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# Blood At The Root

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BLOOD AT THE ROOT

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

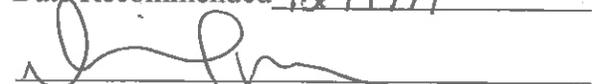
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
April Schofield

May 2015

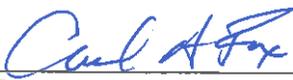
BLOOD AT THE ROOT

Date Recommended 12/11/14

  
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## BLOOD AT THE ROOT

April Schofield

May 2015

123 Pages

Directed By: Dr. David Bell, Dr. Wes Berry, and Dr. Dale Rigby

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This is a coming of age story about two very different boys – Jason, a Northerner who ends up stuck in a small Southern town and Billy, a Southern boy with an abusive father. The boys become friends and grow up learning the dark secrets that are allowed to fester in a tiny southern town ruled by the Good Ol’ Boy System of justice. The story chronicles how their shared experiences change them in ways they never imagined and ultimately destroys their friendship and their lives.

Through a history of violence and prejudice, Billy and Jason learn who they really are and just how far they’re willing to go to get what they want. They discover the true meaning of strength and weakness and how to survive in a world where they don’t fit in.

The story explores the issues of violence, drug abuse, and murder that often lie hidden beneath the façade of fanatic Christianity, propriety, and status in seemingly innocent, charming Southern towns.

## Chapter 1

Driving the hills and turns of dusty back roads, I watch things come alive and I watch them die. The daisies grow, hesitantly at first, only to be replaced in a few short weeks by fields of Queen Ann's lace, delicate and white. Bright orange tiger lilies weave thick stems through their thin ones, eventually choking them into extinction. The thistles pop up sometime shortly after the lace and the lilies, their tempting softness bushing out to cover sharp thorns. I watch groups of black swallowtails, their tiny wings trembling as they feed in the purple tufts. They will wilt long before the thistles turn to down and float into the summer sky. Along the highway, in patches of withered grass, the black-eyed Susans become brown, their yellow petals twisting and charred, crumbling in the heat.

Opossums and raccoons spread their entrails across the hot asphalt of the highway where they once scavenged for food to feed their young. The sun and the tires of countless vehicles will quickly grind them into little black spots, lost in the cracks and dips of the road. These spots will mingle with the faded red stains of drunken teenagers who sped home so fast they missed curfew. For several weeks, the sweet smell of decay will blow past car windows, blending with the scent of cheap vanilla air freshener and sunscreen.

Everything fades under the cruel heat of this blinding Southern sun. Even the people disappear, little by little, until their wrinkled bodies crumble like the burnt grass on all the lawns. It's virtually impossible to tell a person's age—even the young are dark and wrinkled, squinting out deep crow's feet from the corners of their eyes like permanent tears. The withered ochre of the land seems to whisper, *Forget your dreams. Abandon*

*hope.* I shudder when I see this message in the creased, weather-worn faces of old farmers working in the fields of tobacco and the tan, dirt-smudged ones of children riding their bikes in the middle of dead-end streets. I try to come up with some hopeful future for them, but I just can't. There is nowhere to go. There is nothing beyond this cracked, dry Hell. Hopes and dreams and even education can't save them.

I used to think I would go somewhere, would accomplish something significant in my life. Then I realized I was no different. I was no better. I am not from here, but I have lived here so long, the parched, dusty soil is in my blood. I breathe it in when I sleep at night. The scent of magnolias and walnut trees cannot be erased from even my deepest memories. This is my Hell, but it is also my home. Though I don't claim this land, it claims every part of me. I cannot hate this place without feeling at least a little hatred for myself. And I do. It's been choking the life out of me for twenty years now. I know that it will kill me soon.

I live in a run-down cabin by the river. Sometimes, at night, when the windows are open, I lie awake and listen to the water running over rocks and carrying remnants of fallen trees along, past the other cabins and shacks that sit rooted to its banks, losing them far away in the Mississippi. And I think of Billy. I think about how he used to be before he became the monster he was the last time I saw him.

Billy was the first person I met when we moved from Vermont. No one else bothered talking to me for more than five minutes. I was too pale and I talked funny. That was ok with me—I couldn't understand a damn word most of those rednecks said anyway. Hell, it took me a month just to figure out what "commode" and "restroom" meant. Billy

thought I was funny. I think he liked having somebody around who'd listen to him too. I never have been much of a talker, really. I just like to take it all in—study people. And Billy fascinated me.

## Chapter 2

I was standing at the back door when I saw him walking through the tall grass of the field between our houses. Halfway through, he bent down to pick something up. When he stood, he was carrying a long, thin stick. He beat the grass with it while he moved forward, sending bits of dry broomsage flying around his head. He hit it hard and quick, like he was trying to kill it before it killed him. The early afternoon sun shone bright, right over his head, so his blonde hair glowed like a halo. He looked like some avenging angel, bodies made of grass flying up around his face and catching the light just so, making them burn bright in the moment of their death, their souls falling left and right, as he trampled the sinners beneath his feet.

It was too bright to see his face clearly, until he was almost in our yard. But every few minutes, he'd weave to one side or the other, when a particularly short group of broomsage stalks was out of the stick's reach, and I'd see the dark, dirty tan of his skin. At the edge of our lawn, he beat the stick against his leg and threw it back into the field. He lifted the rusted strands of barbed wire on the sagging fence over his head and ducked under them, stepping carefully over the bottom one. There was a quiet twang and a squeak when he let them go. The rotted wood posts bent backward, shedding dry green lichens. He stopped and looked up at our house, as if he could see right through the brick.

Before I could duck out of sight, he noticed me watching him. His slouching walk turned into a swagger as he moved toward the back door where I still stood. He waved at me. I wasn't sure what to do. Strangers waved at each other all the time here and I still

hadn't figured out why. Back home, you just gave a stiff smile when you passed someone. And that was only if you'd accidentally made eye contact.

"Hey, man. What's up?" He wiped his hand across his white t-shirt and left a dusty print.

"Hi." The door was still mostly closed. I wondered what this kid wanted. He gave me a confused stare.

"I'm Billy. I live o'r yonder in the cabin. I just gotta' walk across that stretch of field to get to ya. Pretty cool, right?"

I didn't know if I was supposed to answer, so I just nodded my head.

"Yeah, ain't nobody lived here in your house for 'bout a year. Not since Effie Peterson shot her old man in the middle of the living room floor."

He pronounced "Effie" like "F. I." It took me a few minutes to understand everything he'd said. I still couldn't figure out why he was standing outside my back door. He tucked his hand into his front pocket and spat on the ground. I just watched him.

"Well? What's your name, man?" The toe of his worn sneaker dug a spot in the grass as he talked.

"Oh. Jason. Excuse me, but, did you need something? I mean, my mom's inside if you want me to get her for you." I started to back further into the house.

"That's cool, man. I just came to see who was livin' here and stuff, ya know?" He took a step forward and ran his hand over his sweaty buzzcut a few times, flinging

droplets of sweat and pieces of grass everywhere. I was glad I hadn't stepped outside.

"So, like, what grade you gonna' be in, man? How old are you?"

I had hoped our conversation would be over, but Billy didn't seem to be going anywhere. I opened the door a little wider, "I'm ten."

"No shit, man! Me too! You'll be in my class, then." He smiled and put his head down and mumbled, "Cool. Cool," trying to play off his excitement.

No one had ever been excited over the prospect of hanging out with me before. I'd never really had a whole lot of good friends. I hoped my mom hadn't heard him say "shit." It's not like she didn't say it enough herself, it's just that kids were supposed to go by different rules. I couldn't figure out why Billy didn't know this.

Billy shoved both hands deep into his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Hey, man, you got any video games?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. So, let's play then." He started to open the door.

"I've gotta' ask my mom first." I felt panicked. He was actually just going to walk into my house. He'd invited himself over without asking. My mom would be so pissed.

"Cool." Billy followed me into the house, touching everything on the way.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He just seemed like the type of kid who would slip random things in his pockets for the hell of it. When we walked past the living room, Billy stopped and stared.

"What?"

He jumped and rubbed the top of his head. "That's where she killed him."

“Who?”

“Old Lady Peterson. She shot her husband right there, right in front of your piano, dude!” His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open, in a strange Kewpie doll stare.

“How do you know? I mean, did you see it?” I looked at the thick beige carpet and tried to imagine what a huge bloodstain would look like spreading over it, sinking into the coarse fibers. It gave me chills.

“Kind of. I saw the stain later.” Billy stood tall and puffed his chest out like the information he was about to tell me was so important, it would change my life. “Me and Spencer, he’s this kid from Specksville I hang out with sometimes, we snuck up here one night after they took the body out.”

At first, I thought Billy was lying. I’d met those kids before, plenty of times—the ones who lie so much, they forget what the truth was in the first place. But, he seemed nervous to be near the living room, like something was going to come out of there and grab him if he turned his back.

“Wasn’t there anybody up here? Don’t people come and clean stuff up after that happens or something?” I thought maybe I could catch him in his lie, if I showed him up front that I wasn’t falling for it, that I’d read enough to know better. But he kept going with his story.

“Naw. They’d taken the body and it was already really late Saturday night when the sheriff got done with his investigation. We pretty much figured nobody’d be back here till Monday morning anyway. We just wanted to see, you know?”

“Yeah.” I did know. When you’re a kid, everybody pretends there’s no bad stuff at all going on in the world. But, you know there is. You hear people talk when they don’t think you’re listening. You see stuff on the news. You can’t help it. At school they tell you “just say no,” but they don’t ever tell you why. It just makes you want to know even more.

“So, there was that yellow police tape up everywhere, but nobody was here. I used to feed the Peterson’s cats when they went out of town, so I knew where they kept their spare key. It was under one of those fake rock things, you know, in Effie’s flower garden, right next to this ugly plastic frog.”

I decided maybe he wasn’t lying after all. That frog had been there a month ago, when we’d moved in, buried under a whole mass of overgrown weeds that looked like they’d probably been flowers once. The spot was landscaped with rocks and bricks, but some of the rocks had fallen out of their neat pattern and a lot of the bricks were crumbling or had ivy growing between them, pulling them apart. My dad had thrown the frog out when he mowed the lawn and stacked the bricks and stones near the garage to use later. I felt sick to my stomach. “So, was there a lot of blood?”

“Yeah, kind of. It soaked into the rug a lot. Guess it’d been soakin’ in for a while.”

“Yeah.” I noticed our voices had gotten quiet, but I didn’t know why.

Billy picked at his bottom lip. “Me and Spence, we just sat next to it for a long time, not talking or anything.” He looked down at his shoes and put his hands on his hips. “It smelled funny, like the way your hands smell when you hold a bunch of pennies for a long time, you know what I mean?”

“Copper.” I’d always heard that’s what blood was supposed to smell like, but I guess I’d never been near enough of it to notice.

“Yeah, I guess. Anyways, then I pulled up some threads, you know, to study later.” Billy looked at me to see how I’d react.

“You *what?*” I backed up and ran into the door frame.

Billy laughed. “It’s no big deal, Jason. I just like to know stuff, that’s all. I want to know how things work. I like looking at stuff, studying it. Like a scientist or whatever.” He looked at me to see if I’d challenge him. I didn’t. Something about Billy scared me a little.

“Jason, who’s your friend? You didn’t tell me we had company.” My mom gave me a death look when she walked in from the kitchen. I knew she was pissed I let somebody in the house. It was laundry day and she thought the house was a mess.

“Hi, Ma’am. I’m Billy Lyons. I live in that cabin up on the hill there.” Billy pointed toward our hallway ceiling light. Me and Mom automatically looked up. “I just thought I’d come meet ya’ll, since I ain’t done it yet, you know?”

Mom looked confused. “Oh. ok, then. Well, it’s nice to meet you, Billy. I’m Jason’s mom, Mrs. Turner.” She looked at me again. I knew she wanted us out of the house, but I didn’t want to go. I hoped Billy would notice her look and leave.

“We was just going to play some video games, Mrs. Turner. Is that cool?” Billy glanced at me and grinned.

I thought Mom would strangle one of us soon. “I think it might be better if you played them at your house, Billy. Or, maybe you could play outside?” She said the last part

through a gritted teeth smile and jerked her head toward the door. “Our house is a mess and I really need to get some cleaning done today. Sorry, guys.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I understand.”

My mom hated being called “ma’am.” She said it made her feel old. But everybody she’d met since we moved down here had called her that.

“Come on, Jason. We can cut through the field. It’s faster.” Billy was already headed out the door.

I glared at my mom.

“Be back in time for supper, sweetie.” Mom smiled at me like she was glad to get rid of me.

I followed Billy toward the field.

Billy’s house was more of a strange mixture of discarded building materials, than an actual house. I had never seen anything like it. An old trailer had been somehow fused to a log cabin, whose walls were in the process of crumbling. The logs stuck out at odd angles on the corners and the roof sagged in the middle. The trailer roof was black, except for a stray piece of green roofing tin that had been screwed onto one side to cover a hole. At the back of the trailer, a room had been added with scrap lumber. Inside was an ancient woodstove, whose rusted pipe stuck out through a hole in the outside wall and served as a chimney. There were gray duct tape patches on all the walls to cover holes made by mice and termites and Billy’s father when he was drunk. I wanted to leave, to just make a break for the front door and head for the field as fast as humanly possible. But something about the place wouldn’t let me. It was warm, in a way, all packed in tight

and mostly dark except for a lamp with a ratty shade here and there. There were fat, cushiony chairs all over the place, in every corner. They all had worn spots on their seats and arms where people had sat for hours napping or watching TV. I wanted to be a part of this world as much as I wanted to escape from it.

Billy's mom was in the kitchen cooking supper when we first walked in. He looked a lot like her. They were both tall and skinny. They had the same white-blonde hair and blue eyes. Only Billy's eyes were different. Sometimes, I'd catch him looking at me in this funny way. It was like he knew what I was thinking. I don't know why I thought that, but no matter how hard I tried to convince myself it was just my imagination, I couldn't help getting chills every time I caught him staring at me when I was thinking something bad about him.

The kitchen smelled like salt and butter and something fried. It wasn't a smell I was used to and it stuck in my nose and coated my skin and made me feel like I was suffocating. Corners of the dark orange linoleum on the floor were peeling, revealing the crusty glue and caked on dirt, built up from years of muddy work boots marking a path from the 'fridge to the couch. None of the appliances matched. My mom would've gotten sick if she'd seen them. All of ours were a matte black, clean and new-looking. The Lyons's appliances not only didn't match, but most looked as though someone had driven over them with a truck. When Billy opened the 'fridge to get us sodas, I saw that the shelves on the door had been torn off and yellow insulation hung down, some of it blackened with mold from the moisture. The outside of it was a light blue color, like the robins' eggs I sometimes found broken on the ground after a good storm. Only, it had

been painted with regular house paint that was beginning to chip off. Beneath that, the rusted off-white from the original paint showed through. The rust came off in flakes when the door got slammed too hard. The left side of the toaster had a hole burned through it—it bubbled up brown against the white, making it look like the remnants of a particularly bad boil. Their microwave and coffeepot were the only things that matched—both a dull, scratched black that might have been shiny once, maybe years before. Billy told me later his dad found most of the things in their house on the streets in town, just before trash day. He'd take his dented work truck and scout out the good neighborhoods first, before moving on to the poorer ones. His dad was a collector of sorts. Anytime someone needed some large hunk of garbage hauled away, they called Chuck. He could be seen at all hours, anywhere in the county, his primer gray Ford F150 overflowing with giant metal scraps, lopsided stacks of half-rotted barn wood, and dented washing machines with missing doors. He sold some of it at the local junkyard in town, but the rest ended up in his yard in giant stacks of sharp, rusted treasure that nearly gave you tetanus just looking at them.

Billy's mom smiled at me as I stared around her kitchen, my mouth hanging wide open like a fool. After living my whole life in houses built of solid brick or stone, with appliances that shone so bright you could see yourself in them, and matching furniture that remained draped with sheets unless there was company—so as to keep them looking brand spanking new for generations—I suddenly felt incredibly free. The Lyons's house was a kids' Heaven. You didn't have to keep your feet off the furniture or only eat in the dining room. The labels on the condiments in the refrigerator and cans of soup in the

cupboard weren't perfectly lined up, facing outward. In fact, some of the labels had even been chewed off by mice, so when you opened them you got a surprise. You couldn't plan to have tomato soup for supper, because you might open five different cans thinking they were tomato and only find beef stew. You couldn't plan anything. The Lyons's lives were totally spontaneous. You never knew when a snake was going to pop through a hole in the kitchen ceiling, or the sinkhole in the side lawn flood and run into the utility room, or when Billy's dad was going to go on a drunken rampage and smash plates against the walls. It didn't take me long to learn that freedom wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"Now, what's your name, honey?" Mrs. Lyons had been watching me study her life for several minutes, without speaking. I felt my face turn red.

"Jason. Jason Turner. I live next door." I felt the redness spreading to the rest of my body like a terrible rash. Mrs. Lyons was just a little bit younger than my mom, but they looked nothing alike. She didn't look like anyone's mother. Her body looked like the girls in the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition that I pretended not to look at when my dad sent me in to pay for his gas. Her hair was that perfect white blonde color that rarely comes natural. But hers was. I could tell by the way her eyebrows almost disappeared into her forehead. They were even lighter than her hair. She had big curls that just touched her shoulders and bounced whenever she moved her head. And she wore bright red lipstick, the kind my mom said only prostitutes wore. Mom thought red was a "whore color." I never knew how a color could be so sexual it was offensive. Until I saw Mrs. Lyons's candy apple red mouth say my name that day.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Jason Turner. Glad somebody finally moved into the old Peterson house. It’s a beautiful place, really. Shame to see it go to waste for so long.” She picked a piece of ham off a plate by the stove and ate it, wiping the grease on her beige shorts. She had long tan legs that reminded me of the ones on the Nair commercials that came on during Mom’s soap operas in the afternoon. “I reckon I should stop by sometime and bring your parents a casserole—welcome them to the neighborhood. Do they go to church, hon?”

“No. We’ve never gone to church before.” My parents weren’t atheists or anything, they just didn’t think God was all that important to take up precious time once a week. God was there and that was good enough for them.

But Mrs. Lyons raised her eyebrows and let her red, red mouth drop open in a look of shock and something that resembled pain. “Oh. Well, that’s no good. I’ll have to get some of our church folks to go visit them. We have visitation on Wednesday nights. They home on Wednesdays?” Her eyelashes were so thick with dark black mascara they clumped together in places. She blinked at me and they left little dark lines above her eyelids like a bar code. I could tell I was supposed to say yes, but I knew if I did my mom would ground me for weeks.

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to ask my mom when I get home. We haven’t had any company yet. Mom thinks the house is still a mess.”

“It was clean, Mom. I saw it. Real clean.” Billy took a swig of his Coke, throwing his head way back to get the last drop. He stared at me over the can. I couldn’t tell if he was calling me a liar or complimenting my mom’s housekeeping skills.

“My mom likes things to be spotless. She’s real picky about stuff, that’s all.” I hoped Mrs. Lyons wasn’t mad at me. I didn’t think I could stand to have somebody that beautiful mad at me.

She tilted her head back and laughed at the top of the wall. It was a sound somewhere between wind chimes and a crow. “Well, Lord, I hope she never sees my house then! She’d like to have a heart attack, I s’pose.” She patted my shoulder as she spoke and all the hair on my body stood straight up and I felt prickly like pins and needles all over. She smelled like lilacs and jasmine and strong black coffee.

“Oh, I didn’t mean your house was dirty, Mrs. Lyons. I just meant that my mom is kind of crazy about cleaning everything.” I was suddenly worried I’d offended her. What if I never got invited back?

