his liking.

I glanced at the bedside clock to see the time, it was 3:45 AM, the glowing numerals served to mock me in my quest for sleep. I don't know why I had expected anything different; I had long since become familiar with watching the early morning hours crawl by as I lay awake in bed. I'd been sleeping no more than two or three hours a night for the past three months. In the last four days I hadn't slept at all.

Part of me wanted to close the door, cast the room into darkness. But that would violate Rule #5 – All Doors Are To Remain Open At All Times - of a dozen or so

directives I'd managed to memorize between the hours of midnight and one. After that I had appointed myself Keeper of the Tiles and begun my inventory.

I knew two things for certain that early Saturday morning; it had been almost twenty-four hours since I'd first walked into St. Augustine's hospital seeking medical attention, and that I had somehow managed to find myself transferred and committed to a state facility for a seventy-two hour psychiatric evaluation when my insomnia had been linked (after a very cursory series of questions, I had felt) to severe depression and possible bipolar disorder. The evaluation would not actually commence until Monday, because there would be no "doctors panel" present at the facility to offer a true diagnosis until then – just a single psychiatrist to dispense medication. Why it was okay to dispense medication without a proper exam I didn't know, but it didn't really matter. The "sleep aid" they had given me might as well have been an M&M. Two hundred ninety-four hours and fifteen minutes before I could go home. I wondered how many of those hours would pass before I succumbed to sleep, or found myself forcefully sedated for my own good.

I decided to walk out to the lounge and watch TV for a bit, to see if it would help but knowing it was a futile gesture on my part. The facility had categorized me as a 'voluntary' patient but that label was disingenuous. I had found that out when I offered to drive myself from St. Augustine's to the Peterson Psychiatric Institute, an offer I made to avoid seeing an ambulance bill in addition to the hospital stay. My offer was politely declined, and I spent the hours from ten in the morning on Friday until to in the afternoon waiting on transportation.

When I had finally arrived at three o'clock, counting the time I walked in the door at five am, I sat around for seven hours. Some people argue we need to revamp health care. I wonder where that idea comes from.

Once I was at PPI, a cute abbreviation they insisted on calling the worn down institute, an orderly had taken possession of my clothes and other belongings then issued me a pair of over-sized scrubs. My shoes were an acceptable security risk, once the laces had been removed (apparently I was a suicide risk), and I got to keep them. While I waited, for two hours this time, to be taken to the ward the orderly fell asleep in the hallway watching Judge Judy on TV. He was supposed to be monitoring me to see if I was micro-napping, I marveled at the professionalism. By the time I was actually taken to my room it was five in the afternoon. A meager twelve hours to get checked in.

My room turned out to be at the end of the corridor that connected it to the patient's lounge of the wing where I was staying. As I walked the few feet into the open area I had to pass the nurses' station. The night nurse was an elderly African-American man ("Call me, Bob," he'd said when he gave me the tour nine hours earlier) who was currently working on a crossword puzzle.

He glanced up as I approached, apparently I had been expected, "I see you're still awake, Mr. Denton." He smiled a warm, welcoming grin. I appreciated his obvious attempt to instill a bit of trust within a new patient, as someone who had always worked with people I could recognize a good salesman when I saw one. My sleep-deprived mind translated the intended warmth of that toothy grin into something far less appealing; a swarm of piranha or the emissary of a cannibal tribe. He placed the TV remote upon the station counter, correctly interpreting my reasons for being out of bed.

I shrugged, "I've gotten used to it. And call me, Mark, please." I walked over to one of a dozen or so plastic chairs arranged in front of an elevated television and sat down. Sure enough, there was only local programming. My choices were between Jerry Springer on NBC or an infomercial hawking male enhancement pills hosted by Ron Jeremy (World Famous Porn Star the ad proclaimed, as if those credentials were meaningful) that was playing on both ABC and CBS. It was a tough choice but I went with Springer and a show on "Transvestites and the Women Who Love Them." I sighed and settled into the chair, expecting thirty minutes of mind-numbing torture.

"Are you any good at crossword puzzles, Mark?" I looked over to where Bob was leaning on the counter, puzzle in hand as he used a pencil to point at a series of empty boxes. "I can never seem to finish one, but I love 'em."

I shrugged, hesitant to admit that I made a habit of doing the local paper's crossword every day. I didn't want to do anything but pass the time and get out discharged, getting friendly with the locals was not on my agenda. But it was very late, and boredom was a bigger threat to my well-being than spending a few minutes on a crossword puzzle. "On occasion I will do one, yes."

"Well then, maybe you can give me a nine letter word for 'presumptuous'? Starts with a 'C'."

I didn't hesitate before responding, "Confident."

He looked at me in surprise for a moment, then at his puzzle as he counted the letters to see if my answer worked. "Hmm, not bad."

"My pleasure."

He sat back down and perused the paper, “Ok, thirteen down, eight letters, second letter ‘N’, Orwellian porcine.”

I had been looking at the ceiling when he asked his question; so far I had counted eighty-three tiles. I dropped my gaze to meet his eyes, “Snowball.”

He looked down at his paper, and I imagined I could hear the scratch of his pencil upon the page as he filled in the squares. “That’s pretty impressive, Mr. Denton.”

“Not really, I just remember useless trivia that will never come in handy for anything except the occasional crossword.”

“Even so, with your help I might be able to go home tomorrow and tell my wife I finished the crossword for the first time in twenty years. Just don’t tell the docs I kept you up.” He laughed at his own joke and I joined him, both of us aware that he wasn’t kidding. But I was just grateful to have something to do and the idea of getting Bob into trouble never occurred to me.

Bob and I had long since finished the crossword when the weekend staff began arriving around six-thirty in the morning. Other patients were starting to wake up for breakfast and the common room was rapidly filling to capacity. I was currently housed in a coed wing, and men and women were mingling as they waited for staff to escort them to the cafeteria. I relinquished the remote at the request of an older woman who wanted to watch the morning news; instead I turned my attention to those around me.

I had learned, despite my brief exposure to them the day before, that the majority of patients were there being treated for drug or alcohol related concerns. Aside from myself there were four other men and two women receiving treatment for what I

considered actual psychiatric concerns. At seven-thirty they dispensed meds, and I watched three of my fellow patients fall asleep as seeming result of whatever cocktail they were given. I only guessed this because the orderlies on duty were each assigned to monitor one of the three. A few days later I would learn that the three sleepers were on heavy doses of mood stabilizers, which tended to knock them out. At the time I wished I was getting the same meds. When eight o'clock rolled around orderlies collected all the patients with permission to leave the ward and escorted them to breakfast. My suicide shoes and I were not among those allowed to leave the floor.

Breakfast came to us on large, industrial trays: single serving boxes of Frosted Flakes, stale bagels, scrambled eggs, orange juice, and coffee. A glassed-in room adjacent to the main lounge served as both a small dining area and an activities room where patients were able to play cards and other games when the opportunity arose. I passed on breakfast; another side benefit of not sleeping was a marked lack of appetite. While the food cooled, orderlies walked down each corridor rousing the late sleepers or those who had been checked-in overnight.

Back at the nurses' station one of the patients was arguing with Bob.

"Why can't I go downstairs to eat," he was asking the older man, his voice a barely-there whisper as if he were talking in church.

Bob was looking down at the magazine that had replaced his crossword. He didn't even look up before responding, "Did you brush your teeth this morning Brian?"

"No, but its break..."

Bob cut him off, "Also, did you take a shower when you woke up?"

"No, but..."

“And it’s obvious you haven’t gotten dressed either. You agreed to Doctor Parson’s rules two weeks ago: you get to go to the cafeteria on days when you shower, brush your teeth, and get dressed. Now, when was the last time you did any of those three?”

Brian stared through Bob, as if denying the man’s presence would force the doors of the cafeteria to open. He wore a bedraggled robe that cinched around the middle, and was covered in food stains. I wondered how he managed to keep such an obviously dangerous piece of fabric when my shoelaces were forbidden.

“A month, Brian. A month since you got dressed in anything but that ratty looking robe. As far as showering and brushing your teeth I think we can both agree that you have engaged in neither of those activities. You’ve had this discussion before or after every meal for the last two weeks with me or Regina. Now, I suggest that if you want to go to the cafeteria for lunch you do as you agreed or you’ll be eating up here again.”

Brian walked away from the station dejected. He directed his gaze upward, going out of his way not to look anyone in the eye. I tried to determine his age, but in addition to not showering in at least a month he had also not shaved, and a filthy, bushy beard hid aspects of his face that might reveal his age. Either way I placed him as no older than twenty-three. He selected a chair from in front of the TV and relocated it against the room’s far wall. He turned the chair to face the wall and isolated himself from the rest of us. He stared at that blank, grey wall until lunch when he finally stood up, walked to the station, and had the same argument with Regina regarding his cafeteria privileges. He then returned to his chair for the remainder of the day.

Watching him, I wondered if I would have that zombified aura about me if I didn't manage to get some sleep soon.

Saturday passed slowly for all of us. There was no coffee pot on the ward, or a smoking lounge since it was a state facility, and I watched the folks there for chemical addiction on as they tried to claw the skin off their arms. They were the first in line when lunch rolled around, and I learned that after lunch they would be allowed access to the gym and the common ground area, a place where they could smoke in peace. I could hear basketball being played out on the courts, and see other patients milling about outside through the windows. I returned to my room sporadically to try and fall asleep, never meeting with any success. I spent most of the afternoon in front of the television pretending to watch Xena reruns.

Around four o'clock one of the other new arrivals emerged from his room where he had been sleeping off a hangover. He took in Brian staring at the wall, the rest of the current occupants of the floor zoned out on whatever medications they were on, me watching TV, and moved to join me. He observed me quietly for almost an hour, I guess he was trying to decide if I was going to turn out to be a basket case when he talked to me. Finally he came to a decision.

"Hey, man, I'm Scott." He held out his hand for me to shake, which I did.

"Mark," I said. I nodded my head in Brian's direction, "And that's Brian," I remarked in neutral tones, not sure about Scott myself. But he seemed okay.

“So, how did you end up here, you look pretty normal compared to everyone else. Or is it not cool to ask that” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, slipping one free with well-practiced ease.

“No smoking, Mr. Barnes,” called Regina from the front desk.

He glumly returned the cigarettes to his pocket, while I considered my response.

“Well, I guess what I learned is that you never admit to a doctor conducting a routine psych eval that lately you’ve been having trouble suppressing the urge to lash out in anger at other people. It’s a bad idea.”

