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The Life and Times of America's Most Wanted

By

AJ Jackson

This book is comprised of the writings of one of the most elusive criminal masterminds in American history, AJ Jackson. Part One was sent to our publishing house in New York City several years back and has been in print ever since. Part Two was received by our Los Angeles office about six months ago. As was the case with Part One, a request was enclosed stating that AJ Jackson wished that any proceeds resulting from the publication be donated to The Red Cross. AJ Jackson in no way is able to profit from his crimes against society through this publishing house.

-Janice Cartwright, Editor.

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Book One: The Brat Pack

Introduction by the Author

I am AJ Jackson. Whether you believe that or not is up to you, but I am here to set things straight. Forget what you think you know about me and my friends. Forget everything you have read because, no doubt, the accounts you have heard are laced with countless lies. I, myself, have heard many of the tall tales in circulation, and they are nothing if not disgusting perversions of reality with only a fraction of the truth told. I come forth now, committing these words to paper after all these years, not to beg forgiveness. I desire only the opportunity to clear away the many misconceptions that have tainted my reputation and those of my friends. No longer can I stand idly by, listening to their names being sullied. My friends have been the most constant thing in my life, and friends take care of friends. It is as simple as that.

Now some called us a gang and said that I was the leader. Please. How could they think us anything like a gang? We were just inseparable friends who looked out for each other. Our loyalty, the loyalty of friends, came from love. The loyalty gangs are noted for is spawned by fear and fear alone. I hope we have that much cleared up.

You know who I am and what it is that I have set out to do. Forgive me if everything is not as exciting as you imagined it, but this is real life we are talking about and not cheap pulp fiction.

Before I get ahead of myself, as is my nature, I would like to address directly all law enforcement officials who might be reading this fishing for clues. Give it up! If you sit down with this book in one hand and a map in the other nothing will make sense. That is the only intentional tampering I have done to the facts. Everyone knows we came from Dexter, Missouri. Since that is all you know for certain, I will concede no more. The names of most of the locations described herein have been changed to protect the damned. Any person referred to herein that has aided us in any way has also had his or her identity masked. Come on. Even though this is a “tell all”, you had to realize that I could not safely tell all. I am here to tell our story, and not to do the FBI’s job for them.

Chapter One: Origins

Orphaned at twelve by a car accident, I was shuffled around from foster home to foster home. Finally, I was adopted by Dawn and Jerry Jackson, who were childless and unable to conceive. When I was fourteen Jerry's occupation- working on the railroad (as the song goes)- necessitated a move from Saint Louis to Dexter, a rural town deep in the Bootheel of Southeast Missouri.

Dexter was a small town compared to what I was used to. With a population barely over 7,000 it came as no surprise that Dexter was not as ethnically diverse as Saint Louis had been, not that it mattered to me. Before the move I had many black and Latino friends. Race just isn't important when you are that young and growing up in the city. I remember my surprise that only one black kid, Mikey Turner, went to school at Dexter High School. Soon I was to discover that Dexter was a town sharply divided geographically, socially, and racially.

The railroad tracks pretty much cut Dexter in half, dividing the east from west. The east side was called Cotton Belt after the railroad line that bordered it. It was the

poorer and rougher side of town. Up to one hundred trains would pass through Dexter a day, and not all those during daylight hours. These trains rumbling noisily through in the night and the chicken processing plant's foul stench wafting out did not make it an appealing neighborhood to live in, but rent was cheap.

Drive down any street this side of town and you would see just as many trailers as houses. Some would be in "parks"- grid works of gravel roads boxing in any given number of small trailers economically priced for the poor- while others would be mingled in amongst rundown houses.

Cotton Belt had its own public park, simply called East Park. It barely had any playground equipment for the kids to play on, but it sat adjacent to both the Municipal Swimming Pool and the Stoddard County Fairgrounds. The park also butted up against an overpass that brought traffic in high above the railroad. Underneath this overpass was a popular hang out for the hoods and stoners.

West Park, on the other hand, was where the in-crowd, the kids of prominent citizens, misbehaved. After all, they had the money and connections to get their "youthful indiscretions" forgiven if caught drinking or fighting. So why shouldn't they indulge just two blocks from police station?

So where, in this divided little town, did my adoptive family and I fit? Being middle-class at best, we lived just outside of Cotton Belt, across from Dury's Supermarket. Even though we weren't technically in Cotton Belt, we were close enough we could hear the trains. Every once and awhile we would even get a "chicken breeze" when the wind would shift, sending the chicken plant's stench our way. In fact it was not uncommon to see three or four chickens a day roaming free, having escaped from the

plant. It always made me laugh to think that they were headed for the feed plant just down the road. *Guess that answers the old joke, huh?*

Still, Jerry's middle-class pay was enough that Dawn could stay at home and watch over me. I always felt like I was a practical solution to combat Dawn's loneliness while Jerry was away, which was frequently the case. I only saw him a few times a week, and when I did, he never showed much interest in spending time with me. All this was fine with me, mind you. I had already lost my real parents. I didn't really care to get close enough to lose another set.

Transferring in the middle of freshman year sucked, but at least I escaped getting initiated. I stayed to myself because I didn't know how to relate to the other kids at school. You had a lot of kids that thought they were better than everyone else simply because their families had money or lived in town rather than in the country. You had the country kids that were all a little too sheltered and naïve for my tastes, and then you had your poorer kids who knew they weren't really going to fit in anywhere.

In my classes, I made good grades. I listened to the lectures the teachers were giving, but rarely would I read along or take notes. Instead, I would fill my notebooks with poem after poem. I would write a dozen or more a day, but most of them were crap. Few teachers cared since my grades were better than a lot of the students that tried hard. Mrs. Horton, my geometry teacher, did mind, and it was that very reason that I ended up in after-school detention with JP, where we became quick friends.

JP- short for Jeremy Phife- loved trouble. It was a good thing too, because he had a knack for staying in it all the time. Detention was his second home. It wasn't a question of if he had detention most of the time, but rather what landed him there this

time. Had he been fighting? Was he not prepared for class? Had he gotten caught sleeping in class again?

I was already seated when JP entered the detention hall. He was wearing a tattered blue jean jacket that looked a million years old and talking boisterously with some other kids filing into room. They were rougher looking than he was. Not that JP looked like an innocent little boy by any means. One of his eyes was bruised and his lip was busted open.

He sat down next to me, flipped open his sports magazine, and started talking. “You’re the new kid, right?”

I nodded. “So what are you in for?” I asked.

He gave me an incredulous look and pointed to his battered face before asking, “But doesn’t he look like he got the worst of it?” while pointing across the room at Tate Cargil.

One of the more popular upperclassmen, Tate was the son of Kit Cargil, who owned an upscale restaurant in town. The son had followed in his father’s footsteps and played football for the Dexter Bearcats - both as Quarterbacks.

Tate was built more like a lineman than your typical Quarterback. He was such a hulking mass that he looked ridiculous sitting at his small student desk. Usually a pretty boy, Tate was anything but on that particular day. He was bruised up badly and wearing a neck brace.

Tate glared hatefully at JP. JP blew him a mock kiss. “What started it?” I asked.

“Same thing that ended it, my fist,” he replied. I just kept looking at him, waiting for an actual answer to my question. Finally, JP opened up and told me all about their violent little encounter.

They were on the practice field, on the line of scrimmage. JP played Center, and he was about to snap the ball to Tate. Tate leaned into JP and made a rather distasteful remark about having JP’s mother in a similar position the night before. Before Tate knew what hit him, JP had removed his helmet and was wielding it wildly, like a weapon. JP’s helmet collided with Tate’s, and while he was stunned JP used Tate’s face mask to pull him to the ground. Soon Tate’s helmet was off and both boys had their fists flying.

That was as much of the story as I got before the teacher came into the class and silenced us, but I got the picture. Ten minutes into our detention, Coach Carson knocked on the door and entered. He waved over to Tate to follow him.

Tate gathered his things, and as they closed the door I heard Coach tell Tate to report to practice. He had gotten a free pass on this one, while JP was left behind.

We served our hour in silence, and afterwards I caught up to JP walking home from school. “Hey man, I’m a bit turned around. How do I get down to First Street?” I asked.

“You live on First? I figured you for more of a preppie.” I stood silent, prey to his assessment. “Come on, I’ll show ya. We are neighbors. I live over on Clement Street – two streets over.”

We walked and walked. My legs were getting tired, but at least I had someone to talk to. JP explained to me just where we fit on the food chain around school – just above frog shit.

We cut over onto the railroad tracks and followed them away from the main road. I remembered seeing railroad tracks near my house, so I figured we were getting close, but JP threw his book bag to the ground and sat down. He reached into his pocket and fished out his pack of Marlboros.

“Are we almost there?” I asked.

He withdrew the chrome lighter from the billowing cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He took a quick drag off of it before offering it over to me. I took it, and he quickly retrieved another and fired it up. “Nah,” he paused to exhale, “not yet.”

The first drag was harsh on my lungs, so I coughed. JP laughed, and we sat down beside the tracks. “Laugh it up. Don’t they condition you football players? You shouldn’t be tired yet, should you?”

He flicked his ashes, blew his smoke, and replied, “I’m not tired, just lazy. Why walk when we can ride?” He checked his watch and motioned over to the tracks. “Bout’ five more minutes there’ll be one through heading our way. It’s usually a slow roller, easy to hop.”

What can I say? He had the schedule down. I could already hear the whistle blows in the distance. We repositioned ourselves out of sight and awaited our chance. The engine soon passed by us moving at a fair clip, but just as JP had predicted the train was slowing down. He took one last drag of his cigarette and eighty-six’ed it before grabbing his bag and bolting after the train. I followed, racing behind him unsteadily on the gravel. When he tossed his bag up onto a flat-car, I did the same. As soon as he had scaled the metal ladder, I climbed after him.

An overpass came and went. There were no houses around, only trees and the tracks. We were moving along fast enough to still feel a slight breeze, which was welcome. For the first time since I arrived in Dexter, I was enjoying myself.

I knew then that it would not be the last time I hitched a train ride. I was still somewhat high off the adrenalin rush provided courtesy of its minimal danger. I could already see how this mode of transportation could entice people. I wondered if I was fast enough to catch a train that wasn't preparing to stop. "So you do this often?" I asked.

JP nodded. "Yeah, and once or twice my brother Matt and I rode all the way up to Cabool to our uncle's house."

Ahead I could see a small structure on the left, so I asked JP what it was. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure." He motioned for me to follow, and we hopped off the train, now barely creeping along.

"This is our hangout. We call it the pit."

"Why?" It seemed like an odd name.

"We dug a small fire pit inside. There's no floor; it's all dirt." He continued, "The railroad abandoned it years ago." It had three standing concrete walls but no ceiling.

"We're up here all the time cause it beats the hell out of going home." JP raised his voice, "Hey Matty, you in there?"

A head popped up over the wall. "Yeah, get in here and check this out."

The floor was earthen like JP had said, and it was anything but flat. One side, nearer to the entrance, was elevated high enough to see over the wall as you made your

way in around the perimeter. That was where Matt had poked his head up. A large tree, which had fallen on the building long ago and presumably knocked down the fourth wall, still lay across it, lending its foliage for a partial ceiling. Though it had fallen, it had never been uprooted and still lived.

“AJ, this is my brother Matt.” JP introduced us and we shook hands.

“Yeah, I’ve seen you around school. I think we have algebra together,” Matt said.

JP interrupted to comment on the work Matt had done to the pit. “Not bad.”

Matt had thrown some plywood across one side of the building for shelter from the elements. Inside, he had constructed two benches. They were really nothing more than wooden planks with upside down buckets for legs, but they got the job done. They faced the fire pit the boys had already dug.

It was hard to believe that JP and Matt were even related, let alone twins- as I was to discover. Matt was quiet, and JP was not. They both weighed about the same, but Matt was not built for sports like JP was.

We sat around smoking and talking. They were easy to talk to, and I didn’t hesitate to tell them about my past. I told them that I was adopted and that my real parents were dead. I told them that I didn’t really feel like I fit anywhere. All the foster homes I had been in kinda messed with my head like that.

They told me that things sucked at their house too. JP told me that his father could be a real violent son of a bitch when he had been drinking. “Just a few days ago he laid into me pretty good,” JP said. “Matt calmed him down though.”

The pieces soon began to fall together. I understood why JP got in as many fights as he did. He didn’t want people to know that his father was a mean drunk so he would

get into fights. When he was bruised and battered afterwards, people would think nothing of it. Also, it helped to blow off steam fighting against someone you were “allowed” to hit back.

When it began to get dark out, I told them that I needed to be getting home. My house was on the way home for them, so they showed me how to get to my house.

As we walked I noticed a lot of kids out and about, even as it was getting late. There were a couple of girls riding their bikes in a pack. There were others building some monstrous clubhouse in their back yard. Surely it wouldn't be allowed to stand once the adults saw it, but it wasn't my problem. In front of my house, JP invited me to come down to the pit any time, and so began our friendship.

Matt and I started hanging out every day after school, and JP would usually join us after he finished with practice. We would build a fire down at the pit and hang out there until about nine or ten at night.

Rarely was it just the three of us. Summer Clark, JP's girlfriend, was there a lot. She was had curly blonde hair and was petite and pretty. She was a cheerleader, but she wasn't by any means a Cotton Belt girl.

Her family had money and despised JP. They thought she should see that nice Cargil boy, Tate. Every time he called, she got the message, but JP's calls rarely got passed on. Her mother didn't really want her dating at all, but she had daddy wrapped around her finger. If she wanted to go out, all she had to do was turn on the charm and he would cave.

He was at his most stern when he talked about JP. “Jeremy is going to end up a drunk, just like his father. I'm telling you, Summer, don't let him drag you down too.”

Her father would tell say. “His mother used to be a nice girl with prospects before they ran off and eloped. They should have stayed gone and saved her parents the agony and disappointment.”

She knew the similarities between her relationship with JP and his parents. She knew that JP’s mother had been disowned after she refused to get an annulment. When the day came that she and JP wanted to get married, would her parents react the same way? She knew they would, but still she stayed with JP.

Summer was a sweet girl. Once she even tried to set me up with her friend, Shayla Fletcher. She tried to be subtle, but it was obvious when she started bringing Shayla down to the pit all the time. She would tell JP she wanted to take a walk. Alone and uncomfortable Shayla and I would find ourselves. We couldn’t find enough common ground to warrant dating.

Shayla was very religious. She always wore long denim skirts, and she kept her brown hair long and straight. She didn’t smoke or drink. She always looked uncomfortable at the pit, and as it became obvious that we were not going to date, she stopped coming there. Eventually, the only times we talked was before class or at the school lunch table.

Shayla had much more in common with Shawn Wilson. They were both taking advanced classes and went to the same church. Both lived in my neighborhood and road the same bus as I did. Eventually they started dating.

Shawn was another straight-arrow, but he had his moments. Sometimes he would cut loose and stay out after curfew or take a drink or two. He was smart about it though. He picked his times. If he had a big test the next day, forget it. Making the grade meant

everything to him. Shawn always made us swear never to tell Shayla about the times that he drank.

Chapter Two: A Loner No More

Ignoring commonsense safety precautions, I often walked the train tracks with my headphones on. I was making my way off of the tracks alone one day listening to “The Crystal Ship” by The Doors when a girl I recognized from the bus rode up on her bike. She was as unkempt as usual. Her shoulder length brown hair was stringy and in disarray. Her blue jeans had some wear on them not to mention a few grass stains, but I saw nothing wrong with a girl that wasn’t afraid to get dirty once and awhile.

Despite all this, I thought she was cute, but I had already come to that conclusion days earlier. Though we had not talked, I had come to look forward to seeing her on the school bus each morning. I was starting to make friends, but I wasn’t quite ready to strike up conversations with strange girls. In the end, I didn’t have to.

She spoke, but her words were lost to the louder crooning of Jim Morrison. She motioned for me to remove my headphones. “Yeah?”

“That’s stupid, you know, walkin’ the tracks and not being able to hear the train comin’.” She scolded me. Clearly this wasn’t the way I imagined this conversation starting.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her, quickly tiring of this.

“You shouldn’t even be on the…” Jim Morrison once again flooded into my ears as I walked around her bike and on down the road. She rode circles around me for a minute, yelling unheard at me, and unless I was mistaken she was on the verge of tears.

Damn her brown eyes were pretty. Why did she have to be so fucking annoying? Finally she tired and went her separate way, only to show up on my doorstep later that night.

Dawn and I were eating dinner when the girl knocked on the door. The door was open, and I could see through the screen door. She could see me also, so there was no sense trying to hide.

“May I help you, young lady?” Dawn asked politely.

“I’m Sera Foxworth. I’m a friend of AJ’s,” she paused, waiting for me to dispute our friendship, but I didn’t, so she continued, “We ride the morning bus together.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Would you like to come in?” Dawn invited and smiled at me. It obviously pleased her to think that I was making friends, especially girl friends.

“No, thank you, but can AJ come out to talk for a minute?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s nice out. Why don’t you walk your friend home?”

Dawn suggested. I nodded.

Sera had cleaned up before coming over. This was the most presentable I had yet to see her. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and her glasses made her look like a bookworm. She smiled as I came out and closed the door behind me.

“I think your mom likes me,” she said as we walked out onto the road. “First impressions are important. Now she’ll always talk about how nice that Sera Foxworth from down the street is.” Again, she smiled, but this time I detected some deviance in it.

I was quick to correct her, “Dawn is my guardian, but she’s not my mom. I’m adopted.” That was enough to shut her up for a bit. The noises of the night filled the lingering silence. Autumn leaves dried and dead wandered aimlessly in the night. The full moon shone brightly above us.

“So you couldn’t wait until tomorrow to lecture me more?”

“I didn’t come here to fight with you. I came to apologize for earlier. I’m sorry if I came across a little...”

“Pushy?” I said.

She nodded, “Yeah, pushy. That’s probably putting it mildly.”

A street light buzzed on overhead as we walked under it, and she stopped suddenly in its light. I turned around to face her. Her brown eyes glimmered in the moonlight, and this time there was no mistaking the tear trailing down her cheek. A gust of wind blew through like rude person cutting between the two of us, and Sera wiped away what the wind did not dry. “It’s just that a boy got hit by a train last year. Didn’t want to see you end up the same way.”

“Why not?” I asked. “I mean, you don’t know me.” I said.

She stepped closer to me, took my hand, and said, “I was kind of hoping we could work on that.”

I stared into her eyes, still watching them twinkle like distant stars. I nodded and smiled. We meandered around the neighborhood holding hands and talking for awhile.

Finally, Sera pointed ahead of us and said, “That’s my house.” After all the walking, she had led me back to my street, our street apparently. She lived two houses down from me. She smiled and explained, “I just didn’t want to say goodnight yet. Will you sit with me on the bus tomorrow morning?” she asked.

“Sure.” I wanted to kiss her, but I didn’t want to be too forward either. Besides a girl was standing in the doorway watching us. I erred on the side of caution and kissed her hand.

The sun was slow to rise the next morning, at least by my estimation. I was anxious to get to the bus stop to be near Sera once again. I watched out my window and waited for someone else to arrive at the bus stop. Even though I was dying to get out there, I didn’t want to show it. Finally, others started coming to the corner.

I sat down on the sidewalk and started jotting a cheesy love poem in my notebook. I looked often to her house, waiting to see her door open. When finally it did, it was not Sera coming out, but rather another girl.

She had on her cheerleading uniform and carried matching black and red pom-poms along with her books. She walked up and stood beside where I was sitting. “Can I read it?” she asked. She had great legs.

“What?”

“Your poem; it’s for my sister. Isn’t it?” I didn’t say anything, so she continued, “I can tell you if she’ll like it. She’s weird sometimes.” I passed her the poem and warned her not to laugh. “I won’t”.

My eyes wandered over her again as she read my words. She was every bit as pretty as Sera. Her black hair was long, and her eyes were the brightest green I have ever seen. She had filled out ahead of her sister and her uniform really accentuated her assets.

“Should I just call you ‘Sera’s sister’ or do you have a name?” I asked.

“Christi,” she replied without looking up. “You know, this is good, but I don’t know if Sera will get it. She’s not the literary type.”

She handed it back to me as Sera emerged from her house. “So should I give it to her or not?” I asked.

“Your call,” she replied.

Part of me wanted to crumple it up and throw it away, but I still had it in my hand when Sera joined us. “I see you met my little sister, Christi.”

“Yeah.”

She saw the folded paper in my hand and asked, “Is this for me?” I nodded and surrendered it to her. Christi smirked, looked to the ground and walked away as her sister started to read the poem.

“Oh shit!” I thought to myself as I awaited her reaction.

“It’s nice,” was all I got.

Chapter Three: Days Forever Gone

Let's fast forward a few years. I want to explain what precipitated the events that unfolded on that dreadful day, September 11, 1995. Six years have passed, yet it all has remained fresh in my mind. JP had gotten in trouble – surprise - back in May. This time he wasn't simply caught sleeping in class or fighting. He had vandalized the high school after being suspended.

As I have already mentioned, our school favored the rich kids over the rest of us. This was probably as much out of fear of their parents as bias, but it was also reflected in the "random" locker check policy. After his uncle Joe was busted for misdemeanor drug possession, JP was subjected to a locker check. That just goes to show you what kind of integrity the school's leadership exercised in enforcing their policies. JP protested the search. He was never one to go quietly with the system if he thought things were fucked up. This was one of those occasions. They literally had to drag him from his locker to perform the bogus search. They found nothing.

I am not saying JP didn't smoke weed. Hell, he and I had smoked it several times together through the years, but JP was not stupid enough to leave stuff like that in his locker. Still they suspended JP because he refused to go along with the plainly biased policy.

A couple of nights after the beginning of his suspension, JP got a little drunk and took a few cans of spray paint down to the school. One of the things he scrawled in his three can paint job was, "Fuck the Cops". Now by cops he didn't mean the police, but he was never really that fond of them either. He was referring to the Citizens On Patrol program, our local neighborhood watch. He had been caught several times breaking curfew by these wannabes, and he held a special disdain for them.

Mr. Fields, our bus driver and head of the C.O.P. Program, had hated JP with a passion ever since his little run in with the law. He had detained JP until the police could get there to take JP into custody that night at the school. Their longstanding feud with one another had been escalating. Mr. Fields was becoming obsessed with catching JP, and no matter what the trespass was, he was sure it was he whom masterminded the whole shebang.

When JP finally went before the judge several days later, he was given one year supervised probation and forced to perform eighty hours of community betterment work. He hated being forced to do anything but was, by nature, a hard worker. JP was also informed he would be tried as an adult should he ever again be brought before the court, and his next offense would earn him jail time. The courts tried to instill the fear of God and succeeded somewhat, I guess, but he refused to let them see it affect him. Before JP

was released into his parents' custody, they were ordered by the court to pay nearly two thousand dollars in restitution to the school district.

Things went downhill for JP afterwards. His relationship with his parents worsened. Mr. Phife was increasingly abusive. He lashed out with fists and biting language at JP several times in my presence. I cannot count all the times JP hid out at my house or the pit until his father's rage relented.