“Call me Jolene. I feel old when you call me Mrs. Lyons. No, baby, I know you didn’t mean my house was dirty.” She smiled at me again and it got hard to breathe. “I know our house ain’t exactly clean. This old shack is fallin’ apart.” She looked up at a crack in the ceiling and smiled a sad smile. For a minute, she seemed to get lost in the crack, forgetting we were standing next to her. Then she shook her head and sighed. “I do my best, though. Sometimes all you can do is pray. Right, hon?”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d never prayed in my life. Didn’t even know how or why in the world anybody would want to. “I guess so.”

Billy rolled his eyes at me when his mom turned her back. “Come on, let’s go to my room.” I grabbed my soda and followed him down a dark, narrow hallway that was part of the trailer. There were a few of Billy’s old school pictures hanging on the wall on

either side of the hall, and some of his sister Lori, but on most of them, the glass was either broken or cracked, or the frames had been badly glued or taped back together.

Billy's room was all the way at the end of the hall. His doorknob was missing. In its place, someone had screwed a piece of barn wood and attached a thick loop of rope to it, so it could be easily pulled open. On the inside of the door was a deadbolt. The door had obviously been patched many times. There was a map of duct tape and Gorilla glue and moldy plywood stretched across its surface. You could trace the cracks and glue lines to get to Billy's fears. If your eyes traveled east across the plywood, you'd eventually reach the destination where Chuck's fist liked to vacation on drunken Sunday nights when his wife was at church, praying for his Hellbound soul. Billy acted like none of the marks were there. His door was just a door.

He sat on his unmade bed and dug a box of video games from under it. I wanted to ask about the door, but something told me he wouldn't answer if I did. A few posters were taped to the stained white walls, most of them had ripped corners, or were badly wrinkled, as if they'd been rescued from the trash and ironed.

"Hey, you listen to New Order?" I pointed to his posters.

Billy smiled. "Yeah, man. You ever listen to their old band, Joy Division?"

"Yeah."

"Ian Curtis was the shit till he offed himself."

"Yeah, that sucked."

“I don’t know, though. I guess nobody’s happy, even rich dudes. But, I think if I had all that money, I’d buy somethin’ to make me happy, you know?” Billy stared at the poster in a daze. He was somewhere else.

Another poster had fallen off the wall and lay half rolled up on the floor. I turned my head a little to read it. “Hey, you like The Ramones?”

Billy looked shocked. “Hell, yeah! They’re one of my favorite bands. I like a lot of stuff.”

“I just didn’t think anybody from here would listen to punk. All I’ve ever heard out here is country. Man, I hate country!”

“Yeah, me too. That’s mostly what my friends listen to. I don’t know anybody else around here who even knows who The Ramones are.” Billy slapped his leg. “Dude, I can’t believe you like punk and you live out here in Hickville, BFE with me. That’s awesome!”

I noticed a black Takamine Jasmine in the corner on a stand. “That your guitar?”

“Yeah, man. You play?”

The look on Billy’s face made me wish I did. There was something about Billy that just made you want to please him. I wanted to seem cool to him. If Billy was your friend, nothing could ever hurt you again. Not long after we became friends, I realized this was true—nothing could hurt Billy’s friends—except for Billy. “Nah. I always wanted to learn, but Mom thinks it makes too much noise. Plus, she makes me take piano lessons. She thinks they give me discipline or something. But, after a few years of playing

Beethoven and Chopin, you start daydreaming about slamming your fingers with the lid, just so you don't have to hear any more of it!"

Billy fell back on the bed laughing. "Man, you oughtta' let me teach you guitar. My dad taught me when I was little. I ain't bad, if I do say so myself." He grinned and pulled his t-shirt away from his chest, straightening imaginary lapels. "My dad only likes country, but I taught myself a bunch of other shit. That's when I got into punk. I even tried that classical crap, but it was real hard."

I was surprised Billy'd even heard of classical music. I couldn't imagine the sophisticated notes of Pachelbel running through that house. "Why'd you want to learn that?"

"Have you ever heard those guys play? If you can play classical, you can play anything. I swear, man, they're the shit! There's this dude—plays outside the bar my dad goes to—you should check him out sometime. Plays all that classical shit. Fuckin' badass, man! You should see how fast his fingers move. It's some crazy shit. It helps you play everything better." He air guitared some complicated fingerings against his chest. "Dude, I bet you'd be real good at guitar, if you play piano already. You'd pick it up quick."

"So, teach me, then. Just don't tell my mom. She'll freak. Hell, she'd freak if she knew I listened to punk."

"Damn, your mom's messed up. It's cool. Moms are weird. Mine's all religious and shit. It's annoying. My sister's like that too." He picked up the steel string and played while he talked.

“What about your dad?” I doubted Billy’s dad was religious, but I didn’t see how his parents could be so different from each other and still get along.

Billy stopped playing and looked down at his fingers on the strings. I thought for a minute that he’d just let it go, pretend I hadn’t said anything, but then he looked up at a dirty mirror on the wall above his bureau. He started to play again, softly. “Nah, man. My dad won’t go near a church. Says it’s a waste of time. Sunday’s his favorite night to get drunk anyway. Mom’s not here to yell at him for it then.” He played some Blues chords and tapped his foot. “And Wednesday nights, he brings his girlfriend over, and I know he wouldn’t give her up for church!” Billy laughed, then pressed his lips together tight and looked at his feet.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say. I’d never met a family like Billy’s before.

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m kinda used to it now.” Billy handed the guitar to me. “Here, let’s teach you some guitar.”

I stayed at Billy’s house for hours that day, right up until the sun started to go down. On my way home, I realized no one had ever told me their secrets before. I had never been anyone’s friend. Not enough so that I cared what happened to them anyway. I felt bad for Billy. And his mom. As I opened the back door and walked toward my room, I made a mental note not to tell my parents anything about Billy and his family.

### Chapter 3

I still play my guitar every now and then. A beat up old Takamine Jasmine I got at a pawn shop my freshman year of high school. I'd wanted one just like Billy's. Doesn't make me as happy as it used to, though. Sometimes it even makes me sick because I remember all the times me and Billy sat around playing together—B.B. King, Clapton, Hendrix—anything we could think of that had decent riffs in it.

The chords would fill Billy's bedroom, pushing at the walls like they were trying to get out into the open. Billy would sing at the top of his lungs when he really got into it. He had this powerful, commanding voice that broke into sharp jagged rasps at the ends of the highest notes. I never could sing like that. It was like his voice just came bleeding out his throat, splashing the walls with gore. Just as the wound would start to heal, his fingers would hit the strings and cut it wide open all over again. His face contorted like his guts were being ripped out.

But there was something beautiful about it—something so natural, you couldn't help but be in awe of it—like when you watch a lion take down a zebra on those nature shows. The graceful fall of the zebra, its hips twisting and its legs buckling beneath it, just at the moment the lion's sharp teeth sink in and pierce the striped flesh, sending uneven sprays of red that cut into the preciseness of black and white.

It was pure, raw sound.

I'm not in love with music anymore, the way I was then. Its meaning has changed for me—just like the meaning of most things has. My guitar doesn't even feel the same. The sleek blackness of the body used to give me chills as soon as I picked her up to play. Now, I pick her up only as an afterthought, when I'm out of cigarettes and can't find anything to do with my hands. Or when I need to drown out the endless sound of the river. I always hope playing will keep me from thinking, but I'm usually not that lucky.

As I pick it up now, I feel the slice of the steel strings against my calloused fingertips. If I play long enough, it will numb the pain in my mind. So I sit and stare down at the brown river as it runs past. Eventually the sun will go down and the stars will come out, or they won't. Night after night, King turns into Zeppelin, then to the Chili Peppers, and Robert Johnson, and eventually morphs back into King as the night gets darker. Everything sounds the same to me now. The only noise I ever notice, no matter how hard I try not to, is the sound of that damned river. All that water just taunting me, bringing back the old memories I've tried so hard to forget. Yet, I can't get away from it; can't let it go. It calls to me and clings to me, latches on like a starving dog to a scrap of meat.

Right now, it makes me think of the only time Billy took me hunting in the woods near our houses. It brings back the memory of the little creek we used to wade in. That's when Billy started to change. We all start out as one person, but somewhere along the way, most of us change into someone else. It happens slow for most people—they pick up little bits of the person they'll become and adapt. But, sometimes people can't handle the things they see and hear—can't handle life—so they change too much, too fast. They

forget who they were until that person disappears forever. I think that's what happened to Billy that Fall we found the dead girl in the woods. I guess that's what screwed him up for good. It screwed me up too, but not like Billy. Billy disappeared.

## Chapter 4

Billy had borrowed his dad's old twenty-two so we could go hunt squirrels. Now, I didn't really like to kill things, but I wasn't about to tell Billy that. Southern boys hunt. So, I'd gone with Billy that afternoon, hoping I'd be spared the experience, since he only had one gun.

It was bright that day. One of those perfect Fall days, where the sky is flawless blue and it's warm enough to tie your jacket around your waist after you've only walked a little way. Off toward the fields, the crows called to each other with deep, black "caws." The leaves crunched under our feet, their fallen bodies cracking with each step. The woods smelled damp with mold that grew thick on rotted logs. Deer, whose half-carcasses—empty husks of skin, hooves, and sun-bleached bones—had been left behind after the hunt, while their heads stuck out, glassy-eyed and stiff from some hunter's living room wall, littered the ground near the stream.

The smell changed the deeper we tromped into the woods. It became, at first, sweet—too sweet—like syrup that's been left out overnight. We stepped over the larger mounds of leaves, just in case they hid recently dead animals, not yet scavenged. We fought our way through briars and vines, still searching for squirrels.

Billy stopped abruptly, covering his nose with his free hand, "What the hell is that?"

I smelled it too. It was like the syrup smell had thickened and congealed in our noses—a dark putrid stench.

"I don't know." The words sputtered and squeaked out as I tried not to breathe. Billy moved forward, into an area where the trees grew so close to each other, that some of

their bare branches tangled together. They made loud clacking sounds when he let go of them. I followed cautiously behind him. I wish we'd turned back. A few steps further and Billy made a gurgling, choking noise.

“Holy shit!” It was a whisper and a scream at the same time. He just stood there, his gun held stiffly in his right hand, as if he was preparing to beat someone with it. His left hand was clenched so tightly, his knuckles had turned as white as the deer bones. A branch was jabbing him in the side, but he didn't appear to feel it.

My own hands were shaking, as I pulled the branch aside and stood next to him. And there she was—the dead girl.

We just stood there. It felt like all my blood had suddenly dropped to my toes. But the only blood was on the side of the dead girl's head, and it was caked-on black. A half-rotted piece of rope still twisted around her neck. It was wrapped so tight, it looked like it was part of her—like the vines twined around the trees. The skin bulged around it, purplish and swollen. I tried to imagine what she must've looked like when she was alive. Her hair was an orange color. It was matted and stuck to the leaves so bad in some places, you couldn't tell one from the other, like maybe she was just another dead leaf, fallen from the maple trees around her. She looked really young—much older than me and Billy, but not old. I guess she was probably real white when she was alive, because of that orange hair, but right now, she was mostly blues and reds and purples. Some places were black even. I felt like I must be watching a movie or something. Like any minute, someone would cough and break the illusion of the theater—the feeling that the movie was real.

Billy moved beside me. The shuffling sound of his feet through the dry leaves made me jump. I'd forgotten where I was. "Man, I think somebody fucked her. Check it out." Billy pointed a shaky finger toward the girl's legs. They were splayed out at an odd angle, almost like one of them was broken. Weird bruises spread down her inner thighs. A pair of jeans was still caught around one ankle, caked thick with dried mud. Her pink shirt was pulled up so we could see her stomach. I didn't want to see anymore.

Billy inched forward, slowly, like he thought she was going to jump up and eat his brains any second. I stayed where I was. Every zombie movie I'd ever seen played through my head.

"What do we do with her? Should we throw some leaves over her or somethin'?" Act like we ain't found nothin'?" I don't wanna' get in trouble, man. You know my old man'll kick my ass." I understood Billy's fear, but my parents would kill me if they found out I'd just left a dead girl in the woods and went home for supper, like it was no big deal.

"I think we're supposed to tell the cops or something. Or, have our parents tell them. If we don't, we might get in trouble anyway. You're supposed to report stuff, you know? It's like a law or something, I think." I didn't know anything about laws.

Billy walked around to the girl's feet. He bent over, put his hands on his knees, and squinted his eyes up real tight, like he was studying something small and really important. I knew what he was looking at. He was checking between the girl's legs. The "sweet spot," his dad had called it once when he caught us looking at his hidden stash of *Playboys*. Billy was obsessed with girls. I don't think he could help himself, to be honest.

Think he inherited it from his dad. Still, it made me pretty sick to see him gawking at a dead girl like that.

“Jason, check this out. She’s got bugs an’ shit crawlin’ around in her pussy. This is some nasty shit. Come here.” He broke a stick off one of the trees and I noticed his hand still shook. He began poking at her crotch with it. I knew I’d puke if he didn’t stop. This was Billy’s way of dealing with bad things. He studied them. He violated and tortured whatever bothered him, in the name of science. He “experimented” until it wasn’t real to him anymore.

“Billy, cut it out, man. That’s gross. We gotta’ go. You’re going to leave your DNA or whatever on her and then they’ll think you killed her. Let’s get out of here before your dad comes looking for us.” I figured this would work.

He gave me a worried look and stopped poking the girl. But he held onto the stick as we walked back through the woods. It gave me the creeps. “What do you want that for?”

“Well, I can’t leave it here, can I? They might find my DNA on it, like you said. I gotta’ get rid of it.” As we passed the stream, Billy stopped and threw the stick hard. It flew in a high arc over the water and landed on the far side, near some ash trees. We ran home as fast as we could.

We found out later on that the dead girl was mentally handicapped, and that she’d been raped and killed by a group of drunk guys she’d been hanging out with. I can’t remember her name. Seems like I should. I couldn’t eat for days. I didn’t get grounded, but it was a couple of weeks before I could stand to hang out with Billy again anyway. He missed a week of school. At first, I thought his dad must’ve beaten him real good, but

Billy said the old man never touched him. He said he missed because he was sick. When I asked him what was wrong, he said he didn't know, that he was just sick. We never talked about the dead girl again.

## Chapter 5

To this day, I wonder what Chuck really did to Billy. I'm pretty sure he didn't just let it go. My parents were worried I'd be traumatized, so they made me see a therapist for a few months, till they thought I seemed normal again. At first, they tried to ban me from hanging out with Billy, as if it was somehow his fault that we found the girl, but they stopped that after I refused to go to piano lessons or school. They did, however, forbid me to ever go hunting or enter the woods again. That was fine with me. I wouldn't set foot near there again if you paid me. Sometimes when we walked past them later, I'd get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was going to vomit. I'd shiver to try to shake it off and pretend I was somewhere else. Billy would look toward the woods with a blank stare on his face. I didn't know what it meant, but he didn't seem to feel the same dread I did about them. I'm guessing the only thing that stopped him from going back and checking out the spot where we'd found the girl was the thought of his dad beating the living hell out of him. He was Billy's one fear.

I don't blame him. Chuck scared the fuck out of me too. He wasn't home a whole lot, so I didn't see much of him. I knew to stay away on Wednesday nights when he was there with his girlfriend, but mostly he stayed in town at The Dollhouse—a strip bar near the ghetto where a bunch of factory workers hung out to watch less than average girls shake their tits around. It was the perfect remedy for a hard day's work on the assembly line. Most of the girls were fat and had stretchmarks from the kids they were now trying to support, entertaining the same type of men who'd left them for women they'd met at strip bars. And yet, all these people struck me as being a much higher class than Chuck.

Chuck was on disability, supposedly because he'd hurt his back being a volunteer fireman years before, when Billy was a baby. I was never sure I believed this, though. Not only did Chuck run from actual work, but he didn't seem the type to go out of his way to help anyone else either, unless he knew it would benefit him in some way. He only "worked" a few hours out of each day, driving around the county picking up scrap to sell at the junkyard. Sometimes, he'd bring stuff home and fix it, which meant he'd make it work just long enough to make a quick sell. Chuck always advertised—*Cash only. As is. No Guarantees. No Returns.*—on the sign in his front yard. There was a good reason for that.

After a few hours' work, he'd hang out at White's Tavern, if The Dollhouse wasn't open yet or his factory buddies were still at work. White's was a tiny shack of a bar, real close to the railroad tracks, where all the houses needed painting and the yards looked like overgrown gardens of yellow plastic sunflowers and wooden birdhouses. Everything moved in the breeze, including the houses themselves. It used to be called Whites Only Tavern back in the early sixties, but someone had eventually changed it when segregation became publicly taboo. It didn't matter, though. I'd never seen a black person walk within a hundred feet of the place. It was full of old drunk, retired men who still remembered why they were better than the blacks. Chuck fit in perfectly with this crowd too. He'd sit there for hours, shooting the shit and playing pool at the one pool table in the corner, bitching about how much better things used to be. This was where he was the first time I found out why Billy was so afraid of his dad.

Me and Billy had walked to my friend Mark's house in town, after school. We'd missed the bus because Billy was flirting with some eighth-grade girl at our locker. If Billy liked a girl, there was no pulling him away—not for anything. So I was stuck there, trying to pretend I was comfortable with him locking lips with some blonde, while I stood guard so no teachers saw.

“Come on, Billy, we've gotta' go. The buses are here. We won't have a ride home.” I bounced around nervously on my heels, fiddling with the broken latch of my trumpet case. I thought about lying to him and telling him Mr. Stocking was coming down the hall, but I knew he'd be pissed if he had to leave Misty Barron for nothing. Everyone in our junior high wanted her. She was tall and had blue eyes that made her look like she knew things no one else did. There were rumors that she'd had sex with a senior the year before, but I figured she'd probably started them to make herself more popular with the guys. It worked. “Billy, seriously, dude. Let's get out of here.”

“I'm coming, Turner, hang on. You're really pissing me off. I wish you'd get a girlfriend.” He opened the locker door between us, blocking me out, and went back to sucking face with Misty. After a while, I tossed my trumpet case on the floor and sat down on it. It was too late now. We were fucked. I could hear the buses pulling away from the school.

Misty handed Billy a pink slip of paper, touching his hand too long and biting her bottom lip when she smiled at him. She waved as she walked out the door at the end of

the hall, shaking her ass from side to side in her too-tight, too-short denim skirt. Billy waved back and stared at her till she was out of sight.

He punched my shoulder. “Man, she’s so damn hot. I love older women. There’s just something about them, you know?”

I rolled my eyes at him. He still had pink lipstick on his neck. “You know she’s only a year older, right? I’m not even sure that counts.”

“It counts. Doesn’t matter anyway, just look at her. I’d date her even if she wasn’t older. Did you see her ass in that skirt?” He stared at the pink paper for a while then shoved it in his back pocket.

“You know we missed the bus, right?”

“Oh, shit, really? Can your mom get us?”

“Nope. She’s in Vermont visiting my grandfather, remember? Dad’s at work. I tried to tell you, but you probably couldn’t hear me through Misty’s face.” I pushed him into a locker as we walked past.

“Asshole. You’re just jealous. You know you want her.” Billy grinned and nudged me. “So, what do we do now?”

“I have to come up with a plan? You made us miss the bus, dumbass.”

“Yeah, but you’re responsible. I expect you to know what to do. That’s the way it works—I fuck up, you fix it for me. Why do you think I keep you around, Turner? It ain’t your looks.” He kicked my trumpet case and I went sprawling forward.

“Jackass! Look, we’ll just walk to Mark’s and have your dad pick us up. That’ll work, right? His mom’ll have food.”