In fact my words to the doctor had been more specific. I’d admitted that I yelled at, and nearly punched, a woman in front of me at the supermarket who had thirteen items which exceeded the limit of twelve in the rapid checkout lane. My ability to control my anger had been deteriorating the more sleep deprived I had become, but really, after listening to her argue with the clerk about her coupons for ten minutes wouldn’t you nearly snap? But despite not having hurt anyone, I was marked as a ‘Threat to Others’ and sent to my current residence.

Scott chuckled, “Yeah that would do it. About the same as, say, throwing a punch at a cop when you’re drunk. They don’t like that.” He pointed to a few bruises on the side of his face, letting me know their origin. “So, I guess now we both get a three-day stay compliments of the state.”

“More like five. Weekend doesn’t count.”

Scott didn’t like the sound of that, “What are you talking about? I heard the cops last night say I had earned a three-day hold.”

“Same here, but when I talked to the orderly during check-in he mentioned that the state doesn’t count the weekend.” I explained about the need for a panel of doctors to be present to do an initial evaluation before the hold would begin.

“Oh, that’s bullshit. I’ll be right back.” Scott stood and walked over to the nurses’ station. He and Regina spoke quietly for several minutes. He seemed to have learned from his police encounter the night before how to talk to authority figures – especially ones who might have a say in his hospital stay. Still, he was agitated when he returned.

“This sucks. I have a new job starting Wednesday and now she tells me I’ll be here until Friday at the very least.”

“Why Friday?” I was curious as to what would force him to stay a day longer than me.

He shrugged, in acceptance of Regina’s news, “Because I got arrested, so I’m an involuntary admission. First thing Monday they have to take me in for arraignment. Then I get brought back here, but apparently not until after three and they won’t actually do an evaluation until Tuesday, making my hold last until Friday. And if it gets extended passed Friday it goes straight to Monday. Those cops definitely found a way to screw with me.”

I was dreading having to spend five days here; Scott was looking at being here over a week, perhaps longer. I could understand his concerns. “If it makes you feel any better, apparently a ‘voluntary stay’ isn’t voluntary at all either.”

He stood up, “I think I better call my folks and see if they can line up an attorney for me on Monday. I’ll talk to you later.”

He walked back over to Regina and a few minutes later was escorted by an orderly to the ward's back offices where they had a bank of phones for patients to use for local calls. I had called my parents after I was checked in, but they had not called back. I was twenty-eight, but had known I was over my head when I had been transferred from St. Augustine's to Peterson.

I didn't see Scott the rest of the day, after he got off the phone he disappeared back into his room. Whether he was still sleeping off the effects of his hangover or brooding over the possible length of his stay I never asked. It never seemed like a safe topic to discuss after that initial meeting.

Instead I went back to my room and switched from counting ceiling tiles to floor tiles. When midnight rolled around I walked out and helped Bob with his crossword puzzle. And five days without sleep became six.

After lunch on Sunday, Scott pulled me away from the television, a re-run of *Die Hard*, and over to one of the tables in the room. We were still the only two 'normal' patients that had to stay on the ward all day. As such we found ourselves working together to make the time go by as quickly as possible. He had found a small chess set buried in back of the cabinet that housed all the board games and decks of cards. He held up the set, "You play?"

"A little, I'm not very good." In fact, I only had a rudimentary knowledge of chess, unlike crosswords.

"Good, neither am I so it'll be fair."

We laid out the pieces, having to substitute the race car from Monopoly for one of the black bishops. It became clear to me right away that Scott was a more experienced player than he'd initially admitted to, as his first moves were made to make a castling maneuver. It was a move I was familiar with, but had never seen nor utilized. My chess style was more suited to reading my opponent, and then using the basic movements of the pieces to either play for a stalemate or the occasional win. If I was playing someone who was truly skilled I would lose quickly.

Yet despite Scott's advanced skill I was able to hold him off for quite a while, although I knew early on that he would beat me in the end. For me it became a test to see how long I could hold out. Our first game lasted forty-five minutes, the second game an hour, the third game had passed the hour mark when I realized we had an audience.

Brian had brought his plastic chair into the game room with us, although he was still facing the grey wall. Yet he had turned his chair enough so that he could see us playing chess. He reminded me of an ostrich, believing that his simple chair would keep us from noticing him.

When I first became aware of his presence I looked right at him and he quickly turned away to face the wall. After that I pretended to not notice him as Scott and I continued our game. From the corner of my eye I could see him watching the board as we took our turns. I noticed that his hands moved, mimicking the moves as we made them. My attention to Brian stole my focus on the game and I quickly found my king falling to Scott's maneuvers.

We'd been playing chess by that point for almost three hours so we put it away. Once the board was packed away Brian quickly took his chair out to the lounge area and sat facing his wall again. I walked over to where Regina sat monitoring the patients.

"Yes, Mr. Denton, how can I help you?" She was a walking stereotype of a nurse: large, gruff and suppressing, badly, her sense of humor.

"Just curious," I looked over at Brian, "when I got here Friday he was in that chair staring at the wall, and he did the same thing all day yesterday and again this morning. I assumed it was his usual routine, until he came in the game area today."

"Yes, indeed. I saw that too. I even wrote it in my log."

"So it was different?" I pressed, my natural inclination to solve puzzles suddenly aroused.

"Now, Mr. Denton, I can't talk about other patients now." Her tone, and the nearly-there smile on her face, told me that, yes, it was unusual. More importantly, that she would be as interested as I was in seeing where this particular rabbit hole went. "Plus," she emphasized her next words. "You should be focused on your own treatment. You even try to get some sleep this morning?"

"Who needs sleep," I said, walking away down the hall.

That evening passed slowly. There was an AA meeting in the cafeteria after dinner and most of the patients were off the floor. Scott had even been allowed to go to the meeting, with an escort. When they returned Scott was in the company of a new patient, a woman who I had seen come in during the dinner hour. They split up and disappeared down their respective hallways, neither emerging again the rest of the night.

After Sunday dinner, Scott and I pulled out the chess set again. Within minutes, Brian had moved his chair into the room, although Scott and I both pretended to be unaware of his presence. As we played, Brian would periodically inch his chair closer to where we sat, giving himself a better view of the board. His hand movements were more precise now, even going so far as to mimic Scott's habit of swinging the knight over the board, before setting it down.

We played two games, and I finally won a game. I was starting to learn to anticipate Scott and outmaneuver him. As we were setting up the board for a third game, a quiet voice surprised both of us.

"Can you teach me, how to..."

I glanced at Brian, who met my eyes for the first time. He gestured at the board and then at both Scott and I.

"Can one of you...will one of you...?"

"Sure," I said, not looking at him, worried I might spook him. "I'm sure we can teach you how to play." I looked at Scott, waiting for him to confirm my statement.

"Yeah, Brian, we can teach you how to play," said Scott.

Brian nodded. The act of talking seemed to have worn him out, but he managed to nod as we began explaining the legal moves of the different pieces and their names. Unfortunately he was not the only one watching us play, and our attempts to teach him the rules did not go unnoticed.

"You can't teach that idiot to play chess," said a voice behind me.

I turned in my chair, to face the speaker. There were four teenagers on the ward, all in for rehab, and it was one of them who had spoken. They had been sitting at the

same table whenever they were on the floor, playing an endless game of Uno. The speaker, a boy named Henry, was grinning in my direction.

“Sure we can,” I said. I was worried that their reaction would cause Brian to retreat again, and I wanted them to keep out of it.

“Whatever,” said Henry, sipping at a bottle of water, another privilege given to those who could leave the floor.

Scott and I started over, reminding Brian of the legal moves of each piece before we moved it, or asking him to tell us where certain pieces could be moved as the game progressed. Scott and I were amazed at how fast Brian managed to become familiar with the rules. It was after ten o’clock when we finished the lesson, but Brian seemed to have grasped the basics.

“Maybe tomorrow you can play one of us,” I suggested. Brian smiled at the idea, and rather than his usual plodding walk he practically ran down the corridor to his room.

That night I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. I had counted the twenty-seventh tile when the ceiling transformed into a chess board. An army of pawns walked across my ceiling, waving at me from their upside-down state. A knight on horseback began trotting across my ceiling and when he threw open his visor I saw that it was Brian. At first, I was certain I was beginning to hallucinate as a result of being awake for nearly seven days straight. Then the thought intruded that I was dreaming. I jerked awake, and looked at the bedside clock. Two-thirty A.M., the last time I had checked had been over an hour prior.

I had been asleep for almost an hour, it was a start.

As I walked into the lounge area on Monday morning, I was not surprised to see Brian already in the rec room. He had the chess board set up in front of him, but he lacked an opponent.

“He’s been waiting for you or Scott,” said Regina from the desk.

I looked at her, and she was smiling for real this time. She tried to maintain a professional image, but I had seen that she had a tendency to drop her guard around a few of the patients. “How long has he been there?”

She looked at the clock, “An hour. Came in at six, seems he heard you were usually out here by then.”

I had stayed in my room over the night. It was Bob’s night off, so there was no crossword to work on. Still, I was sorry to hear that Brian had been sitting in that lonely looking position for an hour. “Looks like we created a monster,” I said, heading to join Brian.

“Your color is better today, not so pale. You get some sleep last night?”

I looked back at Regina. “Some. Only an hour though,” I said, as if an hour hadn’t felt like a small miracle at the time.

“That’s good,” she beamed. “We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

I walked off to join Brian. He looked up at me and smiled as I slid quietly into the seat across from him. He had the board situated so that he had the advantage.

“Looks like it’s your move,” I said.

He grinned, a goofy, childish grin that looked perfectly at home on his child-like face with its scruffy beard. He reached out to move a pawn, and I noticed for the first

time how long his fingers were, he had the hands of a piano player. After his opening, I reached out to move, but was stopped by his voice.

“Play for real. Don’t let me win.”

I looked up, wondering what he meant.

“It’s just, it looked like you were letting Scott win on purpose. Don’t let me win, play for real,” he said, not meeting my eyes this time.

Now I was surprised. I hadn’t been letting Scott win on purpose, but it was true that I hadn’t been *playing* to win. Scott hadn’t noticed, but apparently Brian had. I wondered how smart he was, and how easy it must be for others to overlook given his mental condition.

I quickly found out how smart he was, because despite winning two games in quick succession I found myself working to avoid losing the third game. By that point we had an audience. Scott had emerged from his room for breakfast, and watched us as we played.