Aside from problems at home, JP felt the many repercussions of his actions on his social life. Upon his return to school, he was promptly dropped from the varsity football team's starting line-up, and, essentially, from the team. Many people JP believed to be his friends disowned him after his ordeal.

Some also called him a “stoner”, which wasn't too far from the truth at one time. As I said, he and I both had smoked-up from time to time. Most of us drank at parties. None of us were angels, but never did we claim that we were. The media gave us an altered image with their headlines, biasing the masses against us. One headline I recall vaguely made reference to us being "the demons of post-modern society". What kind of bullshit is that? I mean, whatever happened to journalistic integrity? By the time you finish reading this you will have a more accurate picture of those I have been fortunate enough to know and love.

Summer's parents had never liked her hanging out with JP, but when word reached them that JP had been in trouble with the authorities, they forbade her to see him. They even mentioned transferring Summer to a private school in a nearby town to keep them apart. Summer's parents entertained the idea for a week or so, but they never acted on it. Now I wish they had. Summer remained true to her love against their wishes, and

she was there to caress away his every care. Every chance she got, she would go to her man. Usually this was at my house, being that JP hid there quite often.

Shawn had always been the picture of perfection as far as I was concerned. He was immaculate, remaining so even when he dressed down. Never did I see him demonstrate anything less than flawless manners. I feel that, had things not happened as they did, Shawn would have been our valedictorian, but it just was not in the cards. It kills me inside to know all his hard work was in vain.

As it turned out, Donald Light led our class- the Class of 1996- out of the classroom and into the "real world", but by that time some of us were quite familiar with it already. Painfully familiar with it, I must admit. I don't think too much of Donald, but once I did. I admired him nearly as much as I did Shawn, but that was at the time when he was still one of virtue and loyalty.

In school Shawn and Donald made better marks than did the rest of us, but they were far more competitive. Mostly, though, the only competition they could find was in each other. Being tied for first in our class, every point became crucial to them, and it never ceased to amaze me how far each of them would go to top the other. They were creatures of ambition and perseverance. Looking back, I cannot fathom how they maintained a healthy friendship for as long as they did. Both were overzealous at times in their pursuit of academic excellence, but Donald took things way too far. I am sure that means a lot coming from me, but it is the truth.

Instead of setting numerous goals that could be attained one at a time until he got where he wanted to be as Shawn did, Donald always had to advance in huge strides, which he accomplished by working himself into frenzy. I cannot quite figure out how he

did it, but he could convince himself that Shawn had jumped way ahead of him in their struggle. I guess it takes a special kind of person to be able to convince yourself of complete and total bullshit. Untold legions of people do just that every day. In our chain of friendship, the link Donald and I shared was, without a doubt, the weakest.

Donald and I had come close to fighting several times over the way he treated Christi while they had gone out. She had always turned to me first when they had problems. I assumed this was because she knew how I comforted JP on so many occasions. I also figured she just felt comfortable talking to me since I was over at their house frequently. Several times I suggested to her that she should leave him, but it was to no avail. So why then would she always call me, if she was not going to take the advice I gave her? She and I both knew but let it remain unspoken for the longest time.

When she finally did break up with him, she confessed things to me no one else could bring her to admit. In between the sobs she said "Don't let this get back to Sera or the others. It'd only cause trouble. I've liked you since the night you kissed Sera's hand outside our house. Then I wished the poem you wrote for her you would have written for me instead. I knew she'd never get it." The phone was silent for a moment, and then, her voice returned, "I don't know why I'm tellin' you this. I must be out of my mind or something." I reassured her I thought no thoughts of the kind. "You're not really surprised, are you?"

"I've wondered a few times, but I was never really sure. I'd notice you noticing me, and all, but I was never convinced I was reading you right. Don't get me wrong, though. I'm Sera's, faithfully hers." My words slammed into the silence emitting from the receiver, and I was sure I had said all the wrong things.

"Oh, no, you've got me all wrong. I'm not making a play for you. I know you are Sera's, and I'd never do anything to come between the two of you. I just had to tell you how I feel, but please, don't treat me differently." I knew exactly what she meant.

"I won't, Christi. You're my friend, and you can't just shut that off. It doesn't work that way." She didn't speak, so I continued, "I care about you, Christi. I..."

"Could you ever love me?" The words were upon me before I could think, so I stopped to ponder her question.

"Very easily, yes, but I'll never leave Sera as long as she'll have me." We talked a bit longer.

As I was about to ring off, Christi called my attention back to her and said, "AJ, I'm glad she makes you happy." I could tell by the tone in her voice that this was something she meant. I had always known Christi to be true to her word and had no doubt that she would not mention a word of our conversation to sister.

For a long time Sera and I were happy, but that era of our relationship ended the day Donald's cousin, Travis Styles, moved to Dexter from Dresden, Tennessee. Sera became increasingly distant, and whenever he was around she couldn't peel her eyes off of him. At first I thought I was being paranoid, so I tried to ignore it. Later, my worst fears were confirmed when I stopped by Sera's house and found the two of them making out. I broke up with Sera on the spot. I figured, hey, it is better to be alone than play secondhand rose to someone else.

Eventually the pain receded, and an angel made my heart whole again. Sera, if you are reading this, I want you to know that I'm ready to forgive you. Yeah, I still get a little bitter about it now and then, but you can't change what happened so many years ago

any more than I can. Believe me, there are so many things I would do differently, but I can't, you can't, nor can anyone else. It is a mute point, really, now as I write this. I miss everyone back in Dexter something crazy, which is something I never thought I would hear myself say.

I wore my blond hair long in those days, and people sometimes kidded me about it. They would call me "hippie" or "moonbeam" jokingly. I worked at Durry's, the local supermarket, as a carryout making slave wage. The job itself was easy, and I got along with all the checkers- the girls who worked the registers- as well as the other carryouts. Every chance I got, I would hang around in the video department because I loved movies- and still do- and everything about them. Sera had worked as a checker for awhile, but that was a disaster. Later perhaps, I will go into the sordid details of it, but not now. The people don't want to hear about the soap opera lives of checkers and carryouts. No they want the dirt, the filth, and they want it all to be true so they will feel justified hating us. I give it all as best I can. Both will be presented, the filth and the banal, if they are the truth and relevant.

Though my AMA- Advanced Math Analysis- and Chemistry grades could have been better, I excelled in the composition courses I took. Grammar, which never held my interest for more than five minutes at a time, was my weakest area. Still, I told everybody I met that it was my destiny to be a writer. I guess the saddest part is that I actually believed it. Never before have I had anything in print other than this, which I am sure will find its way into paperback more swiftly than anything published by a first-time author in decades.

Chapter Four: The Legend Begins

I remember the day well. The morning air felt rather refreshing as I waited for the school bus. I hung my book-bag on a nearby street sign and glanced down the road toward Sera's house. She was heading my way. Watching and waiting for Sera in the morning had long ago become a habit, and since we had broken up it proved to be a hard one to break.

Sera tossed her schoolbooks down on the blacktop and sat on them. I knew her habits well even if I didn't know her as well as I had thought. I didn't have to look. Making eye contact with an ex-lover is a universal taboo. Yet, being the glutton for pain that I was, I had to do just that, so I waited until she had averted her attention elsewhere. My love for her was mistaken and based on a foundation of lies. Young love all too often is simply foolishness, seeking to fill an uncertain void with what we think a relationship is supposed to be like. She was filler, so to speak, and not the love of my life. I made these realizations as I let my eyes linger, taking in the texture of her skin. Never again would I touch her as I once had, and the fact that she was forbidden territory now made

the want grow stronger still. Cruel images of that day replayed themselves in my mind, taking me on a stroll down bitter memory lane. You know that road where the sidewalks are made of razorblades sprinkled with salt.

I was so blinded by the affection I felt for Sera that she could do no wrong. In all the time we had been together, not once prior to the incident with Travis had I suspected her capable of such bitter betrayal, and by that time it was too late. Things were damaged beyond all repairs.

Christi waved as she made her way across the street to our bus stop. She joined me where I had been waiting for the bus by myself and hugged me. “How are you doin’?” She asked. Sera took notice of us.

“Hangin’ in there,” I replied. Sera was still looking our way. I was self-conscious with her watching us, and as much as I enjoyed Christi’s company, at the time I just wanted to be alone. “She’s watchin’ us right now. Can we talk later?”

“Sure. Let me know if there’s anything I can do, okay?” I nodded, and she moved off to give me some space.

I joined the others only when the bus pulled to the curb. It felt odd not holding Sera close as the bus approached, another hard-breaking habit. The whole concept of parting ways with a lover is weird. Whether two people part as friends or foes, the dilemma remains virtually the same. In either case, you are expected to retreat to your side of the wall and withdraw all emotional attachments resulting from prolonged romantic involvement and act as if you feel those feelings no more. The only difference is that people parting company as foes must contend with a rainbow of negative

emotions: anger, jealousy, and the remaining desire to love the one you now hate. At the moment, I both hated and loved Sera. At least I was honest with myself about that.

Because of my ass-dragging reluctance to join the others, I ended up at the end of the line, which as luck would have it, ended with Sera. We were a scant few inches apart, yet an almost tangible silence kept our minds a million miles apart. I had the sudden desire to both pull her close and push her away. I did neither. I just waited my turn and boarded the bus. The silence held as we searched out separate seats. Being that our's was the first stop of the morning, few people occupied the bus, making it an easy task avoiding her. Christi scanned my face as I boarded, trying to gauge if I was going to seat myself with her or not. I still wasn't feeling real sociable so I passed her seat up.

It surprised me that Mr. Fields did not launch into a personalized interrogation as we boarded the bus. The day prior someone had cherry bombed one of the restrooms at the high school. I was one of the few people to know who was responsible. Even though it was JP that had provided the fireworks, he wasn't the perpetrator. Donald was. At any rate, I was just glad not to be questioned about it.

The next stop was Shawn's, and he came and sat with me. So much for a quiet ride to school by myself. I knew almost word for word what he was going to say before he said it.

"Hey," he said, turning to look Sera's way. "She still got you down?" He paused as if looking for the right words to melt my melancholy mindset. "She isn't worth all the heartache. Besides, there are a lot of other fish in the sea." Never before had it dawned on me how great the magnitude of my hatred towards such trite sayings was. That awareness swept over me, fueling further my somber mood.

"I appreciate your concern, really, but I'm fine. I'm a little down. Yeah, but that's normal enough." I looked to the most recent batch of new arrivals seating themselves. "I'll be alright." Shawn's expression lightened a bit. I have always prided myself on being able to cheer others up no matter how depressed I found myself.

While Shawn and I conversed, I glanced occasionally at Christi, only to find her each time returning my stare. I lost myself in her beautiful eyes. Shawn's voice faded from the foreground of my attention to little more than a persistent whisper in my ear. I caught bits and pieces of what he was saying. I replied every now and again with an "uh-huh" or the like, but my focus was clearly elsewhere. Something about the way she returned my gaze told me that not only did she not mind my eyes exploring her sultry body, but also that she rather enjoyed it. It doesn't take a genius to figure out when a woman is aroused. If it did procreation would have subsided eons ago.

My eyes worked their way down her plush form, savoring every inch of flesh and momentarily forgetting Sera and her lessons in heartbreak. A smile passed my lips, one that I was not quick enough to conceal. It hinted at the thoughts both romantic and deviant running through my mind.

Shawn looked at me, half grinning. "You like her. Don't you?" He had me silent, stunned beyond reply. I looked away, out the window. "You do." He laughed. "I am not asking. Don't even try to tell me you don't." I looked back to him.

"Maybe you are right, but that would be way weird, right? Asking a girl out right after you broke up with her sister."

"Sera's the one that caused the breakup. Breaking up with her to date her sister would be weird." Shawn stopped, glanced at Christi, and continued, "Look at her! You'd

be crazy not to ask her out. Everyone knows she likes you. She tries to hide it, but come on.”

"You're right, Shawn." I flashed him a smile as I gathered up my book bag and moved to sit with Christi.

Sera darted me a malicious glare, and it irritated me that she was self-centered enough to think I was sitting with her sister to spite her. Screw her! If she wanted to burn in a hell she created for herself, let her.

Christi's eyes lit up as I seated myself beside her. "Had enough time alone, huh?" She asked.

I looked her in those beautiful green eyes of hers and replied, "I guess you could say that." I paused, wondering how I was going to convey what I wanted to say. Did I really want to say it at all? I had to be sure. This was someone else's heart here, not a plaything. If I said these things to her, would I mean them? Held softly in her emerald gaze, I knew the answer. Yes. "I need to tell you something."

She nodded for me to continue. "I've been thinking about something, a lot of things actually, but one thought keeps repeating in my mind." Christi listened attentively to my every word. "What would you say if I told you I now realize I picked the wrong sister?" Silence, though her mouth was open. "What would you say if I told you I am ready to pick the right one?"

Her eyes widened, making them even more entrancing. "Are you sayin' what I think you're sayin'?"

I had thought I'd explained myself quite clearly, but I replied, "If you think I am asking you to be my girl, yeah." A slight smile crossed her lips, but it departed as quickly

as it had appeared. I knew she was thinking about Sera. I pressed the issue, "So, will you have me?"

She shook her head in disbelief, "You know I will, but how do you think Sera will react?" I put my other hand on her soft cheek.

"Doesn't matter." She mutely nodded as the bus slowed.

I looked out the window and saw the kids lining up for the approaching bus, and JP running out of his house at the last minute to head up the rear. The doors opened, and they started filing in. Mr. Fields blocked JP's passage and instructed him to sit directly behind him, a seat reserved for troublemakers.

"For what?" JP sneered to which Mr. Fields couldn't help but delight in smiling back at him. So many times he had tried to bluff JP into confessions to no avail. This time would be no different except that Mr. Fields didn't need the confession. He had something better; he had evidence.

"Save the lip, boy. Just go ahead and have a seat, and let me explain a few things to you." JP dropped down into the seat without losing his composure. He had been in similar situations too many times to count. It was too early in the game to start worrying just yet, but if Fatty Fields- as JP called him secretly- really had anything on him he'd be in juvenile hall for years to come.

"Your problem is your mouth, son. Your eyes must not be that good either." Fatty said.

"Oh yeah? How so?" JP inquired.

"Well you see that camera mounted up there?" Fatty looked up from the road long enough to make eye contact with JP in the mirror. "That little flashing red light means

your every action and word is being recorded.” He had JP’s attention. “Maybe you haven’t said anything today, but what about yesterday morning? Can you think of anything you discussed with Donald that might interest me?” He held up a videotape clad in a black case.

JP knew he had reason to worry now. “Porn’s not allowed on the bus, Fatty.” The smile on Mr. Fields’ face evaporated.

“We’ll see how funny you can be when we get to school. Donald’s already confessed and sold you out, son. Looks like this just might be your last ride on this bus.”

For once JP was silent. Not a good sign. That meant the anger was swelling up inside him, and it wasn’t going to be pretty when he unleashed it. Matt knew it. Shawn knew it. Christi and I knew it, and soon so would everyone else.

Mr. Fields brought the bus to a slow approach at the next corner, and Summer and Donald climbed aboard. Summer walked past JP, utterly confused and sat down beside Matt. Donald walked past as quickly as he could; knowing well the visage of anger JP was wearing. For once JP believed Fatty. He would not have had the brains to check the tape without being tipped off by someone. And that someone deserved an ass beating JP reckoned.

What happened next, I cannot say with any degree of certainty. Things happened so fast that next ten minutes or so have, in the many years since, become a blurred event only half remembered. You will just have to take my word on that, but I will relay all I remember.

When the bus was in motion again JP sprang to life and was thrashing Donald before I knew it. JP contrasted me well. You see, he was a brawler; he loved to fight.

Just as Tate Cargil had found out years before JP could inflict real damage. I saw elbows and fists impact hard on Donald's face. I saw the blood patch left on the back door when his head was slammed into it. Donald looked pulverized, lying on the floor. He was trying to dismiss his cowardly acts saying something to the effect that he couldn't afford to throw away all he had worked for over the past three years. It was hard to catch it entirely. JP continued to plant his foot up against Donald's body.

Here is where things get a bit hazy. Mr. Fields must have pulled the bus over at some point, but I was unaware of this action at the time. I was too wrapped up in the fight and digesting all that was transpiring. I put my arm around Christi. Mr. Fields tried to break up the fight, if you could really call it that. In his fury, JP turned on Mr. Fields swinging.

Everyone was on their feet and watching what was unfolding up front. After all, this would be prime choice gossip for the rest of the day, and they had been fortunate enough to witness it first hand.

While everyone else watched JP's onslaught, my eyes were fixed on Donald. He lay sprawled out in the aisle. What a great day he had had thus far. I scanned the murky depths of my soul, searching for the slightest hint of any lingering pity for Donald, who had once been my friend. I could not find a trace. You rat out a friend to save your own tail, you need it beat.

The brawl was almost upon me when I turned to watch it. JP had a much harder time taking Houston Fields down than had been the case with Donald. At the time, I was confused as to how JP could have been so bold, so stupid even, as to swing on such an authority figure, but I later found out what had brought it on.

JP had for several months been taking Prozac. About a week prior, he had decided he didn't feel he needed it any more. He hated the zombie feeling that it gave him. I cannot help but feel that stopping his medicine cold turkey like that didn't have something to do with this unbridled rage manifesting.

The last blow, a swift upper cut by JP, sent the driver tumbling down the stairs and out of the bus. I knew then things would never be the same for JP. He had gone too far. Houston was out cold. JP fell back into the front seat, out of breath. Two freshmen- a guy and a girl- raced out to see if Mr. Fields was okay. He seemed to be peacefully slumbering, and that worried me. My worst fear was confirmed when they lifted Mr. Fields' head to reveal a stone both large and bloody.

He was not cold yet. He still looked the part of a living person and probably would for hours to come. The passengers filed out and encircled the body. A pool of blood was seeping out from under his head. I took off my flannel and placed it over his head, and with the aid of a couple of others, drug him over into the grass.

I still think about Houston Fields now and then. His death reminded me that death isn't an abstract idea, but rather a harsh reality the world over. Death no longer stuns me as it did back then, because it is a beast with which I have become painfully familiar. I have been desensitized by its many faces and have come to understand its true nature. It is used as a means of making us appreciate what it means to be alive. Thus, death is no more than missed opportunities. Take Houston Fields for example. Never again would he make love to his wife, plan a family trip, carve a Christmas ham, or cheer the Saint Louis Cardinals to the World Series. JP had taken all he had and all he could have ever hoped to gain. Death is a terrible thing, no matter to whom it happens.

JP was in shock, still sitting in the driver's seat. He stared down blankly at the floor. "What the fuck just happened? What am I going to do? I didn't mean to hurt him."

"JP, he isn't hurting. He's dead. This is big. You will get put away for this. You won't be coming back for a long time. You understand me?" JP nodded. "I'd help you but hiding at my house won't save you from something like this. I know you didn't mean to do it." I made him look at me. "What do you want me to do? You have two options, go to the police or get out of town. Do you want me to drive you to the police station?" He shook his head and began sobbing violently. "So you are going to leave?" He nodded.

"Look, you are in no shape to drive. Let me get you out of here." He fussed, saying I shouldn't get involved, but I wouldn't listen to him. Screw the consequences. My friend was in need, and I wasn't one to jump ship.

To this day I still debate whether my undying loyalty to friends is a redeeming quality or my greatest folly. I understood completely if I left Dexter with him, I could never show my face there again. I mulled the idea over all of two seconds before deciding to join JP on his journey out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Chapter Five: Farewell to Innocence

Matt and Shawn joined us. Outside I saw Sera rounding up the smaller children, planning I assume to see them safely home. The older students were standing about waiting for the ambulance and police.

JP sat with his head in his hands and addressed his brother. "Matt, tell Mom I love her. Tell Dad I am sorry for turning out as bad as he said I would. And I want you to take care of yourself."

"You are not going anywhere without me." JP raised his head. "I am surprised you actually think you owe Dad an apology, especially after the way he knocked you around." Matt looked JP directly in the eyes as he spoke.

"Don't you think on fugitive is enough for our family? Mom would have a nervous breakdown if she had to handle all this alone. She'll need you."

"All those times Dad beat the crap out of you, what did she ever do to stop it? Nothing, not a damn thing!" He paused to let his words sink in to his brother's thick

skull. "Nah, Mom'll be fine. It's you I'm worried about." Before JP could protest further, Summer spoke up.

"I'm going too."

"No, I'm not dragging you into this." His voice was little more than a weary whisper. I guess all the shouting earlier had finally caught up with him.

"You're right. You aren't dragging me. I come of my own will, and nothing you say will change my mind."

"Look, we don't have time to stand around and argue! Whoever isn't going get off now. It won't be long before we have company. Shawn are you going?" It wasn't easy to rush everyone while they pondered such a dilemma, and now I realize, although it was totally necessary, it was also very dangerous. It remains one of my few, true regrets.

Shawn averted his gaze down the road as he thought things over. "Yeah, I guess." I should have thrown his ass off the bus right then for giving me such a half-assed answer, but I didn't. I wanted to get JP out of there as quickly as possible, and in my haste I made a mistake.

I turned to Christi, unsure of what I wanted her to say, and posed the same question. "I ain't about to let go of you that easy. I just got you." In a way I was glad she had decided to go. I could watch over her and make sure she was safe, at least that is the way I saw it at the time.

If I had not put the rush on everybody that fateful day so many years ago, just maybe JP would have said something to convince the others to remain in Dexter. Just maybe, but never will I know for sure. All I do know for sure is that I wish someone

would have pulled my head out of my ass long enough to give me all the answers, but, as we all know, things don't work out that way in the "real world". Do they, folks?

I took the wheel and got us safely out of Dexter by clinging to the back roads of dirt and gravel. I didn't know how to drive a bus, but you learn quickly when the heat is on you. About ten minutes out of town, Matt suggested we go to his Uncle Joe for help. He said we could probably hold up there, in nearby Cabool until we could make other arrangements. I followed his directions without question.

Houses came and went with varying scarcity, and the quality of the roads got worse by the minute. A set of crossroads appeared to dance about and run away as I drove, but I know, in actuality, it was the other way around. Although the gravel made the roads appear to dance and our acceleration created the illusion of motion in the inanimate, we were the ones running scared as if someone were shooting at our heels. Most of the road was either hill or crook, but that didn't bother me because I had once gone with Dawn to visit a friend in northern Arkansas. Let me tell you, the roads there suck.

I thought I would feel better the more miles I put between Dexter and us, but I was wrong. The miles began to add up, but my tension merely increased. Poor JP. I can only imagine what he was feeling and fearing. The worry must have been written all over my face, because Christi saw it and came to me. "We'll find a way to work everything out," she comforted from behind me.

I was glad she had come to me, but our situation was not really something I cared to talk about right then. "Let's change the subject, okay? I don't wanna think about it

right now." My manner must have taken her by surprise because she took pause before venturing further words.

"Alright. What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know. How about us? Just because you and I are together, it doesn't mean that you have to get drug into this. I can still let you off somewhere. If we get busted...." I let the thought trail off, infinitely unfinished.

"You didn't twist my arm. I'm here because I want to be here." I looked back to her through the rear-view mirror. Our eyes met. "And because I love you so damn much."