Billy looked worried. “Dude, my dad?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?” It seemed like a damned good plan to me.

Billy watched his shoes cross over the dingy green and gray checkered linoleum of the hall. “Mark’s black, man. My dad’ll freak out. He’s all racist and shit. Maybe we can just call him from here?”

“Yeah, and wait an hour for him to get here. I’m hungry. I’m walking to Mark’s. Your dad can be racist all he wants to, I’ll just wait there till my dad gets off work, then.” I sped up and walked ahead of Billy. I knew he’d follow.

“Fuck! Alright, but can we like, wait outside for him or something, so he doesn’t see Mark? Is that cool?” He swiped at his nose with the back of his hand and sniffed like his sinuses were bothering him. I’d noticed this was something Billy did when he got really worried about his dad. He’d told me Chuck had broken his nose once when he’d climbed his dad’s deer stand after being told not to. It was to “teach him a lesson.” Chuck didn’t want him to fall out and get hurt. Chuck wasn’t the brightest guy.

I glanced at Billy. “Yeah, that’s cool. Just don’t say anything to Mark, ok?”

“Ok.”

We stood outside Mark’s dented trailer, its dirty, off-white exterior edged with mint green trim left over from the seventies, waiting for Billy’s dad. Chuck had been pissed that we’d missed the bus. He’d been busy bitching about the government with his bar pals at White’s when Billy had called. He said we’d interrupted his “work break.” But, our

bellies were full of Cheetos and ham sandwiches and apple pie, so we didn't really give a shit just yet. We knew he'd take his sweet time to get there anyway.

After an hour or so, Chuck pulled up in his primer gray truck, the front right headlight bashed in and the tailgate missing. It rattled and roared all the way down the street and spewed smoke from the muffler. Billy's face turned red and he looked away at the other trailers.

Mark stared at the truck, his hands in his pockets, not knowing what to say. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Billy. You can stop by any time. Me and Jason play video games a lot if you ever want to play."

Billy was startled out of his thoughts. "What? Oh, yeah, cool. Thanks, man." He looked nervous when Mark didn't go into his house. His eyes darted back and forth from Mark to his dad's truck, still barreling down the road.

Just as Mark was walking up his front steps, Chuck pulled up into the narrow driveway. We watched as he craned his neck to get a look at Mark, disappearing through the front door of the trailer. I wondered if he'd seen that Mark was black.

"Get in, boy. What the hell'samatter with ya'? You know I got shit to do. I can't be cartin' your lazy ass around all day. You gotta' learn some responsibility." Chuck spat a wad of brown, slimy tobacco spit out his open window and reached for the gearshift.

Billy moved his leg out of the way. "Sorry, Dad. I was getting an assignment from someone. I couldn't remember what page we were supposed to do in math."

I looked out the window, trying not to laugh. Billy shoved his knee into mine.

“Bullshit! You was prob’ly messin’ around with some girl. You need to stay away from them damn women. Ain’t nothin’ but trouble.” He fiddled with the radio, changing the static to clearer-sounding static.

Again, I tried not to laugh. Billy looked at me and grinned. We wondered if women were only trouble when you had more than one, like Chuck.

“I gotta’ make a stop.”

Chuck pulled into the drive-thru at Wayland’s, a discount liquor store in a little brown brick building near the Save-A-Lot. The kid at the window leaned out and shook his hand. I wondered if he could smell the alcohol on Chuck’s breath. It was so strong, it was nearly choking me, even with my head out the truck window.

“Hey, Chuck, what’s up, dude?”

“Hey, Danny, how you doin’?” Chuck tapped a deformed right thumb on the steering wheel while he talked. He’d cut off a chunk of it working on one of his fix-it projects, years earlier, and had skin grafted from his back onto it. Now, sometimes, black hairs would grow from the tip of his thumb and he’d pluck them out with his teeth and spit them on the ground as if this was normal. I didn’t see any hairs today, but just thinking about them made me feel a little queasy.

“I finally got that motorcycle I was telling you about. It’s a Yamaha, but it ain’t bad. Runs pretty good.” The cashier lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the truck window. His face was covered in zits, even though he looked like he was in his thirties. I suddenly felt a sense of superiority come over me. I couldn’t help it.

“Well, hell, yeah. They ain’t bad. Harley’s better, but I seen some good Yamahas too. It’s worth it for the price, though. You did good.” Chuck pulled out a Marlboro Red and lit it with the truck lighter.

I tried not to cough as the truck filled up with smoke. Billy rolled his eyes at me and I tapped out a beat on the side of the door. Chuck and Danny talked for another ten minutes, ignoring us, until a customer pulled up behind us.

“Well, listen, I gotta’ get goin’ anyways. Gotta’ get these boys home.” Chuck held a wad of crumpled bills up to the window.

“The usual, Chuck?” Danny took the bills and handed him a brown paper bag that had been next to him on the counter.

“You know me too well. Thanks, man. Keep the change.”

I’d noticed Danny had made no move to give Chuck his change anyway, before he was told to keep it. It made me wonder just how often Chuck came here. The truck lurched forward loudly and I grabbed the window for support. All the seatbelts were broken.

As soon as we got to the edge of town, Chuck rolled the bag down and opened his whiskey. He chugged huge gulps of it between puffs of his cigarette. The brownish liquid dribbled down into his graying beard and he bent his head to wipe it on his shirtsleeve. Billy looked at me then focused on his knees the rest of the ride home. Chuck belted out country tunes in a slurred, monotone drawl to the static on the radio. I gripped the door for dear life, while the truck bounced from one side of the narrow road to the other, barely missing mailboxes and ditches.

I got out at Billy's, took my trumpet and backpack out of the bed of the truck and turned to walk home. Chuck had already stumbled inside.

"Are you going home, man?" Billy shifted his worn backpack to his other shoulder.

"Yeah, why? I have homework and I have to practice my trumpet solo. Concert band this weekend, remember?" I turned again, hoping he wouldn't ask me to stay there with Chuck.

"You can do your homework here if you want. We can just hole up in my room till my dad passes out." Billy spit on the forever grassless lawn and rubbed it into mud with the toe of his shoe.

"I can't. I won't be able to concentrate. Hey, why don't you come to my place till your mom gets home?" I was starting to see why Billy avoided being alone with his dad.

"My dad likes me to keep him company when Mom's not here. He just likes me to stick around, you know." He looked up at the sky and watched the hawks floating on an updraft in the distance, near the woods.

I watched them for a while too.

"Hey, Jason?"

"Yeah?"

"You think my dad saw Mark? You know, before he went in his house. Do you think he knows he's black?" He blinked like there was sun in his eyes, but the sky had already clouded over.

"I don't know, man. Probably not. Pretty sure he was drunk anyway." I smiled at him.

“Yeah.” Billy snorted out a rough sound that could’ve passed for a weak laugh, if the occasion had been right.

I sighed. I didn’t know what else to do. I knew I couldn’t let him stay there alone. And I was pretty damn positive Chuck had seen Mark. “Come on. I’ll stay till your mom gets home.” I pulled his backpack off his shoulder and shoved him into the side of the truck.

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“Yeah, just don’t make us late again and we’re cool.”

“Can’t promise that. Not if Misty’s at my locker again tomorrow.” Billy stuck his foot out to trip me on the way into his house, but missed.

We were laughing as we walked into Billy’s bedroom, but stopped real quick when we heard Chuck coming down the hall. Billy lunged past me and slammed the door shut, sliding the deadbolt into place. “Oh, shit. He’s really drunk, man.”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“No, I mean like when he gets scary. Maybe we can sneak out the window and hide at your house.” Billy eyed the window as if measuring it.

“Dude, I said before we could go there. Why didn’t we just go?”

“I didn’t think he was this bad.” He began piling furniture in front of his door. I put my stuff in a corner by the window just in case I needed a quick getaway.

Chuck’s garbled voice beat at the walls all the way down the hall. “Get out here, you little fucker! I seen you with that boy! I done taught you better than that.” Something hit the wall by Billy’s door. I wasn’t sure if it was Chuck or something he’d thrown.

“Come on, Billy, let’s get the hell out of here!” I headed for the window.

Billy stood frozen in front of the door, his fists clenched.

“Come on!”

“I can’t. It’s too late. I have to take my punishment or he’ll get really pissed later. Just go.”

“What? Are you crazy? Move your ass!” I had one foot on the windowsill when it happened.

The door burst in, sending large splinters of wood, chairs and empty guitar cases flying toward me. Chuck kicked at the furniture and waded through to Billy, who just stood there, waiting.

“Billy!” I ran toward him and grabbed his arm.

“This ain’t none a your damn business, fucker. Get outta’ here!” Chuck pushed me so hard, my lower back hit the side of the window frame and scraped through my t-shirt. I wanted to jump out the window and run home but I was too scared to move.

“You little cunt! You’re better than those people. You ain’t goin’ near ‘em. Gonna’ fuckin’ catch diseases from ‘em an’ bring it home to us.” Chuck’s words were so slurred, I could barely understand him. It didn’t matter much, though, since what he was saying seemed ridiculous anyway.

Chuck grabbed Billy by the throat and lifted him against the wall. Billy kicked his feet and tried to get free. I just stood there, shocked. He threw him down and Billy went limp. I thought he was dead. When Billy’s dad jerked him up off the floor, though, I saw that his mouth was moving slowly, as if he was praying under his breath. Chuck punched him

and blood rushed in long, snot-strewn tendrils from his nose. Billy made no move to wipe it up.

“I’m sorry, Sir. I won’t—” Billy tried to talk, but the words drowned in blood and disappeared.

Chuck heard nothing. “You wanna’ play with shit like that? Do ya’? Fuck, you can play with shit, then, you little bastard!” He dragged Billy out of the room, over broken chair legs and into the tiny bathroom across the hall.

I watched in horror as Chuck held Billy’s face in the toilet. He yanked him up by the hair and screamed at him. Toilet water splashed over the pink rose wallpaper and blood and snot smeared across the mirror. “Eat shit, boy!” Chuck dipped him in the bowl again and laughed a high-pitched, warbly, inhuman laugh..

I scrambled out the window, without even feeling the loose nails cut through my jeans. I left my backpack and trumpet behind and ran as fast as I could across the field to my house to call the police. It wasn’t until I reached my front door that I realized I’d been screaming the whole way.

That was the last time I saw Chuck drunk until I moved in with him and Billy, years later, after Beth kicked me out. By that time, I was so fucked up on drugs I didn’t care what he did. Still, I avoided him as much as possible. Not Billy, though. He just kept trying to do stuff he thought would make his dad happy. I don’t know why. Chuck was proud of him. I don’t know if he loved him. Hell, I’m not sure people like Chuck are capable of love, but he was always proud of him. Mostly for stuff he shouldn’t have

done, for all the stuff that made me hate Billy. The more he acted like his dad, the more his dad liked him.

## Chapter 6

Most of the time, I try like hell not to remember Billy at all. He was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I haven't seen him in years. I never will, at least, not unless Hell really exists. Then I'm screwed. If it weren't for Billy, I'd have a family right now. I'd have a real life, instead of just this repetition of endless days and nights and thoughts I've somehow fallen into.

Sometimes, I hike up to the top of the bluffs with my dogs and pretend everything's ok down below. It's easy to do up there. The air's so fresh you can almost smell the green from the leaves. It's peaceful. I can believe anything I want to. I look down toward the valley where my cabin is and I can't see it anymore. I turn it into a nice house—nothing fancy—maybe a two-story brick number with a couple of chimneys and a little flower garden in the front. Something Beth would've planted. On the bluffs, I stayed in college, got my degree, made something of myself, you know? I see my daughter Anna running around, playing with the dogs in the backyard. Hell, sometimes I imagine me and Beth have five or six kids besides Anna. I see them all riding their bikes and playing basketball. Some days, I don't climb down from the bluffs till close to dark. Coming down feels like a quick descent into Hell.

I miss Beth so much. We've barely spoken since the night I turned Billy in. She said she couldn't trust me anymore, that Anna shouldn't be around me so much. I can't say I don't agree, after what I put them through, but now I have no motivation to get any better. It's not like I'll ever get them back.

Sometimes, to get Billy out of my head, I think about the first time I met Beth. It was back in high school—my sophomore year—before all the other shit happened. By then, me and Billy and Spencer had started a band. Spencer hung out with this kid, Jamie, who he talked into playing bass with us. He was kind of quiet, but he seemed pretty cool. Besides, he got all the girls to come to our shows. Of course, he also made us feel like we were still in junior high. Jamie was tan, tall, and had huge muscles pretty much everywhere. The girls weren't the only ones who noticed. Billy made him stand behind me during every show—way behind me.

“Man, I ain't gettin' no pussy if they see you first, Motherfucker!” Billy would pretend he was joking with Jamie, but between each song, I'd catch him glancing back to make sure Jamie was still in the shadows with his head down. I didn't really care. It's not like I'd ever been able to talk to girls anyway. I usually stood to the side and played keyboard or rhythm guitar, if the song didn't call for keyboard. Mostly I held my head down and forgot about everyone else. The music was all that mattered to me then. Until I met Beth.

## Chapter 7

It was just before one of the first shows we played, sometime in the Spring of my sophomore year of high school. We were playing out in Doc Smithhart's field, way out in Specksville, near Spencer's house. In fact, Spencer's house was the only thing remotely close to the field. Doc owned all the fields within five miles of there. He had to. If too many people started building around there, they would've found his pot plants. The only reason he let us play there was because Spence promised to sell the old man's weed at our shows and give him a cut of our admissions. We only charged a dollar and on good nights, only about a hundred kids showed up. We didn't make much. We all thought Spencer was a dumbass, but at least we got to play our music.

The show started at dark, but at least thirty kids were there before the sun even started to go down. Somebody'd brought a couple of kegs of Bud and a lot of girls were already trashed. They sat on the edge of the makeshift stage Jamie had made from old pallets and two by fours and screamed at us to start playing.

Billy threw empty cups and yelled for them to get off the stage. "Our bass player's not here yet, Bitches! We don't play till dark. Either show us your tits or get off the fucking stage!" He pushed a skinny dishwasher blonde with the toe of his ratty sneaker and she fell off into the grass.

Spencer tossed his drumsticks on his stool and ran to help her up. By the time Jamie got there, they were standing under a walnut tree in the shadows and Spencer's hand had disappeared beneath her pink tanktop. Billy looked at them and rolled his eyes. "Man, Spencer'll take any piece of drunk trash that comes along, won't he? Fucking whore."

I turned away from them and finished setting up my keyboard. “Yeah. It’s not his fault, though, if they were sober, they’d never touch him.”

Billy slapped his leg and laughed. “Got that right!” He tapped my arm. “Hey, there’s Jamie. It’s about fucking time.”

Jamie walked around the passenger’s side of his truck and opened the door. A girl I’d never seen before got out and waited around nervously for him to get his bass out of the back.

“Who’s that? Does Jamie have a girlfriend?” I couldn’t stop staring. It figured that Jamie would have the best looking girlfriend.

“Don’t know. Never seen her before. Not bad looking, though, is she? I’d do her.” Billy bit his bottom lip and tuned his guitar for the fifth time while he stared at Jamie and the girl.

I tried to catch her eye when she turned toward us. I don’t know why, I just couldn’t help it. I felt bad for checking out Jamie’s girlfriend. It’s not like I’d ever have a chance with a girl like that anyway. Jamie grabbed his bass and walked toward the stage like he didn’t know how cool he was. The girl tucked her long black hair behind her ears and followed him, barely looking up, picking her way through the crowd uncomfortably. She wore a bright red tanktop that made the freckles on her face and shoulders stand out against her freshly tanned skin. Her army green shorts had been cut off raggedly across her thighs. She’d folded them up but the threads still hung in places, brushing against her knees as she walked. I watched her perfect legs high-stepping over the unmowed grass of

the field. I wondered what it would be like to kiss the smooth skin of her thighs, just above her knees.

“Hey, man, you ok?” Jamie punched my shoulder and frowned at me.

I hadn’t even noticed he’d made it to the stage. I clutched my guitar close and shifted it in front of me more. “Yeah, it’s just hot out here. Probably need to drink more water or something.” I swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

As I walked toward the cooler, I heard Billy laugh. “Yeah, it’s hot out here, alright. Hottest I’ve ever seen. Damn!” He slapped his guitar a couple of times, making a hollow, drum-like sound that blended with his laughter. “So, that your girlfriend, Jamie?” Billy winked and punched him in the arm. The girl stood alone in the crowd at the corner of the stage, looking around at nothing in particular.

“No, that’s my cousin, Beth. Leave her alone, asshole.” Jamie’s face turned cold and he watched Billy’s reaction through narrowed eyes. I gulped my water so fast it burned in my chest. Jamie scared me a little. Still, it made me feel relieved to know she wasn’t his girlfriend.

“Ok, dude, damn! What the fuck? I didn’t even touch her and you’re already bitching at me. I get plenty, I ain’t desperate enough to start dating your relatives yet.” Billy spit a hocker to the side of the stage. It landed at some guy’s feet.

“Asshole.” The guy flipped him off and headed for the kegs.

Billy pretended not to notice. “Man, really, I was just fucking with you. We’re still cool, right?” He acted like he didn’t care, but his right hand moved nervously up and down the neck of his guitar.

Jamie shook his head and glared at Billy for a minute more before bending down to open his case. He took out his red Ibanez and tuned it slowly, glancing at Billy every few minutes to make sure he wasn't looking at Beth. "Actually, I was thinking about trying to fix her up with Jason. That cool with you, man?" Jamie asked the question while still looking at his bass, so it took me a minute to understand.

"What? I—yeah, I guess. Girls don't really like me much, though. I'm just warning you. I mean, if you've got anybody else in mind, you might want to try them first." I was afraid more of disappointing Jamie than his cousin, but I didn't want him to know that.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Jason? You know you can't get a girl without some help. I give you the best girl ever and you're going to turn her down because she might think you suck? What the fuck?" Jamie laughed under his breath and grinned at me. He never had a real laugh, just a sort of low, quiet breathy sound that floated out between his teeth, like a quick gasp.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I just don't want her to be bored or anything. Or mad at you for sticking her with me."

"God, Turner, you've really gotta grow some balls." He laughed again and slapped my back. "She just moved here from Evanston. I figure she's shy like you and I don't want her to get stuck with some jackass." Jamie glanced at Billy and flipped him off.

"What the hell did I do? I'm not touching your cousin, bitch. Fuck off!" Billy stuck his middle finger out. "Besides, I don't wanna' ruin what I got going with your mom." He flicked his tongue back and forth between two of his fingers and backed up when Jamie pretended to take a step toward him. I could never tell if Jamie was joking with

Billy or not. Most of the time, he didn't seem to like him, but he never really did anything about it. I think maybe he just thought Billy wasn't worth the trouble.

“So, you'll go out with her a few times, show her around and shit? That cool with you?” There was just enough light left as the sun went down to reflect Jamie's long fingers in the apple-red shine of his bass.

I imagined them closing tight around my throat as I struggled to squeeze out an answer. “Yeah. Yeah, ok, I'll go out with her. No problem, man. Thanks.” I forced out the best smile I could. I didn't realize until a long time later just how nice Jamie was and that I had nothing to be afraid of.

The whole time we played, all I could think about was Beth. I noticed her watching me every now and then and had to look down to keep from screwing up the songs. From that night on, I didn't date anybody else.

To this day, I'm still so in love with her, I can't even picture myself with another girl, even though I know I've fucked it up for good and she'll never take me back. Guess that's what I get for choosing Billy.