Brian never left his chair, his usual argument to eat in the cafeteria forgotten. I was saved from a fourth game, one I wasn’t sure I would win, by my appointment with the doctors. Scott took my place, and I left them to the game.

I had expected my evaluation to be a thorough exam, and when I walked into the room and saw five doctors waiting for me I was certain it would be. Then I sat through the process, listening as they discussed the diagnosis I had received at St. Augustine’s on Friday. I was asked a handful of question; did I have any allergies, had I undergone surgery in the last six months, nothing that seemed relevant to why I was in the hospital. They seemed to consider me a non-entity in the treatment process, and the evaluation

took less than fifteen minutes. It was the one and only time I spoke to ‘my’ physician during my stay.

When I got back to the lounge I saw Scott sitting in a chair watching television. Brian was still at the table playing chess, this time with Henry. “How did that happen?” I asked, pointing at the pair. Scott looked at me, a somewhat glazed look on his face.

“He beat me, Henry had the winner.”

I looked back at Brian, in his filthy, ratty robe. “He beat you in the time I was gone?”

Scott laughed, “I guess I took it for granted that I’d beat him easily. Ten minutes into the game and he had both my knights. I still don’t know how he did it.”

“Fucking cheater!”

The shout came from the rec room and I looked up in time to see Henry flip the chessboard over. Pieces flew through the air, and I watched as Brian withdrew into his shell again. He drew his legs up so that he could clasp his knees against his chest, rocking himself slowly as he looked down at the floor. The orderlies beat me into the room, but not by much.

The first orderly in the room, Steven, barked out, “What the hell is going on?”

Henry gestured at Brian. “The freak cheated. There’s no way he could have beaten me, he’s too stupid.”

I had to fight my instincts not to speak up. But I knew that causing a stir while in the middle of my three-day hold was not a good idea. Fortunately I didn’t have too.

Regina had entered the room, and she took control of the situation like a drill instructor.

“Mr. Reynolds! We do not refer to our fellow patients that way.” She looked at Steven, “Mr. Reynolds is restricted to his room for the rest of the day.”

“That’s bullshit! He cheated!”

Steven waved his hand at Henry, a come-with-me wave.

“But he cheated!”

Regina stepped close to Henry. “If, as you say, Brian is not smart enough to grasp the fundamentals of chess, then how could he have cheated? Or, perhaps he beat you fair and square, and you don’t want to admit. Now, am I going to be adding bed restraints to your day of solitary or will you go with Steven now.” She held up her finger, cutting off further protest. “And not another word.”

Henry stomped off with Steven, and Regina turned to Brian. She knelt next to his chair, her hand stroking his hair and she spoke to him in tones to quiet to hear. While she dealt with him, Scott and I went about gathering up the scattered pieces. Regina shook her head at us though when we started to set the board up.

“No more today, gentleman. I need to confiscate the board until after I explain what happened to Doctor Fredericks.”

Doctor Fredericks was my doctor, I wondered how long a conversation about a chess game gone bad would take. Probably twice as long as it had taken them to interview me for a diagnoses. We didn’t argue though, we merely handed over the board. Brian ran off to his room then, but not before we could see that he was crying.

That afternoon Scott and I watched through a glass window as Regina spoke to a female doctor. She had been in my earlier meeting, but I had never been introduced to

her. After a few minutes Regina had called Steven in, and he had spoken for a few minutes. Then he had walked off down the hall, returning with Brian in tow. Brian spoke to the doctor, and even through the glass we could see that something was wrong. Neither of us spoke as we spied on the meeting, we simply marveled as Brian stood and started shouting at the doctor. His words were blocked by the thick glass, but he had obviously shocked the doctor. She turned to Steven, who had to pull Brian away and lead him back to his room.

Scott went to another AA meeting after dinner, and when he returned it was with details about the meeting we had observed.

“Oh man, get this,” Scott began, a smile on his face. “You know how they have a set of guidelines for Brian, things he has to do before he can go to the cafeteria?”

I nodded.

“Well, now his doctor, that lady, has decided that since Brian suddenly has this desire to play chess that she’s gonna include that as well. So I guess Brian won’t be the next Bobby Fisher.”

The news shocked me. I understood not letting him go to the cafeteria unless he bathed and dressed himself. But not letting him have access to the one thing that had brought him out of his shell? It seemed ludicrous. I was still trying to decide if there was any intelligent reason not to let Brian enjoy himself, and see what happened. I was still thinking about it when I went to bed that night, where I fell asleep within minutes, not a single tile counted.

I was awoken by a hand shaking my shoulder. Scott was hovering over me, a grin on his face.

“Sorry, I know waking you up is the last thing I should be doing, but you gotta see this,” he said.

I followed him out to the lounge, and he was right. It was a sight to see. Regina was sitting quietly at her desk, trying to maintain her composure.

Brian sat in the rec room, the chessboard in front of him. He had followed all of their rules to the letter, understanding them on the same level he had accepted the rules of chess. His face was shaved, with over a dozen small bits of white stuck here and there. He had also showered and dressed, but apparently no one had told him to dry off, because he sat in the chair, soaking wet, his clothes stuck to his skin.

## Remnants

Tobias followed his companion quietly, observing her as she worked to follow the trail of deer tracks they had spotted earlier. As fourteen, Becca was already one of the three best trackers they had in Spring Haven. Her flaw was that she lacked patience, either rushing her shots or taking them from too great a distance, resulting in missed shots or, even worse, a poor shot that merely wounded the animal, allowing it to disappear into the surrounding foliage. Recently a potential kill had managed to throw her off its trail, dying in the creek upstream from Spring Haven, which could have contaminated the water supply if it had gone undiscovered, and even worse threat than the wasting of gunpowder.

After the “Three Days Plague” (named for period between initial infection and death) in 2016, survivors banded together in small communities, if they were lucky enough to encounter other people. The plague wiped out over ninety percent of the human race in a matter of weeks, so that was never a certainty. The survivors now viewed any form of illness as one of their gravest threats, allowing the water supply to almost be contaminated had nearly resulted in Becca’s banishment, regardless of the position that Tobias and his wife held in the community. Tobias now accompanied her on all of her hunting trips, to ensure it didn’t happen again. But this morning that was the lesser of his concerns.

Ahead of him he saw her pause, and raise her hand in the universal gesture of ‘stop’. He looked ahead of her, the deer now visible ninety feet ahead of them on the trail. It was a large buck, nine points on its antlers. Tobias watched as Becca unslung her rifle,

forcing him to slip behind her and place his hand on her shoulder. The teen turned and glared at him.

He shook his head and whispered, “Forget the shot, I want to see how close you can get.”

“This is as close as I can get,” she whispered back, eager to be done with the lesson.

Tobias smiled at her, aggravating her further. “This is as close as you can get? Matt’s taught you a lot better than that. You should be able to cut this distance in half, at least.” The deer lifted its head, its ears twitching in the crisp morning air. Tobias lowered his voice even more, “Your choice, take the shot from here and you get to do the dishes for the next two weeks. Or,” he hissed, cutting off her protest, “you can try to get almost on top of him and I have the other kids do your chores for two weeks instead, whether you make the shot or not.”

Becca’s eyes lit up at the offer. Their household had fifteen people living in two houses, one of the largest in Spring Haven, and they each had a full day’s worth of chores to do every day. A week off from slopping pigs and tending crops was worth her weight in gasoline. She looked at Tobias, who nodded in assurance that he was on the level. That was good enough for her. Tobias had never lied to her, or anyone that she could recall.

Tobias held out his hand, his eyes dropping to her rifle. She handed it over, despite her annoyance. He flipped the safety off, “Okay, let’s see how close you can get before he starts to bolt.”

Becca grinned now, always ready to embrace a challenge and even more eager to impress Tobias. As she slipped into the brush, Tobias recalled the eight year old girl he

and his wife, Beth, had found holed up in a Walgreen's. She had survived by eating cookies, candy, and drinking liter after liter of soda. She had been easy to find in the building, a trail of wrappers littering the floor around her make-shift bed. Now she nearly disappeared from his sight as she slipped into the brush. A smile crossed his face as he followed her, as proud of her as he was of his own children.

Her movements were sure and steady, the need to pass quietly ingrained within her. Tobias did the same, and froze when she did, aware that she was watching to see if the buck was aware of their presence. When she had closed the distance, a task Tobias knew she would be capable of, she froze again. She turned to look at Tobias, her hand held out for the rifle. Despite the animals they raised on the farm, it was still better to eat wild game and preserve their livestock whenever possible.

Tobias handed the rifle over, and unslung his own. This action brought a frown to Becca's face, as she realized he still didn't trust her not to miss. He saw this clearly, even as he saw the deer become aware of their presence and turn its body to make its escape.

Becca stood frozen, watching as the deer began to flee, and Tobias knew she would not get a shot off. He reacted with instincts forged in the struggle to survive, and Becca heard the crack of his rifle. His shot struck the buck in the back of its head, killing it instantly.

They field dressed the deer in less than two hours, and Tobias estimated that the buck had yielded almost two hundred pounds of meat. He carried the majority of that in his backpack, but still made Becca carry fifty pounds in her own satchel. She was quiet

on the walk back to the house, and Tobias decided to address the second reason he had accompanied her today.

“Beth and I want you to take the younger kids over to ‘Manhattan’ this afternoon. Spend the night there,” he said.

Manhattan was the name of a favorite spot in the mostly vacated city of St. Louis, where Spring Haven had been established. Tobias and Matthew Sutherland had found the place in their initial searches for food and survivors after the plague. It was a replica model of the city of New York that a model train enthusiast had built, complete with Central Park, Times Square, and Empire State Building. It also boasted the World Trade Center, but they had elected not to tell any of the kids with no recollection of the events of 9/11 the significance of this fact, since such concerns were no longer relevant.

The people of Spring Haven considered a trip to Manhattan a treat. Most of them would find an excuse to visit the site once a year, and they had even allocated a generator to power the display. The loss of the ethanol used to power the generator was considered a necessary expense. Seeing the tiny buildings with their lights, and the miniature train that ran through the city, was a constant reminder for them. A city like New York would be possible one day.

But today Becca was not interested in going to see the wonders of the past.

“I’m not leaving, Tobias,” she said. “I know that’s why you insisted we go hunting this morning. You want to convince me not to go to the trial.”