"And why is that? What about me is so great?" After surveying the road for a second, I glanced once again in the mirror. "Why do you love me?" I had always wanted to ask her, but the opportunity never presented itself.

She did not answer immediately, but after some thought she said, "Maybe it's because of the way you always treated Sera. All the roses and stuff. Sera let me read all of the poems you wrote for her."

I felt embarrassed that she had read my poetry.

"She did?"

"Yeah." She smiled. "Don't worry. I loved it. For the longest time I've had this fantasy where you write me a real steamy sonnet and read it to me over a candle-lit dinner. Then, we.... I guess we kinda got off the subject." I could tell her embarrassment was nearly equal to my own. "I would have to say I love you because you're so romantic. You convey your dreams so gracefully." She paused once again, and

our eyes met again in the mirror. "I guess it is weird that you won me over with words you wrote for my sister, but it doesn't matter."

"Ok, I'll buy that, but I want to hear the rest of that fantasy sometime." I didn't really know what to say. I hadn't expected her to be able to answer my question with such ease.

She leaned closer toward me and posed a question of her own, playfulness filling her voice. "Now your turn. Why do you care for me?" It both amused and saddened me that she could not bring herself to say that I loved her.

If she couldn't bring herself to say it yet, I would. "Christi, I love you." At this a quaint smile brightened her already beautiful face. "Why? We just go together if you think about it. You love to travel nearly as much as I do. You love the romantic, and I am that romantic. I hope that makes sense to you." She nodded.

I gazed down the stretch of road, so like a winding ribbon being blown about by the breeze. Dark clouds were moving in from the west, but it would be some time before they caught up to us. "Sera used to laugh at me when I would say things like that. I guess that should have told me she wasn't the one."

"I wish it would have." She looked up, shaking her head quickly. "That came out all wrong. I just meant that you could have avoided the heartache. That's all." Her reply touched me. I had known what she had meant, and I let her know it. We soon fell silent, and turning my full attention back to the road, I realized that we were running on empty.

"Ya'll aren't going to believe this, but we're out of gas." A stream of moans and profanity filled the bus as it cleared one final hill before giving out completely. I guided it off to the side of the road.

JP expressed his displeasure with the situation as we filed out of the bus, and he did this using that special way he always had with words, "Son-of-a-bitch! Oh, this is fuckin' excellent!" My friend, JP, was always quite the great communicator.

A solitary road sign in the distance was the only reminder that we were not, even way out here, safe from society and her enforcers, the police. And what of the police? Were they just doing their jobs, or was there something more? Perhaps they were trained bloodhounds driven mad by their preternatural skill and unquenchable thirst for apprehending "bad guys"? If they were indeed the bloodhounds I'd envisioned, I had no intention of allowing them to pick up our scent. "Matt, is there a quicker way to your uncle's house? Preferably, one away from the road?"

He stood thinking and surveying his location. "Yeah, follow me." His voice rang out calm. Still I could tell he was frustrated.

"Ya'll go on, and I'll catch up in a sec." As they headed into the woods, I raced back to the bus and removed both the VHS tape from the Bus Cam and the other one Mr. Fields had intended to use against JP. I opened the flap of my backpack and let the tapes sink deep within. I also gathered the loose articles of clothing and whatever else I thought I might find a use for that had been left on the bus.

I found myself high-stepping over weeds to catch up to them. Matt's short cut was an old hiking trail he and JP had used while camping in the area some years prior. I remembered they had spoken of their camping exploits several times at school. I was of the opinion that the trail existed only in Matt's mind. As far as I could tell, it was as untamed and overgrown as the rest of the forest floor. Blueberry bushes, poison ivy, and briar bushes all flourished and blocked our way. Even though poison oak and sumac

grew extensively in these parts, the flora near Cabool did not hinder much. Every so often I would catch a glimpse of a Red Betty or a Butter Rose swaying gently with the muffled breeze.

We walked in pairs. The trail, being as narrow as it was, would fit no more, and not even that at times. Shawn accompanied Matt at the helm of our expedition. Christi took their time walking together as opportunity to fill Summer in more completely. JP and I headed up the rear.

"They were right all along." JP said hoarsely.

"Who?"

"Everybody. Summer's parents, my Dad, the school. Yeah, I guess they were all right. I'm just no damn good."

"That's bull, and you know it!" I replied. I looked at him and silently prayed I would never know such overwhelming despair myself. That prayer has gone on to join the countless other unanswered prayers I have amassed in my lifetime.

"Is it? Man, has it not sunk in yet? You're walking with a murderer. Whether or not I meant to kill him doesn't change the fact that I did it."

"I know you, JP. You are not like that." I hated seeing him like this, and the words I heard him say frightened me. "They just pushed and pushed and thought you'd keep taking it. Have you stopped to think that maybe none of this would have happened if you weren't bombarded with the idea that you were born bad?" He didn't say anything. "How many times have you been told that you would never amount to anything?" He walked on, watching his feet meet the forest green. "I've seen. I know what you've been put through, at home and in school." My words must have struck a nerve, or he began to

think rationally again. In any case, I saw a tear fall even though he tried to hide it by turning away.

He remained silent. Sometimes it takes all your strength to fight back the tears, keeping you from forming a single word no matter how hard you try. Eventually, he overcame and spoke, "You've always been there for me. Through it all, you've stood by me."

"Yeah, and I'll always be there for you and the others. That's just the way it is with friends." Since that time, I have not come across a truer statement than that. I mean, life at one time or another tears everyone down, and sometimes we cannot pick ourselves up. We must rely on our dearest friends to do the rebuilding. My greatest fear was that there might not be any rebuilding for the six of us, especially JP.

In the silence that followed, we caught bits and pieces of Christi's account of things. JP tried to block out her words. He might have been successful. I really do not know. The wind aided him, as it picked up, I am sure.

Riding the winds that rustled the canopy of foliage high above, thunderheads approached and sprawled all about the threatening sky. Soon they began to topple in upon themselves as the lightning came, accompanied by the low, commanding cries of thunder. At first, the rain fell lazily in oversized drops, but then, as we neared our destination, the storm increased its intensity. While the rain pelted us, leaving our skin red and stinging, the thunder rattled through our very beings. Twice lightning struck so close the forest hid behind a sheet of white light, and the brightness of the image was burned into our retinas temporarily.

"It's over the hill, come on!" Matt shouted over the incessant clamor of the storm. Over the hill was the same gravel road we'd strayed from some time ago. We ran across it and up the steeply inclining circular drive.

The house came into view atop the hill. It was white although the peeling paint made it hard to tell in places. The adjoining garage had a tin roof and walls made of green fiberglass strips. That was all I noticed of the exterior as we scurried for the shelter of the covered concrete porch. Matt knocked, and the door opened.

A lanky woman who appeared to be about forty stood in the doorway. She backed out of the way and invited us in. Matt and JP led the way, and each, in turn, was greeted with a hug and a kiss. Matt made the introductions, knowing that JP was in no shape to do it. "What brings you boys and your friends out? Shouldn't ya'll be in school?"

"Well, Aunt Angela, it's kind of a long story."

No sooner than Matt finished recounting it all, JP added, "I swear it was an accident. I never meant to..." He hid his head in his hands as the tears came, but they slipped through anyway. Aunt Angela, as we all called her, went to comfort her nephew. I could see the shame he felt being in such a situation written upon his tear-stained face. He had worn the very same expression several times when he had shown up on my doorstep in the middle of the night, heartbroken and battered.

"Come on, let's calm down. It's gonna be ok." Aunt Angela said. "Why don't you take one of your pills to help calm you down?" She was referring to the antidepressants JP had been taking.

When JP regained his composure, he told her that he didn't have any with him. He also confessed then that he had quit taking them several days back and had no desire to start again. This revelation- that he had ceased to take his meds- even caught Matt by surprise. "I'm alright." He sniffled a little and raised his head.

"What are you gonna do?" Aunt Angela asked.

"I, I don't know," JP whispered in reply.

Looking out the window over JP's shoulder, I saw a man, who was soon introduced to me as Uncle Joe, heading to the house from a distant barn. Aunt Angela saw him as well and continued, "Well, I want you to know that your Uncle Joe and I will help you any way we can, but you can't stay here. Joe is still on probation for that quarter bag. Here he comes. Just sit tight, and I'll see what he wants to do, all right?"

"Yeah."

Uncle Joe opened the door, stomping his feet to remove the caked mud from his black rubber boots, and entered. "How the hell you boys get out here? Didn't even see ya'll come up." Although he had addressed them, neither JP nor Matt answered. It was Aunt Angela who ended the oppressive silence.

"Can I see you in the kitchen for a minute?" She asked. His lips lost the smile they'd upheld as confusion overcame him. He nodded and followed her from the room.

While Joe and Angela were in the kitchen very little was said. Matt glued his eyes to the television, trying to forget his life for a while. Summer sat across JP's lap with her arms folded around his neck, her head limp against his chest. Christi and I sat at the far end of the old, cream-brown couch, near a dusty end table supporting a spider web ridden lamp. Shawn sat off to himself staring out the window facing the barn. As he

watched lightning illuminate the soaked countryside, I wondered what he was thinking. Indeed, I wondered what was going through the mind of each and every one of them.

Even as Matt sat before the little black and white television, I do not believe he fully escaped from awareness for more than a few seconds at a time. Just because you focus your eyes on something does not mean your mind will always follow. It will roam freely where it wants.

JP, I feel, was in hell. Thinking of Mr. Fields, of his parents, and of what the future held in store for the six of us. Never will I really know what was going through his mind as he sat there, staring blankly at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. I doubt I actually want to know what he was thinking.

Sweet Summer just sat there in his lap, laying her head on his chest with her eyes closed. Perhaps she was in shock, numb to every excruciating pain she would have otherwise have felt. What thoughts did she entertain? Maybe she was thinking about all the things she would never again be allowed to do, like watching prime time with her family, dancing down at Seager's, or relaxing in her bedroom. I hope she was in shock. Would it not be better that way? Of us all, she was, perhaps, the most innocent, and never will I be able to convey how deeply it pained me to think of her lost in the hurt.

When I turned my thoughts to Christi, all I could imagine was turmoil. Turmoil so like that of the clouds violently contorting and toppling in upon themselves and rumbling the earth in attempt to wake the dead, or so it seemed, falling about near mind's end. I mean, she probably missed her parents. Still yet she was glad to have me and be my side. She sympathized deeply with JP, but had I stayed in Dexter, I feel she would

have also. I say that because I believe it with all my heart, not because I am overrun by vanity.

I knew all too well what Shawn was feeling. The demon of regret was tugging at his soul, urging him back to Dexter. I could almost hear his heart pounding out the words his brain was thinking: Shayla, I need you. I should never have left you or Dexter. How could I have just pissed away everything?"

And what was I feeling? I'll tell you. I was thinking about how heartbroken my Mom was on my account, all on my account. I was wondering if I'd ever see her again. I was thinking about how much I wanted to call, yet I knew I could not. All those thoughts lingered in the back of my mind, but at the time my present concern was the safety of Christi and the others.

While I was yet lost in silent contemplation, Aunt Angela and Joe returned to the living room carrying some old clothes. "Get out of those wet clothes, and Angela'll wash em'. You're welcome to wear these while your's are cleaned. Hell, just keep em'. You never know when you'll need a change," Uncle Joe said.

We did as he said. The clothes were musty; indeed they stank with the odor of age. The colors didn't match, and I felt somewhat like a patched up rag doll. Despite all those things, we were grateful for their generosity. Uncle Joe laid the plan out for us in detail while our clothes washed.

He said we were to make out a list of things we would need- complete with clothes sizes- and give it to Angela, and when the rain let up, she'd go into town and fill the van- one of the three automobiles parked outside- up with gas and fetch us those items. He also said he was going to give JP the van for his birthday, but all things

considered he could have it now. We'd hold up at the house until morning. Before the sun climbed very high in the sky, we would be on the road with orders to never look back. It was probable they said that they would not be able to get everything we listed, but they would do their best. Again, we were grateful for their kindness.

Our clothes were dry by the time Aunt Angela finished supper. Although I wasn't hungry at the time, I ate three helpings. I knew it would be a long time before I would get to eat another home-cooked meal. It was quite good.

The meal brought JP out of his daze, if only partially. I was glad he became somewhat like his old self again. Earlier, when we had walked together, he had not seemed himself at all. That had worried me and with good reason. Stronger men than he have been driven mad by fewer traumas, yet the only signs of his marred soul were his distant stare and the dreams.

Oh, the terrible dreams! As far as I know he confided them only to me. They were dreadful enough for me just hearing, but he had to experience them alone, and with unbridled fury! The details he provided through the emotional, fearful sobbing. Against my better judgment, I'll relay the dreams he confided in me.

The dream began with a suffocating darkness. His eyes could not penetrate it to see any great distance. Then, a patch of lightened haze would open up around Mr. Fields' dead body, sprawled out at the foot of the stairs in a building that, in his words, "seemed familiar and not at the same time". The body would rise without the head, and then, as JP tried to escape up the stairs, the corpse picked up its head and hurled it at him. Nearing the top of the stairs by that time, the blow caused him to lose his balance and topple backwards. Next came a period of chaos, as he spun out of control down the steps. And

when he reached the bottom, he found he could not move; yet he felt every ache and pain. Looming overhead, the corpse moved in on him, letting its cold blood fall from the neck onto him. The decaying hands, so like those of the blind, moved about all over his face, sizing up his appearance, bringing the stink of the dead and smearing the blood as they always did. He always told me how he could feel the corpse's hands shivering in delight as his face found the visage of shock to wear. It never went any further. His midnight shrieks saw to that.

There. Does that make you happy? Is it so gratifying to know he hurt, to know that he was haunted in the night by his victim? Savor the retribution if you must, but I see things differently. I see someone who not only tortured my friend in life, but in death as well. It takes a truly sick soul to hurt someone from beyond the grave. At that time, I was weak, too weak to express my true feelings, but no more. Screw Houston Fields! Let him joyfully rot! He brought it upon himself.

Where was I? Oh, yes, that exquisite meal. I remember it well. Although they needlessly lived like paupers, Aunt Angela knew her way around the kitchen. Matt had practically begged her to make her famous burritos. Was that alright with JP? Damn right it was. He loved them as well. We all did after the first bite. And they were huge, each one taking up the whole plate's space. The spicy cheese sauce is what made them so unforgettable and irresistible. What was the recipe for the sauce? A secret, that's what.

Afterwards, Christi and Summer offered to wash up the dishes. Angela fussed a bit, but soon succumbed, using reason to veil her defeat. "Well, I guess if you really wanna do em', I could go on into town and git ya'll's stuff." It didn't take us long to ready a list for her. She was still fiddling around the house as the girls ran their dishwater. She

gathered up her purse and ran once more to the kitchen to thank the girls for doing the dishes before she was on her way into town.

After her departure Joe asked his nephews to go sit on the couch. He returned a few minutes later with a brown suitcase snug under one arm and a case of Bud Ice in his other hand. Joe turned off the old black and white television and shuttled a cold one to each of them. He turned, looking to me in the kitchen, and tossed one to me as well. "Hell, son, you're lookin' out for these boys- watchin' their backs and all, that makes ya as good as family in my book. And that goes for the rest of ya'll too."

He started to throw Shawn a beer, but he protested. Joe looked at him funny for a second when he told Joe he didn't drink. "Alrighty, but a man's gotta have his vices. Let's him know he's still alive."

"Don't I get one?" Christi stood smiling in the kitchen, wiping her hands dry. Joe looked puzzled until she let him off the hook. "Just teasing ya. I don't want one." That beautiful, playful smile of hers shone brightly, warming me. Joe smiled and eventually returned his attention to Matt and JP.

Shawn and I went out on the covered porch and talked for a while, figuring they could use the family time together. Christi went to cleaning off the kitchen table, using a rag to scoop away fallen food and the sweat from where our glasses had sat earlier. Summer dried the dishes and began putting them away.

The storm had passed for the most part, leaving only a gentle, soothing rain. Lightning flashed in the distance with decaying redundancy. The porch swing had escaped most of the moisture. As we rocked slowly back and forth, Shawn dropped a bombshell. He told me that he wanted to go back to Dexter, and that he couldn't handle

being away from Shayla. At the time, I was glad to hear him speak of going home. I felt he was talking rationally again, and it relieved me. Sure, he would be missed by all of us, but we could bear it if he could escape the impending wrath of law.

"If that is what you want, do it." I looked him in the eyes and found tears promising to expose themselves if the conversation continued in the same manner. "We'll deal with all that in the morning. Tonight let's just forget everything, and say, 'to hell with the world.' It's a luxury I'll have to part with soon enough. Deal?"

"Deal."

And did I not get what I desired? I called it a luxury, the comfort of forgetting one's problems, but when it is achieved by alcoholic excess it becomes a pain in the ass. Was I successful? Oh, yes! I forgot... everything. It was nothing more than a common blackout, but it was my first. I hated it. I could have done God knows what with God knows who and would have been none the wiser without relying on the accounts of others half drunk at the time to piece things together. I was lucky though. I did nothing except stumble around the place like an infant yet unaware of the wonder of walking with legs. The others teased me about it but soon lost interest. I wished I could have remembered the things that they had done. The night wasn't a blur to me. No, most of it just simply never occurred. The alcohol had erased almost every last second of it from my brain and left in their place aches and pains.

I was dead to the world come morning, at least I felt dead while I was awake, which was an on and off again thing. Sometime early in the morning I found my way to the bathroom, and it was there that I slept with my head propped up on the cold porcelain seat. Now and then, the sickness would become too much for me and the burritos rose

from the depths. During one of my waking phases, I became aware of Shawn being in the room. I can only guess as to what followed, but I figure he had come to say his farewell. What a disgraceful sight I must have been. When I woke next I was being hauled out to the van. I hate the fact that I never got to talk to Shawn before he left. My own foolishness was at fault. At least I had my farewell to childhood carelessness and was allowed a brief escape from the thoughts and worries of what was to come.

Chapter Six: Onward to Damnation

My head ached profusely. That is, when I finally awoke- and stayed awake for any great length of time- around noon. The whole of my body ached actually and not just my head. I can only imagine how many times I fell to the floor; drunk to the point my legs had gone limp.

Christi, being the angel that she was, had allowed her lap to be my pillow for the last seven and a half hours on the road, and for that, I was thankful. Let me tell you something: Christi's lap had the toilet seat beat all to hell where comfort was concerned. I tried to sit up, but I found out I was too woozy to remain that way for very long at a time. While sitting up the dizziness return, forcing me once again back into Christi's lap, my head that is. She ran her hands through my long blond hair and massaged my temples every so often. The motion and steady hum of the tires meeting the road was a constant I could not escape. Soon the repetitiveness saw me once again into the darkness of a drunken slumber.

Hours later I finally gathered enough strength to remain upright. I was about to inquire where Shawn was, but then I remembered he had decided to go home and face whatever music was waiting for him. Even though I did remember that much, I still needed answers. Too many gaps existed where alcohol had corroded my memory.

"What did I miss?" Christi elected to fill me in the void.

She leaned over and whispered to me, "I finally get you in my arms, and what do you do? You go and get sick." She went on to explain that we had come very close to consummating our relationship last night while we showered together, and incidentally, if she hadn't been there holding me up, I would have busted my head open. What a pitiful sight I must have been standing there, drunk and naked. If she minded, she failed to mention it to me as she rehashed it all for me.

"I had to get JP to help me drag you away from the toilet so everyone else could shower. You were out of it big time." She laughed a bit. "But it's alright baby."

"Yeah, you're right. You could have left me there, and I would not have known different."

She continued, telling me that Uncle Joe had given Shawn enough money to get back to Dexter, and that most, if not all, of the things we had listed had been provided for us. I raised my weary head and looked in the back. Indeed there were several changes of clothes for each of us- probably straight from Good Will of course-, numerous boxes of generic sodas and canned foods, thick wool covers- which had, no doubt, been lying around Uncle Joe's for years-, and other odds and ends necessities we had noted. But what was in the little brown suitcase? I felt that familiar rising sensation within and knew I would be sick if I remained upright any longer.

I leaned back, took a deep breath, then, I posed the question, "Who's suitcase is that, the brown one?" No one took claim, so when I regained my composure; I snatched it from the back and opened it. To my surprise, I found within three handguns and a few shells for each resting on top of yet more clothes. Two of them, a .22 with an ivory handle and a .44, were the color of midnight. The third, which was a .357, reflected back my image in its shining, polished chrome. "Where did these come from?"

JP and Matt turned to see what I was talking about, and Summer glanced into the mirror. "What?" Summer asked.

"The guns. I didn't put anything about guns on the list." I replied.

"Oh, those. Uncle Joe said we should take them for protection. I didn't really want to at first. He filed off the serial numbers so they cannot be traced. Smart." JP said.

"Yeah, I guess." And I dropped it.

Christi continued her tale of the night before. She said I had out-drunk everyone except for Joe. The others had been content enough with a few beers. The same could not be said of me. I had gone on to help Uncle Joe wipe out a fifth of tequila. The slammers had been my undoing, as they usually were, being my favorite drink.

"And then?" I prodded.

"And then I went to bed shortly thereafter. I don't have a clue what you boys did."

JP chimed in and continued, for it was he, Joe and I that sat up talking long after the others had retired for the night. He said that I cheered him up and made him laugh uncontrollably when I did my Richard Nixon impersonation.

"What did we talk about?"

"Girls, drugs, and Uncle Joe's time in the Marines." JP's reply brought it all back to me.

Joe had told us about his first love. He had met her in Nashville. He and some leatherneck buddies were fresh off of Parris Island, and it was celebration time. The boys from platoon 3044 India Company were ready to do a little celebrating, so they headed downtown to a quiet little strip-joint called "The Sunset Strip", and that is where he met her. It is laughable now- that he fell in love with a stripper, but at the time the tale had me engrossed.

He had been with a girl before- at least the way he told it, but he was still shy about things like that. The older guys in the platoon loved to tease him about his inexperience. As he watched the girl on stage dance one of his buddies, a guy they always called "Lar", slapped a few dollars into Joe's hand and said, "Here ya go, kid. Go buy yourself a soda, and be sure you don't stop to pet the pussycat. Never know when they will bite back around here!" He laughed furiously at his own joke, which annoyed the hell out of Joe as much as the remark itself. Joe bought the Coke and seated himself near the back of the stage, away from the pole. The other guys, being more rowdy and randy and drunk, sat in front of the pole. They'd been on the island too long. To hell with the D.I.'s, bring on the girls!

A few girls danced their two songs and went, but not before collecting countless dollar bills from "the asshole section" as he'd heard one of the scantily clad vixens call his cohorts. The room fell silent as the DJ heralded her arrival with much ado, "Gentlemen

and kinky, kinky ladies, its showtime! For your viewing and drooling pleasure the very beautiful Taylor!" He had to admire the humor of her stage name. When she stepped on stage he found himself admiring a lot more than that. Her blonde strands were curled closely to resemble Marilyn Monroe, yet she was more than Marilyn. She was more than perfect. Her eyes and gestures rang out innocent, even as her bountiful body posed sinfully. Black boots thigh high hid most of her sleekly shaped legs, and a very precisely cut bodysuit covered no more than essential, if that. Oh yes, this was just what they needed, a little worldly lust.