## Chapter 8

On the days I don't have to work and the bluffs are too full of ticks and copperheads, I usually find myself sitting on the front porch with the dogs. I smoke Camels until my breath comes in great wheezing gasps and I cough blood onto the worn porch planks. I pray they'll start killing me soon—slow and painful. I want it to be painful. That's what I deserve. That's what Billy's getting, waiting for the rest of his life in a tiny cell, just waiting until they tell him it's his turn to die. I should've killed him myself ages ago, back in high school. Back when I started noticing just how bad he was getting.

It was late June and the loud hum of the cicadas droned on until we stopped hearing them. They became part of the background like the fields around us, the smell of ripening corn, the sweat that dripped coolly down our backs. We all stood in Spencer's backyard in a loose circle—me, Mark, Spencer, Jamie, and Billy—broken here and there by Spencer's pit bulls, Molly and Bubba. Each time someone would pass the joint, the dogs would run to them and lick at the hand that held it. They were almost as addicted as Spencer. He'd feed them little bits of weed and give them the roach when it was done, setting it on their heads and making them hold still until he said, "Get it!" They'd gobble it down like stoners.

"Hey, man, pass it here. Quit hogging it all." Spencer shoved half a joint at Billy and scratched Bubba behind the ears.

"Dude, you smoked it down to the roach. What the fuck?" Billy took a deep drag on the damp joint and passed it to Mark. Mark had only tried it once before and didn't really seem interested this time.

“No, thanks, man, I’m cool.” He shoved his hand in the pocket of his cargo shorts and pulled out a silver flask. “I’m good with this. Want some?” He handed the flask to Billy.

Billy unscrewed the top and took a huge swig. He squinted his eyes shut and shook his head for a few minutes, then slapped his hand on his thigh. “Whew! Man! That’s some strong ass shit! Where’d you get that?” He handed the moonshine back.

“Derek Stewart. He just finished up a big batch yesterday.” Mark’s hands trembled as he reached for the flask.

“You ok, man?” Jamie pointed toward Mark’s shaking hands.

“I’m good. Just hungry. I left before Mom made supper. I’m ok.” Mark wiped sweat off his forehead and took another drink. “This shit really burns, man.”

“Yeah, we oughtta’ start making some. I bet we could get a shit ton of cash for it at our next show. Wouldn’t take much of this to get the girls super wasted. We’d get so laid.” Billy passed the joint around to Mark again. “Here, smoke this. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Nah, I’m good. Really.” Mark took the joint and smoked it anyway, then passed it back the wrong way, to Billy. Billy put it between his lips without correcting him.

For a while everything was silent except the cicadas and Molly and Bubba barking back and forth with a distant neighbor’s dog, far across the field. A porch light switched on—tiny and yellow—and someone yelled in a bellowing Southern drawl. The dog was suddenly quiet. Jamie spit a hocker into the dry grass. Spencer pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds and tapped the bottom. Molly set off the motion light on the back patio,

while Spencer lit his cigarette. Our heads inadvertently turned from one to the other, whipping back and forth.

Overhead, a plane's red lights trailed across the sky. The patio light went back off. It was so dark, we could barely see each other. I looked up at the stars and felt lost, small, out of place. I wondered who I'd be if my family had never moved from Vermont. Somehow I knew I wouldn't be standing around in a field getting drunk on cheap beer and moonshine and stoned out of my mind. I wasn't even sure why I was here now. I watched Billy imitating Mark, while Mark remained clueless and increasingly drunk. Sometimes I really hated Billy. It had gotten worse lately, though. He scared me a little—always had—but lately he made me sick. Mostly because I think I was afraid of becoming like him. I had to admit, sometimes I enjoyed these nights—getting wasted and watching the night sky out in a field or sitting on the beach down by the river. And then I found myself snickering a little when Billy made his hands shake and spilled beer on his shoes behind Mark. I dug my nails into my palms to keep from laughing. I felt like an asshole. I had never been this person. There was nothing about me before I met Billy that ever indicated I would turn out to be the kind of pathetic dickhead who stood around in a field at one in the morning passing a badly rolled joint and making fun of my drunk friend. What the hell had happened to me?

I wiped sweat off the back of my neck and wondered what kind of a Hell we lived in that it was still eighty degrees after sunset. I looked back up at the sky. Another plane flew over and I imagined myself on it—the beige interior, the plush seats, the expensive

drink in my hand, watching the tiny city lights miles below me; the tiny people I'd never know—traveling across an ocean somewhere far away from here.

“So, how’s it going with you and Becky, Jason?” Mark spoke through the flask at his mouth. He kept looking up at the stars like he was searching in vain for a particular constellation. Every now and then, he’d stumble as he tried to turn his head.

“It’s Beth, not Becky. We’re doing pretty good, I guess. I like her.” I watched him trip in place over nothing. I looked at Jamie. I always looked at Jamie when stuff went wrong. He usually knew what to do. Jamie was staring across the circle at Mark whose flask had fallen to the ground. Billy was handing him a bottle of Bud Light from a cooler by his feet. Mark guzzled it like it was water. Billy had noticed something wasn’t right too. He was laughing hysterically, though. Every time Mark emptied his bottle he’d hand him another one. Whenever he got the chance, Billy would cram a joint between Mark’s fingers. Mark just went on drinking and smoking as if he didn’t notice.

“Mark, are you ok?” Jamie had stopped smoking the weed long before, when he’d first noticed Mark’s hands shaking.

“Yeah, man, yeah. Just fucking hungry. Tired.” Mark slurred the last word so much, it was barely a word at all.

“Man, we really should get some of that shit for our show.” Spencer was either ignoring the situation with Mark or he was just too stupid to notice something was wrong. It was impossible to tell. He picked the flask up off the ground and guzzled the moonshine down, then passed it back to Mark after he’d all but emptied it. “I gave some

of this stuff to Sheila last night when I went over there. Her parents are out of town. Fuck, I'm going back over there after this."

Spencer had been dating a girl who lived down the road from him for about a year. It always took me a while to remember he had a girlfriend, though, when he started talking about her because he talked about dozens of other girls the same way. He liked to get them drunk or high and then convince them to have sex with him, because, well, there was really no other way any girl would touch him. I never understood how Sheila didn't find out about all the other girls. Specksville was a very tiny community on the outskirts of a very small city. It's not like there were a ton of options when it came to female companionship. Still, it seemed like Spencer had been with just about all of them by the time we reached high school. Almost every STD in Specksville could be traced back to him.

"So, what happened? You fuck the shit out of her?" Billy started laughing and jerked his pelvis back and forth.

Jamie rolled his eyes and kept watching Mark.

"Well, yeah, but that's nothing new. I do that every night. The fucked up part is that she went wild this time—fucking let me fuck her in the ass till it started bleeding. No shit, man! It was awesome!" Spencer threw an empty beer bottle into the tall grass that marked the end of his lawn and the beginning of a field.

"Was she ok?" I had to ask. I guess I'd forgotten, in my hazy state, that it was taboo to show concern for some bitch you were fucking. Billy and Spencer just looked at me like I

was a complete dumbass. It was the look I knew was probably on my face most of the time Spencer spoke.

“Who the fuck cares, Turner? It’s not like she didn’t want it. She’s just a bitch like any other bitch, except she buys me shit.” He spat and rubbed it into the ground with his foot. “God! You’re such a fucking pussy sometimes!”

Billy laughed and mumbled, “Fucking pussy.”

“Fuck you, Spencer, you fucking asshole!” I glared at his barely visible face across the circle that was now more of a jagged oval.

Spencer jumped forward and raised his fist up, but Jamie grabbed it and forced it behind his back.

“Calm the fuck down, Spence. Finish your damn story.” Jamie waited till he stopped struggling to release him.

Spencer turned to stare at Jamie, then thought better of it. He lit another cigarette. “So, anyway, then I fucking left Sheila’s when she passed out and I went to Johnson’s Store for a pack of cigarettes. Guess who was there?”

He looked at all of us like he’d won the damned Nobel Prize for Fucking or something. What an asshole!

No one answered, so Spencer kept talking. “Fucking Marybeth Spainhoward, that skinny whore with the huge titties I told you about. The one who fucked Danny MacElroy for a joint last month. I was like, ‘Fuck, yeah! Talk about winning the lottery!’ So, I told her about the moonshine in my truck and she went out to the river with me.”

“No way! That bitch is hot! Ain’t no fucking way you got her, you fucking ugly ass bastard. No fucking way.” Billy’s face was red and the veins popped out on his scrawny neck. He jumped around like a boxer. He always got jumpy and excited when he was stoned. I’d never seen anybody else do that.

Mark laughed and started coughing. “Fuck yeah, that bitch is hot.”

Billy slapped him on the back. “Damn right she is!”

I was the only one who knew Mark was gay. That’s why he never took part in these conversations. Now, I was scared. Something wasn’t right at all.

“Dude, check it out, bitch sucked my cock till it was fucking blue! Holy shit, she was good! Like a motherfucking Hoover!” Spencer grabbed his crotch and made sucking noises while Billy bent over with hysterical laughter, trying to catch his breath.

“And here’s the best part—I hadn’t washed my dick yet after I fucked Sheila! She fucking sucked Sheila’s ass off me and didn’t even notice! It was so fucking funny!” Spencer and Billy cracked up laughing, falling all over the yard like mental patients.

“Oh, my God! That’s fucking classic, man! Assmouth MacElroy! Oh, my God!” Billy mimed sucking a dick, his fist to his mouth. His tongue poked the inside of his cheek.

Sometimes, I really hated Billy. But whenever I thought about getting rid of him and finding other friends, I missed him. I don’t know why. Guess I was just used to the guy. But, God, sometimes I really really hated him. I imagined kicking him in his wide open mouth while he was lying there on the ground stoned and laughing. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt at first because he was too stoned to feel anything. But I wouldn’t stop. I’d keep kicking him till my Chuck Taylors were covered in his blood. Till he just ended. I just

wanted him to disappear. If he was just gone, I wouldn't have to leave him. But even in my drunken vision, Billy's bloody, toothless mouth kept laughing at me. It was like nothing could stop him.

And then, something did.

It wasn't exactly what I was hoping for, though. Only Jamie had been watching Mark when it happened. He said Mark had been chuckling to himself, blubbering and stumbling about and then he just fell over. In my anger over Billy, I looked back at Jamie, hoping he would do something—knock him out, just *something*. That's when I noticed Jamie wasn't standing there anymore. He was crouched over Mark's shaking body on the ground.

"It's ok, man, it's ok. We're going to get you to the hospital." Jamie slapped Mark's sweaty cheek and lifted his head. "Somebody call 911! Spencer! Go call an ambulance!"

Spencer's face turned pale. "No way, dude. My parents aren't home. If the neighbors see an ambulance, they'll tell my parents. I'll get busted for smoking pot. No fucking way." Spencer lit another cigarette, his hands shaking.

I'd never seen anyone defy Jamie before. Jamie was scary. And we were all pretty sure he'd end up killing Spencer someday anyway. Spencer was always pissing him off. I looked at Billy and he was looking back at me. It was like a secret language we'd had since we were kids. If something was really wrong, we spoke to each other in stares. I

knew what he was thinking—tonight was the night Jamie was going to kill him. We were about to witness a murder of the most violent kind.

But Jamie kept cradling Mark's head and mumbling things to him. He looked at Spencer, not with rage, but with pleading. "Please, Spencer, just call a fucking ambulance now. He can't wait."

Spencer seemed to know he was in control now. Jamie finally needed something from him. He slowly took the cigarette from his mouth and tapped the end. Ashes fell in the dust near the porch. Spencer was silhouetted in the porch light. Molly was sitting under it watching the moths end their lives. He blocked the sliding glass door that led to the kitchen where the phone was. The cherry on his Marlboro lit up—a steady burn of red-orange rage. Like an open wound. "No. You want him to go to the hospital? You take him there, asshole." He set the cigarette on the porch railing and walked inside and locked the door. He only looked at us for a second before he closed the yellow-beige curtains that hung in front of the door.

We all stood in silence for a moment. No one understood what had just happened.

"Jason, take my keys and start the truck. We're going to the hospital." Jamie tossed his keys at me.

We loaded Mark into the bed of Jamie's truck. Billy stood next to me as I shut the door. "Dude, it's pretty sad Mark can't hold his fucking liquor. What a puss. You should stay here with us. I think Spence has some crystal meth he got from one of his whores. I'm getting fucking wasted!"

Jamie glared at him. “He’s diabetic, asshole. He’s a fucking diabetic. He’s going into a coma because you kept giving him shit when he was sick. This is your fucking fault, Lyons, you dick!”

Billy looked confused. “Fuck that shit—he’s a fucking puss! Man, whatever, fuck you guys.” He flipped us off and headed for the back door.

It was a miracle Mark lived. Billy had been trying to see just how drunk he could get him. Turns out, that’s really bad for a diabetic. Of course, Jamie was the only one who even knew he was diabetic because their moms worked together or something. At least someone knew. Mark never hung out with our group again after that. And anytime Billy mentioned him, he’d call him a puss.

Something changed about us all that night. Jamie got even quieter. He watched Spencer and Billy like he was dissecting them. Every time we hung out Jamie was just watching. Spencer didn’t avoid Jamie as much. He got louder and more obnoxious. He did everything Billy told him to—no matter what.

I started hating Billy. At first, it was just a weird little sick feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I saw him. But over the years the sickness built up until it became part of me. That feeling was there all the time, I just had no idea what it was. For years, I thought it was nervousness. I thought Billy just made me nervous. I did whatever he wanted; followed him everywhere, because I was scared not to. I didn’t know what he’d do. If I’d figured out that feeling was hate a lot earlier, I probably could’ve saved myself some trouble.

After that night, Billy became a different person entirely. He lost himself. I don't know what happened to him. Maybe it was his dad. Maybe it was his parents' divorce. I think Billy had been losing it for a while before that, though. He just got mean. It was like everything pissed him off and he wanted to get back at the world somehow. He realized he could control people, so he did. It was like he did it just to experiment with them. He'd experimented with Mark—pushed him as far as he could, but he wasn't completely satisfied with the result, so he tried with other people.

He'd never taken it out on me before. We were like brothers. We hung out with a lot of people back then, but no matter who dropped out of our group or who joined, it was always me and Billy. We were like two halves of the same person. But after that night, I became Billy's favorite guinea pig.

He dissected me over and over again just to see what would happen. And I'm sorry to say, I knew what he was doing and I just kept volunteering for his experiments. I knew nothing else but Billy's control over me and my hatred for him.

That was the beginning of the end. By the next year, Billy's experiments turned to sudden outbursts of rage.

About the beginning of our senior year, Billy's mom finally got tired of all the drinking and left his dad. She took Billy's older sister Lori with her and they moved in town somewhere. I think Billy was pissed at his mom for leaving, because he stayed with his dad and didn't talk to her much after that. Lori, though, well, they were close. She was only a couple of years older than Billy and she took care of him whenever she could. They were real protective of each other. She was the church-going type, real religious.

Went to church every Wednesday, twice on Sunday, and whenever there was any special event where she could find an excuse to go back again and sit in a pew, she was there. Her mom too. I never could figure out how Billy's mom and dad ended up together—they were so different. The only time Chuck saw the inside of a church was when he was married there.

Lori got a job as a secretary or something after she'd graduated high school, just so she could stay close to her family. She never moved out of the house until her mom did. I figure it was mostly to take care of Billy, make sure their dad didn't beat him too much. She never ragged on Billy about not going to church or about all the girls he brought home. Just accepted him for who he was and prayed for his soul. But, I guess it was Lori who finally damned his soul to Hell.

Lori had started dating some guy from Bratcher County. He was a few years older than her. His family used to live down the road from Billy's, back when Lori was in junior high, but they moved. She'd kept in touch with him for years—had a thing for him. He was a church kid too. I suppose that's why she thought he was so good. That's the problem with most religious people—deep down, they're all a bunch of hypocrites. You can't trust them.

Lori and this guy Trey had been dating for a while and Lori wouldn't give it up. She was just the opposite of Billy—twenty years old and still a virgin, innocent as the day she was born. This Trey guy, he just couldn't take it anymore. They got in a fight one night about it, when he was driving her home. He beat her up real good, then got her pinned in the front of his truck, out in the middle of nowhere, and raped her. She was in pretty bad

shape when she called Billy. Trey had left her at a run-down gas station and told her to walk home. She'd called Billy from a payphone.

When we picked her up, all I could think about was that dead girl we'd found when we were kids. I knew Billy must've been thinking of the same thing. Lori was covered in bruises and the side of her head was all bloody from where Trey had slammed it against the steering wheel. Her shirt was ripped down the front and her face was scratched up real bad. But she wouldn't call the cops. She didn't want anyone to know what had happened to her. Said she was ashamed. I'd never seen Billy so mad. Or so crazy.

He drove Lori home to their mom and told her he'd take care of the problem. Then we called a couple of our friends and went looking for Trey. The son of a bitch had actually gone home and went to bed, like it was just a regular old date, like he hadn't done anything wrong. Billy busted his door down and dragged that motherfucker out of bed like he was some kind of comic book superhero. I wasn't sure what he was planning on doing to him, but I knew Trey was pretty much fucked.

We drove out to this old field in Specksville, where we all used to get drunk and stoned. Billy made Spencer tie that bastard up and ride in the back of the truck with him so he wouldn't get out before we got there. Spencer, of course, saw this as an opportunity to release some pent-up aggression, so by the time we got there, Trey was suffering. Spencer hit him a few more times while me and Jamie dragged him out of the truck. Billy seemed oblivious to the fighting. He looked somewhere far past us, then walked to the front of the truck without saying a word.

When I held the flashlight up to Trey to inspect the damage, I felt sick. His face looked like roadkill. His nose was crooked and completely flat on one side. His right eye was swollen shut. The skin around it that wasn't cut, was red and greasy-looking. Blood covered his face and ran in thick trails down his t-shirt, soaking part of the ropes around his chest and spidering out into the coarse, straw-like fibers.

"Like it?" Spencer grinned his gap-toothed grin, while he bounced back and forth, pounding his right fist into the palm of his left hand. He looked like a damned monkey. "Nice work, huh? Think I'm gonna' bust up his ribs next. Watch this, man." He jerked forward, faster than I'd ever seen anyone move, and jabbed Trey in the side twice, before I could stop him. My hand finally blocked his third strike.

"Dude, What the fuck?" Spencer aimed his already clenched fist toward me.

I instinctively stepped behind Trey. Jamie pushed Spencer in the chest and moved toward him slowly, until Spencer backed down.

"Leave him alone, Spence, or I'll kick your ass, you stupid shit." We were all a little afraid of Jamie. He was taller than we were and a lot stronger. He lifted weights all the time now, so his muscles bulged out of his too-tight t-shirts, making him even more intimidating than his height alone. His legs were so big that once, the year before, he'd squatted down to get a beer out of the cooler at a bonfire, and split his jeans at the seams. He'd already signed up for the Marines, so he figured he'd start training early, since he was leaving in the Fall after graduation. So lately he'd gotten a lot bigger. The thing that scared us the most about Jamie, though, was that he was really quiet. When he spoke,

everybody listened to him, like it was the voice of God or something. Jamie always looked out for me—he knew I'd be in trouble if he wasn't around.

Spencer spat a hocker onto the ground near my feet and glared at me. I think he was trying to scare me. I glared back, brave because I was standing next to Jamie. Spencer made a weird sort of shuffle toward me and I flinched. That must have satisfied him, because he sneered at me, then walked to the front of the truck to see what Billy was doing.

I looked at Jamie to thank him, but he wasn't looking at me. It was as if he didn't even remember I was there. His eyes stared out into the pitch black of the field, like he was trying to find something.

