

HARROWING HEIGHTS

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This is dedicated to my family and friends
for their confidence and support
throughout this project, other projects, and projects to come.

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Introduction

As a child, and I mean a seven year old towhead full of energy, my favorite thing to do in the summer was spread a blanket out on the lawn and read a book with my legs in the sun. Not just any book would suffice, though. I wanted the Stephen King guarantee. I wanted to be creeped out, chilled, afraid someone would be waiting in the dark corners when I walked back into the house, or suspicious that someone was stalking me from the other side of the garage. Essentially, my seven year old self was giddy for realistic characters. I feared Alexis Machine and wondered whether or not fans of book writers could really be as obsessed as the woman in *Misery*. As an adult reader, and as a writer, I assume everyone wants characters they can believe in, and that is what I hope Alana Crippler and Alex Thornton become to my readers.

Harrowing Heights came together through a series of explorations. The task of getting to know the characters was like moving into a new neighborhood and categorizing who fits where. At first, I only produced murder scenes and it was my job to figure out who was doing the murdering. Exploring this mystery for myself was so enjoyable, however, that I built the story so reader can discover it also. While trying to figure out who the killer is, though, I hope that readers begin to value both Alana and Alex due to multiple flashback scenes where they get to know the characters on a deeper level. Alana Crippler is memorable because she is not only disfigured, but also tormented by her parents and peers, and yet she is burying a body when the story opens. Alex Thornton is memorable because he fails to act as expected when his fiancé commits suicide in a public restroom, which may cause a reader to pay extra attention to him. These are not qualities one would attribute to the general public, and this helps the characters take root in the reader's mind.

I have to admit, however, that just good characters never did it for me as a reader. I wanted to learn something about these people as well. I wanted to know how they felt, what they thought in reaction to the events going on around them, and who they were to themselves. In order to satisfy this need of mine, a need I assume other readers possess, *Harrowing Heights* is mostly in third person. Creating a narrator who is never fully established, I was able to let the reader into the character's actual thoughts and show the bigger picture, or a section of the bigger picture, that the character would not normally see. This functioned especially well during the murder scenes, when the reader gets both the victim's and perpetrator's perspectives.

These murder scenes also happen in a book within a book, instead of occurring in real time for the reader. The device of a journal, written by the murderer, allowed me to access another level of the murderer's psychosis and help round out his tendencies as a "serial killer" for those readers who are both familiar with, and typically enjoy, serial killer thrillers. This indicates that he not only relished killing his victims, but also enjoyed hunting them, guessing what they were thinking, and relished their fear. Furthermore, this account gives the reader an intimate, front-row seat of the killer's actions, which is something I want when I read books. Oftentimes in horror fiction, this is either overdone or skirted around. Finding balance was a true challenge, but it works in the first murder scene, and will be repeated in the scenes to follow. Again, even these qualities built into a narrative would not hold a reader's attention as I hope to, if the characters were not memorable. Therefore, during Alana's storyline and through those of the journalist, I worked very hard to stay close to the character, showing occurrences through the character's eyes, in an effort to build the intensity of each character as previously described.

Another strategy I developed in hopes that it would give readers a satisfying story include three narrative threads, occurring during different time periods, which come together in the

reader's mind at one pace, and in the actual text at another pace. The development of these storylines alone was fun, but trying to make them function as a whole was a chore. I will continue to develop this area of the craft throughout the end of the story. I also ran into complications where the setting was not established quite enough for readers; they had difficulty figuring out how to relate one section, or storyline, with another. In order to make the story more fluid, but not lose the rich character-based prose, I titled the chapters. I also developed first lines and first paragraphs that remind the reader what happened in the most recent chapter to that storyline at the point where it left off. At times, I tried to drop "reminders" into paragraphs as well. I also attempted to close chapters with an action paragraph that leaves the reader hanging a bit, wondering what will happen next, in hopes that it carries them over into the next chapter while building suspense.

Not only did I struggle with cohesiveness during the creation of this story, I also struggled in giving the reader the impression that Alana was dark and creepy, because the original story started out with her being ridiculed by her own parents, implying a more sympathetic character. In order to give the reader a sense of these creepy qualities possessed by Alana, qualities that come out later, and in an effort to keep the entire story together, I chose to start the story at the end, giving the reader a glimpse into what was occurring in "real time." In this way, the reader sees Alana digging a grave in a basement of a house before he or she learns that Alana is disfigured, or that there are murders going on. This should say to them "something is not right about this girl" and the reader should carry this with them as the story takes a step back to the three days leading up to the grave digging. This move of going back in time to tell the story has become popular in recent film. Where I think it functions to complicate stories in

film, it assists mine by making things somewhat clearer. It suggests that the story is heading somewhere from the get-go.