The music started. Joe's heart raced as Taylor fell to the floor, threw her head about wildly, and slid, looking as sexy as ever, over to Joe on her hands and knees, disrobing as she went. She leaned over the edge of the stage, letting her breasts, perfect in every respect, rest inches away from Joe's face. "Hi'ya." Instead of dancing over to the others, she waited for him to respond. "Well, what's the matter honey? Cat got ya tongue?"

"N-no, it's just... I mean, what do you say to a naked woman?" He fondled a dollar nervously as she spun herself around and threw her legs wide open, exposing her all to Joe.

She shrugged and said, "How 'bout nice tits? Works for me." Her reply put Joe at ease. "You sure you're old enough to be in here?"

"Yes. How about you, ma'am?" Boot camp had drilled the manners into Joe's very soul. He tried to hand her his dollar.

"Here, doll, put it in your mouth. Like this, " and she grabbed him by his cammy blouse and tongued the dollar out. "Gotta run cutie pie, stick around for the next dance."

She certainly didn't have to worry about that. He was hooked. Nope, not going anywhere he thought. Wild horses couldn't drag me away right now.

He nodded, and PFC Lance yelled, "Now that's a fuckin' lady!" She danced for the others, but he could tell her heart wasn't into it. She hated this job if you were to get right down to it, but it paid the bills. She had this distant look in her eyes as she kept looking over to him.

When the music changed, she returned, naked as before and twice as nasty. The most beautiful fragrance Joe had ever known emanated from her skin as she threw each of her boot-clad legs on Joe's shoulders and said, "Take that dollar on the bar and put it into your hand." He obeyed, and she reached for his hand, pulling it toward her and thrusting two of Joe's fingers inside along with the edge of the dollar. She pushed it back out, took the dollar into her hand, ran it under his nose, and dropped it in his lap. "That's to remember me by, soldier."

It was later, according to Joe, that she gave him something to remember her by. He said he liked Nashville so much he would have probably stayed in Nashville had it not been for the war in Southeast Asia. And do you know what? He still had that dollar! He showed it to JP and I, and sometime later I passed out.

Confident I knew all I needed to know about the previous night, I inquired about our route over those, our first, fledgling hours on the road. Summer, who had been driving for the last five hours, rambled off various route numbers, state roads, and turn offs that had been taken. They are not important, though, because ours was less a journey across mapped distances than one across emotion and time.

The van was in dire need of gas as we neared the small town of DeLand, Kansas, and we were all wondering whether or not the fumes in the tank would carry us to the nearest filler station. We were lucky, though I hate to use that word, and DeLand proved to be closer than the bottom of the gas tank. We pooled our every last cent together, creating a gas fund, which, in the end, amounted to little more than sixty-nine dollars. It was not much, but it was all we had to work with. We were not yet desperate enough to explore or entertain our every option.

Matt pumped the gas, and Christi went in to pay. The rest of us remained in the van. I looked around although there wasn't that much to be seen. I pondered what kind of town DeLand, was. There was not anything spectacular about it. Just your average hick town in the sticks where everybody knows everybody and "niggers", as they are called locally, are sparse.

Christi returned with a folded newspaper under one arm and quickly got in. Matt climbed into the driver's seat, relieving Summer, and pulled the van back onto the highway. JP and Summer were lying in each others arms in the floor with their eyes closed. I spoke in whispers so as not to disturb them. My head still ached anyway.

"Did they give you any crap back there?"

She shook her head. "No, they didn't seem to recognize me." She leaned toward me and said, "Catch the front page. Don't let on."

I took the paper, afraid of the meaning of it all, and I read the main article, which she had needlessly pointed out to me. The huge picture of Shawn accompanied by four uniformed police officers would have drawn my attention to it without her aid. Beside the black and white picture, in bold, black print, were the words: **WILSON TAKEN**

INTO CUSTODY. Beneath it was the following caption: Missouri teen, Shawn Wilson, who is believed to have aided in the escape of murder suspect Jeremy Phife, being brought into custody by Officers Comfort, Lawson, Jarrell, and Stone.

The sick feeling in my stomach returned, but I fought it off. I read the entire article. Shawn was being held in the county pen on charges of aiding and abetting. He would be sentenced in the morning, and according to Missouri law, he would serve his time in adult facilities. The article said Shawn had refused to "cooperate with authorities". So he refused to cut a deal. I call that a friend. Later in the article we were referred to as "the brat pack", and that name stuck. I'd love to get my hands on that slimy muckraker.

"I don't think we should tell the others." I looked her in the eyes surprised she would suggest such a thing. I could see she was suppressing her tears, and if she ventured another word she would run the risk of unleashing the downpour of tears.

I folded the newspaper and stashed it away in my bag. I pulled her closer to me. "We'll sit on it for now, but sooner or later we have to tell them. They need to know." She quietly let loose a few of her pent up tears, and they soaked into the fabric of my shirt. I whispered, "It'll be alright, baby." Was I trying to reassure her or myself? I don't know, but, perhaps it was a little bit of both.

Matt kept us on the road until twilight overcame the horizon. We were near the Colorado-Kansas border. Our stomachs had growled most of the day because we rarely stopped to chow on any of our provisions. I had not really been that hungry during the day though, the booze still in my system saw to that. The others had to be ready to do

some major munching. "Why don't we call it a day, AJ? Find someplace to pull off up ahead in those woods, how's that sound?" I agreed and confessed I had been thinking the same thing.

Down a not so worn path we parked the 1984 Ford so it would not be subjected to the scrutiny of others traveling the byway. After building a small fire, we took turns washing up in a nearby stream. Summer and JP went first, then Matt, and finally Christi and I. Things had to be rough on Matt, being the only one among us without a significant other, but whether he thought much on it I do not know. Protecting his brother was top priority. Despite the hard times at hand, Christi and I managed to escape the sadness that was ever-present those days, and we might have even been happy, as we bathed each other. I will never forget it.

The canopy was silently gliding back and forth overhead, held by the loving arms of a delicate breeze. The full moon peaked through the trees, spying on us like a dirty voyeur. The landscape was given to shadows adding to the sensual appeal of everything half visible, half shrouded in the night. This included Christi. Her every voluptuous curve was deepened by this night shading, bringing a wealth of eroticism to her every movement and increasing her already flawless beauty ten-fold. The way her drenched jet-black hair clung tight to her supple breasts turned me on in a way I had never imagined possible. How had we remained friends so long without having had our relationship turn to this, the romantic? Strong self-control.

Slowly and sultry, she closed in on me, eye to eye the whole way. Inches away, she took hold of my hand and whirled herself halfway around. Her fine frame came to rest against me. Her movements disturbed the halcyon waters briefly, but soon the

stream was once again serene. I reached around her so that I embraced her fully from behind. Covered from the waist down by water and shadows, I was so close to Christi that I could hear her breaths. They were coming so shallow now. I am sure mine were equally shallow, but I couldn't hear them. Although we were not screwing, as others would call it, nor making love as I call it, it was definitely not an innocent embrace. Christi woke her hips to motions strippers (Joe's included) could only dream of attaining. Her flesh meshed with mine until I thought I had slipped inside of her, but I had not. We were instead two people basking in the harmony attained by two hearts beating rhythmically and in unison, overtaken by our emotions.

She had been forced to keep hers pent up for far too long, and the release let forth an amazing passion play. My love for her was not newfound. No, I had known for quite sometime, but I had told myself that it was nothing more than compassion heartfelt for a friend. What a lie I had told myself! This was love and torrid passion, plain and simple, and I felt it like a cyclone in my heart. It destroyed any lingering thoughts and images of Sera.

"I love you, AJ," She whispered.

"I know. I love you too." I knew she wanted me to fill the silence, the void, with poetry. Most of the stuff I had committed to memory had been written for Sera, and I refused to ruin the moment by spouting out words written for another. Whatever came to mind, I vocalized. "Yes, bring your impassioned body to rest against me, reveal the loins and curves that set my mind free. Use your angelic voice: talk, whisper, moan, please adhere, my princess, from your throne..."

In her excitement, her ample breasts heaved as she inhaled and exhaled, and rather than cease her hips naughty paths of gyration, she turned loose all of that passion against me. Who was I to deprive her of this influx of sensations, or myself for that matter? Her fantasy had to be fulfilled; I would have it no other way. More rhyme invaded my brain, so out it came.

"...Remain close, move nasty but slow, and unite in mind, in body, and in soul." I released every syllable with the precision of a surgeon's hands. She was panting in my ear.

"Oh God. Kiss me." Her voice was desperate and full of want.

That kiss will be forever etched into my mind. So close I felt to her that, with my eyes closed, I fancied I could almost see her thoughts. We were one of mind, the poet and his muse, the mortal man and his beloved goddess Venus. The end of the euphoria saw us safely back to drab reality.

As I dried off my breathing became somewhat normal, as did Christi's. We changed clothes and set out for camp. On the way we resolved not to tell the others of Shawn's capture just yet. Everyone was down enough, why fuel it further.

Entering camp we could smell the meal JP had prepared, and for the first time of the day, the smell of food did not make me sick to my stomach. Indeed, Christi and I had worked up an appetite. The supplies we had were being put to good use. The pans, the canned food, the can opener, and the blessed toilet paper! I was relieved in more ways than one when I realized we had toilet paper. That was one of the few things I forgot to put on the list. Luckily, Aunt Angela had enough foresight to think of it.

The baked beans were good, but the beef stew was even better. We all ate heartily and helped wash the dishes in the stream before crashing for the night.

Summer slept outside by the fire with JP. Under his bundled up jacket JP placed the loaded .44 before surrendering to his sleepiness. Matt slept a few yards further out. Christi and I crashed in the van. She and I laid awake sometime before fading into our dreams.

"You really were something earlier. Never have I felt anything like that before, that intense I mean. You didn't even go in, and I, I came." She went silent. "Was it ever that way with Sera?" She rushed to add, "You don't have to answer."

"Never. Christi, it's never been like that with anyone. I can't wait until we actually make love! I bet sparks will fly and the world will stand still. You think?"

I was holding her close as she replied, "I don't know. Wanna find out?" It almost seemed as if she were trying to sneak the question in or something. I didn't know what to say.

Finally, I answered. "Sure I want to find out, but not yet. I've got too much on my mind right now. Besides, we don't even have a condom. Last thing we need right now is for you to get pregnant. Sometime when things are less hectic." I knew as I said the words that it came out all wrong, but I just could not find the right words. Still, I feel, she understood.

"Yeah, we'll wait. Just I feel like I'm walking on air with you. Love you."

"Good night, baby. Love you too."

My peaceful slumber was shattered hours before sunrise when I heard the side door opening slowly, quietly. I first thought it was the police, and I found myself wishing I had one of the guns nearby.

It was only JP. The horror of that first nightmare had become too much for him to stand alone, and that was why he came to wake me. I sat up with him for the rest of the night comforting him. It was then that he told me the awful details of the nightmare. So horrid were his words that I found the hairs on my arms were standing up as chills swept through me. I was glad when the first glint of light breeched the obscured horizon, brightening our camp and pushing back the shadows.

We woke the others, letting them assume from our bloodshot eyes and tired expressions that we had only woke moments beforehand, and gathered our gear. JP wanted no one to know of the nightmares or the sheer terror they evoked in him. I allowed him that bit of pride.

With the gear loaded up, we returned to the road. As I drove I addressed them all, and due to the subject matter, I must change the names of the state and person mentioned so as to elude the countless gumshoe dicks that would love to put me in a cage or better yet a box. "Hear me out, guys. What are we trying to do here? Where are we going, other than away from the here and now? We need a game plan, and I've been thinking. I know a guy in California named Chris Davison that might be able to help us. He stayed with his grandparents in Dexter a few summer's ago. I think I introduced him to you, JP." JP nodded his head in confirmation.

"Anyway, he really knows his way around cyberspace. You know, the Internet and shit like that. There isn't much he cannot do with a computer. So I was thinking maybe there is a way he could set us up with a dummy account with enough money to leave the states. I mean, let's face it, we can't evade the police forever on the road." I let it all sink in before wrapping up. "So, what do you think?"

"Sounds good to me. Ain't got much of an alternative," JP said, and the others concurred.

Near Cortland, Colorado a streamlined black and white highway patrol car began tailing us. I felt like they were waiting for me to screw up in some minute way so they could pull us over, but I always felt that way about cops.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence. They probably don't even know who we are," Christi said, and I realized she was probably right. They were, in all likelihood, still searching for the bus, not a van. Down the road a piece, they turned on their lights and siren. My heart began pounding furiously, and I was sure it would jump out of my chest any minute. Next the patrol car did something I was silently praying it would do. The cop must have had the pedal all the way to the floor when he finally passed us.

The experience frightened me something awful, so I know it must have scare JP out of his mind. The shock of the incident faded as we continued our cross-country trek. While the others immersed themselves in conversation, I sank deep in my thoughts and memories.

One memory came back vividly, sparked, I presume, by our ordeal with the cop, was of the time JP and I were getting wasted on some wacky weed. We had been sitting

in between the towering rows of my neighbor's garden just tokin' away, and a cop rolled by in his black and white. We about choked on our smoke as we smashed out the joint and ran for my house. We were sure we were busted, but, as it turned out, the cop had never even known we were there. He was in route to a burning shed a few blocks away. Some kid down the road playing with matches had nearly gotten us busted. Strange how things you have not thought about in ages surface when you least expect them to.

The scenery was first class. We gladly put the drab flatness of the plains behind us and looked with excitement westward to the great Rocky Mountains before us. We had been among the foothills for an hour or so when their larger kin began to appear. Sights to the left and right would command your attention frequently and, as often was the case, simultaneously. As much as I would have loved to have savored every moment and sight, I could not. As it was I was driving on very little sleep. That was chore enough at times. The roads we clung to were often nothing more than connected stretches of paved curves, and for me to have let my tired eyes stray from it for more than a few seconds at a time would have not been merely foolish but rather fatal. The towns came and went, as did the signs. DANGER: FALLING ROCK. BLASTING ZONE AHEAD. Our altitude was always on the rise. Sometimes in sporadic, steep intervals, and other times over a gradual incline most would barely detect.

The towns we happened upon nestled around the bases of the Rockies were unique from any others I have ever come across. They are the closest likeness of Swiss alpine tourist towns you can find in the states. That is merely an assumption of mine, being that I knew next to nothing of Europe. The churches hinted of gothic influences and made for an interesting blend, as they were mingled among high rises, evergreens,

and maples. The thing I loved most about those towns was the way the high rises were dwarfed by the mountains in the distance. Mother Nature refused to be overcome by man, by his technology, or by his colonies.

Then it hit me. Painful thoughts of Shawn caged like an animal. Thoughts of Shawn depressed and isolated from the outside world. My friend in need, and I was here, thousands of miles away and impotent to rectify the dreadful situation. What had gotten him there, if not his loyalty to us, his friends? At one point I even contemplated a return to Dexter to execute a daring rescue attempt, but soon I realized that, however romantic the notion seemed, it would be impossible to pull off.

The others had to know. But when? Now? No. For the first time in days everyone seemed to be more at ease and damned if I was going to make them edgy. No, not now. Perhaps when we made camp for the night. I put the matter out of my mind, because it only hurt to think about it. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news.

I let the music on the radio erase my sadness. I let it take me someplace inside me where things were not as bad as real life. The lyrics soothed me. *I've got dreams...dreams to remember.* Yes, what a lovely song. So pure, so mellow, so heartfelt and encasing. Then came the feeling of being at one with the road and environment. Maybe it was the exhaustion working on me finally; telling me it was time to rest. Maybe it was just that my worrying had reached its maximum load, and my mind turned a switch that said, "OK, if I don't do something soon he's gonna snap!" And that switch had brought the piece of mind that I now felt.

I was no longer AJ Jackson. I was no longer from Dexter, Missouri. I was no longer a wanted man. No, I was of the same fabric as all that surrounded me. I was a lie

waiting to be told. No one except my companions knew who I was. Whatever lie I was to plant in strangers' heads would become my identity. I felt like a chameleon free in the wild, and I knew we would be damn near impossible to catch if we used our heads.

We finished off our gas fund filling up the van in Lodi, fittingly enough. I paid for the gas while Matt once again pumped. The newsstand beckoned me to stop and read, so I heeded their silent cries. Sure enough, there, on the front page, was another article about Shawn's capture, and this one had details from the sentencing the first had lacked. I looked around to see if anyone was eyeing me funny before I fed the money-hungry machine my last two quarters. The quarters glided effortlessly down the slot and beyond like giddy children in mock hiding from their parents. I pulled the front of the vending machine down and found every copy gone except for the one in the display compartment. With no alternative, I rescued it from its tiny chrome cage. It made me nervous standing out in public for very long, so I paid for the gas and returned to the van.

About fifteen miles outside of Lodi we crossed a mighty river I shall refer to as the Durango. The river was wider from shore to shore than most lakes I had swum in, and its bridge was a massive industrial monument. It made me sick to my stomach that people must cross by way of the huge, bland connector instead of the older and smaller one, dwarfed and forever out of commission, by its side. The smaller bridge had more of a soul than its successor would ever have. Though it seemed a bit flimsy in its old age, it still commanded my respect. How many travelers and journeymen had passed over the Durango courtesy of its creaky wooden boards? I could not even fathom a reasonable guess.

On the other side of the Durango we found a boat access road that doubled back and terminated on its bank near the smaller bridge. We made camp in the dense, thriving forest fed by the plentiful water. JP and Matt immediately began a fire, which would be a necessity at this higher- and colder- altitude. Summer, who had fallen asleep two or three towns back, remained in the van asleep. A nap. What a nice idea! But not yet, no I could wait until later.

Christi and I wandered away from the others under the pretense of gathering driftwood to sustain the fire through the night. As we gathered the wood, we discussed how to break it gently to the others that Shawn had been captured. We agreed that nothing would be said until after I had a chance to scan today's paper. I was hoping against hope that maybe the judge had suspended his sentence.

It was getting chilly as we returned to camp carrying all the wood our arms could hold, but the fire was blazing nicely. Summer was awake and by its side warming her hands. Night was pulling down her curtains once more, draining away all the lingering warmth and hiding in her shadows the details of the land. It was far too cold to bathe in the river, but we heated a few pans of water and sponged off. Afterwards, we scarfed down a few cans of ravioli.

"Not bad, Matt. This is good stuff." I knew my comment was banal. He didn't really cook the ravioli. He warmed it up, straight from a can. I was merely stating something, gathering my nerve to move on to a more important topic; Shawn's capture.

I had read the paper. I was crushed to discover that the judge threw the book at Shawn. Five years with a minimum of two served. I doubted if Shawn could last two years behind bars. If he did, it was bound to be hard time.

In another article I read, "Gang Violence on the Rise", we were cited as a prime example of gang violence hitting closer to home, which is to say small town life. Yet another was devoted entirely to us. Despite the eyewitness accounts we were innocent contrary to the printed words. All accusations were false. We didn't beat the elderly lady in Kentucky, run the school bus off the road in Arkansas, or set fire to the school in Iowa. A few other sightings were elaborated on in the article, but, like the others, none were accurate.

After supper JP and Summer got up to take a walk. JP turned to us and said, "Just leave the dishes. I'll wash them up later tonight." It was now or never. If I kept putting it off the right time would never present itself. I had to be honest with myself about that. Before they could turn away, I spoke up.

"JP, could you hold up a sec?" He put his arm around Summer's neck. His eyes had bags under them. He was as weary as I was.

"Can it wait until later?" He asked. He rubbed his eye.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think it can. I've gotta say this now, or I'll lose the nerve." The pain was evident in my voice, and he stopped to hear what was on my mind. "There is something I have got to tell ya'll. Something I should have told ya'll before now. "I looked to the earth beneath my feet, pausing as I searched for words to use delicately. Those words never presented themselves to me. Maybe there were simply none that could convey the matter in such a manner.

I am sure JP, as he stood there, waiting for me to be out with it, thought all kinds of things. That perhaps I was turning back. That perhaps I thought the best thing for him to do was to turn himself into the police, or that I was taking it upon myself to force him to do just that. Whatever was going through his mind, I know I had his full attention. "What is it, AJ?"

Christi gazed into the fire, knowing what words were working their way out of me. The others stood, eyes transfixed on me.

My inner voice spoke up, telling me to be blunt and be done with it. Being without a menu of options, I did just that. "Shawn got busted." They remained motionless and shattered. I spoke to fill the awkward void. "They sentenced him today."

"How long'd he get?" JP asked. Summer tried to inch closer to him, but he shrugged away. "I'm okay."

I started to lie. "I don't..." but something in me knew that it was best not to hold anything back from him. "Two to five." I blurted out the first thing that came to mind, trying to console him. "They tried to cut a deal with him, but he wouldn't take it." As soon as the words passed my lips I knew they would only hurt him, and I regretted having said them. It had to hurt him knowing that Shawn had rejected redemption to protect us. It hurt me, though, secretly I sighed in relief and shame.

The winds gently drug the cold off the water, but we quivered not. In fact, I felt as if I was suspended within that horrible moment, motionless and frustrated. Yes, I was getting cold, but not in the physical sense. My heart felt as if it were hardening within my chest, an icy organ.

In truth we were all hardening, I suspect, but I can only speak for myself. What had the last few days held for me? The viewing of a corpse. The abandoning of my civility and ties to my family. The separation from a beloved friend, jailed on our account. Experience was evolving us the way time was stiffening Mr. Fields' corpse. The only difference, I suppose, was that Houston was not pained by the change in his decomposing body.

JP looked up as if he was about to lose his composure. "Uh, I'm gonna go now." Summer knew, as did we all, that he needed to be alone awhile, and she let him be. You could hear the sobbing in his voice as he spoke from the shadows a few yards out. "Leave those dishes, I'll get 'em later." Summer and Matt busied themselves with the dishes after he had gone, ignoring JP's request.

It had taken a lot out of me, but it was over. Said and done, and totally out in the open. I felt like a walk would do me good as well. I ventured down a narrow, winding path armed with the .44. I had no intentions of using it mind you, but I felt more secure with it on me.

The heavily trodden path twisted about until finally delivering me onto the Durango's bank. Apparently, I had been following a (drunk) fisherman's path. Camp hid itself behind the timber, the shrubs, and the weeds. The wind was harsher out here in the open. It hit me from the left, blowing my long hair back in my face. No sooner would I shrug it out of my eyes than it would return. Holding it so that it didn't block my field of vision, I looked to the bank.

Stones of fair size met the water's edge, and weeds sprouted out from beneath both stone and the waterline in places. The water was calm save for the occasional snake

slithering in or fish gyrating about. Headlights came and went across the larger bridge, yet no sounds reached me from the transwater highway. The crickets and gently ebbing waters were the only sounds I heard. The small, wooden bridge seemed so very inviting.