Billy and Spencer came back, loaded up with armfuls of duct tape. Billy held his old Gerber Gator firmly in one hand. I was hoping it was just to cut the duct tape. Spencer had a wicked grin on his face and he couldn't hold still. When I followed behind him, I noticed he had a couple of black Sharpie markers stuck in his back pocket. I looked around the field to see if there were any good hiding places, in case the cops somehow made their way out here. I could feel the panic starting to eat away at my stomach. I wondered how the hell I was ever going to get out of this one.

Billy found the road. It was an old gravel one at the farthest end of the field. It probably used to be the main one, back when there were actually houses around here. Now, it was mostly overgrown, grass crawling up between the rocks, covering them over until they were barely visible. At the end of this road was another, similar to it, but slightly paved. The asphalt was so cracked and broken, most of the road didn't exist

anymore. It was more of a wide trail with chunks of tar scattered over it. Where the two met, an old stop sign stood, faded and useless. This was Billy's destination.

"Bring that son of a bitch over here." For a minute, I thought Billy was talking to the fat roll of gray duct tape he was struggling with. He never even looked up at Trey. Jamie shoved Trey forward so that he faced Billy. It wasn't the first time that night I felt like we'd gone too far.

Billy didn't speak to Trey, just spat at his feet and stared at him. There was as much hate in Billy's eyes as there was fear in Trey's. "Jamie, put him up there." Billy's tone was cold and deep and his words dragged out slow. His drawl had almost disappeared. He continued to stare at Trey, while he pointed at the sign.

Jamie and Spencer struggled to hold him up, while Trey writhed and kicked as best he could. I stood back away from them, in the shadows, hoping I'd be forgotten. But Billy never forgot about me.

"Jason! Where are you?" Billy was pissed. His plan wasn't going as smoothly as he'd envisioned. I knew that meant I'd better be at his side as soon as he yelled at me, or I'd get it. Once, right after his mom moved out, Billy beat the shit out of Spencer for not giving him a cigarette when he asked for it. Billy was pissed off about something most of the time. No one knew why, we just knew better than to question him. Me, I was pretty quiet anyway. I was more of a follower. I always tried to blend into the shadows, so no one would remember I was there. "Jason!" Billy yelled louder this time.

I stepped out into the hazy beam of his flashlight.

“Go back and get my truck. Don’t drive it over the field. Too many tracks’ll show. Just—” Billy looked around for a solution. His eyes fixed on the gravel road. The asphalt one was too broken to drive on. “Just try to get through to that gravel road over there. I guess we’ll have to leave a few tracks. Ain’t nothin’ I can do about that. Fuck!” He threw a roll of duct tape at Trey. It hit him in the chest and he screamed.

“We could burn it, Billy.” My voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere far across the field.

“What?”

“The field. The part we have to park the truck on. When we leave, we can burn it just enough so the tire tracks don’t show. I mean, we’ve gotta’ be careful not to catch the whole field on fire, but I think we can do it.” I began to regret my solution as soon as I said it. But, there it was, hanging thick in the air in front of me.

And Billy snatched it up like money.

“Damn, you’re a genius, man! Go get the fuckin’ truck and let’s string this bastard up!”

“Sure, Billy.”

I grabbed a flashlight and turned in the direction I thought the truck was. I took a last look at Trey and shivered a little when I saw that he was looking back at me—looking at me the same way he’d looked at Spencer and Billy. Like I was doing this to him. Like I was the bad guy.

I pointed the beam down in front of my feet and headed toward the truck. I kept repeating to myself that Trey had raped Lori. He was the rapist, not me. Fuck him! I tried

to remember Lori's face when we'd picked her up at that gas station, but all I could think of was Trey's.

When I got to the truck, I slid into the driver's seat and rummaged through Billy's CDs. I put in a Tom Petty, rolled up the windows, and cranked it up. I sat there and listened until I forgot Trey's one good eye staring at me. By the time I found the faded end of the gravel road, me and Tom were belting it out real good.

*"Think of me what you will, I've got a little space to fill..."*

I had to stop partway down the road to clear away some branches that had fallen over it. While I was dragging them to the side, I realized I had left the radio turned up. You could probably hear it all the way down the road. Billy would kill me. I didn't know it was that loud. When I opened the door, music came blasting from the truck.

*"...let's head on down the road, there's somewhere I gotta' go. And you don't know how it feels..."*

"Dammit!" I climbed back into the truck and turned the volume down, hoping no one was around to hear. I sat still, trying to will myself far away, just in case. A cow's low mournful note sounded somewhere over a distant field and a few crickets sang back, but that was all. The suffocatingly sweet smell of clover hung heavy in the air. I could almost hear the darkness that surrounded me. I saw the flashlights on the other side of the field. From this side, they looked a lot like the lightning bugs we used to hunt when we were kids. I thought about how nice it would be if I could trap them all in a jar—Billy, Spencer, Jamie. I could put them on my nightstand and tap on the glass until eventually

their lights faded out. Then I could sleep. Then I wouldn't have to worry about going to jail or accidentally killing someone in a field in the middle of nowhere.

I finished clearing the brush and drove Billy's truck slowly over the old road, the music turned off this time. As I backed up to the stop sign, I realized that in the time it had taken me to get the truck, it had become unnecessary. Trey was slumped over in the dirt, his clothes in a pile at Billy's feet. Someone had knocked him out. He was covered in black tattoos of penises, the phrase "I Suck Cock" written across his forehead in Spencer's handwriting. The word "Rapist" stretched from one end of his chest to the other in large permanent Sharpie letters.

"He's not dead, is he?" I knew how mad Billy was and I'd been afraid that might happen. I'd seen stuff on TV about people getting hit just the right way and dying. The human body isn't just fragile—sometimes, it's a real piece of junk.

"He's fine. Spencer just knocked him out with the flashlight, because he's a dumbass." Jamie looked worried, despite his tone.

"Dude, he kicked me in the nuts! What the fuck was I supposed to do?" Spencer's arms flew up in the air, as if he were having a spasm. I think it was his way of trying to threaten Jamie, but he was standing five feet away from him, with me and Trey between them. He couldn't have hit Jamie if he'd wanted to. Spencer was an idiot and everyone knew it but Spencer. Only Billy found him entertaining.

Jamie and Spencer lifted Trey against the sign, while Billy stood in the bed of the truck and wound rolls of duct tape around him. It was a long, tedious process. It seemed like way too much trouble to go through, but Billy was determined. I put Trey's clothes

in a pile near the truck, so we could burn them along with the tire marks. When the last roll of duct tape had been used, I started to get in the truck so we could drive it back to the road.

“Hang on, man. I got one more thing I gotta’ do first.”

“Billy, he’s already up there. Let’s just go.” I didn’t even want to imagine what else Billy might do to Trey. I thought he’d been punished enough. After all, it wasn’t like Lori was dead or anything. She’d be fine...eventually. I watched Billy flick his knife open. He held it up to Trey’s chest, which had been left mysteriously uncovered by the duct tape. I hadn’t noticed it earlier.

He began carving into Trey’s chest, tracing over Spencer’s letters. He moved as if the knife was just an extension of his arm. I remembered back to all those times I’d sat next to Billy in class, and watched him scrawl elaborate drawings of skulls and trees and naked women all over his notebook. He was really good. It surprised me how quick his hand moved, even held back by the pull of flesh around the knife blade.

Trey jerked awake while Billy was carving and tried to scream. But, Spencer had taped his mouth shut. His unswollen eye got real wide and just stared down at Billy. You could see the fear in it. I’d never seen anybody look like that. I thought if I lived till I was a hundred, I’d never see that much fear in a person again.

When Billy finally pulled his hand away, one word stood out deep and red in the center of Trey’s chest:

**RAPIST.**

Taped up there like that, the red letters dripping on his pale chest, he looked like some gruesome negative of the stop sign itself. He warned girls not to go near him—*STOP—RAPIST*. Maybe that's what Billy was going for. I felt a little sorry for Trey. I couldn't help it.

"That's from my sister, Motherfucker!" The hand that held his knife shook. For a minute, I thought Billy was going to stab him. I saw Jamie inch forward.

"Hey, Billy, why don't you drive the truck back with Spencer and wait for us? Me and Jason'll stay here and burn the tracks." Jamie spoke in a deep, smooth voice, the kind you use to make babies stop crying. It was weird.

"That's cool. Meet you over there."

After the truck left, Jamie set Trey's clothes to the side, away from the fire. We carefully burned the grass around the sign and the cardboard from the rolls of duct tape.

"Listen, Trey—"

I looked over at Jamie, but he was busy talking to the fire. He wasn't even looking at Trey. I didn't know what to say. I just let him keep talking.

"I think you're a fucking bastard, but so is Billy. So, I'm going to help you out. I'm going to take that tape off your mouth, but if you make any noise, Billy'll probably come back here and kill you. I'm also going to leave your clothes here in case you can actually get down." Jamie continued to shove dirt around the fire with his feet, so it wouldn't spread. The thick smell of dry, burnt grass floated up toward Trey. "Now, when I get home, I'm calling the cops, so they'll find you before you die out here. But if you tell them who did any of this, I'll kill you myself." He finally looked at Trey. His teeth were

clenched tightly together and he looked like he wanted to kill Trey right then. I got ready to run, just in case.

The pungent stench of Trey's sweat was so strong, I could smell it even over the smoke—blood mixed with terror and hate. We stomped the rest of the fire out, and when everything was dark again, Jamie took the water we were supposed to use to put it out, and poured some over Trey to wash off the blood. Trey kept licking his lips and crying. I thought about sneaking back later to untape him, but I knew I'd be too scared. We turned our flashlights on and started back across the field.

“I won't tell them. I'm glad you did that.”

“I know.” Jamie just looked straight ahead, toward the truck.

Far away, we could see the cherry on Spencer's cigarette get brighter and then go dim again.

“Almost looks like a lightning bug.” Jamie flashed his light at them.

## Chapter 9

When I sit here and play my guitar, I usually think about Beth. Remembering her makes it all better and all worse at the same time. It's so hard to live without her—if I didn't have my memories of her, I don't think I'd make it. I used to have this old guitar pick—my lucky one—that I used at our shows. It was faded black with fancy silver crosses on both sides. One cross was worn where I used to rub my thumb over it when I got nervous. It looked like an upside-down L instead of a cross. L for luck. Our band broke up sometime in the early months of summer, right after we graduated high school. Jamie had left for the army, Spencer was a slacker and just stopped showing up for practices so we kicked his ass out, and me and Billy were stoned out of our gourds most of the time so nothing much mattered to us anymore. I ended up giving the pick to Beth. When I found out she was pregnant with Anna, I drilled a hole in it and put it on a chain and made a necklace for her. L for luck, remember? L for love. She wore it until the night she kicked me out. I guess it stopped bringing her luck after that. L for loss. I try not to think too much about that night if I can help it. I usually can't.

## Chapter 10

Beth's dad had bought her a little place out in the middle of an empty field in Carson a couple of years after high school. It was just an outdated double wide, but to us it was Heaven. It became a party house almost immediately, of course—the middle of nowhere, in a giant field, no neighbors—what else could it be? We had drunken bonfires just about every night. The chipped white bathtub was stained with meth rings that would never come out, no matter how hard we scrubbed. When we were too messed up to make our own meth, we bought it from some loser in the Bottoms. We grew pot out in the woods behind the field. Sometimes we drove Beth's shitty little blue Neon way out to Newton to harvest other pot crops dealers had planted in unsuspecting farmers' fields. Spencer almost lost a leg in a bear trap one of the Newton dealers had set to keep people away from their crop. But we didn't care—we just kept pushing it farther and farther. We knew we'd live forever. We'd been fucked in the ass by life so nothing mattered to us. We were stuck in this Godforsaken town, in this shithole of a county and this was how we fought back. We figured nothing would ever change. We were wrong. So wrong.

Sometime in the winter after we moved to the Carson house, Beth got knocked up. We were scared shitless. We'd done so many drugs—ones we couldn't even remember. We were afraid the baby would die. She was very pregnant by the time we found out—about four months. The baby would be due at the end of July. Our partying days were suddenly cut short.

Beth didn't want Billy around anymore. Too many drugs, she said. Too much partying. Said she didn't trust him. In the end, I chose Billy over her. Over my own

daughter even. Not on purpose. I just couldn't get straight, so Beth made the choice for me. I couldn't handle the responsibility. I wasn't sure how to grow up. They never really teach you that kind of thing in school. It's like it's just supposed to happen one day or something, and when it doesn't, you just get confused. It's downright scary. I didn't really want to grow up, to tell you the truth. I missed being a kid. Things were easier then.

I managed to avoid Billy for a pretty long time. He was pissed and blamed it all on Beth, but he found other losers to hang out with and got over it for the most part. I was too worried to party anyway. Me and Beth spent long, sleepless nights sitting on our front porch, just holding each other and crying. I got a job at a gas station the next town over—there wasn't anything in Carson. Beth quit her job at her dad's factory because she couldn't stay on her feet that long anymore.

Even though the ultrasounds showed nothing wrong, we still worried. We worried every second until Anna was born—completely healthy—on the twenty-third of July. She was beautiful; perfect. And we were ready for her. Beth had quit everything cold turkey as soon as she'd found out she was pregnant. I took a little longer, but by the time Anna was born, I'd gotten it down to just a couple of beers every night and four cigarettes on the front porch each day. We'd turned the tiny spare room where Billy used to sleep off whatever he'd gotten trashed on the night before into a cozy little nursery. We were ready for everything to work out. And I think it would have if it hadn't been for Billy. He hated it when anyone tried to get better at life. He hated losing control over other people. Especially me.

So, one afternoon in late January, when Anna was about six months old, Billy showed up at our front door. Beth was at work. It was my day off, but Beth's parents wanted to spend time with Anna, so they had her for the day. To this day, I thank God for that. There's no telling what Billy would've done to my daughter if she'd been there.

He looked high. His pupils were dilated and his eyes were crazy. His shaking fingers jumped from his pockets to his face over and over. He would periodically bounce on the balls of his feet until the flimsy trailer shook.

"Hey, Turner, long time, no see. Beth home?" His eyes darted around behind me into every corner.

"No, she's working. Why? You need something, Billy?" I didn't ask him to come in, but I knew that's what he wanted. It was pretty warm for January, so it's not like he was cold—he could stand there a little longer.

"I just thought I'd stop by. Ain't seen ya in a long damn time, ya know? You got that kid and all..." Billy trailed off and looked up, like he'd heard an airplane overhead. I looked up too, but there was nothing there. His left eye twitched a little and he played with the zipper on his jacket—moving it up and down quickly—zzzip, zzzip, zzzip, zzzip.

"Billy! What do you want?"

His hand stopped. The zipper went quiet.

"I—I just um..." He pulled the zipper all the way up and ran his hand through his dirty hair in one fast, fluid motion. "What's up with you, Turner?"

He leaned forward on the ball of one foot. I thought he was going to fall on me at first. I took a step back. “What are you talking about?”

“Man, fuck you, man! You just, you fucking left me just fucking ditched me, fucker!” He slurred several of his words together and then suddenly snapped out the last one, biting it out of the cold winter air.

“What?” But I knew what he meant. I had ditched him. He’d been my best friend since we were kids and I’d just left him. I felt a little bad about it. But I felt good too. I wasn’t scared anymore that he’d suddenly turn on me or that I’d wind up in jail for something he’d talked me into. It was nice to be free of Billy’s craziness. And I really wasn’t sorry. But I was terrified to tell him that.

“You just stopped. I mean, we did all that shit together. You were there all the time and then you weren’t. Man, fuck you!”

I didn’t know what to say. Billy had started crying. Billy! He hadn’t even cried when his old man had beaten his ass. He just didn’t cry. Hell, he made fun of me for months when I cried after I found out Beth was pregnant and didn’t know what I was going to do. And here he was, standing on my front porch, bawling like a baby.

“Billy? Man, get in the house. What the hell’s wrong with you?” I put my arm around his neck and shoved him into the living room. I still think of that as one of the biggest mistakes of my life. I should’ve knocked him out, locked my front door, and called the cops. But I felt sorry for him then. He seemed so alone. I didn’t know that his goal was to make sure I was alone too.

Billy flopped down on the orange 1970's recliner in the corner, next to the space heater and stared at me.

"You want some coffee or something?" I was hoping to sober him up and get him the hell out of my house before Beth got home.

"Coffee? Got any whiskey?"

"Nah, we don't drink much anymore. We got a kid, man, ya know?" I knew I'd get it for that, but I didn't care. I just wanted him to sober up and leave. But when I walked back into the living room with his coffee, I noticed he looked almost normal. The shaking and fidgeting had stopped and he was just looking around the room at everything. There were no more tears in his eyes. It was as if he hadn't been crying at all.

I saw my hand shake a little as I handed him the mug. "So, what are you on, Billy?"

He smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. Not at all. "Just a bit of pot, that's all. Smoked a joint with Spence before I came out here. Warms me up, ya know?" His voice was clear and steady. He sipped the coffee and held it still, warming his hands.

"You asshole." I looked from him to the door. I wondered if I could get out before he did whatever it was he'd come there to do. Then I remembered we only had one car and Beth had taken it to work. I was fucked and Billy knew it. I started wondering if he'd planned the whole thing. He was good with stuff like that. He'd always been able to get people to do what he wanted just with casual suggestions. And he could watch and wait and stalk like a damned snake. Once he saw you were vulnerable, without help, alone—he'd strike. I knew I was prey.

“What? Something wrong, Turner? You seem a little pissed. Or scared. Is that it? Are you afraid of me, Jason?” He laughed and put his coffee on the end table.

“Why are you here? How did you know I was here alone? And what the fuck do you want anyway?” I was angry. I just wanted to strangle him. I knew he was here to take my new life away from me. I also knew I’d do anything to hold onto it.

“You act like I’m some kind of stalker. Spencer ran into Beth at the gas station this morning when she was on her way to drop your kid off. See? No big deal. No twisted, scary plan here. Just thought I’d come hang out with you. Like old times.” He picked up the coffee cup again, finished the last remnants and set it back down without ever taking his eyes off me.

“I thought Spencer was in jail for fucking up that graveyard or something.” I watched his hands. Steady and quick, the energy just resting there on the tips of his fingers, ready to pounce.

“Nah, that was a few months ago. You’re out of the loop, Turner. You need to hang out with us again.” He stood up slowly and stretched. He walked around the living room, looking at the photos of me and Beth and Anna. “Remember all the fun we had out here? Man, we got so fucked up, didn’t we?” He smiled.

“Beth doesn’t want you around anymore, Billy. Not with the baby. You’re not exactly the best influence to have around kids, you know?” I grinned at him and hoped he’d take it as a joke.

He laughed. It was a cold, bitter laugh that didn’t seem like a laugh at all. I shivered.

“No, she’s right. I probably shouldn’t be around babies. But, you’re ok with me, right? I mean, this is all your old lady. You’d still hang out with me if she let you, wouldn’t you?” He gave a pleading look that at the same time made me cringe. It was hard to look Billy in the eyes, because once you did, you couldn’t look away. He had those ghost-blue eyes that were there and not there at the same time. It was like God forgot to color them in all the way.

“Yeah, man. Of course I would. You’re my best friend.” I didn’t know where it had come from. Even as the words were coming out of me, I wondered who was saying them. I looked down at the stained beige carpet and wished Beth would suddenly show up. But I knew she was at work till late. I was alone. Just me and Billy.

“Then hang out with me. Smoke a little pot with me. Come on, it’s been forever, dude. It won’t hurt you to smoke just one.” He pulled a joint out of the inside of his jacket.

“Nah, man, I can’t. Beth’d kill me. I can’t get fucked up on that stuff again. Sorry.” I knew I was the biggest dumb shit in the world if I actually thought that would get rid of Billy.