Tobias sighed. Trying to convince Becca to do anything she didn’t want to do was a challenge. Would his own children be any different when they were teenagers? Had he been any different at her age? He doubted it, but he still liked to believe he had been

more reasonable. Of course, he had been just two years older than Becca was now when the plague erupted a decade ago. After that, no one had been children for a long while.

“The trial’s over,” he said. “I don’t want you there for the verdict.”

Becca stopped walking. “Would it make it easier for you if I wasn’t there? Will you be able to hang Billy easier then?”

Billy Simmons and his sister Megan were residents of Spring Haven. He, Becca, and Jake Sutherland were also the only teenagers. This fact united them, most children under the age of eight had not survived the plague. Billy and his sisters were an oddity in the community, refusing to live at any of the homesteads. Billy was thirteen, while Megan was six, having been born after the plague. According to Billy their parents had been killed by raiders while he had kept his sister and himself hidden. They insisted on fending for themselves, living on their own in one of the abandoned houses in the city. Tobias and Beth had taken great pains to keep tabs on them, as had several other households.

They had managed to live in the community for two years without incident. Then, two months earlier, Billy had been caught stealing a pig from one of the local farms. The incident had sparked controversy in the community, stealing being a crime punishable by hanging. The community was currently divided as to how his crime should be addressed. As the person elected to stand as the town’s mayor, Tobias was also the de facto judge.

Tobias ignored her remark, “Matt’s kids will be going as well. Beth thought you and Jake could help her as well.” He paused, “She has to stop at the Taylor’s place on the way, check on the Sophia and the baby.” Beth had suggested this part of the proposal, knowing Becca’s desire to follow in the older woman’s shoes as the town physician, a

position Tobias felt was much more necessary to the community than his own meager position as mayor.

They emerged from the woods to face the houses of an old subdivision. Much of the properties had been undeveloped when the plague hit, but they had been cleared of trees to make room for the installation of telephone and electrical lines. The empty lots now held acres of growing vegetation; corn, spinach, and beans being the predominate crops that Tobias grew. They were all easy to store once they had been properly canned or dried, although the corn storage was kept far enough from the house, since corn dust could be explosive. They walked slowly towards their house, a periwinkle blue, two-story structure. There were six trucks parked on the street in front of the house, only one of which had the tell-tale signs of being converted to run on ethanol.

Beth stopped and looked at him, “You didn’t answer my question.”

He sighed, and looked her in the eye. “Becca, is that what you really think of me?”

The teen looked up at him, tears forming at the corner of her eyes. She rarely showed such emotion, thought Tobias, maybe she was more aware of the stakes than he or Beth knew. She suddenly threw her arms around him, heedless of the dried deer’s blood that stained her hands.

“Promise me something,” she began, struggling to control the hitch in her voice.

“Anything,” said Tobias, wrapping his arms around her, comforting her as much as he could.

Becca cleared her throat before stepping back to look him dead in the eye.

“Promise me you aren’t asking me to leave just so you can have Billy hung for stealing that pig. And that this isn’t an excuse to make sure I’m not there,” she said.

Tobias reached out and clasped her small hands inside his larger ones. She was trembling, and he realized for the first time how deeply she had been hiding her feelings about the current trial. He looked towards the house, and saw Beth standing out front watching their exchange.

“Rebecca Marie,” he said, “I have no intention of letting William Davenport hang for stealing a pig. You have my solemn oath on that.”

Becca freed her hands and threw them around his neck again, Tobias pulled her in for a long hug. Her small frame shivered for a few minutes until she got herself under control. When she finally pulled back, she had dried her tears on her sleeves.

“Well, fine then, I guess if I’ll go with Beth.” She struck an air of false bravado, “Though you better be sure I’ll collect on this later.” She kept talking as she walked towards the house, passing Beth who had come to join them. “You’ll owe me big time for this though, I’m thinking chick flick marathon next movie night,” her voice faded as she walked away from the two adults, continuing her conversation with an invisible companion, never once stopping to draw breath.

Tobias saw Beth looking at him.

“I heard what you said to Becca, you decided against hanging then? Reynolds won’t be happy.” she said.

Tobias looked down at his own hands. He’d killed men back in the early days of the catastrophe while forming the colony, when it was a matter of survival. He would not

deny that he had blood on his hands. “You’ve known me longer than anyone but Matt. Did you think I’d even consider it?”

“But Reynolds...”

“I’m not going to hang a thirteen-year-old kid for stealing a damn pig. Not today, not ever. I don’t care what Reynolds wants.” What Tobias didn’t say was, “*And it’s likely that Matt and I will be strung up alongside Billy on the same tree before nightfall.*”

Tobias perused the pages of an old book, trying to consider the various outcomes that could arise due to his imminent decision. He sat behind a solid oak desk, in what used to serve as the principal’s office of a nearby high school. He tried to imagine a school board justifying the purchase of such an expensive desk, and decided that the principal must have bought it personally. Now it was the Mayor-Judge’s office for the town. The desk calendar was still set to November, Year of the Plague. If not for the disease, the calendar proclaimed, the following week would have seen the arrival of Homecoming.

Before walking the two blocks from his home to the school, he’d waited to see the children off. Each household of the colony assisted in raising orphans discovered following the outbreak, and his was no exception. Beth and he chose to house four youths in addition to their own daughter Angelica. At only eighteen months, Angelica was part of the first wave of new children born in the colony. Childbirth was again a hardship, and the death rates of children were back to where they were two hundred years earlier,

despite the medical degree Beth had nearly completed before the plague. Angelica was usually considered too young for the trip. Today had been an exception.

At ten minutes to eleven, there was a knock at the door. Matt Sutherland, who now served as the town's elected sheriff, poked his head inside. Like Beth and Tobias, Matt was a founder of the colony. The three of them had worked tirelessly in the initial months to locate and bring as many people together before winter settled over the changed landscape. Now he went around the community compiling a list of possible issues and conflicts that arose between homesteads, dealing with those he could and sending the rest to Tobias. Yet despite their ties to the community, Tobias knew that today they could both find their past contributions to be worth very little.

“Reynolds wants a word with you,” said Matt.

“No.” Simple, direct.

Matt was uncomfortable with the answer and fidgeted in the doorway. “Tobias, are you sure this is the right thing to do?”

Tobias read from his book, “Listen to this, ‘They had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind, when fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere, and when you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes’.” He closed his copy of *Animal Farm* and laid it upon the desk blotter. “You think that isn’t where we’re headed if I give in to Reynolds today? Jesus, Reynolds would be leading the pack if I give in,” said Tobias. He stood and pulled his black, judge’s cloak (when discovered, the robe had become another reminder of the past, and a symbol for the future) over his shoulders and buckled the fasteners from the collar down. “Besides, it’s far too late to

come to an agreement now. Time to play our hand.” He stepped around the desk and gestured for Matt to open the door.

“So long as it isn’t aces over eights,” said Matt, following him down the hall into the gymnasium that doubled as a courtroom when necessary.

Sunlight streaming in from rooftop windows, the rays bathed the gym in enough sunlight for most daytime functions. When necessary, lamps powered by converted ethanol generators illuminated the large space. Over half of the colony appeared to be present as Tobias walked down the center aisle to the judge’s desk. The front row contained a dozen men, each observing the large figure standing at the head of the aisle blocking Tobias’ path.

“I wanted to talk to you before sentencing, Tobias. Weren’t you informed?” asked the woman, known to her friends as Reynolds. She oversaw the largest herd of cattle the colony maintained, which she felt made her the most important person within fifty miles. She had been a citizen of the town only a few years, but it had rankled her to see Tobias elected repeatedly to the position of Mayor. She had made it abundantly clear over the years that she felt someone older, someone like herself, should be the Mayor. Reynolds let her hand drop to the sidearm she wore, a subtle reminder of the lengths she was prepared to go if the verdict did not go to her liking.

Tobias ignored the gesture and stepped around the larger woman. “I didn’t see the need, Maureen,” he said.

She bristled at the use of her first name. She had gone through much to earn the respect of her fellow cattle ranchers, her gender initially an issue, but one she overcame.

She remained quiet, and took her seat. She had already decided that she would have the last word after the sentencing.

As he passed the defendant's table, Tobias purposefully directed his gaze elsewhere. He saw no value in tipping his hand too soon. He welcomed the sight of the mural that decorated the wall behind the rolling judge's bench that served their needs. The mural was composed of two images, Blind Justice standing before the Tree of Liberty. Except their version of the Tree only had three large branches. Each branch displayed one of the three primary laws of the colony; they were admonishments against murder, rape, and theft. Emblazoned above the mural were the words:

Spring Haven Colony

Rule of Law Above All

which served as the colony's creed.

He stepped up to the elevated bench, and took his seat. Looking down from his position above Billy Simmons, he recalled the cast of the dead deer's eyes, Billy's looked the same now.

Tobias acknowledged the crowd with a slight nod in their general direction. His eyes skipped over Reynolds and her followers, noting the rifle was now situated against a chair. He turned his gaze to the small boy seated before him.

"William Simmons, please step forward so we can begin sentencing," Tobias said. The boy solemnly stepped forward, stopping three feet in front of the judge's bench, never raising his eyes to look at Tobias. There was a subtle tremor running through the terrified boy's body that Tobias could discern from the bench, and he wished he could tell

the boy that everything would work out all right, but he had to maintain his distance. Nor was such a statement sure to be the truth.

Tobias surveyed the crowd; every mother in the gym looked ready to run to Billy's aid. He wondered if he were being overly pessimistic about this hearing. Then he looked at Reynolds, who was smiling at the boy's discomfort. The man seated next to Reynolds, with the rifle now propped between his knees, was idly fingering the hilt of a knife he carried around his waist.

*"No, this will be as bad as I imagined,"* thought Tobias.

Tobias retrieved a sheet of paper from the desk in front of him; it contained the simple facts of the case as well as his sentencing notes. Several things, not the smallest being Billy's life, relied upon the preciseness of his words as he read aloud the sentencing:

"The facts of the case are as follows: That you willfully stole a pig from Paul LeFay's herd, a pig belonging to the Colony. That you were seen with the pig by Maureen Reynolds, who stood as sole witness to the crime. That you at no time denied the crime, in fact you admitted your guilt when questioned by this court. That you offer only the potential mitigating circumstance that you stole the pig for the purpose of feeding your sister, who was ill with fever. Do you disagree with any of these facts?"

"No, sir."

Tobias straightened up, his gaze locked on Billy. "Very well, this court finds you guilty of stealing."