Though my attempts have been readily received by peer groups, horror-fiction, as a genre on the whole, is often criticized for its gratuitous gore and/or flimsy, plot-based narrative. Sometimes the stories simply ignore the obvious and the girl goes up the stairs to investigate the scary sound even though the audience already knows the killer is waiting there for her. This may not work for literary theorists, but there is something to be said for the suspense built when a reader is sitting on the edge of her seat, paperback gripped in a white knuckled squeeze, mouth chewing at her nails as she moves onto the next page. On the other end of the scope, horror fiction sometimes tends to get criticized for overcomplicating stories and confusing readers, almost cheating them by not allowing them to put the pieces together for themselves. In my opinion, stories should entail qualities of entertainment and educate readers at the same time.

In his essay “Watching TV Makes You Smarter,” Steven Johnson discusses how the plots of some television shows are more complex than they were ten years ago. He argues that successful television series, such as *The Sopranos*, are so successful because they have active threads which connect largely to inactive threads. This means that viewers are required to remember and relate events which occurred in previous episodes, or with characters not even directly related to that particular scene, in order to make sense out of it. He argues that this allows for engagement by the viewer and causes them to take an active part in putting the pieces together instead of passively watching. This all makes sense to me as a television viewer *and* reader because one of my favorite qualities of Stephen King’s style was that he subtly brings in characters from his other books, often to make a greater point if you happened to have read the previous. Faulkner, too, demanded great effort from his readers with *As I Lay Dying*, jumping

from character to character without indicating the place or the time period of the scene. Both King's world and Faulkner's intentionally disconnected storyline caused me to continue making associations long after the books were read through and put away. *Harrowing Heights*, like the novels of these two writers, encourages the reader to actively engage in making connections between storylines.

This discussion of making connections outside the reading of the text could push *Harrowing Heights* out of mainstream entertainment and align it with literary theory through Phenomenological criticism. Fortunately, most readers are unable to relate to characters that murder or do other sick things in the literal sense of "relating." Alana and Alex both possess distinctly negative qualities which would hinder a reader's response that "she is just like me." Due to this inability to relate to the character, a person may ask where the connection comes through since I have admitted one important part of a book is relatability, specifically through memorable characters. Wolfgang Iser, whose essays continue to lead the field of Phenomenological criticism, describes the connection to occur through a non-self. During the act of reading, the reader is still him or her "self" in the physical sense, but his or her ideas and associations to the text occur outside of that literal "self," inadvertently becoming part of the process, but not literally influential. Psychologists may have a different interpretation, but it is through the phenomenological "I," as established by Iser, that readers may experience relation to explicitly evil characters such as serial killers, or characters with mental disorders or psychoses a sane reader could never literally understand. This explains one reason why so many readers enjoy serial killer thrillers but do not go out on murder sprees of their own. Taking a Phenomenological approach, *Harrowing Heights* may have some literary merit.

Overall, however, I want readers to enjoy the story itself, to pick the book up at the bookstore, read a few pages, and put the book in their basket instead of back on the shelf. I hope readers choose to keep this book on their shelves to read it again in ten years, or pass the book on with good recommendations to their friends. Ultimately, I want the book to be read all the way through. As an avid reader, I know good characters and good storylines keep me in an iron grip. I hope *Harrowing Heights* succeeds in that aspect as I continue on through the end, intertwining the storylines tighter and tighter until they are one strong thread.

CHAPTER I

AWAKENING

The sound of the spade scraping into the soil was soothing to Alana Crippler who dug with profound strategy, as though she had buried hundreds of corpses before. The spade was an old tool, rusted where the dry round handle met the iron bolt, but metallic where its tip came to a sharp point. Blood soaked into the wood where Alana's bare hands gripped so tightly that blisters had surfaced, had burst, and had torn into oozing sores. She ignored the bite of sweat salt that singed the open wounds and focused on piling the earth higher and higher between herself and the body, so she wouldn't have to look at the mess of his face.

Other than the wind whipping the old house into shudders, the unfinished basement was eerily silent, dank, and unsurprisingly dark. A single clear bulb sent light out around the base of the stairs, and for long moments Alana watched the pull chain sway with the groan of the beam supports while she pushed the shovel deep into the dirt with her soiled bare feet. In-between those moments, Alana's eyes darted curiously toward the uneven runnels of blood coming out of the darkness at the top of the stairs toward her, as they turned from crimson to mocha against the raw maple steps. Even though she had hurried in dragging him down the stairs, the blood did not flow in a single line or smear under the weight of the carcass. Instead, it jittered back and forth and fat dots peppered the steps at different intervals where his bloody bare heels smacked them.

Alana dug in the dimness beyond that ring of light, negotiating depths and distances blindly, now thigh deep in the rectangular grave. It had pleased her to find the basement floor a convenient chaos of dirt-hills, leading to one rock wall in the back. It was a kind of natural foundation for the two-story house. In earlier times it likely assisted the healthy oak tree growing out of the center as a wind barrier, long before the tree found itself surrounded by nails

and paint and the constant human chatter of the home built around it. Although Alana had dropped the body away from the tree, she still dug too close to its trunk and its reaching roots, and had already cut clean through more than a few with the tip of the spade. The inner flesh of each one was visible against the damp soil, the severed root twisting with alien-like movement caused by the shadows.