Billy put the joint back in his pocket. “That’s cool. Let’s just go to a bar for a while then. Wolf’s?” He stood up as if it was definite that we were going.

“Why don’t you just go grab a couple of six packs and we’ll drink here. I can start a bonfire in the backyard, like we used to.” I hoped nostalgia would get the better of him and he’d agree to the bonfire. I didn’t want to go anywhere with Billy.

He rubbed his thumb over Beth’s face in one of the pictures on the wall and clicked his tongue like he was thinking really hard about something. “It’s just that I was hoping

we could meet Spencer there and hang out with him too. He wanted to see you.” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye then continued to pace around my living room.

“You know I don’t like Spencer that much anyway. The guy’s a dick.” I shoved my hands deep in my pockets and wished for a cigarette.

“Come on, man. I’ll bring you back here in a couple hours. I’ll even buy you a drink. I think Jamie’s supposed to be there tonight.”

And that’s what did it. Jamie was the only one who still hung out at our house. He wasn’t around much since he’d joined the military, but he was home every now and then. I knew he was home this week because we’d gotten a call from him a couple of days before. If he was in town, he’d probably be hanging out with our old friends at Wolf’s. I knew I’d be safe from Billy if Jamie was there.

Jamie wasn’t there. I don’t know why I even considered believing Billy in the first place. He was famous for lying to manipulate people into doing what he wanted. Why would I think I was somehow different; somehow special to him, just because we’d been best friends since we were ten? I guess I just hoped things might have changed for the better in the time that we’d been apart.

When we first walked in, I did a quick glance around for Jamie. The first person I saw was Spencer. It figured. Billy gave him a nod and walked over to the barstool next to him.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” He clapped Spencer on the back and lit a cigarette with the lighter Spencer handed him.

Spencer stared at me, his eyes squinting through the smoke of his cigarette. “What’s up, Turner? Ain’t seen you in a while. Thought you forgot about us.” He and Billy looked at each other as if they shared a secret—one I didn’t want to know anything about.

I lit my own cigarette. I was hoping it would calm my nerves. It didn’t. “Hey, man. It’s kind of hard to see anybody when you live out in the middle of nowhere with a kid.” I hoped that would be a good enough excuse to get him off my back. I was pretty sure Spencer didn’t give a shit about seeing me anyway. We had never been on the greatest terms.

He laughed a loud, high-pitched, fake laugh. “Hell, kids ain’t got nothing to do with it! I got two or three now and I ain’t never even seen ‘em! I don’t know why you don’t just leave that bitch and move back into civilization. Fuck that responsibility shit.” Spencer had ended up getting some white trash girl from Specksville pregnant. He’d married her, but that didn’t stop him from screwing every girl who’d have him. He’d been in and out of jail for a couple of years for beating her up so much. He flicked his cigarette too hard and ashes scattered across the bar. A chubby girl next to him wrinkled her nose up and glared. Spencer flinched his arm toward her as if to hit her, then laughed again when she gasped and leaned far away. “Fat bitch!” He mumbled into his beer bottle.

“Yeah, well, maybe because I actually give a shit about Beth and Anna and I’m not a retarded jackass like you.” I stepped toward him, then took the stool next to Billy. I wasn’t afraid of Spencer.

Billy laughed. “He’s right about that! Fucking retarded jackass!” He almost fell off his stool. I wondered how much he’d had to drink before he picked me up.

Spencer slammed his empty bottle down and leaned across Billy. “You think you’re better than me, Turner?”

“Of course I’m better than you. That’s never been disputed. You’re a cocksucking asshole, Spencer. Everyone knows it. Hell, you know it. So just give it up and have another beer.” I smiled at Billy and took a big swig of the whiskey sour the bartender had just set down in front of me. I felt very satisfied. All that anger I’d felt toward Billy for showing up in my life again and for dragging me here and lying to me about Jamie being there was easily transferred to Spencer. I thought Spencer was the biggest piece of shit I’d ever met. He was Billy’s pawn. He just did whatever Billy said and thought that made him some kind of royalty. He only did what he thought made him cool.

I didn’t know that I would end up being Billy’s pawn too. Worse than Spencer ever was.

I came back into myself hours after we’d left the bar. I had no idea what was going on. I was so drunk, I thought I’d never left my house. I’d mostly forgotten about the bar until a few days later. I looked around and saw my trailer, far away, all the lights off. I was sitting in our front field near the driveway. Billy and Spencer were sitting next to me, waiting for me to pass them the joint..

“What the hell’s going on? Where’s Beth?” I could see the first faint hints of morning light, pale in the sky just over the hill. I figured it had to be around five in the morning. The ground was covered in a sparkling frost that I at first thought was snow. I suddenly realized how cold I was. All I wanted was to crawl into my nice warm bed next to Beth and hold her. I tried to get up, but I could barely stand.

“Whoa, dude. Might want to sit still for a while. You were really wasted last night.”

Billy laughed and cupped his hands around the glowing fire of his cigarette for warmth.

I wanted to kill him. “You did this to me! You did this on purpose! You fucking bastard!” Again, I tried to stand, but stumbled over nothing and twisted my knee.

Spencer laughed. “You’re funny. You should get fucked up more. This is great.”

I glared at him. “Where’s Beth and Anna? Are they alright?”

Billy snickered. “Relax, Turner. Why would we mess with your kid or Beth? We were just trying to get you to have some fun. Like the old days, remember?” He looked toward the driveway as he said this. I didn’t know what he was planning, but I’d never been more scared in my life.

I did the only thing I could think of. I started to scream as loud as I could. “Beth! Beth! I’m here, Beth! Where are you?” I crawled toward the trailer, still screaming for help.

The trailer door flew open and a large figure in a black shirt stood in the doorway. It took me a minute to recognize him, then I realized it was Jamie. I couldn’t have asked for a better savior at that moment. As he ran down the steps, I saw that Beth had been standing behind him. She looked small and fragile. Her face was pale and her eyes were red and swollen. She’d probably been up all night worrying about me. Her long, black hair hung around her shoulders and got lost in the folds of the thick beige comforter wrapped around her. I wanted to hold her so bad. It seemed like years ago that I’d been sitting in the living room, waiting for her to come home from work. I wished I’d never let Billy in the door. I wished I could take it all back.

Jamie ran to me. “What’s wrong with you? Can you walk? What did they do?”

“I can’t get up. Not yet. Please, Jamie. Help. Get them out of here.” I felt like a helpless child, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to be rescued. It’s all I’d ever wanted. Jamie grabbed me under the arms and picked me up and walked me to the trailer. Beth held her arms out to me.

I fell into the recliner, her arms still around me. Jamie locked the door. “I love you. I missed you so much. I want to see Anna.”

“Shhhh! You’ll wake her up. Where have you been? Are you ok? You didn’t even leave me a note, Jason. I was so worried about you.” She went in the kitchen and brought me back a cup of hot coffee.

I told her what happened. I was so ashamed. I couldn’t look up at her or Jamie. I just held onto the hot mug and stared at the steam that drifted up from it.

“So, you’re stoned right now? And drunk? And you just went off with Billy, even though you knew I’d wonder where you were and worry all night?” Her voice rose, thin and cracking. Her lips were pursed. She stared at me.

“I thought it would be ok. I thought Jamie was going to be there, I swear. I just wanted to get Billy out of our house, Honey.” I was tired and confused. I didn’t even have the will to argue or explain. I just wanted everything to be ok again. I could feel my life crumbling apart with every passing second. I tried to think of something I could say that would fix everything. There had to be something. But as my broken mind was trying to piece together those magic words that would repair my world, there was a horrible crashing, grinding, metallic sound outside. Jamie ran to the door.

“What the fuck! Beth, call the cops!” Jamie took off down the front steps.

I finally managed to stand up and limp to the door. Beth was already there. What we saw made us sick. Her little blue Neon—our only vehicle—was now attached to a telephone pole by the side of the driveway. The front end wrapped around it as if they were puzzle pieces. Spencer was smashing all the windows in with the baseball bat Billy kept in his truck.

“Nooooo!” Beth’s scream was weak and ghostly next to me. Anna woke up and started to cry. She ran to the baby’s room. I ran after her.

She patted Anna’s back until she fell back to sleep. Then she walked past me, out the door and into our room. “Jason, how did they get into my car?” Her voice was cold. I thought back to what seemed like just a few minutes ago, when she had put her arms around me.

I reached for her hand, but she pulled it away. I felt in my coat pocket. I searched all my pockets frantically. “They took my keys, Beth. They must have taken my keys. I didn’t know. I promise.”

“I need you to leave. You just—you have to go right now. I can’t do this shit again. Not with a baby in the house, Jason. I can’t live like this with you. I told you that before. We agreed.” Her face was rigid and her hands clung to the blanket around her like it would save her from me. Her cheeks were wet.

“Please, no. Beth, you don’t mean it. I won’t do any more drugs again. I told you. I promised. I won’t.” My words stacked up like bricks, walling her off from me.

“Jamie will drive you to his place and then you can just go wherever. I don’t care.”

She walked toward the living room and I followed her.

“What about Anna? I can’t live without Anna. Please don’t take her away.” I had to be dreaming. Everything felt off.

“You can still see her. As long as you’re sober. Right now, I just need you to leave.”

And she went outside to look for Jamie.

Billy and Spencer had already driven away, leaving me to face their destruction alone.

Later, as I was getting into Jamie’s car, Beth took off the necklace she always wore—the one with my old guitar pick on it—and handed it to me.

“I love you, Jason.” She walked back into the house with her head down. I watched as the trailer door closed behind her, leaving me with nothing.

## Chapter 11

I never got to see Anna much back then. I just couldn't stay sober long enough. I think Billy planned it that way. I'd get nervous about going to see her, so Billy'd have me get stoned so I could calm down. Then I'd drink a little. The next thing I knew, it was three days from then and I'd missed seeing her completely. I'd be pissed off and Billy'd just have a good laugh about how stupid I was and it'd happen all over again the next time. Pretty sure the bastard planned it. I can't prove it, I guess, but that's what I believe. Really, there's no sense even thinking about it now.

I try not to think about any of this stuff if I can help it. The past is just a dead end. You can't keep going back to it—eventually you'll just get stuck there forever. But, I feel like I'm already there. Sometimes, I don't mind the past. Back then, I was with Beth and Anna. I had a chance then. I think I used to be a decent person once, but it's so far away I can't see it anymore. If I'd gotten off my ass and straightened up sooner, I'm pretty sure I could've avoided all that shit Billy put me through. I just didn't know what I wanted. But I know I didn't want what I got.

## Chapter 12

It happened late in the summer, the year me and Beth broke up, the same year I moved in with Billy and his dad. They'd finally sold the old place Billy grew up in. Guess Chuck just couldn't take living there with all those memories of Billy's mom anymore. Anyway, they moved out to a little flimsy farmhouse near the Newson Bottoms.

That house was so long ago. Sometimes, I walk through it in my dreams. I feel the hardwood floors under my bare feet. I run my hands over the faded gold fleur-de-lis on the wallpaper in the hall. I breathe in the flowery perfume scent of the lilac that grew by the mailbox. It was always so cold in that house, no matter what season it was. We never could figure out why. Chuck said he thought it was because it was haunted. There was some stupid rumor that a father and son had killed their family there, then hung themselves in the barn. People said the water made them go crazy. Not being the superstitious type, I thought that was just a load of bullcrap. But I never said anything to Chuck or Billy, just let them believe they were sharing the house with crazy ghosts. Whatever made them happy. Personally, I think it had something to do with the wood floors and the old root cellar underneath them.

It was the beginning of August. There was a solid wall of wet heat outside every day. I'd open the front door and just walk right into it, sweat pouring down my face and trickling down the middle of my back, and I was soaked by the time the door shut behind me. There had been a drought for months. Mudball, Billy's old hound dog, would lie flat on his belly in the driveway, covered in dust, stinking of dried river mud. Every once in a while, one of the little fat gray birds that nested in the Forsythia by the living room

window, would land on the edge of his food bowl and peck at bits of stale dog food. Then, Mudball would slowly raise the droopy lid of one eye, like it took all the energy he had, and you'd know he was still alive. It would rain every few weeks, but only enough to tease us, make us think a real storm was coming. You could tell it was a lie, 'cause it'd be a hot rain, like it'd been boiling up in the clouds for a while before it fell. Then, it'd get even more humid. The river would stink like dead fish. I started wishing I could grow gills so maybe I could breathe. The sweet smell of dying corn drifted through the air now and again, on the rare occasions a breeze actually blew. The only thing left growing was kudzu. It grew and overgrew on fence posts and telephone poles and on the side of every road. It choked out everything around it.

It wasn't so bad living there, though, at first. But, after a few months, I hardly saw Billy or Chuck at all. They started keeping odd hours. Sometimes, they'd be gone for a week or two at a time. They'd make up excuses and tell me Billy's Aunt Martha was sick and they had to go stay with her. But when they'd come back, and I'd ask if she was any better, they'd forget that's where they'd been.

Things were getting better with Billy gone so much. For one thing, he stopped giving me crank, so I had no choice—I finally got clean. It took a while, but not as long as it would have if Billy had been there when I was trying to do it. I was still talking to Beth, trying to work things out. When I told her I thought they were dealing some really hard drugs, she freaked. She told me to get the hell out of there and move back in with my parents or something. When I said I'd move back in with her, she said no, not yet. The

night I got really scared, the night I stopped being friends with Billy, that night was when I started to put things together and realize maybe it was more than just dealing drugs.

Chuck and Billy had left early that morning and they'd been gone all day. I'd had a sore throat, probably from the weather. Every summer, I got sick from all the heat. My body never has gotten used to it. Anyway, I'd gotten up to get some water from the kitchen. I was standing there, with the freezer door open, digging out chunks of ice to put in my lukewarm water, when the back door opened. Billy walked in slowly, like he was nervous about something. I hadn't turned on a light, so the room was pitch black. I closed the freezer door and just stood there, waiting for Billy to notice me, to say something. But he didn't. It took me a minute to realize his eyes hadn't adjusted enough to see me yet.

"Hey, man, what's up? You guys just getting in?"

Billy jumped back a little and reached for something behind him.

"Dude, you ok?"

"Where's your dad?" I kept waiting for him to respond, but everything was silent. All I could hear was my own voice and Billy's breath, coming in hard, rasping gasps. I opened the 'fridge for some light. Billy was blocking the switch and I was afraid to go near him. He didn't seem right. As soon as the shaft of light hit Billy, I saw the blood on his hands. It dripped in heavy streams from his fingertips. He just held them out in front of him and stared at me, like he didn't even know who I was. There was blood soaking through his t-shirt and smeared on his jeans. I saw it in the footprints he'd left behind him on the green-checkered linoleum.

“Oh, my God, Billy! Are you hurt? Where’s Chuck? Did you guys wreck?” I was panicking at this point and he still hadn’t said a word to me. I thought he was in shock. I threw my glass in the sink and ran over to him. Somewhere far away, I heard the glass shatter. I started shaking Billy. An overwhelming copper smell filled the kitchen. Blood got on my hands. I could feel it, sticky and slippery, under my bare feet. I tried not to think about it. My best friend was going to die.

I guess all my shaking woke him up or something, because he finally spoke.

“Let go, Jason. It’s not my blood.” His voice was deep and cold and strangely steady. I still thought it was the shock.

“Is it your dad—”

“No.” He looked me straight in the eyes and I shivered. I couldn’t help it. I started believing the stories about ghosts possessing people and the water making them go crazy. I was suddenly glad I hadn’t been able to drink my water.

“Then whose—”

“Just leave it alone, Jason. Leave it alone. Pretend you never saw me. I mean it.”

I just couldn’t let it go. I thought maybe I was still in bed asleep. I hoped I was anyway. “Where’s your dad, Billy? Where the fuck is he? What did you do to him?” My voice cracked with fear and my throat was sorer than ever. My tongue searched my mouth desperately for spit to swallow, but came up empty.

“He’s cleaning out the car. Go back to bed. I’m going to take a shower. You weren’t supposed to be up anyway, dammit.”

I backed away slowly, keeping my eyes on him the whole time. I couldn't stop staring at his hands. All that blood. I'd never seen so much. He didn't stop watching me either. Just kept walking forward as I moved back. When I got to my bedroom door, I fumbled for the knob before realizing I'd left it open. I started to close it slowly, still watching Billy, watching me.

"Jason. You didn't see shit, remember? You didn't see shit." His voice was angry now, threatening.

I closed the door the rest of the way until I heard it snap shut. Then I locked it and jammed a chair under the knob. I pulled my bloody clothes off and cried while I wiped the blood from my hands and feet. I sat on the edge of the bed in my underwear, shivering in the heat. I didn't reach for the phone until I heard the shower come on. Then I knew he couldn't hear me.

The phone rang for so long, I got scared she wouldn't wake up to answer it. She was all I had left. I was scared shitless and she was all I had left.

"Hello? Hello?" It was the best sound I'd ever heard.

"Beth? Beth, it's me. Don't hang up, please, I need you. I'm not trashed, I promise. Don't hang up."

"Jason? Are you alright?"

"No. I— Something happened. I can't— I don't know what to do. You always tell me what to do."

"Honey, are you crying? What happened?" She was wide awake now. I could hear the fear in her voice.

“Beth. Just now—” I couldn’t breathe. The fear and the heat were suffocating me. What if she didn’t believe me? What if she hung up? I needed her. “Just now, I was in the kitchen and Billy came home with blood all over him. He— I don’t think it’s drugs, Beth. I think they’re doing worse shit—way worse.”

“Blood? Where’s Chuck? Did he kill him?”

“I don’t know. No, I don’t think so. He said Chuck was cleaning out the car. I’m scared. I think he’s going to kill me ‘cause I saw him with the blood.”

“I’m coming to get you. You’ve got to get out of there.”

I panicked. I knew I couldn’t let Beth come out here. They’d kill her too. I listened for the shower. It was still going. The rotten egg smell of sulfur water drifted under the door and filled my room.

“No. It’s too dangerous. I don’t trust them. Just, please, stay on the phone with me till morning. I need to hear your voice or I’ll lose it. I’m really scared—just don’t hang up.” There was silence for a while, and I thought she’d hung up anyway. Maybe she’d fallen asleep.

A sigh broke through the stillness. I heard Beth drop her keys into the little glass dish by the front door. I knew she was probably sitting there in the dark in our living room, sunk down deep in that big, ugly chair her grandmother had given us. Eventually, she’d get cold and go get a blanket from our bed. I could see her curled up in the chair, a blanket, probably that holey blue one that always smelled musty, no matter how many times we washed it, pulled up under her chin, the one hand sticking out to hold the phone. I always felt better when I thought about her.

“Ok, honey. I’ll stay up with you. But you have to promise to let me get you tomorrow. You’re coming home.”

“I promise.” I had never wanted to go home so bad in my life.

We started working things out after that. I was so happy to move back in with her and Anna. I didn’t even try to see Billy. Hell, I pretended he didn’t exist. He didn’t come around and I didn’t visit. Suited me just fine. When me or Beth saw Lori at the grocery store or the gas station, she’d talk to us about him and Chuck getting a job traveling around, state to state, painting water tanks. She said they were making pretty good money. They’d bought a brand new car—a real nice one. I never told Lori what I thought they were really doing. Didn’t want to break her heart. Plus, it made me sick to think of it.

## Chapter 13

My life was starting to go like I'd planned it, before I'd messed it all up. Until Jamie showed up at my front door one day in late September. He was on leave for a week and a bunch of people from high school were getting together to celebrate. I knew why I still hung out with those guys—I was stuck here and so were they. But, I didn't understand why Jamie would want to. Maybe he was homesick. Maybe he was checking up on us or something. Jamie's younger brother hung out with the same crowd I did, so maybe he just got talked into it. Either way, it was nice to see him again.