There were surprised gasps from many in the crowd. Most of them knew of Tobias's close association with the youth and had expected him, perhaps, to excuse his

behavior. In her seat, Reynolds sat with a shit-eating grin. "*Probably thinks she's won,*" thought Tobias.

"However," Tobias said, and the audience fell quiet as they waited to hear the rest of the sentencing. "Since you committed this crime on your sister's behalf I feel it is appropriate that she share in your punishment."

There were muffled exclamations from the crowd, yet all Tobias noted was Reynolds' sudden fixed gaze as the woman realized the sentencing was not proceeding as she desired. Tobias pounded his scavenged gavel upon the bench.

"Silence, please," said Tobias. "I have decided to be lenient for the time being. You will work off your debt to the colony for the next four months, the time necessary to breed another brood of pigs on Paul LeFay's farm. You will work for each household on a weekly basis, after your teachers have dismissed you from school. Further, you and your sister will no longer be allowed to live on your own. You and your sister will take up residence at an available household within the week."

Billy was looking directly at Tobias now, the realization that he would see another sunrise evident on the boy's face.

"IF," and here Tobias paused to let this sink in, "you violate any of the colony's laws before your sister's sixteenth birthday, when she can become a citizen of the colony, then you will be punished to the full extent of the crime and your sister will be banished. Do you understand," asked Tobias.

Tobias could see that Billy did. The boy had been willing to break the laws of the only haven willing to embrace them in an effort to save his sister's life. He would walk through fire before risking her safety.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” said Billy, relief etched on his face.

“Very well. Then I would ask willing members of the audience who have room in their homes for Billy and his sister to please stay. I know Beth and I can always accommodate two more mouths if you and your sister are interested. I’m sure there are others.”

Tobias raised his gavel, the words ‘court is adjourned’ on his tongue. Before that could happen his worst fears took shape.

The lead dog began to growl.

Maureen Reynolds had risen to her feet, cheeks flushed with anger. Her followers were doing the same. The moment Tobias had worried over the most had arrived.

This is unacceptable, “said Reynolds. “What, the boy breaks the law and gets adopted by the judge? Who do you think you’re kidding, Tobias?”

“You object to the sentencing, Maureen?” asked Tobias. “Then please step forward to be heard. William Simmons, Megan Simmons, please sit at the defendant’s table.”

Billy and his sister turned and walked back as instructed. Megan had to avoid being knocked down by Reynolds as the older woman strode by the child in anger. Billy almost spoke out but he saw Tobias staring at him, a slight shake of the older man’s head kept Billy on course to the table.

Reynolds stopped before the bench. “This is bullshit, Tobias. You know the law as well as I do. Stealing trinkets is punished by lesser verdicts; stealing livestock has always been a hanging offense.”

“Yes, for raiders coming in from outside the colony. Not for our own, and most certainly not for a boy too young to shave,” said Tobias.

The crowd, which had started to empty the auditorium, was filing back in to see the confrontation between the two. The rivalry between them was well-known, and had always presented itself as a powder keg. Many of the spectators simply wanted to see who would be the victor. Each had their own supporters, but Reynolds’ men were definitely the more vocal. And the better armed.

Reynolds turned and began addressing her men, certain that their guns would sway the minds of the crowd in the long run. Most of the citizens had never had to fight for survival outside the gates. They had hidden away, waiting for rescue until invited to live within the sanctuary.

“Is this the kind of law we want for the colony,” she asked the crowd, pointing her finger back at Tobias. “Is it, Paul,” she asked of the man whose pig had been stolen. “What about you, Tom,” he addressed the man with the rifle. “Are you willing to sit back and let this happen?”

Tobias stood up at the bench, “The court would ask Mrs. Reynolds to direct her remarks to the court.”

“Fuck you, Tobias. You aren’t a lawyer, why do you insist on talking like one? Best thing that ever happened was all the lawyers dying in the plague,” said Reynolds. She turned back to the crowd, whose attention she held. “I thought we were done with

this teenage delinquent bullshit. I thought we were making a new start here. Paul, get the rope, it's time we taught this little shit," she gestured at Billy," a lesson. Time for everyone to learn who calls the . . . ."

*CRACK.*

The gunshot from the .22 caliber pistol in Tobias' hand was no louder than a firecracker going off, but caused silence to thunder through the gym. When fired from less than five feet the small caliber was devastating, nor could Tobias miss his target when shooting from a standing position behind the bench. His placement behind Reynolds allowed the bullet to bore through the woman's skull, rip through her parietal lobe, and then ravage the frontal lobe. The caliber was small enough, however, that it failed to exit the skull.

Before her ruined brain could realize that she was – in fact – dead, Reynolds managed to turn and face Tobias. Her eyes registered shock as her hand attempted to reach for her sidearm, but the most it could accomplish was a weak flailing. Her body supported itself for a moment longer, then collapsed to its knees, followed by the upper torso falling face-first to the gym floor.

In the silence that followed, a handful of men loyal to the best interests of the Colony, if not Matt and Tobias, had taken positions around Reynolds' followers. Tobias had asked that they be prepared in case of further hostilities in the wake of the expected confrontation. However, as Tobias had expected, with the death of their leader any fight they had was gone.

The remaining spectators looked silently from the body lying on the gym floor up to the bench, where Tobias stood looking down at the gun in his hand. He passed it from

hand to hand, testing its heft to see if it outweighed the life he had taken. Disgusted with his own decision, he placed the small pistol down on the desk blotter before raising his eyes to look out at the crowd. He'd hoped to spare them this side of his nature, hoping to save most of them from the man he was outside the gates of town.

Stepping around the bench, he walked to the body of Reynolds, pulling off the black robe he wore. He draped the cloth over the body, hiding it from further view, and then proceeded to walk over to where Reynolds' followers stood.

"Are we done here," Tobias asked them.

"You killed her," said Tom, looking from the covered body to Tobias and then back to the body.

"Yes, I did. And without hesitation," said Tobias. "If I'd let you all have your own justice I'd have had twelve folks to try for murder. Then it was likely that myself, Matt, and several others would have found ourselves shot or hanging from trees as well. Simpler this way, don't you agree?"

Tobias turned to the table where Billy and Megan still sat. He gestured for them to follow as he walked down the center aisle. The crowd parted to let him pass. He could feel the weight of his actions settling over him, and did not stop to talk to any of the townspeople, even the ones he considered friends. If he indicated that he was anything other than in complete control at this point, the flames he had doused could reignite. He opened his office door, ushering the two children inside, and made his way to sit behind his desk. Under the desk, out of sight of his two silent watchers, his hands began to tremble.

"Tobias, I'm sorry," said Billy, before Tobias interrupted him with a shake of his head.

“Don’t. For now, let’s just sit quietly.”

The day had not yet reached the noon hour. Tobias considered what the rest of the day, week, and years would bring.

OMEGA WATCH

FADE IN

INT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, GRAND BALLROOM

The ballroom is decorated for a black-tie affair, dozens of GUESTS are seated at tables, SECURITY GUARDS dressed in black-tie circle the room watching for threats. At the head table, the UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY GENERAL is talking with DIGNITARIES. There is a low buzz of conversation in the room.

INT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, LOBBY

The lobby is crowded with PRESS, HOTEL STAFF, and BYSTANDERS waiting for the doors to the Grand Ballroom to open. Velvet ropes block them from entering as do a dozen SECURITY GUARDS and POLICE. Shimmer is standing off to the side, dressed as a bellhop and out of the way, checks his watch which displays the time as closing on 1 PM.

SHIMMER

Go in twenty.

EXT. ROOFTOP - DAY

The body of a SWAT OFFICER has been shoved against the outer lip of the building, as if to hide it from view. SNIPER is dressed in a SWAT uniform with sniper rifle in place, looking through the scope.

SNIPER

Clear here, fifteen.

EXT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, ALLEYWAY

Police cars block both ends of the alleyway between the hotel and the neighboring building. A ten by ten section of wall on ground level facing the Excelsior Hotel begins to vibrate, then collapses silently into loose dust and sand. AS the dust settles, BULWARK appears, large man, skin appears dry, chalky. He is dressed sharply.

BULWARK

Entering in 10...

He places one hand on the Excelsior Hotel outer wall, which begins to vibrate.

BULWARK (CONT'D)

5...

INT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, GRAND BALLROOM

The scene is the same before, when one wall of the ballroom Explodes inwards, throwing tables out of the way and injuring those in the destructive path. Bulwark steps calmly into the room as SECURITY AGENTS begin shooting, bullets tear through his fine suit but land harmless on the ground. Bulwark surveys the damage to his suit.

BULWARK:

Every. Single. Time.

Bulwark gestures and debris from wall rises into the air before it propels itself at the three nearest Security Guards. The shrapnel hits them like shotgun fire, knocking them off their feet. Across the room Security has surrounded the Secretary General and is rushing them out of the room.

SECURITY GUARD 1

Stadium is compromised! Flamingo is  
in route to primary extract!

Bulwark watches the contingent of guards flee with the Secretary General, content to cause mayhem in the ballroom. He continues to hurl debris around the room, with no concern whether his targets are civilians or security.

INT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, LOBBY

The ballroom doors burst open, most of the people who were standing near the doors have moved back at the sounds of battle from behind the doors. Shimmer has moved closer, gaining the attention of a Police Officer.

POLICE OFFICER 1

Sir, please stand -

Before he can finish, Shimmer has stepped forward and snapped his neck, moving fluidly on to the next closest officer. The security and police split their attention between the doors and the new threat in the lobby. The next target in Shimmer's path tries to draw his firearm, but Shimmer hurls a dagger at him, impaling the officer's hand to his holster. Villannamel takes the gun out of the holster, places the gun against the police officer's head.

SHIMMER

Nice Glock.

Shimmer rams the gun grip into the officer's throat and the officer drops to the ground. The doors to the ballroom burst open and the Security contingent with the Secretary General emerge and head for the lobby doors.

Shimmer continues to decimate their ranks as he works his way closer to the Secretary General. Multiple agents converge on him and he is forced to deal with them, allowing the Secretary General to exit the hotel.

SHIMMER (CONT'D)  
Target has exited. Proceed to extraction.

EXT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL, DAY

Three limousines, led and followed by POLICE MOTORCYCLE COPS, pull up to the front of the EXCELSIOR HOTEL where other UNIFORMED POLICE guard the perimeter of the building. The United Nations SECRETARY GENERAL bursts out of the doors, security contingent in tow. They hastily move her toward the middle limousine. As the Secretary General comes out into sight of the surrounding buildings a figure, PARAGON, in colorful superhero garb, swoops out of the sky and lands protectively in front of the General and his security detail.