I went to it, approaching it, at first, with caution and then with admiration. The widely spaced boards creaked underfoot when I finally trusted it with the whole of my weight, but it did not give way. I strolled out always conscious of my footing, nearly to the middle, and sat, troubled by my prospects. What would we do when the gas ran out? Surely we would exhaust it tomorrow, leaving us stranded who knows where. How was Shawn handling incarceration? When would our nightmare end? The worry yielded to weariness at last.

The wee hours of the morning, before the sun's rays could fight back the darkness, found me asleep on the bridge. The fact that I was too distant to feel the warmth of our fire must not have mattered much more than the fact that I was without a blanket, because I don't remember waking cold once. The hours and hours without sleep had worn me down, and my body simply demanded rest. No the bridge was far from comfortable, but the setting was most relaxing. Just the gentle nudge I had needed to send me sliding off to sleep at last.

I awoke as rested as if I had slept for days upon days, but I had only been out for an hour or two. The sun had not yet risen. Twilight illumination clung to the landscape like a jealous lover, lighting my path, although dimly as I returned to camp, and I considered it my ally.

I found the others asleep when I returned to camp. No sooner than I sat down by the neglected fire, JP sat up with a start, tears already forming in his eyes. The dream stalker, the conscience, was after him again.

I calmed JP back to sleep with soothing reassurances, but I could not bring myself to sleep more. I sat staring into the ash pile of glowing embers until light gradually overtook the land again, waking the others. I enjoyed the solitude of that early morning, but at the same time, I felt empty. Hollow even.

After all these years I can still recall what was going through my mind as I watched the morning sun rise over the Durango. I was missing my real parents and the days of my childhood innocence now gone forever.

We ate breakfast and hit the road around nine o'clock.

Chapter Seven: The Misfit

Matt toyed with the radio dial until he found a classic rock station and, then, pulled onto the already busy highway. JP and Summer once again rested in the floor. JP liked to stay down and out of sight. Can you blame him? Christi and I returned to the very back, where Christi had nursed me back to health from the hellish hangover, and stretched out side by side.

I rested my head on Christi's chest and felt as if I would explode from sensory overload. The heater's comforting warmth seeped through the vents to protect us from the morning cold penetrating the van's every crevice. Christi's soft white tee shirt, being warmed by her, heated my face. The perpetual buzz of the engine and the sound of Christi's heart thudding in my ears hypnotized me as she twirled my hair around her fingers. Once, when she thought I had drifted off to sleep, I felt her put her nose to my hair and inhale, taking in my smell. More than once I had done the very same thing myself when Sera had slept in my arms. I wonder how many lovers throughout history

have performed this intimate little ritual. I also wondered how I could have ever chosen to remain with Sera when I knew Christi would have me. I still don't know.

I faked the groggy waking period, stretching, rubbing my eyes, and exalting a yawn. I pivoted my head, and I let my lips find Christi's. They were moist and as inviting as ever. Dropping my head so that it once again rested on her ample cleavage, I reached for her tiny hands, wanting to hold them both in mine. I found a small crystal firmly pressed against her left palm. I paused to look it over.

"It's my lovestone," Christi offered.

"It looks like a crystal. What's it for?" I inquired. I had seen her clutching it several times before, yet never got the opportunity to ask her about it before.

She remained still and quiet for a moment before replying. "It is a crystal, but it was charged using a gypsy love spell. I got it while I was on vacation with my family in Mountain Home, Arkansas. That was just before you and Sera got together. I just about flushed the damn thing when ya'll started going steady. It is supposed to bring your true love to you." She moved to taste my lips again, but I interrupted.

"Do you think you could get me one? I'd like to meet my true love too!" Before I could finish, I was already busting out laughing.

Christi faked surprise and broke into a quiet giggle. I knew I could joke like that with her. If I had even contemplated a similar jest with Sera she would have replied, "Oh, what's that supposed to mean?" and gotten nine kinds of pissed off. There is only so much fighting two people can withstand before coming to the realization that it probably was not meant to be. Sera and I had reached that point weeks before the incident at Travis's house.

I looked to the floor to see if JP had appreciated the humor inherent in my last query only to find him fast asleep. Summer had her back to me, but I figure she was out of it. Christi began to speak, and rather loudly I might add, so I gave her a whispering, "Shh." I knew JP needed his sleep. I was afraid he would wake up crying or screaming and alarm the others, but he didn't. In fact, he slept all the way to Moenkopi, Arizona, where, as luck would have it, the gas ran out.

We pulled into an EZ Pump filler station to decide what to do next. We still had fumes in the tank. Still, we were smart enough to know that the next town was out of reach. I wasn't too big on the idea of being stranded in the desert either.

Matt shut the engine off and turned inquiringly to face us, "Well, now what guys?"

JP wiped the sleep from his eyes and sat up. I looked Matt square in the eye and said, "I'll tell you what now. Now that you've pulled this big bastard over, I've gotta piss!" JP seconded that. Summer had to go too. The whole lot of us made a toilet run.

Once again we were front-page news. Must have been a slow news day. I had Christi plant a paper in the small of my back. The clerk either didn't notice the swipe, probably because he was watching four little hoodlums race by outside and disappear into the darkness.

The discussion was on as soon as we got back to the van. We concluded we were up Route 66 without gas, or, to use a saying you are probably more familiar with, we were up shit creek without a paddle. No one was forthcoming with any ideas so I spoke up.

"Look. I know this wouldn't be the preferred way to fill our tank, but if worse comes to worse, we do have three weapons at our disposal. We could...."

"No. There has got to be a better way." JP offered up his two cents.

I knew he was still a little rattled after Mr. Fields. "I agree, but what do you suggest, JP? I am at a loss." He looked out the window.

"What would stop us from just ciphering it from one of these other cars?" He had a good idea, but I was not yet sold. I moved to the window and looked out. All the cars close at hand were newer models that probably had alarms. I explained this to him.

"Unless you want to hang around here waiting for some older junker to pull up, but I don't really wanna hang out around here. Cops have to fuel up too. Besides, we don't have a rubber tube, so that kinda rules that out." I hated being so pessimistic. It wasn't like me.

From the very rear of the van came an unidentified rustling, and then, a voice called out, "What if I filled your tank?" Christi and I backed away from the seat. I grabbed the gun in the floor. The voice came again. "Well?"

"I refuse to carry on a conversation with someone afraid to show himself," I said. Slowly, the voice passed into the tangible, becoming a young man with dark brown hair. It was hard to judge his height because he was knelt over our supplies.

He looked at me. He looked at the gun I was clutching, aimed in his general direction. "Easy, man. You don't want to do that. I'm coming out, okay?" I nodded and lowered the gun a little.

The youth freed himself from the supply area, stepping slowly over the back seat. He was wearing jeans, a trench coat, and a Misfits tee shirt, all of which were black.

"What the hell are you doing in our van, you little shit?" JP quipped.

"People were chasing me. I had to give them the slip. Didn't have time to get anywhere else." He paused. "My name's Ben. I can get you that gas you need. That is, if you want. I'll consider it squatter's tax."

"Who are you hiding from?" It wasn't me being nosy either.

Shame masked Ben's face and distorted his sharp, well-defined features, proving remorse slept within his young heart. "It was no one...."

"Bullshit, son." I cocked the gun and raised it. "You have three seconds. Are the cops after you? Straight answer."

"No."

"Then who?"

"Eric and a couple of guys he knows."

"Eric, huh?" I lowered the empty gun, pulled the trigger and let it click into the carpeted floor.

"Yeah, he was my best friend."

"So why's he chasing ya?"

"Janice...he caught us together." I had to remind myself over and over again that this was not Travis sitting before me confessing his sin. No, AJ, this is simply Ben the stranger. Ben the repentant. That was more than I could say for Travis. A question came to mind, one that I had wanted to ask Travis.

"Why? Why this Janice and not one of the millions of other women in the world?"

He averted his gaze. "She said she loved me. I was fool enough to believe her. Come to find out she was just playing both of us."

I nodded, "Yeah, I guess I have always known." My response must have seemed odd. Ben looked to the others as if he had missed something. He mumbled something, and I responded with a simple, "Never mind."

"So is the gas all you need, AJ?" So he knew who we were, did he. He stopped, noticing I was staring coldly at him. I stared on without a word. "Relax, man. I'm not going to turn you in."

I had to think of something to get the truth out of him. I had to know for sure that I could trust him. He knew the gun was empty. Well we'll fix that. I put down the .22 I had been holding and grabbed the loaded .357. "See this gun. It stays loaded." I emptied all the chambers except for one, gave it a spin, positioned it at his right temple, and pulled the trigger. Click. That might seem a bit excessive, but it was all smoke and mirrors really. The bullet was several chambers away from being fired, which I could see, or I would not have pulled the trigger. "Make me a believer or I will keep pulling this trigger until it does more than click."

He closed his eyes tightly. His words were rushed and honest. "Fuck pigs, man. Juvy picked me up twice in the past six months. I'm on your side." Gut instinct told me he wasn't brave enough to try and bullshit me, he'd have faltered if he was false.

Time to let him off the hook. "Alright, Mr. Ben. Is there anyone at your house?"

He shook his head. "Na, Dad's at his office. Mom's at Betty Ford." His words were without emotion.

"Take us there."

Down an uptown lane the fully tanked van rolled, edging closer to Ben's abode. It looked like a hotel. Ben was really Richie fuckin' Rich. "What exactly does your dad do for a living?" JP asked, clearly in awe of the house.

"Step dad. William's a cardiologist." At the great iron gate Ben hopped out and punched in a six digit security code on a small keyboard. Soon, the gates swung open, allowing us access.

The lawn, complete with rose bushes, lilies, and a statue spouting water, was immaculate. As we made our way up the circular driveway of red brick toward the mansion, Ben said, "She has three floors, over seventy rooms, a home theatre that takes up the whole third floor, and an Olympic size swimming pool".

The front door was red, which seemed odd to me, but then again, I had never really seen a house like this up close. How was I to know what was fashionable among rich weirdoes? A few short strokes on another small keyboard and the door opened for us.

The interior was as grand as the exterior, if not more so. High ceilings, gargantuan rugs, and polished, hardwood floors so stunning that they still remain etched upon my mind's inner eye. It was a cathedral to secular materialism, and I love it. Vases, paintings, sculptures, and autographed movie memorabilia decorated the sweetly scented hall leading up to Ben's room.

Ben pushed the bedroom door open, revealing a sight to excite any youth. Before us was everything a teenager of the nineties could conceivably desire except for a voluptuous nymphomaniac in thigh high boots. Lucky for me I brought my own, minus

the thigh high boots. There was an easel surrounded by a rainbow of paints in one corner of the room. The walls were covered in highly original works of art I was to discover Ben to have created. An entertainment center, complete with a large screen television, two VCR's, and a stereo with surround sound filled one wall, flanked to either side by three or four towers of CD's. A closet door standing ajar displayed countless videotapes. At the time I was highly envious, but now I cannot help but chuckle. Just one of the many people who would, years later, have to upgrade to the next great technology- DVD. Anyway. Welcome to the house that weak and broken hearts built.

Hidden away among the many paintings and posters there was one family portrait. It had to be at least ten years old. Ben looked to be no more than seven or eight at the time it was taken. His smile was warm, yet hesitant. His cheeks were plump, and his eyes were full of life. The suit he was wearing looked out of place on him.

His mother had been attractive. Perhaps she still was, but I could not know how the years and alcoholic abuse had treated her since the time the portrait was taken. She had her hair up extravagantly and wore slightly more makeup than she should have. She looked younger than the man in the picture. The man, who seemed to be a caring person, was wearing a suit just like Ben's. He did not have a single hair out of place. He had one hand placed delicately on Ben's shoulder.

The portrait was a mirror to a bygone time many call "the big eighties". It was the decade Boomer's lost their cherries, and our parents lost their innocence while we retained ours. Like I said, it was a different time, gone forever.

The nineties belonged to us, the Generation X-er's, but we couldn't even decide what we wanted or what we stood for. We were that lazy. The sixties and seventies were about peace and piece of ass. The eighties were about corporate greed and gluttony. Let me translate: Piece of the pie and ass. I guess the nineties was about one thing: peace. No, not silencing guns and ceasing air raids, but rather peace from all the worries laid on us by our predecessors' excesses. Deficit spending, thank you very much! AIDS, thank you very much! Broken homes, thank you very much! I'm ranting again, but I just wanted to illustrate that greater evil than the five of us existed.

Ben came around the corner and tossed a red towel at me and said, "I'm gettin' ready to start a load of clothes if you want to get out of those."

"Sure." He started upstairs, but I called after him.

"Yeah."

"I was just wondering about the picture. I mean...." I wasn't sure what I wanted to know about it. He looked to it and then to me.

"The picture. I was six. Mother had just divorced my father to marry Dr. Sennett. His voice took on a tone of extreme sarcasm. "A true humanitarian, William, and giving, of everything except himself." He paused, lost in memory, then, "I remember I had cried for my Dad all that day. If you look close you can see how red my eyes were, see?" He pointed to his eyes.

"Did you get to see him?" I asked.

"No. I told them I wanted to see my Dad. Mom shook her head and said, 'Why would you want to go back to that roach-infested coffin he calls home? You'll live like a

prince now.' She still doesn't understand why I go and visit Dad. That's where I was coming from earlier." He looked up, tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Poor little rich kid, right?" Ben wiped his eyes.

"No," I said, "it's more like unfortunate guy."

We returned upstairs, and Ben pointed me to a vacant, guest bedroom where I could disrobe. I closed the door, locked it, and proceeded to undress. I had my shirt off and my jeans around my ankles when someone began rapping on the door. I tried to walk, and forgetting about my pants, I fell flat on my face. I went thudding to the floor.

A voice came from the hall, "Are you alright?" It was Christi. I told her to hold on, and I clasped the scarlet towel loosely around my waist. I opened the door, shutting my clothes out into the hall and letting Christi enter.

She was wearing only a black towel, and she was beautiful. The tiny towel barely covered her assets, and briefly, I felt my face go red with jealousy that Ben, Matt, and JP had seen her so, so nearly exposed. It left me quickly as she approached me. After all, where was it that she was headed when they possibly glimpsed her? She was coming to me, just as she was now, and what fault was there in that? None. "Ben said there's a tub we can use in there." She motioned to another adjoining door. "Did you hurt yourself?" She reached for my forehead.

"I'm fine."

"I can see that, silly." She slid her tongue down my throat. Releasing me from her enchanting kiss, she spoke softly into my ear. "Look what I got earlier." She reached

into her towel and pulled a condom from between her breasts. I thought of the illusionist David Copperfield, and realized that Christi had surpassed him in both ability and style.

I moved forward, losing my towel in the first few steps, backing Christi onto the bed and pulled her towel loose, rendering her equally as vulnerable. She grinned and holding the condom with two fingers, presented it to me. I set it aside for the moment, held her gaze, and stroked her hair. I inched my way down playfully. Stopping at her nipples just long enough to wet them with my saliva so that the air could work on them, bring them erect. I kissed a trail down her tummy and ventured further down. I left the most tender kisses along her upper thighs before reaching for the little package sitting inert beside us on the bed. In no time I was astride her, caressing her every curve and probing her depths and squeezing her hands in mine. The union was blissfully special, and I would like to preserve it in memory rather than further words.

We showered afterwards and joined the others in the den, which appeared to have been used rarely if at all. It was comical to me seeing my friends fighting with their towels to keep their goodies hidden! JP, who was not as inhibited as the rest of us, removed his towel and began popping asses with it.

Bitter, to think of such fun times entwined so intimately with the sour ones.

We were heading out when the phone rang. Ben answered it. William was calling to inform Ben that he'd be gone a few days. He had been home earlier, gathered some clothes for the trip, and was headed out to pick up Ben's mom, Jenny, from the clinic.

"Yeah, everything's okay here. Just been watching television. Okay. Bye." He returned the phone to the cradle. "William is going away for a few days. Ya'll can stay a bit longer, if you want to, that is?"

We really needed to stick to the road and rack up some miles, but I could tell he was lonely. Hell, who wouldn't be? That was probably the most he had talked to William in weeks. His mother kept company with bottles, and his stepfather with the ill rather than him. He had loused up his relationship with his best friend, so he couldn't turn to him. Besides, I had no problem spending a few days living large. Would you?

Chapter Eight: Daze of Contentment

Jim Andrews, my former boss at Durry's Supermarket, may not have been the most friendly of employers, but he was by far the most efficient I have known. He knew how to keep profits up and shrink down. Although it is true I do not miss working for Mr. Andrews, I do miss "those days". We did have some good times at Durry's, Sera and I.

As I have said, I was a carryout. I stocked the shelves, mopped the floors, faced the aisles, and yes, carried out groceries. It didn't pay much, but I got to talk a lot.

I had gotten Sera a job there as a checker only a little while back. We were still good together then as I recall it, for a while. The fights were becoming more and more frequent though. I noticed this even then, but I guess I figured that we were those types of people that fight to make up. Increasingly, our fights tended to focus on a central theme: unjustified jealousy. Sera's to be exact. Whenever another checker would call me up front to carry out, Sera would give her the dirtiest looks. If I carried out for the

same checker more than three times a day, which was very common, Sera would get ticked off at both the checker and I.

One day we were really busy, and Bobbie Renee called me up several times. The next time Sera called me up she wouldn't say a word to me or even look in my direction. I carried the order out, and when I came back inside I asked Mr. Andrews if Sera and I could take our break. He said that it would be fine. That was the one thing he was always nice about, letting us take our breaks at the same time.

I walked back to Sera's register to tell her she could go on break. She kept her eyes on the customer in front of her. "That'll be \$7.71. Out of ten? Okay, \$2.29 is your change, sir. Have a nice day." She slung her closed sign down on the register and stormed pass me, not even acknowledging my presence. I followed. The deli, where breaks were to be taken, was empty when we sat down in the back booth.

"What the hell is wrong with you now?" I asked. She said nothing, but the icy gaze said it all. "Well at least you'll look at me now. This is so damn childish!" That infuriated her, spawning for the first time a reply.

"Oh so now I'm immature! I didn't think maturity was something on your mind, hanging all over that bleached blonde bitch up front!" She would not keep her voice down, and whenever I mentioned her volume, she would speak louder.

"Who?" I was still at a loss. Was she accusing me of flirting with a customer or a checker?

"Don't play dumb. Ditzzy-ass Bobbie Renee. I've lost count of how many times she's called you up today." I tried to interject something, but she cut me off. "No! Shut up! You can't take your eyes off her ass for anything today. I don't know if she's got

'Fuck me hard!' written across her tight fuckin' jeans or what, but it's written all over her face."

"Oh give me a break! If I carried out for a nun and said more than two words to her, you'd think I wanted to jump her too. This jealousy bit is wearing a little thin. There are a lot of girls that work here. Whether or not you like it, my job requires me to talk to them. I'd appreciate it if you'd just keep your jealousy in check." I grabbed her firmly by the arm. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't flirt with the guys that come through your line."

She looked around uncomfortably. "You're changing the subject. We're talking about you and that slut Renee!"

No sooner than the words had passed her lips, Bobbie Renee walked up carrying a Dr. Pepper and a slice of coconut cake. She stopped in her tracks, shocked, silent, and visibly hurt by what she had heard. She sat down her food and rushed to the bathroom.

"Are you happy? You make me so crazy sometimes." I thought for a minute. "Now look me in the eyes and tell me you have never flirted with a customer."

"I haven't." Her voice was small, as if she was not use to it, and her eyes rushed away with the words.

I grabbed her chin, guiding her eyes back to mine. "I get jealous the same as you, but I keep it in check. I believe you, simple as that. Why can't you believe me? I released her, stood, and went to check on Bobbie Renee, who was hurting because of me. I couldn't let that be.

She was leaning against the wall with her head resting on the edge of the time clock sniffing and drying her eyes when I found her. As I approached she spoke. "Stop. Just stay away, AJ. I'm not a slut, and I don't want Sera starting anything. Please."

"That's not going to happen. I promise. I just came to see if you were all right and to apologize for you being drug into all this." I had to make amends somehow.

"It's okay," Bobbie replied.

"No it isn't. Are you?" I was concerned. I knew how sensitive she was. So what is she was a flirt anyway? She didn't flirt with me, and that was what mattered. Right? Her feelings were no less important than Sera's, and I hate to see any girl cry. It breaks my heart.

"I'll be fine." She looked into her compact. "My eyes are red. Every nosy bastard that works here'll want to know what happened."

I walked her back to the front and made Sera apologize. I realized something big was up with Sera, but I didn't know what.

In retrospect, I think I now know what caused her to act so irrationally. Her conscience was eating her up, and she was trying to get me to break up with her so she could pursue Travis guilt-free. That is what I think, but I could be wrong.

What brought these long removed memories to mind now? I wondered about that as Christi and I walked around a local supermarket. Perhaps seeing the manager doing an error correct for a checker had set my mind in motion with thoughts of the old days at Durry's, the last of them anyway. Or maybe it was the sight and sounds of carryouts yammering at checkers for calling them up over and over.

In any case, the memories did return, bringing both an unrelenting want for the past and a healing for my yet fractured heart. The memories brought along an appreciation for what I had at the time. Admittedly few envied me at the time- being pursued by every pig in the country and all- I'm sure, but I would have changed places with no one. Granted, I was worried, but I was content in Christi's loving arms. I had love and isn't that more than some people are ever granted? Some live their whole lives alone, in want of nothing more than a person to share their hopes, dreams, and embrace with. Even if I had nothing else, I had that one precious thing: Christi's undying love for me.

We grabbed some Cokes, a few packs of ramen noodles, and three boxes of condoms before returning to Ben's sometime around seven o'clock in the evening. The others were swimming. We put the sodas in the fridge, changed, and went out back.

The pool was lit from within, and the fence around the yard was high enough to hinder any curious outsiders. The guys were wearing swimming trunks, and Summer was wearing a white bikini that was big on her. I believe it probably belonged to Ben's mother. Every so often she'd lose either the top or bottom of her suit while diving in. I'm sure I caught Matt and Ben staring at the "uplifting" spectacle once or twice, and I would be lying if I were to say I didn't attempt to sneak a tiny peek here and there.

Christi caught my roaming eyes once. "Would you rather be peeking at Summer or caressing this?" She opened her robe to display her voluptuous body covered only by a skimpy pair of black, crotchless panties. Her back was to the others, but they used their imaginations and cheered mockingly.

"What's it gonna be boy?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I want to hear you say it." She glided her sultry, cat-like frame my way, pushed me down to my knees, and said, "So why don't you say it?"

I looked for the words, but all the blood was rushing to my lower extremities as she hiked one leg, placing her moist foot on my shoulder and revealing a heavenly sight. Searching still for the words, I found one and only one, "You." It was enough, though, that one simple word. Effective communication.

Christi laughed and dropped her leg back to the ground and closed the robe. The guys booed in jest, but I listened to the words she was whispering in my ear. "Take me upstairs. I'm tired all of a sudden, which is to say horny." I grinned, lifted her into my arms, and took her to bed.

We had slept like spoons and remained that way upon waking. The birds serenaded us, and sunlight streamed into our room. A thin white sheet covered us as we laid awake. Christi rolled over on her back, and her nipples raised the sheet ever so slightly. She kissed me and said, "I wish we could stay here forever."