"We're just going to have a little bonfire down in The Bottoms. You know, get drunk, shoot the shit, just like old times, man. What do you say?"

I got the feeling Jamie didn't remember "old times" like I did. He'd been away for a long time. I looked at Beth.

"Billy going to be there?" Her lips were pressed tight together and one eyebrow was slightly raised. It was her "don't-lie-to-me-or-you'll-be-sorry" look.

"Nope. My brother said he heard he's still outta' town." Jamie adjusted his baseball hat and grinned at her. I knew she wouldn't refuse. She'd been friends with Jamie since they were kids. She didn't worry when Jamie was around 'cause he always took care of me. Besides, he was the only one of our friends who'd ever made something of himself.

"Go ahead. What's one night? I'll be fine. Just behave yourself." She smiled that perfect smile of hers that made her eyes squint up till they almost disappeared.

I look back now, and I can still remember every detail about her. The way the light from the living room lamp landed just right on her hair, so the black got all glossy like

polished wood, the way she leaned over to pick Anna up, her baggy shirt slipping down over one shoulder, showing the dark freckles left over from her fading tan. That smell she always had, like fresh raspberries and honeysuckle.

All these memories collect and fester in my mind like clusters of gnats on an open wound. I can't take anything back—can't erase it. But, I can't seem to let it go either. I am made of memories. I live in the past—a real live time machine. Only, I can never move forward. Not after that night.

When we pulled up, the first thing we saw was Billy standing there, pretending to push some guy in the fire. I looked at Jamie.

“I thought Billy was out of town.”

“Me too.” Jamie's lips pressed together in a tight line and I could tell he was gritting his teeth. “It'll be ok I'll watch him.”

I trusted Jamie, but I was still scared.

It was the first time I'd seen Billy in a month. He'd gotten real skinny and pale. I thought that was kind of weird, since he'd been up on those tanks in the hot sun every day. But, I didn't say anything. I knew better. Every one of us had heard the rumors. Some people even said Billy was bragging about stuff he'd done. But nobody knew for sure and nobody would ever accuse him of anything. We all knew he was fucking crazy. But we pretended anyway. This was where no one spoke of anything. To speak was suicide. You just kept your damn mouth shut and went about your business like you didn't see anything at all.

“Hey, man. I ain’t seen you for a long ass time. Beth ok? She still pissed off at me?”

He threw his arm around my shoulders and I had to try hard not to flinch. He gripped my shoulder tight like my dad used to when I’d done something bad and he was about to lecture me. I half expected Billy to tell me I needed to really think about what I’d done. I could still smell the thick metallic scent of blood when I thought about that night in the kitchen.

“Yeah, but she’ll get over it. You know how she is.” I looked at the ground. I couldn’t make eye contact with him without cringing. His hand gripped a little harder. I almost looked to make sure it hadn’t somehow turned into a claw.

“Yeah, don’t I know it. Those bitches sure can hold grudges, right?” He slapped me on the back and walked toward the fire, a cigarette dangling from his mouth and a bottle of Bud Light in his hand. He seemed like the same old Billy, but I got the feeling he’d only asked me about Beth to see if I’d told her or not.

When the bonfire was almost out and just about everybody was gone, I grabbed a couple of beer bottles off the ground and filled them with river water. I poured it on the fire and kicked dirt over it. Billy stood close to the embers and pissed on the last flame until it sizzled and went dark. I looked around and realized I was alone with Billy. I saw Jamie walking away with his brother. He was so wasted I knew he’d forget me if I didn’t say something. Everybody’d been so glad to see him, they’d forced drinks on him all night. I’d never seen Jamie that drunk. I always heard you drink more once you join the military, though. I guess it’s true. I started to run after them and Billy grabbed my arm.

“Where you goin’?” His words fell out in a slur over the burnt end of his cigarette.

Even through the leftover heat of the dying summer and the smoldering bonfire, I could feel the cold of winter like tiny needles on the back of my neck. I answered without turning around to face him.

“I was going to catch a ride with Jamie. I really need to get home. Beth—she worries, you know. She’ll come looking for me if I don’t get home soon.” My stomach felt like it was collapsing in on itself. I knew he wasn’t going to let me go. I could feel myself giving up before he even spoke.

“Naw. I need you to ride with me. We gotta’ talk about some stuff.”

I watched Jamie and his brother get in their truck and drive away, leaving me alone with Billy. I turned and followed him to his new car, a shiny black Camaro.

The seatbelt held me in like a prisoner. Billy started the car and Metallica came blasting from the speakers.

*“I jumped up, fired my pistols and I shot him with both barrels...”*

I clenched my hands tight so Billy wouldn’t see them shaking. He didn’t say anything, didn’t even look at me. I started praying it would be over quick. I almost cried when I thought about Beth and Anna. Billy did ninety down the gravel road, dust spewing out behind us. I figured he was pretty drunk, so maybe I’d have a chance if I could just get out of the car. I knew I could outrun him. Billy had been fucked up on all kinds of shit for years. He was already half rotted inside.

The road Billy chose followed the river pretty close. It went past all the shanty houses where the poorest people in the Bottoms lived. I knew I was fucked. People around there didn’t call the cops for anything. Hell, most of them had family in the county jail for

selling meth or pot. They hated cops. If they saw or heard anything, they just closed their curtains and locked their doors until it was over. Guess that's why Billy went down that road.

He turned the music off and slowed down.

"Don't shit yourself, Jason. I ain't brought you out here to kill you, dumbass." His words were clear now, not slurred at all like before. I'd seen him drink a shitload of beer and half a bottle of some shit Derek Stewart had made in his barn. He had to be completely wasted by now. But he wasn't.

"I didn't think you were going to kill me, Billy. I'm just worried about Beth being home alone, that's all. I just really need to get home soon." I tried to sound convincing, but I knew I just sounded like a wuss.

"I just need to talk to you about somethin' and I can't do it with people around." He pushed the cigarette lighter button in and waited for it to heat up. "Hand me that pack by your feet, man."

I looked down and grabbed the battered pack of Camels my foot had kicked half under the seat earlier. I handed it to him and my hand still shook.

"For fuck's sake, Jason, you pussy! I mean, what the fuck, dude? It's me. We've been best friends since we was ten, you dumbshit! You just gonna' all of a sudden start bein' afraid of me? What the fuck!" Billy slammed his fist on the steering wheel. "Why don't you fuckin' grow a pair, Turner!"

I looked out the window at the skinny stretch of river. It was so dry now, you could actually walk across it in places. Most of the trees had lost their leaves early and I could see to the other bank. I kept my eyes on the river when I talked to him.

“I just thought— I saw the blood, Billy. I— People have been saying shit about you, you know. I figured since I’d been there that night— You’re not the same anymore, Billy. I haven’t even seen you in over a month. Then you take me way out here alone. What the hell am I supposed to think?” My voice cracked on the last word. He knew how scared I was. He knew everything about me. We’d been best friends since we were kids. Hell, he knew me better than Beth.

Billy started laughing. He lit his cigarette and took a long drag, then laughed again. “God, you have got to be the biggest fuckin’ pussy I have ever met! Shit, you can’t even bitch at me without soundin’ like a little girl! Holy shit, dude, if I had to live like that, I’d fuckin’ shoot myself. You’re funny, Jason, you really are.” He laughed again and cracked his window to let the smoke out. “I brought you out here to cut you in, dude. Me and dad are makin’ a shit ton of cash and we thought you might want to get in on it. Shit, I don’t know now, man. You’d probably piss yourself if you ever had to shoot somebody.” He glanced over at me. He knew I knew. Didn’t even pretend. I had no clue what I was supposed to say. If I tried to back out, I was pretty sure he’d kill me.

Up ahead, on the side of the road, we saw somebody standing there with their thumb out. It was my way out. “Hey, dude, isn’t that Mark Salyers?”

Billy leaned forward in his seat. “Holy shit! Sure as fuck is! What the fuck’s he doing down here?” He slowed the car down. “Don’t he live in town somewhere still?”

“Yeah, out at Thompson’s Trailer Park. You remember, we went to his house a coupla’ times in high school.”

I had gone to Mark’s house more times than I could remember. He lived in the trailer park behind all the fast food restaurants. I remember his backyard smelled like a county fair, all grease and barbeque. I used to go over there all the time to play video games and watch movies. We got along because we were both so different. We talked different than everybody else, thought different even. It was easy to be friends with Mark.

Billy’d only really started hanging out with him in high school. By then, Mark was the biggest pot dealer in town, so Billy had a reason to want him around. We’d go over to his house when his mom was at work and smoke blunts with him in his closet-sized bedroom. Billy said black people always had the best pot. I guess he was right, because Mark made a ton of money selling it. Billy didn’t go over there too often, though, when he found out Mark was gay. It’s not that he didn’t like gays, he was just a bit homophobic. Always thought they were trying to hit on him. Of course, he also thought every girl who saw him wanted to fuck him too. Most of them did, so I guess he had a good reason to be worried. Me and Mark hadn’t hung out in a few years, though. I’d started hanging out with Billy a lot and then there was Beth and Anna. Mark lived in town and I lived out in the county. Shit happens, people forget each other. That’s life. I was sure as hell glad to see him now, though.

Billy stopped the car and I rolled my window down.

“Mark? Hey, man, I haven’t seen you in forever!” I stuck my hand out the window and shook his. The alcohol smell of him drifted in through the open window and sunk into my skin when I touched him. He was beyond trashed.

“What the hell are you doin’ way out here? I thought you lived in town.” Billy ducked his head to look out my window at Mark.

“Oh, man, I’m glad iss ya’ll. I am so fucked up, man.” Mark’s words dragged out thick and slow. He tried to talk normal, but they kept running together, almost like his tongue was swollen. “I was sellin’ some shit out here an’ cometa’ fin’ out, Tug Roberts is livin’ out here with those Dawson kidswewentta’ school with. I’ve been’ere all day. My ride ne’ershowup an’ Tug’s truck is fucked up. Think Ic’n getta’ ride in town with ya’ll?”

I looked at Billy, confused. I figured Mark had asked us to take him home, but I wasn’t positive. Billy looked back at me without trying to hide his amusement. He thought drunk people were funny. Hell, Billy thought anybody he could mess with was funny.

“No problem, man. Get in.” Billy tossed his cigarette butt out the window and lit another.

I felt a little better with Mark there. I couldn’t wait to get home to Beth and Anna. I swore I’d never come down to the Bottoms again if I got back safe. Then it happened.

From the back seat, Mark’s slurred voice yelled over the radio. “Hey, man, Ioweya’, Billy. I thought I’sgonna’ hafta’ walkallwayinta’ town. I don’ havenny money for gas oranything. Sorry.”

“That’s cool, man. Don’t worry ‘bout it.” Billy was still snickering.

“Itellya’ what, man. Itellya’what. I’ll blowya’ll’fyou want me to.”

Billy stopped laughing. I stopped breathing. I knew in that moment that Mark and I were both fucked. We were never getting home. Billy’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel. His jaw clenched and I could see the bones locked tight together under the skin.

“Billy, he’s drunk, he doesn’t know what he’s saying. Just let it go, man. You know he’d never say that shit to you if he was sober. Let it go. Take us home.”

“Naw, it’s cool, Jason. It’s cool.” His voice was abnormally high and calm and his jaw stayed clenched. He’d pinched the end of his cigarette between his fingers so hard, it was almost flat. “Yeah. Yeah, ok, Mark, I’ll let you blow me, that’s cool. Fuck, what’s it matter, right? It’s dark out, I can’t see ya’. Sure, man. We’ll park over by the river, is that cool? Do it on the beach. You up for it, man?” He looked at Mark in his rearview mirror, his eyes squinted with hate and disgust. I knew Mark was too drunk to notice this.

“Yeah, thas’ cool. Jas’n, youwan’onetoo?”

“No, man, I’m good. I’ve got a girlfriend, remember?”

He drove up onto the beach, near a clump of river willows, where the darkness was deep and whole. There would be a full moon in a few days, so most of Newson Beach was pretty bright. But not that spot. People had picnics in the shade of those trees on hot afternoons and teenagers made out there in mud-covered cars on sweaty summer nights. But it was too late for anyone to still be there tonight. Besides, it was late September. Most of the teenagers had school in the morning and early curfews that night. We were alone.

Billy parked the car and led Mark to the group of trees. I got out and followed them, still hoping I could talk Billy out of whatever horrible thing he was planning to do. Billy leaned against a tree and started to unbuckle his belt. Mark tried to kneel down in front of him, but he was so drunk, it was more of a clumsy drop to the ground. As soon as Mark reached out to unzip Billy's jeans, Billy's knee shot up fast and caught him in the nose. Mark fell backward, blood gushing out of his face and running down off the end of his chin like a waterfall. He cried out a pitiful drunken cry that was a mix between confusion and pain.

"Billy, no! What the fuck?" I ran to help Mark up, knowing I was risking the same fate. Blood and sand stuck to his face in clumps that looked like oatmeal. I looked up at Billy and saw the rage on his face. It wasn't over.

"This is none of your business, Jason. Either get back to the car or you're part of this too. Understand? You ain't pussin' out no more, motherfucker. I'm sick of your shit!" Billy's voice was cold. I wanted to run. I always ran. But something kept me there.

"You can't do this! You're always fucking with people like they don't matter. They fucking matter, Billy!"

"You're such a fuckin' pussy! You can't fuckin' stand up for yourself! I'm sick of your bitching and whining! He's just a damn queer, for God's sake! He doesn't fucking matter!"

I'd heard Billy yell at other people like that, but never at me. I'd always managed to avoid it by doing whatever he told me to. I watched Mark struggling to get up, wiping blood off with the back of his hand. "You son of a bitch! I'll fucking kill you!" I started

towards him. Billy pulled something from behind his back. The moonlight caught it just right and I stopped. My best friend was pointing a gun at me.

“Go ahead and try it, asshole. Bad time to finally grow some balls, isn’t it?” The moonlight made his face look like a Halloween mask. His eyes were hollow black and half his face was stuck in a twisted smile. The other half was missing, lost in the shadows. I could hear Mark behind me, his breath coming in raspy, choking gasps.

“Billy, don’t. I— I’m sorry. Just let us go. Forget this shit, ok”

“Fuck off, Turner. Put him up against that tree. We gotta’ tie him up.”

“What? Why? Can’t we just leave him here? You already broke his nose. Just leave him.” My whole body was shaking. My stomach burned.

“That fuckin’ homo tried to suck my dick! I ain’t lettin’ that shit go. Ain’t no fuckin’ way. Lean him up against the tree or I’ll fuckin’ shoot your ass!” Billy took a few steps toward me.

I went to Mark and half-carried him to the tree, his feet dragging over the rocks and sand, making muffled scraping noises. “Mark, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do. I’ll get you out of this, I promise.” I whispered low in his ear as I propped him up, so Billy wouldn’t hear.

“It’s not your fault, man.” Mark’s words were sober and clear. “Jason, tell my mom I’m sorry. Tell her I love her.”

His face was so close to mine, I could smell the sharp whiskey sweat that drenched him. “It’ll be ok, man. I promise.” I didn’t know what else to say.

When I stood up, Billy came up beside me and shoved the gun into my hand. “Here. Hold this on him while I tie him up.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll shoot you?” The words hung there in the air between us like the mist that was starting to roll off the river. Silvery and transparent.

Billy laughed. He got so close to me I could feel the heat from his breath. “It ain’t loaded, dumbass. You think I’d aim a loaded gun at you? You’re my best friend. I just wanted to scare the shit out of Mark.”

He pulled something from a low limb. Rope. I hadn’t even noticed it before. What the fuck was wrong with him? He must have put the rope there earlier, that’s why he was driving me out here, to scare the fuck out of me. That motherfucker had finally lost his mind. I watched him tie Mark to the tree, the gun dangling by my side uncomfortably. Billy was right. I could never shoot anybody. I couldn’t even aim an empty gun at them. I didn’t know why that was a bad thing.

Billy grabbed the gun from my hand. I looked at Mark. He was tied so tight, the skin on his arms bulged through between the white plastic of the ropes. When he tried to struggle, I saw tiny cuts appear on his left arm.

“Dude, why’d you tie him so tight? I thought this was just a joke. You’re hurting him, Billy! Loosen the ropes!”

Mark was crying now. It sounded awful—great, deep sobs with gasping breaths between them. I wanted the joke to be over.

“But, if I loosen the ropes, he’ll get out. And then I couldn’t do this.” Billy aimed the gun and lowered it till it lined up with Mark’s head.

“No!” I felt my feet leave the air, but I don’t remember moving. The next thing I knew, I was wrestling with Billy, trying to yank the gun from his hands. He kicked me in the face and I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my cheek. I wiped at my face and smeared blood across the back of my hand.

Billy watched me, laughing. He looked pleased. I wanted to strangle him.

“Well, it’s about time, Turner! I guess you got some balls after all, don’tcha’? Just gotta’ be faster next time.” Billy bent down and took out another, smaller gun from a strap hidden under his jeans, on his calf. It was a dull black. Not shiny like the other one. I could only see it when he turned and the moonlight fell over the barrel. Billy had always liked guns. He’d collected them since high school. Always carried one with him. I wondered when he had started carrying two. Maybe it was just for special occasions, like tonight.

He came toward me, the black gun pointed at my face. He held the other one down at his side, like it was just an empty bottle of beer or something. When he got close, he reached out and grabbed my hand. I screamed.

Billy threw his head back and practically wet himself laughing. “You sound like my sister, you fuckin’ baby! What the hell’s wrong with you? I was just givin’ you the gun. That is what you wanted, right?” The sarcasm in his voice was more than I could stand. I grabbed the gun from his hand. He let me.

I pointed it at Billy’s eyes, trying to keep my hands steady.

“Yeah, I reckon we could do it like that, man, but I was thinkin’ of somethin’ else.”

Before I could even think about moving, he had somehow managed to get behind me. I felt the hard barrel of the gun jab into my spine.

“Billy, don’t. I’m sorry. You know I wasn’t going to shoot you. You know that, right?” I hated myself because I knew that even though I only said it to save my life, it was the truth. And Billy knew it.

“I know, Jason. That’s what’s so fuckin’ pitiful.”

He leaned in so close to my ear that his cheek touched mine. “Listen, Jason, I want you to do somethin’ for me. You’re gonna’ shoot Mark in the head, ok?”

A strange whimpering sound came from deep in my throat. I’d never heard it before. It was somewhere between crying and screaming. At first, I wasn’t even sure it was me.

“Jason, calm down. Don’t think of it as Mark. Think of it like you’re killing a deer. You’re just out hunting and it’s no big deal.”

“I don’t want to. You can’t make me, Billy. I won’t do it.” I tried to pull away from him, but his hand clenched tight around my arm.

“Yes, you will. ‘Cause if you don’t, I’ll kill you. And if you’re dead, then who’s to stop me from killing Beth and Anna?” He spoke deep and low, in a strangely soothing voice. The sound of spit sticking to his tongue, catching on his lips and the roof of his mouth, hung on the last part of each word.

I clenched my fists and willed myself to breathe deep just once before answering. “ok, Billy. I’ll do it.” He pressed the gun into my hand. I stood there and aimed it at Mark, while Billy continued to shove his gun into my back. My hands were so slick with sweat,

the gun kept slipping and I had to wipe my hands off on my jeans more than once. They shook. My whole body shook. My stomach burned and I didn't know if I was going to shit or throw up.

“Pull the fucking trigger!” Billy screamed behind me, the softness of his voice gone. It was full and loud and it made me jump. I had been aiming for the trees to the left of Mark. I thought if I shot there, I might be able to turn real fast and shoot Billy or knock the gun out of his hand. Anything to get out of this night. When I flinched, my finger pulled the trigger.