PARAGON  
Get down!

Shots ring out from a building across the street. Bullets impact against the chest of PARAGON where they flatten harmlessly against the man's chest. The security detail get the General into the limo which squeals away. POLICE OFFICERS begin to swarm the area.

PARAGON (CONT'D)  
(to Police)  
Wait here.

PARAGON flies off in the direction of the rooftop across the street.

EXT. ROOFTOP, DAY

The sniper is heading for the exit of the rooftop. Before he can reach the door, PARAGON hovers directly in his path.

PARAGON  
Where do you think...

The sniper draws a handgun, empties the entire clip into PARAGON.

PARAGON (CONT'D)  
...you're going?

PARAGON laughs as the bullets land on the ground around him.

SNIPER:

Who are you?

PARAGON grabs the sniper, who struggles to no effect. PARAGON drags him over to the rooftop and picks up the rifle with his left hand. He flies into the air.

EXT. EXCELSIOR HOTEL - DAY

PARAGON lands next to a stunned police officer. A CROWD gathers nearby, cheering at the unusual sight.

PARAGON

I'm afraid I was too late to help your man on the roof. But I think this man can answer any questions you have.

He flies off into the air, PHOTOGRAPHERS run after him snapping pictures.

MONTAGE - DAWN OF THE SUPERHEROES

-EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

PARAGON lifts a car off a trapped VICTIM, allowing PARAMEDICS to aid the individual.

-EXT. SKY - DAY

PARAGON flies under the wing of a plane, the engines on that side are both out, he stabilizes the plane, allowing it to land.

-INT. BANK

PARAGON and STARFALL stand together in a bank, they are handing over Bulwark to police.

-EXT. CHICAGO - WRIGLEY FIELD - DAY

The MAYOR is handing over a Key to city to IKARUS.

-INT. OMEGA WATCH HQ.

This is a simple meeting room. Posing for cameras are PARAGON, STARFALL, IKARUS, ATLAS, SHEER.

-EXT. UNITED NATIONS BUILDING - DAY

The United Nations Secretary General is standing in front of a large podium, presenting awards to several costumed heroes, at the head of the group is PARAGON. A banner unravels down the front of the United Nations building, heralding the group as OMEGA WATCH.

End Montage

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - ELECTRONICS STORE - DAY

A CROWD has gathered outside a plate glass window, watching as multiple televisions display images of superheroes involved in various acts of rescue. Scrolling text runs across the bottom of the individual screens with specific details. The main jumbotron in Times Square displays of a televised address by PARAGON. The television in the center of the window switches to the same image as the jumbotron.

ANNOUNCER 1 (ON TV)

...see PARAGON as he speaks to the press regarding today's unprecedented event. Today, the 5th anniversary of the appearance of PARAGON the members of Omega Watch will allow some of the planets foremost leaders access to their base of operations.

A figure pushes its way through the crowd in front of the electronics store. When he reaches the glass we see McIntyre, 30's, he would be handsome save the fact he is currently unwashed, with unkempt hair and beard. Dressed in clothing that is just as worn out as he is physically. He carries a small gym bag. The crowd around him steps away to stay out of his immediate vicinity.

ANNOUNCER 1 (ON TV) (CONT'D)

As viewers are aware the Watch operates out of a satellite that sits in geosynchronous orbit with New York. The visiting dignitaries will be welcomed by the entire contingent of heroes operating under the UN-sanctioned banner of the Omega Watch.

Down the street, thee PUNKS, all teenagers with one with a basketball, see McIntyre watching the televisions. They saunter over to confront him. The crowd begins to scatter as the three punks walk into the area, and surround McIntyre.

PUNK 1

Hey, old man, what are you doing  
out of your garbage pile?

The punk with the basketball bounces it off the glass to the right of McIntyre's head, catches the rebound and then bounces it off the glass to other side of the man's head. McIntyre draws his arms in, making himself a smaller target, but otherwise ignores them. Punk 1 leans against the window, blocking McIntyre's view of the main screen.

PUNK 1 (CONT'D)

How do you walk around like this  
old man? The smell alone would kill  
me.

McIntyre continues to ignore the punks, turning to watch the jumbotron. They lose interest and turn their attentions to an ATTRACTIVE WOMAN watching the monitors as well.

INT. UN OPERATIONS CENTER

REILLY, early 40's with gruff exterior and military stance, dressed in a business suit, stands at the front of a monitor room, similar in design to NASA Flight Control, where several TECHNICIANS monitor various monitors displaying hot spots around the globe. The monitors closest to REILLY display the arrival of dignitaries aboard the Omega satellite.

REILLY

Run the board, people, I'd like  
this day to go smooth.

TECHNICIAN 1

North Vietnam, green.

TECHNICIAN 2

Chine, green.

TECHNICIAN 3

Mexico, green.

TECHNICIAN 4

New York, yellow. Omega Launch  
Station, yellow. Flight escort,  
report.

FLIGHT ESCORT (ON RADIO)

Shuttles have been clear all  
morning, control. Situation is  
static.

TECHNICIAN 4

Flight escort reports yellow, sir.

Reilly turns as WILL TRIMBLE, early twenties, enters the room. He is dressed in a jumpsuit with the Omega Watch insignia upon the chest. He crosses the room quickly towards Reilly, technicians pointedly ignore the obviously angry young man.

WILL

You canceled my flight privileges?  
I was supposed to escort the French  
delegation to the satellite and I  
find out I'm grounded. Why?

Reilly stands in front of a monitor and punches a series of buttons. The image on the screen is projected above the screen as a hologram, which Reilly enlarges as you would a screen image on your phone. It is the flight hangar onboard the Omega Satellite, he points to one of the shuttles currently parked in the structure.

REILLY

Relax kid, standard protocol.  
Someone relay to station, I'd like  
to know why shuttle four is out of  
position.

He turns from the monitor and heads for the nearest exit.

REILLY (CONT'D)

Walk with me.

Will hurries to follow.

INT. UN OPERATIONS CENTER - HALLWAY 1

Reilly is striding quickly down the hall, Will walking fast as he tries to keep up.

REILLY

Evaluations came back.

WILL

And?

Reilly stops in front of an elevator, pushes button and waits for it to arrive.

REILLY

You passed. Paperwork just needs my  
signature to go through.

The doors open and Reilly enters the elevator, Will follows.

INT. UN OPERATIONS CENTER, ELEVATOR

There are no buttons in the elevator. Red lights scan both men for retina patterns.

REILLY

S3. (pause) I've read your psych report. Typical "I wanna help people" crap. Doctors like those types of responses. I don't. I want you to tell me why you want to join the Watch. And I better buy it or you won't be taking the elevator back up.

The doors open and Reilly steps out.

INT. UN OPERATIONS CENTER - HALLWAY 2

This hallway is designed for pure functionality. White paint on the walls, linoleum floors. Reilly and Will emerge from an elevator that seals seamlessly behind them.

WILL

And what if I tell you the truth and you still don't like it?

REILLY

In that case, we'll have a different type of discussion.

Will stops in the hallway, hesitant to continue on until the conversation is over. Reilly takes two steps, then turns when he realizes he is not being followed.

WILL

Fine. Sally Henderson. That in the file? A thirty year old woman ends up paralyzed because I couldn't control this.

He holds his hand out, palm upward and a small glowing ball forms above his palm.

WILL (CONT'D)

This stupid little ball of light that I can make do just about anything now.

He hurls the ball down the hall. It bounces off the ground in front of Reilly and precedes to rebound over and over of the wall, ceiling, and floor. Its speed increases until Reilly appears caged in light, then the ball scream back down the hall where Will catches it.

WILL (CONT'D)

But I couldn't control it worth a damn six months ago. I was showing off for my friends, and lost control. Blew her car into next week. (Pause) Now I start paying that debt.

Reilly turns and continues walking down the hall, no reaction to the display or the confession. He stops in front of blank wall.

REILLY

Thomas Reilly. Delta-37.

Another retina scanner tests him before the door slides open.

INT. UNITED NATIONS OPERATIONS CENTER - DESIGN LAB

The lab consists of several tables, all with various pieces of equipment partially constructed on each. In the center of the room is a glass case with a colorful hero's costume hanging within. There are several LAB TECHNICIANS and PERSONNEL within, all facing the door which opens allowing Reilly to step in. The lab technicians and personnel applaud when Will enters. Will focuses on the costume and then looks at Reilly.

REILLY

Suit up. PARAGON wants to introduce you to the world after the opening speeches and tour of the satellite. Wheels up in forty-five. Congratulations.

Reilly turns to leave the room as people step forward to congratulate Will.

WILL

Wait. What did they decide on for my name? Ricochet? Rebound?

Reilly stops in the open doorway.

REILLY

Neither. They wanted to up your appeal with older folks, hit that nostalgia angle. See you in a bit, Pinball.

Will looks horrified.

WILL

Pinball?

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

The fenced-in graveyard is still and quiet, an old graveyard as the names on the tombstones have mostly worn off and the stones are overgrown with weeds. A large tree grows in what appears to be the center and sitting at the base of the tree is MBUTO, an African in his mid-20's, strong physique, bald. His clothes are casual, the only truly identifying article of clothing is an illeke beaded necklace he wears that is dyed black and green. Before him is the remnants of a campfire, wisps of smoke still rising as it cools. He is watching three BOYS as they play hide and seek among the tombstones. GRANDMOTHER, African and ancient in years, wearing a shift dress with a belt pouch and sandals. She enters the graveyard and walks over towards Mbuto, who rises to greet her.

MBUTO

Grandmother. You honor me.

Grandmother sits across from him on the opposite side of the burned out fire and gestures for him to do the same.

GRANDMOTHER

Mbu Abimbola. You have grown much since I last saw you.

MBUTO

Yes, I was only twelve then.

GRANDMOTHER

And now you are a man. Or you at least pretend to be.

Grandmother removes the pouch from her side and begins removing several items, leaf, stone, what looks to be a dried lizard, and places them in her lap. She stares into the dying fire. Mbuto sits quietly for a few moments before becoming impatient.

Grandmother, I have come a long way  
to be here, in this place and at  
this time.

GRANDMOTHER

This is what I mean, you play at  
being a man, with no patience. When  
will you grow up?

She waves in the direction of the boys playing.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

You would rather play with them, I  
suppose? Rather than what you were  
sent for?