"I know. It's like a dream. Things are so perfect." And it really was. I could not think of one thing that needed improving upon. "It makes me worry though. Nothing stays all good for long."

She turned and looked me in the eyes. "That's not like you. You're not a cynic, you're a romantic."

"Yeah, but maybe it is time I became a realist. I mean five lives are on the line every time we make a decision."

"Still, don't let this whole thing change you. I love you just the way you are."
Silence.

I stared at the ceiling. "You surprised the hell out of me last night. I didn't know you could be so nasty."

"But you liked it, right?" She asked.

"Oh, don't make me harder, honey. You know I liked it."

Later I reached for the remote on the nightstand and turned on GNN. The news and... a long, familiar face. Mom. She was crying, pleading with me to come home. She was begging me to silence my gun and quit killing. The bastard pigs and media had her brainwashed into thinking I was some sort of rabid killing machine. I wanted to pick up the phone, call home, tell Mom I was fine, and explain to her what had happened. What really happened, not that movie of the week shit they were spoon-feeding her. Yet, I knew I could not. Traces, no doubt, had been placed on my home phone lines.

After they were finished using my Mother's image against me they paraded JP and Matt's parents, and then Christi's and Summer's in front of the camera to beg us to return home and face the music. As much as their pleas choked us up, that was not about to happen.

Christi ran to the bathroom. I slung my legs over the edge of the bed and leaned forward. The television droned on in the background of my mind. The bad news wasn't

finished by GNN's parental parade. I felt it from the gut seconds before the reporter's words reached my ears.

"In other news, cyberspace is a much safer place this evening. Police apprehended Chris Davison- also known as "the mouse"- late last night at his home. Davison is suspected in seven separate hacking cases. He is expected to be formally charged later this morning in connection with last week's outbreak of the so called "Sweetie" email virus.... "

That is how I began my day. How I hate being right all the time, let me count the ways. Sure I had a room with a view, but all I could see was the heap of shit my life was quickly becoming. Our parents were being fed lies, turning them against us, or at the very least confusing the hell out of them. If that was not enough to make me want to greet the toilet bowl that fine morning, I also had to wonder what would become of us now that salvation had been yanked out from beneath us. With Chris now behind bars we didn't really have a destination any longer. I turned the volume down and went to comfort Christi.

I approached the door, slowly at first, as I formed in my mind exactly what I would say to Christi, my weeping angel. She leaned limply against the sink with her head bowed. Her beautiful, black mane became a sacred sadness shroud my vision could not penetrate. I waved the hair gently over one ear and brought one hand to rest on her tear-moistened neck. "Why are they doing this to us?"

I replied the best way I could. "We are fugitives from justice. As long as they stick one little word- allegedly- into their slanderous reports, they can say anything they

want about us." At once I regretted having rushed everyone to decide if they were staying or going. I turned her to face me, my hands coming to rest on her naked hips.

Hesitantly, Christi asked, "Don't you ever want to just leave all this behind us. JP and the others seem to look up to you. They're afraid to make any changes without asking you first. It has to be stressful." I let her words sink in. Part with JP, Matt, and Summer, and leave them at the mercy of this cruel world. I could not see that happening. Perhaps one day we would part company, but not yet.

"I've thought about it once or twice, but now is not the time to make any hasty decisions. Don't worry. I'll think of something." Silence. Just when I was about to question the effectiveness of my comforting words a giggle came from Christi's downturned head. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"I was just wondering if that's on my account," she said. She was staring over at me, naked, and at full attention.

I looked up, smiled the smile of acute embarrassment, and replied, "He's always up an hour or so before me, but you have been known to have that effect on me."

As we got dressed, I continued to listen to the news. Hell, it couldn't get any worse, I figured. "Yet another Brat Pack sighting in Arizona. Ray Raimi, Police Chief of Sauntermville, called 911 after shooting himself in the foot. He claims he heard prowlers overnight in his residence. When he went downstairs he found the perps to be none other than JP Phife and AJ Jackson. Despite the chief's claims no sign of forced entry were found."

I did not know whether to laugh or cry. This moron, who was the willing prey of either his delusions or wounded pride, had set in motion the hysteria that usually results in mob justice. That is, if anyone believed his claims. They did.

Saunterville was west of Moenkopi, so I quickly ruled out continuing on our western route. Criminologists from across the nation had speculated we would attempt to cross over into either Canada or Mexico; so going north or south was out of the question. Going east didn't sound that appealing either, but it was our only shot. So that is what we did.

It had been difficult saying goodbye to our new friend, Ben, but all of us, including Ben, knew it could not be helped. As we were pulling out of his life, he came running to the van with an oversized envelope containing nine hundred dollars and a slip of paper with his phone number on it. I looked inside and fussed a little before finally accepting the money. We needed it. I could not argue with that. Ben had reassured us, "Don't worry. I have a great allowance. Call if there is anything I can ever do for you. Now go on. Get out of here."

I got the van rolling. The town of Moenkopi was coming alive in a way I had not seen before. People, mostly middle aged, were gathering in the streets, and police cars were everywhere. As we left the city limits, I realized what was happening. In the rear view mirror I saw three police cars block off the road. Moenkopi and Saunterville were being blockaded. The search was on for us, the villainous Brat Pack.

Chapter Nine: The Death of Innocence

The heat was on us. I was sure of that. They seemed to be getting closer all the time. For the first time it seemed the enemy was within sight. I realized that as we narrowly escaped running into the blockade. It was hard to believe that a delusional little man, who had never laid eyes on us, gave the authorities their biggest lead, setting all that was to follow in motion. If only I could have gotten my hands on him.

We kept on the road as much as possible. Every two or three hours blue lights would flicker in the distance behind us. Every two bit, worn down backcountry road that presented itself to us, we took. With the exception of stopping to put oil or gas into the beast, we didn't stop for two and a half days and several states later. On the road I slept whenever I could. We rotated driving shifts only when we would stop for fuel. By that time you were ready to sleep, but even after coming off of a long turn at the wheel, JP would stay up. During that whole time I think he might have slept five hours, if that.

He was looking a bit frazzled around the edges. He didn't bother changing clothes or scrubbing off on our brief stops. Bags sagged underneath his eyes. He was drained

emotionally, mentally, and physically. When we finally did stop, it was at a hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Christi and I got a room together, as did JP and Summer. Matt got a room for himself. We checked in separately to avoid arousing anyone's suspicions. When all was said and done, we spent about a hundred dollars for the three rooms. It was good to have a bit of room to stretch out after having been cooped up in the van together for so long.

We retired to our rooms for the rest of the night. After all, we were exhausted and it was nearing three in the morning. Christi and I showered and fled to the cool comfort of the bed's fresh sheets. Christi turned to me. "I'm worried. Do you think we lost them?"

I wanted to say yes, but I was unsure. "I don't know. At least they are far enough behind that we can relax a bit. Maybe we'll see the city tomorrow?" I wanted her to smile. I wanted her to forget her worries.

"Yeah, that would be nice. I think."

"Oh you'll love it. Beale Street's just a few blocks away. B.B. King got his start playing down on Beale." Christi gazed attentively at me while I spoke enthusiastically about all the blues greats to have come out of Memphis, not to mention Elvis.

"Shh, I'll see it all tomorrow." She crawled up on the bed beside me. "Speak me a poem." It was both a command and a request. I saw it as a small favor could do this magnificent lady allowing me to love her.

"What about?" I asked, trying to get into the proper mindset.

"It doesn't matter. Just make it smooth." Her voice trailed off.

I searched for exact wording, striving to string them perfectly for my vixen beauty. After some time they came to me, like faithful servants. "Okay, close your eyes." I cleared my throat and began.

"I am the timid, you are the tizzy.

Absent from you I turn livid, and around you, my mind's a frenzy.

Here's a dream from your scribe: Us free, caring, loving, and together.

Maybe it'll remain only in my mind, only time will tell, never sever.

Confect in your mind, a place for these syllables beginning to wind...down.

Keep them some place easy to find, so you'll never again frown."

I could have gone on. Why should I have though? The poem had told its tale. It was complete. The tiny tears in Christi's eyes were the greatest gift of all to me. I had touched her with my words. That is the measure of every writer. So you can put a few words together and convey a message, okay, great, but can you touch someone's soul?

The monologue brought back memories of that night near Laconia, when Christi and I had feasted on the fruits of two minds perfectly in tune without having sex. For me that night, in memory, was as electrifying as any actual sex we have had since then.

Christi scooted closer to me. "Hold me." I moved closer, stopping only when I felt our bodies mesh together. I kissed her and slid my hand softly down, ever down to her hip. The kiss continued and I tightened my hold on Christi. I let my hand hold tighten causing her to sigh and sink into the kiss more passionately. She guided my hand around to where she wanted it, and admonished me, "Be gentle". She was wet and waiting to be satisfied. Her kisses peppered my neck, and her fingers slid through my hair. Mine were doing the same but far from her head. Soon she was pleading, "Now.",

but I made her wait. She climbed on top of me and sank down on the object of her immediate desire. She leaned back, eyes closed, and savoring the intimacy, but it wasn't long before she was hovering over me, kissing me and tickling my face with her hair. "Remember I said, 'Be gentle?' earlier." She asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, forget it! Faster!" I took charge, dropping her to the subservient position. My arms held her legs high as I delivered everything quickly, rhythmically, deeply. Afterwards, I collapsed beside her short of breath and euphoric. She spoke once more before sleep claimed us. "I love you."

"I love you too."

About six thirty in the morning a few quiet knocks resounded on our door. They were so low at first that I thought the person was hitting on the door of a nearby room rather than ours. The phantom rapping came again slightly harder, so I slid out of Christi's embrace and climbed out of bed to answer their summons. My mind was too groggy to race, but it did stumble over a few fleeting worries. Is it the cops? Is it the manager? Is it the media? I looked through the peep-hole and a weeping JP came into view backlit by a bright street light.

I opened the door and hurried JP inside. "What's up?" Then I knew. "The dream again?" He couldn't even speak at first, just nod. "Come on in," I said and closed the door after him.

We dropped our weary bodies to the carpeted floor. JP pulled it together long enough to speak. "Worse this time. He, he told me I didn't deserve the air filling my

lungs. Ugh! He kept saying, 'Run out to the van! Do it! Put that gun an' put it to good use! Do it!' He lost it again. Christi woke to his frantic sobs.

She rubbed her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep, baby." I replied. A few minutes later she was asleep once again.

"That wasn't Mr. Fields. It was your mind playing tricks on you. That's all." I was nearly yelling under my breath. I tried to shake some sense into him. After an hour of this, I managed to calm JP to the point he was ready to try to go back to sleep. I closed the door behind him as he ventured out into the night going back to his room, and then I cuddled back up to Christi.

As I laid there in her arms I found myself worrying about JP. There was no denying it. He was getting worse by the day. Like veteran's have what they call "the thousand yard stare", JP gazed distantly as if he saw things others would never know. He was pale as a ghost, worn down from the whole struggle. I could not muster a single positive thought. When sleep finally returned to rescue me, I welcomed the escape.

We met in Matt's room a little before eleven. All of us seemed thoroughly rested except JP, who looked like ten pounds of shit packed into a five-pound bag. His eyes were red from all the crying.

"Okay, just in case we get split up or busted, let's divide up the remaining money. I like to cover all my bases." This we did, and it gave each of us roughly a hundred and forty dollars.

We set out to see the city. We drove in circles at first, lost and confused by the layout of the area. Finally Fourth Avenue brought us to Beale Street, which was blocked off from traffic. We parked at the Tourist Information Center because it was the only free parking around.

The street was red brick, and the lights were archaic. Being that it was still early, few people were out and about, and nowhere did I see another white person. Those who were carried garbage bags over their shoulders. These were the homeless of Memphis. You could say we felt slightly out of place! Not a good thing for us to stand out so much, since blending in had become so very necessary for our survival. I am not a racist, but it made me uncomfortable.

We walked around for a bit. People were scattered like the newspaper pages being blown in the wind. Some were still asleep on benches; others sat awake drinking the last of their wine for breakfast in Handy Park. Matt scooted over closer to me and spoke under his breath. "AJ, I think we might possibly be on the wrong side of the city. Why don't we cut out of here?"

"Alright, alright. But you are going to have to relax." He nodded. "I mean these are people you see. Desperate perhaps, but still people none the less." We continued back pass the clubs: B.B. King's, People's, and the Rum Boogie Cafe. A homeless man approached us and spoke. I was the only one to look him directly in the eye, and the fact that I actually looked at him while he spoke to me seemed to catch him off guard a bit.

"Brother, can I ast you a question? I'm not astin' for three or four dollars, just a little somethin'. I'm tryin' get breakfast. Ya' know what I'm sayin'?" I felt for the guy. I scrounged for the loose change in my pocket. Seventy-five cents.

"Here you go. What's your name?" Matt and Summer looked as though they'd take off any minute. They didn't. Christi just clung close to my side.

"Wha'? Uh, it's Rufus Brown, man. What chu' wanna know dat for?" He looked at me suspiciously. I guess nobody had ever taken the time to actually speak to him other than the occasional, "Get away from me."

"Well, Rufus, we haven't eaten breakfast yet either. Would you like to join us? My treat." In the end he agreed, and we went to a nearby fast food joint.

"What's it like being homeless in the city?" Christi asked as we ate.

Rufus filled his mouth with food, chewed, and answered, "What chu' think it like, girlie? It sucks. Same as bein' wit no place ta go anywhere I reckon. You folks wouldn't know nothin' bout dat dow." We said nothing. "You gotsta watch your back night and day. Dey spit on you. Dey call you a drunk, and if dey don't, dey jest flat out ignore you."

While he talked we listened attentively, with the exception of JP. He stared off into the distances as if searching for something. Though I didn't know what he was searching for then, I do now. Rufus continued, "It's a shitty ole world, en sometimes you gots to steal to survive. Don't wanna do it, jest got to dow." I knew exactly what he meant.

When we finished eating, Rufus thanked us. We offered to drop him off back on Beale. "Na, one place jest as good as dey next." He walked a ways down the street, turned and waved, and that was the last I ever saw of him.

It was nearing noon when we piled into the van. The air conditioning went on immediately to combat the heat and humidity. Matt volunteered to drive, and for that, I was thankful. I can drive in the city, but prefer to navigate instead, if given a choice in the matter.

"He seemed nice enough." Christi said watching Rufus scuffle down the street.

"Yeah, he was." I thought back to earlier in the day, when we first came into contact with Rufus on Beale. "Not what you expected at all, huh Matt? I thought you guys were gonna bale on me and leave me standing there by myself earlier."

"No. Hey man, you never know though. Guess my small town upbringing was showing." He put the van in drive and asked, "So, where to?"

I thought for a minute. What would appeal to all of them? "How about we hit up a mall?" They all nodded in agreement, so we next went to the Mall of Memphis, which was both massive and beautiful. Back home the nearest mall was in Cape Girardeau, and it only had one floor. It blew our minds. As soon as we walked in there was ice rink to our left and an escalator to our right. The food court was directly overhead. There were both blacks and whites walking around, so we blended in better than we had down on Beale earlier.

The girls went into Victoria's Secret and bought a thing or two. Then, we all played Laser Tag at Laser Legion, an arcade specializing in laser-oriented competitions. We got suited up in an assortment of differently colored vests with sensors built in and belts complete with holster and laser cannon. A young girl no more than sixteen explained the rules to us before opening the doors to "The Arena".

The concept of the game was simple: Shoot your opponents before they shoot you. Soon the lights went down, leaving behind only day glow obstacles. Music blared through unseen speakers, and a voice declared combat had begun. Everyone ran for cover.

Content with my position, I fired on Matt. Then, I fired on Summer, only to be shot in the back by Christi. When my cannon reactivated itself, I returned the favor. JP was the next to take me down. Combat lasted for fifteen minutes, and then the lights came on, the music stopped, and the young girl, who didn't look that bad considering her age, returned.

A weird feeling overcame me, sending chills up and down my spine, as we took the vests off. It was a vision really. It disturbed me how JP had looked while he was firing on me. His eyes had been wild, but maybe it was just the flashing lights.

The last stop we made before leaving was the wishing fountain in the center of the mall. Pennies in hand, we turned our backs to the fountain, exhaled, and rocketed our coins into their watery destinations. I wished for an end to suffering. Not just mine or the others, but everybody's. No one deserved their suffering. Not our parents, Mr. Fields' wife, Ben, Rufus, Travis, Sera, or the lot of us. I wanted to be at peace with the world around me. Maybe it was something that hit me at that visionary moment when JP had fired on me. Maybe it was then that I realized I might not make it out of this thing alive. I was tired of the never-ending struggle. I loved all my friends as much as I ever had, but I didn't feel as though I could live for them much longer. I had needs too, mind you. Although, I know everyone was curious what the rest had wished for, no one dared to ask the question.

We needed a rest after running about so vigorously, so we returned downtown to catch a flick at The Orpheum. Its grand marquee of luminous bulbs and letters greeted us. To Kill a Mockingbird, which is one of my favorite films, was playing. I had not seen it in years, so I was due for a refresher.

If I had not wanted to see the movie so bad, we would not have stood in the extremely long line like we did. I found the interior of the lavishly ornate motion picture palace to be spacious and cushy. It reminded me of an opera house, or at least my idea of what an opera house should look like. Years later, I discovered that, indeed, the Orpheum was originally The Grand Opera House. The walls were golden and the curtains were scarlet.

Organ music lulled us as we waited and waited and waited, and when we could wait no longer, the lights went down and the music ceased, leaving only the sounds of the show and the projector sputtering forth the black and white images. A Mickey Mouse short warmed the crowd up for the main attraction.

I sank into my seat to enjoy the film for the umpteenth time. The others sat spellbound, most of them viewing the classic for the first time. I scanned their faces from time to time, and they appeared to be enjoying the movie. How could anyone not? Never has there been a more potent blend of strong characters and gripping plot.

"...remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird," Atticus told Jem. His voice was stern yet reassuring, at least to me.

Miss Maudie added, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing

but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." I thought about this as hard as I had every time I had watched the film (and read the book) before, maybe harder. In other words, it is a sin to kill a mockingbird because it is innocent of certain crimes against humans. I like to stop and ponder little things like that. I guess every scrap of clarity and understanding provides comfort, which has always been in short supply for me.

By the time the movie was over, I was fully rested and ready to dance the night away. I was a recreational creature always searching for escape. Always had been, from as far back as I can remember. I used to sneak up late at night and watch rated R movies on Cinemax and HBO. I didn't understand half of the things I saw and heard, but you could not tell me that. Invariably, I would doze off on the floor before the television, only to get in trouble when morning came. That happened too many times to count. Tonight was no different. I sought the nightlife. "How about hitting Beale again? Things should be swinging now."

I was right as usual. The nightly block party was already kicking. A band was playing somewhere amid the crowd in Handy Park. The neon club signs called out to me, but I knew it would be foolish to enter one of the seedy nightclubs. The feedback was awful over the P.A. system, but the blues was good nonetheless. People danced wildly about, drank, took turns singing, and really lived it up. Occasionally a fight would break out, but we stayed away from those scenes as much as possible.

As we walked, I noticed JP's mind wondering. He stared off down the road again. Suddenly he stopped, falling out of rank with the rest of us.

"What's up, bro?" I ventured. He looked pale and uneasy, and acted as if he barely heard my words.

"Uh, nothing. I. I just thought I saw someone." He and I both looked at each other. The others wondered out loud whom? "It's nothin'." So we walked on. A block or so later JP announced that he was going back to the hotel because he didn't feel well. At that point I pulled him aside to talk to him.

"Are you sure you are alright?"

"Yeah, just going to lay down for a bit." Finally, reason I thought. He knew he was exhausted, and that he was in dire need of sleep, I thought. Summer and Matt invaded our private conversation, saying that they'd go back with him.

"Here, take the van. Christi and I'll walk." I handed the keys to Summer, and I assured them that we didn't mind. "If you would, pack up the van, we are out of here come morning. And get you some rest, okay?" They nodded.

JP chanced another look into the distance, and followed Summer and Matt away.

Christi could see how worried I was about JP. Reading me like a book she said, "Don't worry. He'll be fine after he's slept a bit. He's just rundown."

"I know. Hey, no use standing around worrying. Let's dance." So we danced, and danced, and danced. Although we were much paler than the majority of the party population around us, I felt very little anxiety. Nor did I pick up that Christi did either.

Christi and I would mumble the words and laugh at ourselves when we'd mess up the lyrics. Near midnight the crowd began to thin, which was fine by me because my feet were aching profusely. We still had a good little walk ahead of us too.

Our walk back to the hotel was a slow stroll, and we held each other close, quietly conversing away. "Tonight was great, AJ." Christi laid her head on my shoulder for a sec, then raised it once again, looked to me and smiled.

I returned her smile. "I knew you'd like it."

"Oh really? And what made you so sure?" She was kidding. I could tell.

"Because I knew I would like it, and we just have that much in common."

"If I'm so darn predictable, if you already know me so well, what am I going to do next?" She looked me in the eye and waited for my reply. I laughed.

"That's an easy one." I stopped, walked in front of her, put my hands on her hips, and said, "You are going to kiss me." It was still quite humid, and the city was still alive with people going this way and that way. Still, there was not another person on our side of the street for a good distance.

"Guess you do know me that well." She put her arms around my neck, tilted her head and kissed me passionately. There we stood kissing in the shadow of a tall building, shielded from the streetlights for sometime.

We walked the rest of the way hand in hand. When the hotel came into view, I was tired and totally relaxed. Too worn down to worry. All that would change soon enough. As experience has taught me, it does not pay to get to comfortable. Tonight was to be no different.

We found JP and Summer's door ajar. Strange sounds echoed within. Adrenaline began to pump through me. I motioned for Christi to stand back a bit, and I proceeded forward. I opened the door. Everything inside of me nearly rushed up, that familiar sick

feeling. I snatched the keys off the nightstand by the door and threw them to Christi. There was blood on my hands from the keys.

"Go wait for me in the van!" I yelled to Christi. She hesitated and tried to peer inside. "No time, just go!"

As she darted off, I rushed in. Matt was crying uncontrollably. JP, nearly catatonic, sat rocking Summer, blood soaking into his clothes. Blood dripped from her head laying limp to the side. There was a small but growing crimson puddle edging closer and closer to one of the guns. Blood seeped from her beautiful, slightly parted lips, falling to JP's flannel shirt to stain it in yet another local. Blood everywhere.

Despite my best attempts to bring JP around, he just kept rocking Summer's corpse. "I thought you was him. I thought you was him. I thought you was him." Over and over he repeated it. His voice held no tone, not emotion. His eyes displayed a soulless shell, the very vision of him I had earlier in the day. He deviated from the repetitive phrase to another. "He tricked me. He tricked me. He tricked me." When he turned the gun on Summer, he ended his own life. Never could he hope to find any happiness.

I tugged Matt's arm. I tried to lift him from the floor. He too had long ago gone into shock. "Come on, there's nothing we can do for him! He's lost it!" I shook him, and he looked to me for the first time. He looked through me. "That's not your brother cradling a dead body. Matt, JP is gone."