Mark screamed in pain. His left shoulder gushed blood. The gun fell from my hand, landing with a quiet thud into the sand at my feet.

As I watched Mark cry, saw the fear in his eyes, a loud shot rang out beside me. I watched as the blood sprayed from Mark's forehead, dark spatter pelting willow leaves and sinking into sand. I felt the echo of the shot in my ears like a blunt stab. The choking sulfur of gunpowder was already starting to disappear into the damp river smell. My knees gave out and I fell into the sand. I didn't want to move. I spoke important things in choked sobs, but there really weren't any words. I lay there with my face pressed against the sand for what seemed like hours. I couldn't move.

“Come on, Turner, we gotta' get you home to your whore. She'll be out here lookin' for you, remember?” Billy picked up the empty bullet casings and slipped them into his pocket. He put the gun away and held out a hand to help me up. There was no emotion on his face. No indication of what he'd just done.

I couldn't speak. Couldn't look at Mark. I shut my eyes tight and tried to will myself home in bed with Beth. Billy's voice was all I could hear.

## Chapter 14

“Come on. Quit bein’ such a puss and let’s get the fuck outta’ here, man. I don’t wanna’ have to off you too, dumbass.” Billy kicked at my side with his the toe of his shoe. After a few times, he finally lifted me up as best he could. I followed him, because I was too scared to stay there with Mark’s body. When I sat in the car, damp sand came off of me in clumps. I could feel my cold sweat drying with the air coming through the open window. Mark’s smell still soaked the backseat where he’d sat. Whiskey and pot smoke and that faint perfume and fresh-baked food smell of his mother’s house. It was all there. I pretended he was still in the backseat, quiet, because he was passed out, waiting for us to deliver him safely to his mother’s, where he’d lived since I’d known him. I closed my eyes and imagined that Billy never existed. Maybe Beth was driving us home. I began to smell honeysuckle in place of cigarettes. Billy’s voice cut through my fantasy and I could hear the gunshot, see Mark’s body go limp all over again.

“Dude, look, you know you can’t say anything about this, right? You can’t tell the cops shit, ‘cause your fingerprints are all over my gun and all over Mark, ok? They’ll know you were there and it’ll look like you killed him, so you gotta’ just keep your mouth shut, man.” Billy flicked the ashes from his cigarette out the window and they melted into the trees flying past. I said nothing. I’d be sure to tell the cops when I got home. Billy was too fucked up to remember that his fingerprints were on everything too. He hadn’t thought about his tire tracks at the scene either. It was like he thought he’d planned the perfect crime. He finally stopped looking at me and turned the radio up. Tom Petty and cigarette smoke filled the car, drowning out the lingering smell of Mark.

“Now I’m free, free fallin’ ” Billy and Tom sang at the tops of their lungs, while I stared out the window at the blur of passing fields and farmhouses.

Billy dropped me off at home. He leaned out the car window, the pale white of his arm hanging over the mud-spattered black door of the Camaro. Bits of ash floated down from the cigarette dangling between his lips. “I had fun, Jason. It was good hangin’ out with you again, man. You did good. Take it easy, ok?” I could hear him singing until his car went around the curve and disappeared.

Billy went to jail that night. I told the cops everything. I knew I wasn’t innocent, but it didn’t matter. I just wanted Billy to go away. Beth left me for good during the trial. She said she wasn’t sure what to believe; didn’t know what I was capable of anymore. I let her go. I knew I didn’t deserve her anyway. Never did. Been alone here ever since.

## Chapter 15

I try not to think too much about any of them anymore. Just try to live my life—bad as it is. I've thought about moving back up to New England where all my relatives are, but I don't think it'd make much of a difference. The poison's inside me. I'm infected, rotting from the inside out. Everything reminds me of what I did, of what I lost.

I tried to go to college a few years after it happened. Thought I could get away. But I just went a couple of counties over and that only lasted a year. I couldn't concentrate on anything but my nightmares. Had one every night. I didn't fit in with anybody, so I finally gave up and came home.

Home. It's funny that I still call it that. I haven't really had a home in years. Not a place I felt comfortable—like I belonged and was safe. I bought this place a few years ago. I think it was mostly to punish myself. I could've bought something in town, something nicer. But I needed to be alone. And I needed the river. Every muddy ripple that breaks the surface, every time the moon shines on it at night making a mirror for the stars, every splash from every animal that dives in to escape the summer heat—all of these things—remind me of Billy. Remind me of the night my life ended.

The river tears up its banks more every year. The box elders on the other side used to grow so thick, I couldn't see the house over there for their knotted trunks. Over the years, the river has pulled them down by the roots, drowning whole trees at once, destroying miles of land. Sometimes, it just eats away at it little by little and you don't notice until one day there's a big, empty spot where there used to be dirt and trees and grass.

All I do anymore when I'm not at work is watch that damned river. Watch it flow past and wear everything down to nothing. Twice a year it overflows its banks and comes fast and angry out of itself, up through the sinkholes and into the road, the fields, my yard. And then I feel more alone than ever—cut off from the rest of the world by its presence. I have to canoe across the road to my truck to get to work. Then, the river is invasive, intruding into my life and festering like a scab that won't heal. After about a week, it slowly drains back into its path and continues on like always, leaving everything soggy and stinking of dead fish.

Often, it's difficult for me to resist the urge to follow it back. It would be so easy to just walk off my porch and into the water. To let it carry me away into oblivion. That's when I think about Anna the most. She usually keeps me from giving up completely; from disappearing into the flood.

I suppose the reason I started remembering all this stuff lately is because I saw Beth and Anna last week at Walmart. Anna yelled, "Daddy!" and my heart stopped. It's the best feeling in the world when she calls me that. I talked to her and Beth for a good hour before they had to go. I wanted to ask Beth if I could just come home with them—sit down to supper and talk about our day together. Tell Beth how good her Shepherd's Pie is—how even though she's a Southerner, she makes it just as good as my mom did. Ask Anna what she learned that day; listen to her talk about her friends. Watch Beth smile and remember what she looked like the first day I met her. It was all I could do to just keep it together long enough to get out of Walmart and into my truck. I don't think anything will

ever be fixed—I'll never get the past back. And maybe I don't want to anymore. Maybe Beth and Anna are better off without me dragging them down.

I plan on ending it now. I can't last any longer out here. I tried not to think too much about Beth and Anna before I came up to the bluffs, but I almost called, just to hear their voices. I stopped myself after I'd already dialed six numbers. I left money for them on the counter, along with a note letting whoever reads it know how guilty I feel about just being alive. I put the dogs in the pen with some food and water. I hope Beth will take care of them like I asked in the note. I know she will.

The bluffs are unusually quiet today. That happens before it rains a lot. Everything takes shelter to wait out the storm. The wind is the only thing I can hear—blowing through the Sycamores and battering the Maples around. It's a nice sound. It comforts me, makes me think that God might still be around. Looking over the edge of the bluff, things become so small they barely matter. I feel small too. Insignificant, compared to this landscape. The sky is getting dark over across the river. It's scary to get caught up here in a storm. The path gets too slippery to climb down, all that moss growing over the rocks.

Closer to the edge, I can feel my body start to sway when the wind blows hard. Leaves fly past beneath me, over the slope that leads down to the river. I watch the river rush by, knowing nothing, feeling nothing, just moving past everyone for so many years. I close my eyes, dizzy with the darkness and the crashing of the water against broken tree limbs, stuck in its path.

I remember Mark. I take a deep breath and try to remember the smell of pineapples on baked ham and sweet tea with lemon. Dollar General cologne and the overpowering bittersweet stench of the best pot I ever had, rolled up in cheap cigars. I remember video games in his bedroom—Mark making up names for his *Final Fantasy* characters, “Lithium” and “Prozac.” Wiping orange Cheetos gunk on our jeans and laughing. I try to remember anything but his limp body and the bloody hole in his forehead. But that image is forever mixed in with all those simple high school memories of him. I can’t help it. Sometimes bad things just happen—they can’t be stopped. Sometimes we should punish ourselves anyway, just in case.

I can smell the fresh clean scent of rain in the air now. I feel the first icy drops hit my face as I dangle my foot over the edge of the bluffs toward the trees below. Far off, when the wind calms down, I can hear the dented tan jeep the mailman drives stop at my mailbox. I can’t help but wonder what kind of junk mail I’ll get today. Will anyone look through it? Throw it out? It amuses me that I’m thinking about junk mail right now. What the hell is wrong with me?

The ground is getting slick toward the edge. All the damp, rotted leafmeal left over from last fall has turned shiny in the rain. It’ll be just like I misstepped; like I slipped and fell and never saw it coming. Except I saw this coming. Saw it from years back. What else can I ever do with my life now? It can’t be helped, this misstep, it’s already set in stone.

I can hear my dogs barking. Someone must be at the house. Must be the mailman had a package. Oh, well, nothing's really important enough to open right now—not going to need it anyway, right?

The ground seems so far away. I wonder how long it will take my body to reach it, to feel the rocks break my bones? Will I feel it? I hope so. I hope I lie there and suffer. I deserve it. I deserve worse. I may not be a killer, but I'm just as bad. I could've saved Mark, but I didn't. I just stood there and watched him die, then got in the car with the guy who killed him. I should've killed Billy. If I had, maybe I could justify living. But I didn't. I was a coward then and I'm one now. Every time my foot goes out I hesitate and pull it back. I can't commit. Guess that's always been my problem. I'm a failure. I just keep waiting for something to happen in my life and nothing ever does. No wonder my life has led here, to the muddy edge of these bluffs.

## Chapter 16

“Jason? Jason, please come down!”

Shuffling through the thick, rotten leaves to the back edge of the bluffs, I can finally see her. I thought it was the wind or that my mind was finally gone. But, there she is, her long black hair tied back in a quick ponytail, parts of it falling out around her flushed face, her blue t-shirt drenched with rain, her face twisted up with the exhaustion of the hike and panic. My dogs are circling around her feet and barking up at me. She must’ve let them out of the pen.

“Beth? What? Why are you here?” I’m scared and relieved at the same time. How am I supposed to explain himself? I wasn’t really expecting to have to explain anything. That’s why I wrote the letter. But, here she is. A minute ago, I was ready to jump off into oblivion. Now, looking down at her and thinking about Anna, I just feel shame and embarrassment.

“I came to see you. I wanted to talk to you about something. The dogs were in the pen. Your key—your key was on the porch chair—I saw the note—I ran up here—” Her breath comes in hitched gasps. She holds her left side, pressing into it hard with both hands. She must’ve sprinted up here as fast as she could. I can’t help smiling. I didn’t think she cared. She hardly ever comes out here to see me. Says it’s too far out; gives her the creeps being in the middle of nowhere, where anything could happen to you and no one would know for a very long time.

“Can you come down, please?” She’s doubled over now. Her breath is shallow.

I look to the far edge of the bluffs where I'd been standing just a moment before. I still have a strange urge to run as fast as I can and fly off the edge. It's calling to me in a dark voice that sounds like the wind. "Yeah, but it's really hard to climb down from here in the rain. It gets real slick."

"Well, try. I need to talk to you and I'm sure as hell not coming up there." She looks almost sick.

"Ok." I search out handholds and footholds within the large crevice between the rocks, climbing down slowly. The grooves in the limestone are precarious at best, but in the rain they become deadly. It's not as bad when I was climbing up here. I eventually make it down, sliding half of the way. I brush the wood rot and leaves from my arms and clothes and try to look at her. I can't meet her eyes. I'm too ashamed.

"So, you were just going to leave us? Is that what you were doing up there? Leaving us?" She's standing so close to me now, I can smell the faint raspberry scent of her skin mingled with her sweat and the dampness of her rain-soaked hair.

I don't know how I'm supposed to answer. I've never thought of it that way. I've always thought of it more as unburdening them; giving them a chance to be somebody, without having to be tethered to my shortcomings. But mostly, I've been trying to escape my pain. I thought I'd been punishing myself, but really I guess I've been doing that every day of my life since the day Billy shot Mark.

"I'm sorry, Beth. I just couldn't live like this anymore." I try to meet her eyes, but have to look past her, down the hill toward the path, to keep from crying.

Beth puts her hands on her hips and stands a little straighter than she had been. “Like what? Like a hermit? Well, whose choice is that, Jason? You could live closer to us.” She looks up at the clouds and tiny drops of rain sprinkle her face. She takes a deep breath, as if she were breathing the raindrops in. “I came out here to ask you that.”

“What?” I’m confused by her words. Is she asking me why I choose to live like a hermit? “I just—I don’t think I need to be living near anyone else. I don’t deserve—I was there and I didn’t stop Billy. I just let him.” I push my hands deep into my pockets. It’s something I’ve always done when I’m nervous—ever since I was a kid. The rain is starting to come down faster and harder now, but it’s a warm, summer rain. It’s still hard to take a breath without being choked by the heat. The lump in my throat keeps getting bigger and rising.

“Jason.”

I’ve always loved the way Beth says my name. Like it’s just another breath of air floating through her lungs, out into the open. She says it like she’s experienced everything that name means; slips it on like a second skin.

I finally manage to look at her. She’s smiling. It isn’t a real smile. It’s one filled with worry and pain. But it’s still a smile. I try to smile back, but my mouth won’t work right anymore, and I cry instead. I’m just so tired and so done with trying. I know no matter how much I sit around reliving the past, I can never go back. Everything is over. Having Beth here just makes it seem even more final. I try again to talk to her but nothing comes out but ugly, choking, gasping sobs.

Beth puts her hand on my arm. We are standing in a downpour now. The rain is starting to get chilly. “Jason, I meant that I want you to live with us again. I want you to move back in with me and Anna.” When I don’t respond, she grips my arm a little tighter. “I want to start over again.” She holds her breath and waits for me to speak.

I wipe at my face. It’s useless. My whole body is soaked now and it’s impossible to tell which are tears and which is rain. “You want to be together again?”

“Yes.” She stares at me.

“After everything that’s happened? After all these years, Beth?”

“Yes. I’ve always wanted to be with you. After I saw you the other day at the store, I realized it was ridiculous to wait. I hate you being out here alone. I worry.” She moves closer to me. I can feel the goosebumps on her arms. I hadn’t noticed how cold the rain has gotten while we’ve been standing here. That’s how summer rain is around here, though. One minute it’s like warm bathwater, the next, you feel like a ton of snow just melted on you.

I put my arm around her waist and lead her down the path. We duck under the shelter of a tall Maple. The rain falls softer here. It sounds muffled and staticky. I remember going to my grandmother’s house in Dartmouth, Massachusetts when I was only about six. She lived a mile from Horseneck Beach, where we’d spent the day collecting periwinkles and rocks and shells. She’d told me on the drive home that if I put one of the bigger shells up to my ear I could hear the ocean. I hear it now—all around us. I feel like if I step out from beneath the tree, I might drown. It would all be over. I just want to stay here with her in the safety of the tree forever. Here, time holds fast and can’t move to ruin

me. It might just be a dream and I'd turn around after I stepped out and she'd disappear and I'd be back on the edge of the bluffs alone with my ghosts, but right now it's real.

“So? Will you be with me again? Move in with us?” She looks up at me and just waits.

I still have no idea what to say. Somewhere in the back of my mind I feel like it's some sort of trick. I decide to just say what I've wanted to since she first asked. “Yes.”

Beth stands on her tiptoes and hugs me. “Thank God! I just want us to be a family again. Billy's gone and all those assholes we used to hang out with are gone, and we won't have to worry about that shit anymore. It'll just be us and Anna.”

“You guys can move out here with me. There's plenty of land. We can add onto the cabin if we have to. I can—”

“No.” She lets go of me and backs away, toward the edge of the tree.

“What?” I'm terrified. I figure this is probably where I wake up from the dream.

“If we're going to live together, I don't want to live way out here where there's nothing. I don't want to live where you almost died. Hell, you've been sitting out here dead for years, Jason. We'll live in our house.”

It makes sense. Still, it's hard for me to think of leaving this place. I love it as much as I hate it. I can't bear to think of the river going on night after night without me. And where will my dogs go? I take her hands. “What if we sell both places and buy another, better one?”

“A fresh start. I like it. Do you think we can do that?” She smiles, then puts her arms around my waist and buries her head in my chest.

I would do anything for her.

I kiss the top of her wet head. “Yeah. But, I need a river. Maybe a pond. Something, you know?”

She looks at me like she’s confused. “Ok. Whatever. If that’s what you need.”

We hold each other for a few minutes, but for me, it feels like years. I’ve thought about how it had felt to hold her every night for years, while I lay in bed alone, listening to the river crawl past. I’m still afraid that if I let go, she might disappear.

“The rain’s stopped.” She loosens her hold and turns to look at the path. “We should go see Anna. If you want to.”

“Of course I want to.” I hold her hand and we walk carefully back down the muddy path to the cabin.

Beth looks up at the trees. “The leaves are already starting to fall. It’s not nearly as hot out as it usually is this time of year. I think maybe we’ll have an early Fall. Think so?” She glances at me, then watches a hawk circle on the updraft left over from the storm.

“Yeah.” But I’m not really listening. I’m thinking about the willow leaves that had fallen down around Mark, in front of his bloody, blank face after Billy had shot him. One had stuck to some blood on the back of his left hand. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head and catch my breath. I know the image of Mark will be stuck in my head forever, no matter what kind of life I live from now on. And I know it’s my punishment. It’s what I deserve. But all I can do about it is grip Beth’s hand tighter and smile at her and thank God she came back.

I watch the hawk circle. It follows us down the path. I have a strange thought in the back of my head that it's Mark. I wonder if Billy will haunt me after he gets the electric chair. Probably. That's the kind of guy Billy is. It doesn't matter—Billy has haunted me enough while he's still alive—I'm used to it. I'll never be completely rid of him. All I can do is try to remember the old Billy—before he changed. I think back to that day in the woods, before we found the dead girl.

*“Jason, check it out!” Billy stopped in the path, his right boot deep in mud. He put his arm out behind him to stop me. “Shhhh! Look over there.” He was so still, he could've been a ventriloquist. His lips never opened when he spoke. His eyes didn't blink.*

*I ran into Billy's outstretched hand and stopped short. My breath sounded like trees falling all around us. I tried to hold it but it was no use. And my feet wanted nothing more than to crunch and shuffle through the deep, brown leaves until you couldn't hear anything else. I couldn't help it. But Billy had become a statue. I looked in the direction he was looking and I saw them. Two deer—a mother and a fawn, drinking from the stream, oblivious to the danger they were in. I clenched my fists and pressed my toes into the bottoms of my sneakers. I imagined the blood exploding from their heads. It was so real, I heard the shot. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see this. I kept them closed for what seemed like hours, but I never heard Billy move. When I dared to open them and look up, I saw that Billy was still standing there, watching, his gun limp at his side. He'd made no move to pick it up. Suddenly, my foot moved as if I wasn't controlling it. The leaves around it made a noise like the loud tv static that startles you into waking, after the station has gone off the air and you've long since fallen asleep. The deer jerked their*

*heads up in unison. The mother ran ahead and the fawn followed, their white tails bobbing through the trees till they were out of sight.*

*Billy turned around and looked at me with an annoyed expression.*

*“Sorry. My foot went to sleep. I had to move it.” I looked down, embarrassed that I was such a lousy excuse for a hunter. Then I realized something. “Hey, how come you didn’t shoot? You had plenty of time. They didn’t even know you were there.”*

*Billy spat a hocker on the ground and rubbed the leaves over it with his foot. He looked out over the miles of trees, as if he was seeing something far off. “Because sometimes it’s just better to let things live, you know?”*

*I stood still and stared at the place where the deer had been while Billy walked on ahead.*