MBUTO

No, grandmother. I will do as I am  
bid. If I can.

GRANDMOTHER

If you can. The only thing that  
will prevent that is you.

She looks over at the boys playing.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

You. Children. Come here.

The three boys run over, eagerness upon their faces. As they  
get closer it becomes apparent that they are not living boys,  
their forms are transparent when seen from a closer view,  
they step through the tombstones and the weeds are not  
effected by their passage.

BOYS

(together) Yes, Grandmother?

GRANDMOTHER

I will need your help if I am to  
show my grandson his path. And time  
grows short.

MBUTO

Do you need them? Is the situation  
so dire?

GRANDMOTHER

More than you know.

She begins placing small sticks upon the still hot fire, they  
slowly spark to life. She continues feeding it until the fire  
is crackling away.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

They've played with forces they cannot control and now the world will suffer for it. Unless a few find the strength to act. You will aid them against the Enemy.

MBUTO

Aid who? Where must I go now?

GRANDMOTHER

That is what the fire will tell us.

She stands and drops the items from her lap into the fire which causes the flames to turn white. She takes the hand of the nearest boy, as the boys all link hands as well. The boys merge into a ball of sparkling energy. Grandmother holds it high above her head and hurls it into the flames. Upon entering the flames shift to form themselves into the image of a large bird which rises above the fire before collapsing into the center of the arranged burning wood, instantly the fire is extinguished.

MBUTO

I don't . . .

The bird image erupts from the cold fire, shooting off over the graveyard and disappearing in the distance.

GRANDMOTHER

A powerful sign.

MBUTO

I don't understand. I am to find a bird?

GRANDMOTHER

Silly boy. Still not a man. You must find a being who is reborn out of ashes. Elegba will open the path for you. It will be the last aid I can give you.

She stands up and steps over the fire. Mbuto stands and she reaches up to caress his cheek, her hand passes through his face revealing that she is a ghost as well. Her hand stops and hovers over the illeke necklace.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

He gives you many gifts, grandson. You must accept all of them, even those that frighten you.

Grandmother . . .

She gestures towards the gate on the far side of the graveyard.

GRANDMOTHER

Elegba has you now. Go through the gate. You will emerge where you need to be.

Mbuto walks past Grandmother, across the graveyard, pausing to look back, before he steps outside the gate and immediately vanishes from sight.

INT. OMEGA WATCH HQ.

The satellite is a thing of beauty, all polished metal and glass. DIGNITARIES sit facing a podium placed before the outer glass wall of the satellite which looks down on Earth as the satellite orbits the planet. Seated on each side of the podium are the MEMBERS of Omega Watch. PARAGON stands and walks to the podium. PARAGON looks like he has not slept in days, a far cry from his standard look.

PARAGON

Ladies and gentleman, people of the world, I am PARAGON. For the last five years, you have welcomed . . .

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - DAY

McIntyre has resumed watching the televisions in the electronics store. The punks are hassling the attractive woman. McIntyre's knuckles are turning white as he grips the gym bag tighter and tighter. On the televisions the images shift to show PARAGON on the Omega satellite.

PARAGON

. . . my comrades and I as we attempted to make your lives better.

INT. OMEGA WATCH HQ.

PARAGON

Today, I have the . . .

From somewhere deep within the satellite a massive explosion occurs, the shockwave from the blast knocks the assembled crowd out of their chairs. PARAGON watches as the window overlooking Earth begins to splinter.

PARAGON (CONT'D)

(stunned) No.

The window explodes outward, carrying the occupants of the satellite with it.

EXT. OMEGA WATCH HQ.

Plumes of smoke are exiting from various breaches in the formerly state-of-the-art facility, it is their oxygen being vented. The satellite begins to drift closer and closer to Earth.

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - DAY

The crowd has gathered tightly around the window now.

PARAGON

Today, I have the . . .

The image abruptly switches to static, but is quickly replaced by the face of ANNOUNCER 1.

ANNOUNCER 1

We are sorry for the interruption we hope to have the signal back in a moment or two. As you saw that was PARAGON addressing the delegation, and the 'People of the World' from Omega Watch's orbiting satellite.

All the televisions are now broadcasting their various talking head announcers. McIntyre raises a hand and places it against the window. On the center monitor Announcer 1 has muted his microphone and is talking to an off-camera individual.

INT. SHUTTLE 8

Reilly is buckling himself into the pilot's seat of the shuttle, a minimalist vehicle with a front compartment for two pilots and a rear compartment for a passenger contingent of 8, with them sitting 4 across facing each other in the manner of a 1970's station wagon. Will is sitting in the co-pilot's seat, with eight AGENTS in the rear compartment.

TECHNICIAN 1 (ON RADIO)  
Sir, we need you in ops. We have  
lost communication with Flight  
Control onboard Omega.

REILLY  
Kind of busy here at the moment.  
What does central satellite control  
read?

TECHNICIAN 1 (ON RADIO)  
Sir, we really need to speak to you  
in ops.

REILLY  
Damn it. Just tell me, what is  
going on?

Silence for a few seconds as Reilly stares at the shuttle's  
controls.

REILLY (CONT'D)  
I'm waiting.

TECHNICIAN 1 (ON RADIO)  
Sir, there appears to have been an  
explosion on the satellite.

REILLY  
(Pause) Is it venting oxygen? Can  
you tell?

TECHNICIAN 1 (ON RADIO)  
Yes, sir. We believe so, sir.

Reilly begins flipping switches on the control panel.

REILLY  
Flight, I need clearance for  
launch. Control, calculate  
satellite trajectory based on  
presumed oxygen venting. Prepare to  
ground air traffic if satellite is  
entering atmosphere.

TECHNICIAN 1  
Copy. We have you cleared for  
launch.

INT. UNITED NATIONS OPERATIONS CENTER - HANGAR

The roof of the hangar parts down the center as hydraulic arms raise to doors in the roof, allowing the shuttle to rise between them.

EXT. TIMES SQUARE

McIntyre continues to stand with his hand against the window. Onlookers are milling about, most now watching the jumbotron as a news scroll of 'Breaking News' crawls across the bottom of the screen. Announcer 1 appears on the jumbotron and most of the televisions in the electronics store. The punks have turned their attention hassling an old woman.

ANNOUNCER 1

We are receiving the first news now of a tragic event. As many of our viewers know, we lost our feed to the Omega Watch satellite a few minutes ago. Early reports indicate that there has been an explosion during the event. The nature of the damage has yet to be determined but (pause) ladies and gentleman I am being informed that air traffic worldwide is being issued alerts to potentially ground their air . . .

By the store window, McIntyre clenches his hand into a fist and all the televisions in the front window spark, flames emitting from vents in the sides of the televisions as the screens go black. Nearby members in the crowd suddenly stop to look at cell phones and mp3 players. He turns around and steps out to the edge of the sidewalk and looks up into the sky. The punks notice the reaction and decide it is open season again as they surround McIntyre.

PUNK 1

What's the matter, old man? Worried the sky is gonna fall on you?

Basketball punk bounces the ball off the concrete at McIntyre's feet, catches it. McIntyre drops his gaze to the ground.

BASKETBALL PUNK

He seems sad.

PUNK 2

That it? You gonna cry over the dead do-gooders? Ask me, better off without them faggots in tights.

BASKETBALL PUNK

That's right, better to have no  
superheroes . . .

He throws the basketball, intending to bounce it off  
McIntyre's head, but McIntyre looks up and catches the ball  
with his free right hand. His left still clutches the gym  
bag. The three punks surround him.

PUNK 1

Give my friend back his ball, old  
man.

McIntyre holds the ball out at arm's length. He smiles wide  
at the punks, his eyes suddenly begin to emit a glow, and an  
aura of yellow surrounds his body. He drops the ball to the  
ground where it hits with a dull thud, as the rubber runs  
like candle wax along the concrete.

MCINTYRE

Or what?

PUNK 1

Shit!

The punks scatter and run, the crowd sees McIntyre and  
scatters as well. He looks at the crowd, he looks upset at  
their reaction. He rises majestically above the crowd,  
coronas of energy circling his hands, and rockets up into the  
sky.

INT. SHUTTLE 8

Reilly and Will are monitoring radio chatter.

REILLY

I need to know now, Control, What  
is the trajectory?

TECHNICIAN 1 (ON RADIO)

Still calculating, but we put it  
somewhere west of Kansas City.

REILLY

Copy, Control.

Reilly and Will adjust the shuttle heading, causing the  
vehicle to bank as they head west.

REILLY (CONT'D)

If we're lucky it will burn off as much mass as possible in atmo, and land in a large vacant area of Nebraska.

TECHNICIAN 1

We estimate impact in seven minutes. Also, confirmation from United States Department of Defense, they are scrambling military units for immediate response upon impact to keep the site contained.

REILLY

Good. Also, contact the governors of Kansas and Nebraska. Apprise them of the situation. Ask them to have National Guard response units ready as well. We'll need them to seal off all highways into the area of the eventual crash site.

TECHNICIAN 1

Sir, we have confirmation. Omega Sat will impact northeast of Colby, Kansas. We are informing D.O.D. now. Impact in five minutes.

REILLY

Copy. I estimate our arrival at just under forty-five minutes. Has all other air traffic been grounded?

TECHNICIAN 1

Copy, sir. You are the only bird in the air until it hits.

EXT. KANSAS COUNTRYSIDE

In the sky the Omega satellite is leaving a contrail of smoke as it crashes to earth. Smaller chunks of the satellite are impacting ahead of the primary portion of the satellite. The structure has been reduced to a fifth of its original size. It still is the size of a small building when it hits, generating a shockwave of damage that decimates landscape for a quarter mile outside the initial point of impact. It continues on, the ground absorbing its velocity as it leaves a half-mile long trail behind it as it comes to a stop.

INT. KIRKLAND'S OFFICE

JOSEPH KIRKLAND, 40's, sits at a desk, a suite of television monitors on the wall across from him. On several screens there are reports of the ongoing story of the destruction of the Omega satellite, these are muted. On two monitors are the images of Bulwark, and LILY. Lily is a white female, late twenties, very athletic.

KIRKLAND

Everything appears to have gone as I foresaw.

LILY

Not everything. Shimmer was still on the satellite. He was supposed to evac before the explosion. What happened?

Kirkland walks over to a small bar near the monitors and pours a drink.

KIRKLAND

Couldn't be helped. PARAGON was going to expose us. That could not be allowed.

LILY

It took a long time to develop him as an asset. I expect compensation.