Matt found his feet but resisted my pleas. "He is my brother! I won't let them take him!" Matt grabbed JP to pull him up. JP was still delusional. His eyes went wide, and his hand ventured into the blood puddle to retrieve the pistol. He took aim and fired before I could intervene.

"No!" I screamed, but voices cannot shield a soul from racing bullets. Matt fell lifeless, and I backed away and slowly out of the room. Sirens, although distant, were close enough for me to hear them barreling toward me. I never turned my back on JP until I was safely out of the room. I paused, at the door, took one last look, and then left JP to his draining corpses and fading phantoms.

I felt cold inside. Bits and pieces of my heart were being chiseled away. At the same time, I got a mental image of Satan carrying shovel loads of our souls to the eternal flames. I could hear the cries of my two fallen friends as I walked through the gathering crowd of spectators in night robes and the arriving emergency crews. Christi had pulled the van around, minimizing the gauntlet of questioning faces I had to deal with.

Riding away we heard the echo of cackling madness extinguished with an ominous thud. Tears filled our eyes, and our hearts broke that night. Christi's words came back to me, "Tonight was great, AJ," and I hated myself for having been so happy while JP suffered so. I could not shake the pain, which both drained me and refused me sleep for nearly a week. I was torn down. I looked a wreck by that time. In the mirror I saw JP's image, and that had scared me sufficient to make me lie down and sleep finally. No. Insanity was his fate. Not mine.

The thud I had suspected was JP either shooting someone else or himself, but I was wrong. Two days later, I read in the newspaper that it had been JP shot alright, but by the police. The wound was not fatal. He had raised the gun to fire on the officer, but the policeman was faster. JP was taken into custody, found incompetent to stand trial, and will probably spend the rest of his days in a mental health facility called Shady Grove. Don't worry. He hasn't "gotten away" with anything. Nope. I am sure Summer,

Matt, and Mr. Fields are there to keep him company. Since he has been captured he reportedly has not talked to anyone, living anyway.

As for Christi and I, we drove until most of our money was gone, stopping finally I dare not say where. Every second of my waking hell was filled with memories of Shawn, JP, Summer, and Matt. Not as members of "the Brat Pack", mind you, but as themselves, as I had grown up with them back in Dexter, Missouri. I remember the bottle rocket wars we waged annually on the Fourth of July. I remember Summer smiling beautifully while she practiced her football cheers. I remember JP teaching me to swim down at the creek. I remember Matt standing up to anyone who put his brother down.

Yes, I remember the day our bus driver died and all the days that followed. I blocked those days out now as much as possible. I don't want to go down like JP. I will not. Writing this has forced me to face a lot of pain I could otherwise have simply shut out, but I had to do it. For their sakes, I had to do it. I can make my case, but they cannot. Shawn is in jail. JP is locked up in the Looney bin talking to the gentle breeze, while soon; it will come and scatter what remains of Summer and Matt. And up until now, nobody had any idea if Christi and I were dead or alive. Yes, we are both very much alive. I must confess that I still hurt so badly. Sometimes I ball myself up in bed and cry so hard I feel like I am dying. Sometimes I fear that I will. Sometimes I wish that I would, but I never do. Christi is all that keeps me going.

The thought crosses my mind every now and again that I've tasted all the fruits the emotion tree has to offer, so I should find my final resting place, wherever it may be, and fill it. Pull the dirt in on top of me and say goodnight. Perhaps that would be wise, to purge the world of one of its demons, but what would become of my Christi angel? For

her sake alone, I shall draw my breath, a ghost-souled guardian companion. Just in case others should decide to help me fill that final resting place, I prepared.

I wrote my family the other day. I let them know we were not as the media has depicted us. I told them how sorry I was that I had let them down, and that I was also sorry that our time together had been cut so abruptly short. I told them all that I loved them, and if they loved me at all, not to try to find me. I am not the same boy you once knew, in fact, I am a nearly grown man now, but inside I have not been that little boy you once knew since the day I left Dexter. "Consider me dead," was my message to them. "Please," I begged them, "find comfort in memory. Yes remember me as I remember you... and my fallen friends... before innocence died."

Chapter Ten: Flight of Your Demon

So what has become of Christi and I? Where are we? Well, that you mustn't know. Heavens no! I have gone to great lengths to remain the invisible man loving my invisible woman, hiding in plain sight as it were. What amazes me still is that people think it is so hard not to stand out. There are so many ways to avert unwanted attention. I will not go into too much detail, but rather only speak briefly on this matter. People see what they want to see when they look at others. They see stereotypes stored in their minds. Let's say that I venture out dressed like Rufus Brown. People's reactions would almost universally mimic those of the others when we first met Rufus, and by that I mean that people tend to try not to make eye contact with homeless people. People don't look at you, they don't see you. Class dismissed. I can't give away all my secrets.

People think our lives must be dreary and unbearable. Most of the time they are right, but you must also understand the total freedom that Christi and I have now. Our life is filled with so many experiences that many will never know, and by that I speak not of the sadness covered at length already. I am speaking of the brighter side of things.

Would the two of us ever have spent a New Year's Eve in Time Square had we not been on the run? Would we have ever seen Los Angeles or Dallas? Or even had the chance to take pictures of sweet Saint Louis from our perch, the Gateway Arch? Would we have been able to go clubbing at the Underground on Second Avenue in Nashville, Tennessee? I think not. Never would I have gotten to tie one on down in the French Quarter or follow it up on Fat Tuesday catching Mardi gras throws. We are modern day gypsies reluctant to swindle others but doing what we must to keep on keeping on.

How did I put it earlier? We are of the same fabric as the world around us. Never does a week go by that we do not change our appearance and mannerisms in some way, shape, or form. A wise man once said, "You can never step into the same river twice, for its waters are always flowing away." And equally true, one could meet us every day and never meet the same two disguises. For years we have evaded capture. Years! Does that not tell you something? Look throughout each and every state if you desire. If there are not bigger criminals than Christi Foxworth and AJ Jackson, come find us and take us away, but it will be the biggest mistake of your life. That is if you ever do find us. I pity the fool that tries to separate me from my wife of a hundred weddings and newborn son, Lenny. I know, a hundred weddings? Let me explain.

Living the lifestyle that we do, Christi and I cannot have a big white wedding with all our family in attendance. We had many conversations about this and even fought about it once. Fights are a rarity with us, so when they occur, I listen up. Anyway, I decided that I would find some way to make it up to Christi.

"Baby," I had said, "if it were possible for me to marry you a hundred times, I would." And she had held me to that statement. To date we have been married ninety-

nine times in twenty-three states, but by the time anyone reads these words, we will have tied one hundred knots. And if the truth be told, I doubt she will let me stop there. It has become a bit of a running joke with us too.

Each time we stop in one of the little fly by night wedding chapel's we each make up the other's name for that wedding. Last time I was "Aldova" and she was "Fredricka". I think we should make it into the Guinness book somewhere, though that will never happen since we cannot really verify that we ever did this. Oh well, I guess we have left plenty of a mark on the world at large. The smallest is the one I am most proud of, my son.

Little Len is just adorable. He has my blond hair and blue eyes. He has Christi's nose. I recently got a camera from, well, it doesn't matter how I got it, but the point is it was with that camera that I took the picture Christi sent in her letter home. Her mom had always wanted a grandbaby. If things get too rough I know she would watch over Len, but I don't see that ever happening though. Things are going decently right now. What more is there for me to say? Maybe you will hear from me again in the future, maybe you won't. Only time will tell. Until then, Au Revoir.

Book Two: Saving a Generation

Chapter Eleven: The Storm Blows In

“Daddy, what’s wrong with mommy?” His words rang in my ears, stinging me like the worry I could not evade any longer. Though I did not answer the first question, another came. “Is she gonna be alright?”

“Yes, Len.”

My eyes worked back and forth between the road ahead of me and my ill wife in the back of the van we were calling home then. All the while, my six year old son, Lenny continued interrogating me, “Where are we going, daddy?”

“Away, son. Lie down, and let daddy drive. Okay?” I could not bring myself to admit to him that I had neither a destination nor a plan in mind. I could not tell him that I was acting on that instinct- flight- that I had honed with virtually every breath I had ever taken. The clouds grew darker as we took to the road. The rain soon followed. It dawned on me that now we were escaping into the night as Christi and I had done so many times before Len was born.

An hour or two passed and the volume of traffic greeting me on this country road shrank to next to nothing. At the time, I was wishing the heavy rains would follow suit. I pulled into the parking area of a closed convenience store. I crawled into the back, careful not to wake Len, to check on Christi. She was still no better, worse perhaps. She was sweating profusely, and her fever refused to break. She was incoherent and talking off the walls.

“JP, I can’t drive much longer. Tired, so tired.” I was stung at the mere mention of the name of my dearly departed friend. Even though that gruesome night was more than six years behind us, nightmares visited upon us those horrid images often. Now in her feverish state she was locked in a nightmare she could not escape. Try as I might, I could not wake her from her misery.

Throughout all we had been through together, I had never seen Christi in this bad of shape. Forever seems so long when you are young, but as you get a few years under your belt you begin to realize how time really does get away from you. As I sat there, caring for my lady, those familiar vows echoed in my ears, “until death do you part”. “Yes,” I had replied a hundred times at least, but it was only now that I understood the gravity of such a solemn vow.

I was at a loss for ideas, and if I was not able to figure out what to do soon “until death do you part” might end up being sooner than I would have ever feared. Where could I turn? Who could I trust with the well being of my ailing angel? Who was good enough to fight back the illness attacking the mother of my little Len? Could we in fact chance getting pinched to take Christi to the hospital?

I could not stand to see her in this state any longer. As quietly as possible I slipped out of the parked van without waking Len. The cold rain was still coming down, but the downpour was the least of my worries. I sat on the pavement for a while wishing the rain could wash away all my problems. Lost in a chorus of raindrops and sadness, I came to a realization that I had so desperately sought to avoid. This was a decision that wasn't mine to make. It wasn't my life hanging in the balance here. It was Christi's. She had to decide her own fate, and I had to follow her wishes to the best of my abilities.

Christi was ill, and it was beyond my ability to make her well. That much I knew for sure. If I did not get her to a hospital and soon, she could die. Just leave her there and take off, is that what I was to do? As cold as it sounds, that is precisely what I had to do if it was her will.

And what if I were arrested while taking Christi to the hospital per her request? What would become of little Len? He'd be raised by the state, be put in some foster home, and be taught that his parents were bad people. That is where he would end up, were I to allow myself to be taken into custody. Any way I turned, I risked losing someone dear to me. These words I scribbled in my notebook later that night:

Once again in a tender moment- this very time

I find myself bound in a double bind.

Would Christi wake and answer my inquiry? Would she understand in her weakened state just what was at stake? What if she opted for going to the hospital when asked, but when she awoke in the hospital she found herself hating me for what she

perceived to be the ultimate act of abandonment? Or what if she chose to stay with Len and I for the rest of her days and did not get better? Would I- could I- ever forgive myself for letting her die before my eyes? Our unorthodox union had persevered now for several years, but this obstacle seemed bigger than both of us. By now I was soaked.

After I returned to the dry warmth of the van, our home and changed into a pair of sweat pants, I put it all before her. “Baby,” I said. “Wake up, Christi. I need to talk to you.”

Her eyes opened about a third of the way. You would have thought they were made of lead, the way they fluttered up and down as she struggled to keep them open. I ran my hand through her hair and kissed her forehead. “What is it? I am tired.”

“I know, baby, I know. You’re sick, and I have to admit I am worried.” She was as drenched in sweat as I was wet from the rain.

“Len? Where’s Lenny?” She sat up and looked around for him. “Where’s my baby?” She was obviously delusional and oblivious to the fact he was fast asleep in the very back.

“He’s okay, and I will make sure he stays that way. Just relax.” With her mind a bit more at ease, she laid back down and let me continue. “I need to know what you want to do. If you stay out here- on the road with us- you could die.”

“I know.” Her voice was weak. Each syllable seemed a struggle to free from her throat. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Just don’t seem to have any energy any more.”

We discussed every option available. In the lulls I listened to the rain meeting the roof. The longer we talked the more alert and coherent Christi became. She fell silent and simply stared at me lovingly. “I love you, AJ.”

I smiled. “I know, baby, and you know I love you too.” I patted her thigh. “Are you hungry? Want some soup?” She nodded.

Over the years I had come by many a useful survival trick. One such trick was cooking on a car engine. We had but a few dishes. Just the essentials: a can opener, a few spoons, knives, forks, bowls, saucers, and two pans. I turned the engine back on to let it heat up, and then dug out a can of soup and opened it. Outside I covered the pan with foil and placed it on the engine. The hood I let come to rest on top of the pan. Ten minutes later I had hot chicken noodle soup to deliver to my love.

She sat up and prepared herself to eat. “Thanks. Smells good.” She took a couple of spoonfuls of soup before further addressing me. “I know it doesn’t seem smart to stay, but I can’t leave you and Len.”

“Christi, we just want what is best for you.”

“I know. Staying with you two is best for me. I don’t think I’d bother to keep fighting without you.” I watched her lift another bit of food to her lips. The decision had been so easy for her to make.

“So you’ve decided? You can change your mind any time, baby. Just say the word.” I didn’t have to say the words. Christi knew. She knew me better than I knew myself sometimes I think.

“I have, and I won’t change it,” she replied. I knew from the look in her eyes that she would be true to her word.

When she had eaten all she cared to have, I washed the bowl in the falling rain. There were still another three or four hours of darkness and I was tired. I lay awake for twenty minutes at least holding her hand and watching her sleep. Finally my eyes shut, and I slept more soundly than in the preceding week.

As the sun rose once again to dry all the rain away we pulled back onto the road fueled by our resolve to remain together no matter what the world threw at us.

Christi and Lenny sat covered up in the floor. Lenny was practicing his reading aloud from a book I had lifted from Wal-Mart once. I listened to him read for a while, and then he came to the part where the little boy's puppy died. He had read the book ten times at least and had never before questioned what death was, but he asked this time. Christi and I looked at each other. Christi offered the answer to Lenny's question. "Baby, when someone dies they just go to sleep and dream of Heaven forever and ever. God opens up the gates and lets them see all the people they love that died before them." He seemed satisfied with that answer so we left it at that.

We were heading west, and it was early yet so the sun was at our backs. The glare was, at times, bothersome, but driving was still a pleasurable act for me.

I retreated into myself. My mind could roam my inner recesses just as my physical body was roaming the byways of America. Good times gone for so long could be called forth to bring a smile to my face. Friends could be with me for a while once again if I so desired.

I thought of all those kind souls that had helped us through the years. One person in particular kept coming to the foreground of my thoughts. What had ever become of Ben Sturgin? Was he still the misfit by his own design? Had he ever worked out all his

family issues? I wondered if his mother's goodbye to the bottle had been permanent or only one of the high points in a much longer struggle. Had his step dad, Dr. William Sturgin, learned to put his family before strangers sometimes? Like a flash of lightning, an idea struck me.

"I've gotta stop for a few minutes." I pulled into yet another insipid truck stop. "You need anything?"

"We are almost out of aspirin." I nodded, and Christi and Len went back to reading their book.

I went to the interior payphone and pulled out my wallet. Inside I found the crinkled up piece of paper I sought. On it was scribbled Ben's phone number. I had never used it since he had given it to us. Every time I was tempted to call and ask for a monetary favor the nine hundred dollars he gave us before came back to mind. I would always back out, feeling wrong about it. That day I did call the number. I wasn't asking for money after all, but rather something far more important.

"Is Benjamin there?" I asked, trying to sound sophisticated.

"No, he doesn't reside here any more. Who is calling please?"

"Tim Murray. We used to go to school together. I am going to be in town next month. Would you happen to have a number where I could reach him?" Lying becomes effortless when you have changed identities as many times as I have.

"Sure. Hold on." She dictated the number to me so I could write it down. "Thanks."

I hung the phone on my shoulder and let my fingers disconnect the call. I took a deep breath and dialed Ben's new number. After several rings a familiar voice, slightly aged in bass, answered.

"Ben?"

"Yes, this is Ben. Who's calling?"

I thought for a moment before answering, "An old friend."

"You are going to have to be more specific than that. I have many friends." I smiled to myself. Perhaps he had come to fit in better. Good for him.

"Let's just say once you extended your hospitality to my friends and I, and...." Again, silence.

"Is it really you? AJ?" Six years had passed, and never once had I seen Ben on television spouting off his account of time spent in the company of the Brat Pack. He had proven himself to be a true friend, where others had not.

"It is. Have the years been good to you?"

"Better than it has been to you guys. I was sorry to hear about..." I could not hear the names, not right now.

"I know."

"I always thought you would call," he said. I could hear the disappointment in his voice. I could tell he had missed us after we left that long ago night. I explained to him that I had not wanted to take advantage of his generosity.

"So why now? What's different?"

"Christi's sick, and I think she might be dying. I thought maybe with your help I could persuade your step dad to have a look at her." I paused. "I don't know where else to turn." Tears welled up in my eyes, but I suppressed them as best I could.

"We can try. Are you here, in town?"

We talked for a few minutes longer. He told me of a young lady staying with him and assured me that she was trustworthy. I took down directions to his house and told him we would come as soon as possible. After giving our goodbyes, I hung up the phone and went about my five-finger shopping.

With aspirin in hand, I returned to the van. Len said, "What'd ya get me, daddy?" I handed him a candy bar and watched his face light up.

"And these are for you." I handed the aspirin to Christi.

"Thanks. What took so long?" She asked.

"I had to make a call."

Chapter Twelve: Melancholy

Christi took a turn for the worse just before we left Texas. Her fever shot up once again and her appetite left her almost totally. I was torn between doing what I wanted to do and doing what I knew I must. I wanted to pull over and wait on Christi hand and foot and try to nurse her back to health, but I knew the best thing I could do for her was stay our course and try to get her to Ben as fast as possible. It was all I could do to keep from speeding. My foot felt like lead, and had it not been for cruise control I am sure we would have gotten pulled over and busted.

Little Len sat up front with me. I tried to keep him occupied. It was all I could do to comfort him when he cried without me succumbing to tears. I felt like I was reaching my breaking point. Two days without sleep had taken its toll on me. My driving was getting worse all the time. My focus kept fading and the lure to close my eyes started to make more and more sense. It could be avoided no longer. We had to pull over, but there was a problem.

Where can a van hide in the desert? Vast stretches of sand do nothing to conceal a vehicle. An approaching sign welcomed us into the city limits of some town too small for it to matter to my memory.

Soon I found my feet on the parking lot of the Thrifty Oasis motel. The sun was low in the sky setting almost on the horizon. I adjusted my curly black wig and baseball cap and set off to get us a room. The room was cheap enough, but it polished off the last of our money. It didn't bother me being broke like it once did. It was more of an inconvenience than anything. There was always a way to obtain money if one so desired. A few times I even worked for it.

I pulled around and parked the van distant- yet within view- from our room. This was another little trick I had learned. If anyone were going to pay attention to us they would check out our vehicle first. At a distance it would take them longer to figure out which room we were in and get to us. As long as we had the van in view we would have a fighting chance to escape if we were discovered. I was so tired I was barely able to bring the van to rest between the lines of the parking place.

I locked the front doors, and Len and I crawled into the back. "Len, get the door." I handed Christi my bag, stepped out, and then picked her up. Len closed the door behind us, and we made our way to our room. I gave Len the key. The lock gave him a bit of trouble, but he had us inside before we knew it.

"Wow, this is great!" Len said. I did not share his enthusiasm. It was just another rundown room in yet another rundown motel that was long overdue to be condemned, but it had a few precious saving graces. It had a bed. It had running, hot water. It had a television.

“Yeah, its nice.” I laid Christi down on the bed and covered her with the blanket. She was shivering something awful.

“Dad, can I watch TV?” I supervised what Len watched on those rare occasions that we had access to a TV. I was dreadfully afraid of what crap might be broadcast about us. Only about a third of everything said about us was accurate.

“We’ll see. Right now I want you to get in there and get you a bath before it gets too late.” He nodded and did as he was told at once. He minded good.

Though Lenny was only in the next room, it felt odd to be alone with Christi. I took a look out at the van and then closed the curtains tight. I crawled under the covers with Christi and cuddled up to her as close as I could. I didn’t know if she was contagious or not, but I knew well enough that I needed to be near her, needed to feel her touch, needed to touch her. Her soft skin was burning up. She was like a human heater.

I could hear Lenny running his bathwater in the bathroom. I kissed her forehead and sat up on my side of the bed. Christi began to speak.

“AJ.” I turned to face her. Her eyes were open and she was paler than I had yet seen her since she took ill. “You gotta promise me something.” I nodded. “If I don’t...you know. Don’t let this be Len’s life. Get him out of it.” I took my smelly shirt off, laid back beside her and promised her. I realized for the first time that failure might be in the cards. We both professed our love for each other. She fell back into her delirium.

As I laid there waiting for Lenny to finish up in the bathroom, I rested my eyes. Another hotel room greeted me in my dreams, but the greeting was not welcomed by any means. Memphis again, haunting me with visions I wish I were blind to. *Sweet Jesus let*

me be blessed with memory loss at an early age. Let me become AJ the forgetful. In my dream I was lying down on the bed as well, staring up at the textured ceiling. A gunshot echoed in my mind. BANG! Blood splattered all over the ceiling, dripping down on me. I felt my body convulse. I was shaking all over.

Or rather Lenny was shaking me awake. “Daddy wake up.” I sat up with a start. “Can I watch TV now?” I searched through the channels and found Cartoon Network.

“Keep it on this channel, and don’t bother your mommy. She’s sleeping. When I get out of the shower it is bed time, okay?” He nodded.

“Daddy,” he added, “take your time.”

That is just what I did. I took a long, hot shower. I felt the water against my skin, burning so blessedly. It felt like a hundred masseuses were working their magic on the tension tormenting me. I sat down and let the water continue to rain down on me. What resistance I had left to sleep was worked away by the steam and steady sound.

I woke shivering under cold water still falling some hours later. Lenny was asleep on the floor. I covered him up. The TV was still flickering its myriad of images in the darkened room, so I turned it off and looked once out to the van before joining Christi in bed.

That night all my hopes and wishes materialized in my dreams. Lenny had grown into a respectable citizen. Christi and I had escaped to some distant island where we would never have to look over our shoulders again. JP and all my fallen friends were seated with me before a grand buffet of never ending food. I did not want to wake, but as is always the case with dreams it contented me for a night and was gone forever.

When I woke I found that in the night Len had joined Christi and me in the big bed. He was on the other side of Christi, cuddled up close to her. He slept soundly and his little chest moved as he breathed, but Christi's did not. I checked her pulse at the wrist. Nothing. I was immobilized. I commanded my limbs to respond to my orders to move, but they would do no such thing.

My Christi was no more. I lay there and stared at Lenny sound asleep still clinging to his mother's dead body. Her mouth was open and her eyes were not totally closed either. I could feel that her body temperature had already begun to fall. No tears came. Only regret found me. *Why didn't I press on and drive through the night?*

To move would mean to admit that this was no dream, and I was not ready to do that just yet. To move would mean that it was time to explain to Len what death was and that no longer did he have a mommy. What would it mean to lay here forever?