BULWARK

Relax, Lily. We'll all get paid before this is done.

KIRKLAND

Listen to the man. We have a long way to go before we can let our guard down. Are we prepared for stage 2?

BULWARK

Just waiting for the word.

KIRKLAND

Well, then, it's time for you to have some fun, old friend.

EXT. OMEGA SATELLITE CRASH SITE - DAY

SOLDIERS swarm the area around the crash site. They appear jumpy, as if unsure how safe it is to be this close to the satellite.

Above the site helicopter gunships circle, keeping media helicopters outside the perimeter. One of the soldiers looks up and sees a yellow glowing streak headed for the ground.

SOLDIER 1

Incoming!

Soldiers gather with him, weapons trained on the approaching figure of McIntyre. He lands on the ground and is immediately surrounded by seven well-armed soldiers.

SERGEANT

You are in violation of protected air space. Additionally, you are trespassing on a level one quarantine site. You will surrender yourself to us for debriefing.

McIntyre looks at the gym bag in his left hand, one of the handles has come loose during the flight from New York, leaving him holding the bag by one strap.

MCINTYRE

Sergeant, I am afraid that will not be possible. I need to examine the wreckage.

SERGEANT

Not going to happen. Wilson, Jeffers. You're up first, if he moves tase him.

WILSON and JEFFERS hurry forward, each points a taser at McIntyre, their hands shaking.

MCINTYRE

I don't have time for this.

He steps forward and Wilson and Jeffers both fire. Their tasers both hit McIntyre in the chest. He shows absolutely no reaction to the electric current the two soldiers are discharging. The whine of feedback static is very clear in the air and all the assembled soldiers cup hands over their ears as their radios all whine loudly before they die. McIntyre flinches, in sympathy rather than pain. He plucks the taser darts from his chest and drops them to the ground. Wilson and Jeffers look at their tasers, there is a meter displaying battery charge that should have a glowing display, instead the screen is black.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

Sorry. I'm out of practice.

The soldiers are panicky, unsure how to deal with McIntyre.

SERGEANT

Fine. Squad, open fire.

The seven soldiers all open fire with their rifles. Around McIntyre there appears a glistening layer of yellow energy that glistens under the impact of each shell. The ground around McIntyre is littered with a growing pile of flattened slugs that have failed to penetrate the force field. The sergeant finally holds up his hand and the soldiers stop firing.

MCINTYRE

Yeah. Those won't do you much good either. Tell you what. You get your superior officer, I'll just poke around out here for now.

He begins moving towards the crash, the soldiers ringing him maintaining formation around him as he walks.

SERGEANT

Wilson. Radios are out, go get Lt. Davies. Then we'll decide how to proceed.

Wilson runs off.

INT. SHUTTLE 8

The shuttle is hovering over the crash site, Reilly is looking out the windshield, examining the site from a better vantage point.

WILL

Do you think anyone survived?

REILLY

Possible. Three of the watch could survive vacuum. So if they managed to work their way to the center and could withstand impact . . . maybe Starfall, and he could have saved others.

Reilly's eyes are drawn to a ring of soldiers with weapons aimed at McIntyre in the center.

REILLY (CONT'D)

Reilly to Control, do you have unauthorized personnel on- site.

STORMFALL CONTROL

That's affirmative. We've been discussing how to handle it but thought we should wait for your arrival.

REILLY

What? Why would you. Never mind. Coming in.

EXT. OMEGA SATELLITE CRASH SITE

The shuttle lands twenty feet from where McIntyre is surrounded by soldiers. The shuttle opens to gull-wing doors and agents pile out followed by Reilly and Will. Reilly see the figure in the center of the soldiers and stops, surprise showing on his face for the first time.

REILLY

Son of a bitch.

He continues toward the group and pushes his way past the soldiers.

REILLY (CONT'D)

You can not be here, McIntyre. You are not a part of this.

McIntyre reaches into his bag, and withdraws an apple. He bites into it, letting the juice run down into his beard.

MCINTYRE

I have been a part of (pause) this for a lot longer than you have, Thomas.

WILL

Sir, who?

McIntyre waves at Will.

MCINTYRE

Who's the new kid? I like the costume.

He walks over to Will and throws an arm around his shoulder.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

So, what handle did they saddle you with?

Will shoves McIntyre off him. Before Will can respond to McIntyre's taunts, a bright red, concentrated beam of light erupts from the wreckage. The light slices through metal, and the beam nearly hits Wilson as he stands with his back to the wreckage, but McIntyre is able to throw himself in the path of the beam. He bathes in the light and keeps it centered on him as the light moves, cutting an escape hole in the wreckage. Stepping out is STARFALL, late twenties, he is a preening peacock, always worried about his image. Even now he runs a hand over his bottle-blond hair when he sees Reilly and the soldiers. He is dragging an unconscious Shimmer, who he proceeds to drag over to the growing crowd. The soldiers abandon circling McIntyre and form a wall facing Starfall.

STARFALL

Easy, gents. I'm on your side.

Reilly steps forward and shakes his hand.

REILLY

Glad to see you made it.

McIntyre steps to Will's right. He and Starfall lock gazes, dislike apparent on both men's faces.

STARFALL

What rock did he crawl out from under?

MCINTYRE

Missed you too, Tinkerbell.

STARFALL

Do not call me that.

Reilly grabs Starfall and leads the man outside of hearing range of McIntyre.

WILL

Tinkerbell?

McIntyre reaches into his bag, pulling out two apples and offers one to Will, who refuses. McIntyre bites into the apple with a hearty crunch.

MCINTYRE

You'll see.

He swallows the mouthful of apple, and then puts a hand over his stomach. He looks at the apple.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

That ain't right.

He drops his gym bag and the apple, both hands displaying energy coronas around them now. He gently pushes Will aside.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

Step back for a second.

Energy slowly flows off his hands, floating in the air around Will and McIntyre. The energy starts drifting to a spot a few feet from McIntyre where it starts to swirl and coalesce, outlining the shape of a seven-foot oval. Once in that ship it continues to swirl and pulse in a rhythmic beat.

WILL

What is that?

MCINTYRE

Reilly, Tink? I think you better see this.

Reilly and Starfall look over and see the forming energy vortex. They immediately walk over and join McIntyre and Will.

REILLY

What do you think?

MCINTYRE

It's generating a low-level EM pulse. Not dangerous, just enough to make my apple taste funny.

REILLY

I wasn't asking you.

STARFALL

He's right though. I don't detect anything much.

The rhythmic pulsing begins to speed up strobing faster and faster.

REILLY

Let me guess, the energy signature is building?

MCINTYRE

Nope, getting weaker actually.

REILLY

Once again, I am not asking you.

Before Starfall can respond, the strobe effect flares, causing everyone but McIntyre to avert their eyes.

He looks into the energy discharge, seeing the figure of Mbuto appears as the energy vortex fades.

MCINTYRE

Okay, now that was a neat trick.  
Teleportation? I'd kill to be able  
to do that.

REILLY

Who are you?

Mbuto stares around at all the guns. He is clearly frightened, but not of the guns. He turns looks up at the sky.

MBUTO

I was sent to give aid. To . . .

REILLY

I asked your name.

MBUTO

I am sorry. I am Mbu Abimbola, but  
I am called Mbuto, it was a joke of  
my father's as I was the second son  
of twin boys. A very prodigious  
sign among . . .

Mbuto turns and looks at the sky again.

MBUTO (CONT'D)

Did you know there are three AGM-  
114 missiles about to strike this  
location?

REILLY

What are you talking about? There's  
been no authorization for-

McIntyre steps in front of the group, hands glowing.

MCINTYRE

The kid just appeared out of thin  
air and you're questioning him now?  
How long till impact?

MBUTO

Twenty seconds, no time for them to  
get to safety.

REILLY

This is ridiculous.

McIntyre braces his feet, and holds his hands out over the group. A glowing, domed shield surrounds Mbuto, Starfall, Reilly, Will, Shimmer and the seven soldiers. McIntyre stands outside the force bubble.

WILL

Sir, someone took out the Omega satellite, they may have planned on possible survivors.

Reilly pounds his hand against the energy shield.

REILLY

I don't have time for this. Starfall, can you knock this down please?

Starfall hesitates, looks at McIntyre. Before Starfall can begin cutting through the shield, the first missile drops, surrounded by the second and third. The crash site is engulfed in fire, the occupants of the domed shield are forced to watch as the soldiers patrolling other areas are incinerated in the blast wave. The helicopters circling the area crash to the ground, causing further devastation. Outside the safety of the bubble, McIntyre is forced to his knees, but the shield is sustained. When the firestorm finishes its destructive onslaught, McIntyre allows his hands to stop glowing and the shield falls. His clothes are scorched at the edges.

MCINTYRE

That was unpleasant.

REILLY

A strike like that would have required major influence. No one has that kind of pull.

MCINTYRE

And yet, here we are. We need to get out of here before any more party favors go off.

REILLY

I can call in an airlift, they can be here in less than twenty minutes.

McIntyre picks up his gym bag from the ground where it was protected.

MCINTYRE

You do that. But I think, right now, that you should consider trusting a few less people.

STARFALL

What do you suggest then?

MCINTYRE

We need answers. And three of us know there's only one man who can give them to us.

Reilly and Starfall exchange a look, then nod.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

And seeing as only two of us can fly- (looking at Mbuto and Will) neither of you can fly, right?

They shake their heads.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

Then we need transportation.

Reilly waves his agents and soldiers over.

REILLY

Alright then. Gentleman, you will spread out and find the first usable transport and bring it here asap. Starfall, was kind enough to deliver to us the man who sabotaged the satellite. We need to take him with us.

STARFALL

We should separate. I suggest only those absolutely necessary go to see him. (looks at McIntyre) I can presume you intend to make the trip?

MCINTYRE

Only if you agree to be my bestest friend in the whole world. Besides, he wouldn't even talk to you without me there.

McIntyre walks away from Reilly, Starfall, and Will who speak and deploy their troops. He steps next to Mbuto.

MCINTYRE (CONT'D)

Long way from Nigeria.

MBUTO

(Surprised) How did you know I was  
from Nigeria?

MCINTYRE

You're name. Spent some time in  
Africa after the war.

MBUTO

War? Which war? Desert Storm or-

MCINTYRE

World War One.

MBUTO

(laughs) I think you might be  
mistaken.

MCINTYRE

Could be.

He walks away and sits on the ground by the unconscious form  
of Shimmer.