It would mean to accept my soul's defeat. It would mean that I had been beaten. I had to get up. I had to give Christi a proper burial. I had to make Len understand. Most of all, I had to fulfill my final vow to my fallen wife. Lenny had to be taken away from this lifestyle.

I woke Lenny and asked him to take a walk with me. The sun was out and blazing as it only does in the desert. I didn't know how to start this difficult discussion so I just took it one sentence at a time. "Son, you know mommy has been sick and hurting right?"

"Yes." He held my hand and continued walking, staring at the ground.

"Well she got so sick and hurt so much that she decided to go to Heaven and wait for us. Remember our talk about death?"

“Yes.” He thought for a minute, rubbing his eyes. “Does that mean mommy is going away? In the book they took the puppy and put him in the ground.”

“Lenny, that is the way to Heaven. We have to.”

“Okay.” He cried and I comforted him. I had no tears to shed. I was still numb.

We returned to the room and each kissed Christi goodbye. Lenny went to the bathroom. I pulled the cover and sheet out from under Christi and folded them. Then I gathered up all our belongings. Lenny carried my bag and the bedclothes, and I picked up Christi and carried her back out to the van.

After I laid her down in the back and got Lenny buckled in front, I closed his door. I looked back to the motel. If I never again slept inside one it would be too soon. The two worst memories stored away in my mind happened in motels. We left without returning the key. Why bother?

We drove into the desert. Lenny and I fought the midday heat and dug a sandy grave for Christi. We laid out the cover on the ground, topped it with the sheet, and then brought Christi to rest on top. We folded the covers over as best we could before finally easing Christi down into the grave. To say we were sad would be a huge understatement. Our souls were saturated in sadness and our minds were mired in melancholy.

My tears joined Lenny’s as we pushed the sand in over Christi. When we finished you could not tell the sand there had ever been disturbed. I did not want to be able to find this place again. My sadness would overtake me if I were ever to return. That is all I really have to say on the matter.

We were only an hour or so from Ben’s so I stayed the course. I needed something to lift my spirits and what better to do so than the company of a good friend?

Lenny had fallen asleep in his emotional exhaustion leaving me the silence I so needed. He was still asleep as I pulled into Ben's town. When I opened the door to use a payphone, he stirred a bit but did not get up.

"Ben, I am on my way."

"How is she?"

"She's gone. We buried her this morning."

"Oh, AJ. Come on over."

Chapter Thirteen: Reunions

Almost before I could knock an attractive young lady of mixed heritage opened the door. She had long black hair and brown eyes. She was wearing a stylish yellow dress. Ben was there to greet us as well. I put Lenny down, and Ben hugged me. Holding the embrace he whispered, "I'm so sorry to hear about Christi." He withdrew and asked his roommate to show Lenny inside and to get him a Coke while we parked the van in the three-car garage adjoining the house. Lenny looked up to me, as if asking permission to go, and I nodded giving my blessing.

I followed Ben outside. He opened one of the three of garage doors, and I drove the van inside to conceal it from police and would-be bounty hunters alike. The garage was well organized and housed a green Mustang and a black Honda CR-V.

Ben was really sticking his neck out for us by inviting us into his home. If we were to be apprehended here, he would go down with us. "I really appreciate you letting us crash here for awhile."

“Don’t mention it friend. Stay as long as you feel it is safe. Your welcome could never be worn out here.” His words were kind and touched me. “Come on, let’s get back inside. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

I followed him back inside and up a spiral staircase that led to a huge room. He assured me that Lenny was in good hands with the young lady. The floor was covered with paint-splotted tarps. There were at least twenty easels holding as many paintings in various stages of completion. Framed comic strips lined the wall and each one of them bore the same signature- Benjamin Sturgin.

“So you stuck with art?” I walked around and surveyed everything. He nodded. “Well, it seems it has been good to you.”

“It has indeed. You finally got published. I read it. It was good,” he replied.

“Thanks. There is more on the way. Some poetry and other misdeeds of mine if I ever get around to proofreading it all.”

“There is something I want to show you. It’s why I brought you up here really.” He reached into a large box sitting on the floor by an inclined top drawing desk, and he pulled out a thick comic book. He handed it to me, and I read the cover: *The Brat Pack*. I looked up to see him smiling and then back down to the comic. I thumbed through its pages. The illustrations were of the same style as the rest in the room. The words I recognized at once to be my own.

“What do you think? I’ve made you rich with that graphic adaptation of your memoirs. You have over \$20,000 in a bank account that I have put back for you.” He came nearer and handed me an ATM card and piece of paper with the pin number written

on it. “You don’t have to worry about money again for a long time.” He studied me, trying to gauge what I was thinking. “So do you like it?”

“I like it. It is beautiful. I’ll take the money, but it isn’t the reason I came you understand.”

“I know,” he replied, and again we embraced. Then he returned to the box and got out another copy of the same book and signed it. “Take it. It will be worth something some day.” He offered it to me, but instead I took the pen and signed the copy I was holding.

“Only if you take this, and I assure you it is already worth something! Sell it on Ebay or something.” We made the exchange, and Ben showed me around his home.

It wasn’t quite as grand as Dr. Sturgins’ house, but it was still impressive nonetheless. More of Ben’s personality came out in the decorating decisions in this house. Most of the house was decorated with his original artwork or anime stills. He led me to a grand bedroom. It had its own restroom, and the closet was triangular with sliding doors.

“You and Lenny can use this room.” I thanked him and he turned out the light and shut the door.

“Is that your room?” I inquired pointing to the door across the hall.

“That’s Charlotte’s room.”

“What’s the story with her? I mean how did you meet?”

“Oh we’re not together or anything like that. We met online in an art chat room about a year ago. She is from New Orleans. We talked for several months, and then her parents were killed in a car wreck.” He continued to talk, though we had run out of

hallway. We stood before a large window overlooking the desert. He continued, "Since she is seventeen she stood to become a ward of the state. She ran away and called me. I sent her a bus ticket. She has been here lying low until her eighteenth birthday. She's an artist as well." He turned to a painting hanging behind him. "This one is hers."

It was a beautiful abstract consisting mainly of red, blue and shades of violet. "Not bad," I judged.

Lenny seemed relieved when Ben and I returned. He ran up and hugged me, and he rambled on and on about how nice Charlotte was. She was standing in the kitchen, framed by the bar between us. She wiped her hands and walked out to join us. Her hand was extended in greeting as she introduced herself, "Charlotte Savoy. Pleased to meet you." Her voice held a bit of Creole flavor to it.

Ben entertained Lenny playing a few video games with him on his Playstation 2 before joining Charlotte and I for drinks and conversation. Lenny continued to play in sight but out of earshot. Though I had a few drinks I remained in control of my thoughts, words, and actions.

"So what are you going to do?" Ben asked. "About Lenny?"

"Keep my promise. That is all I can do." They said nothing. "I promised Christi that if anything happened to her, I would not try to raise Len alone on the lamb. I would give him a chance at a stable life."

"How?" Ben inquired. I sat thinking and sipping from my jack and coke without a response. "I'll help any way I can. I could watch over him, even adopt him for you."

“No, too many questions would be asked. I know what I have to do.” I paused.
“I appreciate the offer really, but I am going to take him to his grandmother in Dexter.”

“Won’t that be a dangerous trip to take alone?” asked Charlotte.

“I won’t be alone.”

“True, but how much are you willing to expose Lenny to? He’ll have to be with you all the time. He will see everything you do. Do you really want that?” Charlotte was thinking objectively about the situation.

Ben spoke up to object.

“No, she’s right. As much as I hate to admit it, I need another.” I turned to Charlotte and asked, “Are you volunteering?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“A ride back home to New Orleans. I’ll be eighteen soon now.”

I eyed her, trying to figure her out. I didn’t doubt the fact that she was trustworthy. I just could not understand at the time why she was willing to be so cavalier with her future. Why did I care? I needed something that she was willing to supply and wanted very little in return. So what was wrong?

“Okay.”

Charlotte smiled at her victory. Ben commented that she always got her way, and we talked on for hours, stopping only once while I carried Len upstairs to bed. It wasn’t long after that that I joined him.

When we were finished chatting for the night I went back upstairs and I sat up watching Lenny sleep for another hour. Only parents understand such an act. Who else

loses themselves in awe at the perfection of something they have created? Artists, writers, and musicians I suppose, but parents know best. I stared at my little boy attributing his each and every feature to either his mother or myself. His little nose and blond hair were definitely mine, but he owed his smile and ears to his mother, God rest her soul.

Sleep found me shortly thereafter, and I dreamed of Christi. I dreamed of hands I could no longer hold. I dreamed of hair I could no longer run my fingers through. I dreamed of a woman who would always remain in my heart.

More specifically I found myself alone with Christi in a vast field of waist high weeds. The twilight sky offered little light, and the wind was blowing hard, making waves of the weeds. Christi raised her hands to shield her face from her wildly blowing hair. She was staring in my direction and was wearing the same yellow dress Charlotte was wearing when she had greeted us. She spoke.

“I’m better, AJ. Grieve as you must for me, but know I cannot be resurrected by your tears.” She wrapped her arms around me, and I inhaled that familiar scent of the lady I loved from her blowing hair.

I woke to Charlotte nudging me, beckoning me to wake up. She sat on the edge of the bed. “I just wanted to thank you again for allowing me to join you.”

I stretched and replied, “Don’t mention it.” It was then that I realized the smell that had come to me in the dream was that of Charlotte and not of Christi. Lenny was still fast asleep on my other side.

“I know you don’t owe me anything, but can I ask another favor of you?” Her every syllable reminded me of New Orleans, my most favored southern city getaway. So

sweet was her personality, I wondered if there ever existed an individual that could refuse her anything.

“Sure. Ask away,” I said.

“Could I talk you into sitting for a portrait, you and your son?” So she wanted to draw little Len and I. She said that she would give me the portrait after it was finished, but she just felt the urge to draw us, to show us how it was that she saw us through her eyes. What enticing eyes they were too! Of course I agreed. Why should I not? It would be a good way to help Lenny deal with our parting ways when the time came. It could help him remember his father.

After chowing down on our breakfast and cleaning up, we commenced with the session. Charlotte chose for her medium ink on paper and situated us in front of a white background. There were three very large lights on us as well, just as if it were our photograph being taken instead of a drawing rendered. I sat on a soft carpet square with Lenny sitting in my lap.

Though she was painting only our bodies, when she looked at us it were as if she saw down to the pits of our souls. I felt naked and at her mercy, and I hoped it would be tender and never-ending. I understood why she had asked my permission to draw us rather than simply sitting there in the quiet doing it as we slept. To take someone's image and through your own perception and skills render it differently than they originally viewed it was to be granted immense power over another. Perhaps I delighted secretly

in the fact that it was beyond my control what final image her pen would record of my likeness.

Two hours later she announced that it was complete. Lenny and I stretched and went to inspect the finished work. Lenny, being the refined art critic he was, accessed it best with his thought-provoking, “Wow!” His smile seemed a mile long and his eyes bright.

I was caught off guard by what I saw on the paper. I mean, there was Lenny and myself to be sure, but another was portrayed as well. Lenny and I appeared as we had posed, and between us hovered a beautiful head and shoulders of Christi. Tears formed in my eyes and an accompanying smile did the same on my lips.

“I hope you like it. I have seen pictures of Christi several times on TV and in magazines. I didn’t botch it did I?” I assured her quite the opposite was the case and sought some words to convey the deep sense of gratitude in me aching to be expressed.

“You have given us a treasure to be sure, and the likeness of Christi could not have been better had she been sitting right her with us this day. Thank you.”

Ben who had been sitting silently observing the whole time, watching over Charlotte’s shoulder finally spoke up, “Is it so far off to suppose that she might have been sitting here?”

I smiled at him and replied, “I suppose not.”

The next two days flew by as we made all the preparations for what I expected to be a trying journey. I made Ben a list of items I thought we needed, and like the true friend he was, he fetched them for us. He brought us several boxes of additional rounds

for the two pistols I always toted, and I hoped for everybody's sake that those rounds would never have to be spent. He also restocked our nearly depleted food supply.

One item high on my list was a computer, but what he brought back was far more advanced than your typical computer. It was a laptop with 1.5 GHz processor, 256 MB of RAM, and a 80 GB hard drive. To top it all off it was capable of satellite Internet access enhanced with protocol gateways. If you are not computer literate just rest assured that it was a sweet piece of machinery that would allow me to keep in touch with Ben from the road, have instant access to online maps and weather information, and keep track of what was going on in the world.

The night before we left we busied ourselves with the details of a well-planned trip. We washed every thread of clothing that we owned, gassed the van up, and Ben took care of the details of setting up our internet access account, which would be paid for automatically each month from funds in the bank account. Everything was taken care of with the exception of the most important thing.

How was I going to explain to Lenny my intentions? His mother was barely a week in the ground, and now he was going to have to deal with the separation from his father. Could he handle it? Would he understand it was for his own good and that it killed me inside to even consider parting with him? He could handle it because he was my son, strong of mind and raised in adversity to always triumph over it, but it would be many years before he understood and accepted it to have been in his best interest. I would tell him tomorrow some time, somewhere, some way, and hope he would not hate me for it.

Chapter Fourteen: A Dark Time

To state it short and sweet: I chickened out. I did not talk to Lenny as I had so intended that day, but rather I had let two dark days pass without a hinting word in regards to what I had planned.

Just as the darkest times I ever experienced with Christi were the days directly preceding her passing, my darkest days without her came when we left Ben's house. His hospitality and conversation had stayed off the impending gloom temporarily, but now that we were traveling again I was without that comfort.

Those two nights I cried myself to sleep as quietly as I could. Lenny never stirred, and if Charlotte heard me she never let on.

More worries worked my mind than I had had to deal with since the incident in Memphis. A stranger- this Charlotte Savoy- was in our company now, and we had to adjust to living together in the small quarters of the van. We had even less living room with the van fully stocked with our new goods and the few art supplies that Charlotte had brought along with her. That was the least of my troubles though. Soon I would have to

leave my son in the care of his grandmother and walk away. Here I was at one of the most critical crossroads of my life without Christi.

I felt helpless, especially when Charlotte was driving. So often I had been the one determining when and where we went, and I had gotten used to it. I filled the hours fiddling with our new computer. When I wasn't checking to see what kind of weather we were driving into or searching for Mrs. Foxworth's email address, I surfed the sites dedicated to subversive data. What is subversive data you ask? Well, I'll tell you. It is the kind of knowledge that would allow one to make a bomb out of easily accessible items. It is also where I learned how to slimjim into a car and hotwire it. Most people would find these tidbits being posted for the general public to be a vulgar abuse of the freedom of speech, but not me. I thought of them as my version of survival magazines.

Those websites and newsgroups were reserved for when I wasn't playing Dick Tracy trying to find a way to locate Christi's mom. I finally gave up on searching for an email address. It seemed that she was the last person on Earth not to have hooked up to the Internet yet. Instead I used one of the countless websites that allow you to make free long distance calls from your computer. I failed on four separate occasions to get her on the line when Charlotte would take Lenny in to use the restroom wherever we were stopped. On the fifth try, I got through.

"Mrs. Foxworth, it's AJ," I said. The quality of the call was horrible, slightly garbled, but still understandable. The delay between sender and receiver was the worst part though.

"It's been so long since you have called." Her voice was coming through the tiny laptop speakers, which made her voice more high pitched than it really was.

"I know. We have to keep a low profile." We had called only a few times in the past.

"How's Christi and the baby? I wish I could just see him one time."

"What if I told you that's why I am calling?"

"To see Lenny?"

"To raise him. I don't know how to tell you this really, so I am just going to say it. Christi died last week. She got sick, and just.... I don't want to do it, but it is for the best." I started to cry before I had even finished the sentence, but somehow she understood me through the tears and static. I tried to regain my composure, and she agreed before I had succeeded.

I told her I would call her when we got inside the Dexter city limits and tell her where to go. I could see Lenny and Charlotte returning. "I gotta go. I'm sorry."

She was crying, and there was nothing I could do about it. I hung up because Lenny had already opened the side door and heard his named called.

"Daddy, who was that?"

Charlotte looked up at me, opened her door and got in.

"That was your grandma. You are going to go and stay with her for awhile in Missouri."

"Why?" Children's love of that word has made it most hated to adult ears.

"Your mommy asked me to have her watch over you, and I have to do as she asked." He looked at me confused and then lowered his head. He repeated that evil word and added, "I don't wanna go!"

I told Charlotte to get us moving due west again. After ten minutes of silent pouting Lenny repeated himself, "I don't wanna go! I wanna stay with you!"

"Son, it is too dangerous for you out here on the road. How can I make you understand?" I tried to hug him, but he shrugged away.

Charlotte interrupted to inform us of the bad news. "We are getting pulled over!" She was frightened, and it showed.

"Just pull over, stay calm, and we'll cover up in the floor." She pulled over and left the engine running.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Daddy, I am scared." Lenny said.

I told him not to worry and stay under the cover. "Tell him that you're late for a wedding you're coming into town for."

"He's coming. Any other suggestions?" Charlotte asked.

I replied with the obvious, "Flirt your ass off."

I wasn't as worried as you might imagine. I couldn't count the number of times I had been pulled over in the past. My only worries were things beyond my control-Charlotte and Lenny's reactions. What if things did get hairy and I had to shoot the cop in front of Lenny and Charlotte? How would that change the way they saw me? I didn't know and hoped to God that I would not have to find out.

I heard the cop tapping on the window and then Charlotte rolling it down.

"Ma'am, do you have any idea how fast you were going back there?"

"Too fast, I guess. Specifically? No," She was trying to hard to make light, which some might perceive as cockiness.

"Eighty-five in a fifty-five," he replied.

"I'm sorry officer, I didn't realize. I am late for my best friend's wedding. Just got into town." She paused. "It's in thirty minutes. I should be done with my duties by nine or so. Would you want to show a girl where she might get a drink afterwards? I'm sure I'll need one by then." The longer she talked the more comfortable she became, playing the role perfectly.

"Ma'am, I wasn't born...."

She cut him off. "Oh I'm serious right down to that tingling sensation I am getting just thinking about it. Hell as late as I am I might as well just skip the wedding and let you cuff me."

The exchange was followed by another uncomfortable- for me- silence. I was sure the policeman was as turned on by her come-on's as I was. We were going to breeze through this close call after all.

He started writing on his clipboard, and I started to think I had judged him all wrong. I was reaching for my pistol when I heard him speak again. "I'm off in two hours. This is a number you can reach me at. Just tell whoever answers that I am needed down at the station, and I will meet you in the parking lot of the Moonlight Inn on Pine Street. My name is Dan," he said and then waited for her name.

Another test of the true con artist: how quickly you could change identities. "Claudia Lavey," and just that quick she had earned her first alias. She passed the test.

She rolled the window up. Perhaps I had been wrong to bring her along. After all, it was her carelessness in speeding that had drawn attention to us in the first place. Still, I could not help but admire the quick save she pulled off to amend her folly.

We were nearing the Missouri border, and Lenny was acting like he hated me. I could not leave him this way. I had to know that he was going to be okay. "Charlotte, let's stop at that park up ahead for awhile."

We all got out and stretched our legs at the park. "Wanna play for a bit?" He said nothing. Despite several more attempts at conversation, I could not get Lenny to speak to me. Charlotte did her best to stay out of it, but she finally came to a point where she could listen to no more without speaking up."

"May I?" She asked, and I gave her permission to attempt what I had failed to do. I went to sit on a nearby swing while they talked. Charlotte had taken a knee and was speaking words I could no longer hear. Once Lenny shrugged away from her and walked off pouting, but she signaled to give her another minute and went after him. Again she took a knee. Lenny rushed to hug her, and she picked him up and carried him to the swings where I still sat. She ran her fingers through his hair comforting him and stood him up.

Lenny approached me with tears in his eyes and arms wide open.

Chapter Fifteen: To the Stomping Grounds

Dexter's city limits came and went without a call being made. All along I had sworn to myself that I would be strong enough to do the right thing, but now that I was there, standing on the threshold I wasn't so sure. My faith was replaced by the fear of being on my own, or rather of being away from all that I had left of my sweet Christi.

"AJ? You want me to do it for you, make the call?" Charlotte offered. I shrugged and asked her to just drive around for a few minutes.

It felt so weird to be back. I had been in exile for so long from my hometown. Now Dexter is by no means a special place, but I felt like a fallen angel being welcomed back into Heaven by the Almighty. Quite the opposite was true though. There was no welcome on these midnight streets. If I would have been discovered bullets and sirens would have been the welcoming committee.

This town would now reject me to be sure. Sure Dexter had his share of problems, but growing up there hadn't been so bad. Norman Rockwell himself could have painted Main Street. This was the place for Lenny to grow up. I couldn't let him follow me to an

early grave. No, he had to overcome. The longer we drove around, the more my resolve strengthened.

I fired up the laptop and made the call I had been so dreading. When Christi's mom answered this was all I said to her: "Meet us at the Pound in fifteen minutes. Any longer and we won't be there." I hung up and began giving Charlotte directions to the Pound.

"Lenny wake up, son. We're here." He wiped the sleep from his eyes and grabbed his little book. We were pulling up to the city Pound, which is what they used the old water treatment plant for. It sat in the shadow of an overpass crowning the train tracks. It was fenced all the way around with barbed wire across the top, except for the place JP and I had cut out so long ago.

JP and I had gone on a little rescue mission to break his pit bull out, and in the process we had gotten busted making our departure. At least Spike got away. I had to admit to myself that there was some symmetry to meeting there, but I refused to let the outcome be the same. Lenny would escape my way of life to be sure, but we would not get pinched in the process. Being back there did something else though.

It brought back the pain. The pain of friends lost, and the pain of a time in my life I would never be able to regain myself. The most I could hope for was to pass it on to my little Len.

Mrs. Foxworth was late, which was something I had allotted for in the fifteen minutes. I knew we would be able to avoid notice for at least twenty minutes. She pulled up, kept the motor running, and killed the lights. She sat in the car and waited for us to

approach the car. It was the same old two-tone Pontiac Christi had been so ashamed to get dropped off to school in years ago, and it was the very reason that she rode the bus!

Lenny and I walked over to her sitting in her relic. I wasn't sure how she would receive me, but she got out and hugged me. I handed her an envelope with directions to where we had buried Christi. "Open it later." I didn't know what else to say except, "I'm sorry".

"I know. You need to get going." I nodded and hugged Lenny one last time and walked him around to the passenger side of the car.

He started to cry as he got in, but he looked up at me and said, "Daddy, I'm okay." Then he did his best to fake a smile on my behalf. I kissed his forehead and told them that I would call when I could.

We left town quickly thereafter and visited places I don't really care to share with you further. After all, have I not completed the tasks I set out accomplish?

I shared with you my dearest friends and their downfalls. I also tried to make you understand that we were not as evil as we were made out to be by the media. I shared with you my heart and soul, the bitter and the sweet. Now simply let me retreat. I doubt the day will ever come when I will desire to tell more tales, so simply let me become an unsolved mystery: What ever became of AJ Jackson and Charlotte Savoy?