The methodic thump-scrape-swish of her occupation belied the ache swelling through her shoulder blades and lower back as her fifteen-year-old, five-foot-four frame, bore the brunt of a full grown man's task. The staccato tings did nothing, however, to deter sweat from stinging the whites of her eyes or soaking the greasy tendrils of her black bangs. In brief respite, she reached back and rubbed the short hairs at the base of her neck with a gritty palm to appease a particularly irritating strand, and went wide-eyed the sound of rustling newspapers. Already in the darkness, Alana's vision reached far into the new tomb's depths, but the corners remained matte black.

Leaning silently on the spade, Alana looked over what she could still see of the body behind the dirt-hill, carefully considering the angle of the left hand, which she had dropped high above the head. The three fingers were curled close together, a trio of almost touching tips. The index finger fell open toward the floor, pointing into the darkest corner in the same way a rose petal curls open instead of in, and the thumb, including the knobby meat of the palm, folded closed. The hand's position had not changed. Its detailed features were the same, angled as though it held a pen. It was not the body that had moved.

Again, Alana sank the spade into a tree root, the thump resounding more firmly, the root-hairs sticking out of the dirt hill like an octopus tentacle. A faint stink of ink wafted back up at her and Alana attributed it to the root-blood, ignorant to the fact that in a breezeless basement,

the sweat had dried up on the back of her neck, when the distinct rustle of newspapers resounded again. Alana judged her efforts quickly as to whether or not the body would fit into the hole. Almost hip-high in the hole, she realized she would not have the luxury of rolling the corpse in with the heel of her dirt-caked feet, due to the mound she had piled before it. So, Alana compromised having to touch the cold clammy flesh again by choosing to drop him in face-down.

Spade in hand, she launched herself up onto the rim of the hole and squirmed out. She stabbed the spade into the ground and rounded the body as a wolf circles its prey, hunched over and hearing her ankles crack, building the courage up to touch it again. Just as she was about to grab the wrists, Alana saw something sticking out from under the corpse's back. She rolled him over and yanked a weighty book out of the band of his pants which his belt held onto tightly. She stood up quickly, trying to get a better focus on the pages in the dim light, only to find them empty.

"Figures," she mumbled, and was just about to toss the book into the grave when a thump against the side of the house startled her. She had taken enough precaution to lock all the doors. She was not concerned of someone coming in, because Alana was equipped with a weapon. Flipping the book around as though it were a puzzle, she opened the cover from the other side and to her satisfaction, saw full pages of scribbled lines. Intrigued by her new treasure, Alana stuffed the book into her own waistband, where she could feel it against the small of her back. Then, with a smirk, she yanked the body around the mound and dropped it into the gaping hole with a short series of sickening thuds.

CHAPTER II
THREE DAYS PRIOR

Alana sat in her usual spot on the loveseat, staring at the television, thinking how she wouldn't have spit on John Krohke if his skin was on fire and sliding off in crisp rinds. This cold attitude derived from multiple confrontations with the stout bodied, bellowing young man. In first grade, she had watched John grip a desk chair and hurl it into the sky-blue cinderblocks that made up the room's drawing display wall. Another time, Alana dared to throw a kickball at him in gym class and watched in horror as he mowed Patrick Pennell over, sending him bawling to the school nurse. Patrick had come back the following day with a cast on his forearm. The climax of these confrontations, however, came when Alana was in seventh grade. John strode up to her looking angry with his bushy eyebrows knotted together and grabbed either side of her head in his chubby hands. Alana feared he would head-butt her or rip her diamond studs out of her earlobes. Instead, he squeezed her cheeks together and in front of everyone, planted a hard kiss on her lips. The scratch of dry flecks of skin, flakes which she immediately visualized him gnawing at during homeroom, caused her a shudder, and Alana feebly slapped him away.

John backed up quickly, his pallor darkening into red.

"Ewww." He screwed his lips up under a wrinkled nose. "You taste like dirty fingernails!" The thirteen-year old boy stated it as if it was a fact, and although Alana Crippler felt disgust toward him, the girl was ashamed. Perhaps this was the reason that Alana's lips twisted into a genuine smile as she heard the news of John Krohke's body having been found mutilated beneath the Clawfoot Creek Bridge.

Sitting with her legs curled under, safe in her home, Alana listened to the special report on the local channel's afternoon news. There had never been a murder in Clawfoot before and

the media spared no detail in covering the story. John's throat had been slashed beneath the jaw, clearly torn by a dull edge rather than the sharp blade of a butcher knife, but not before he must have felt the pain of his left leg being ripped from the hip socket and his right kidney punctured eight times by a thin metal object, maybe a skewer. John's face bore the brunt of mutilation with his eyeballs yanked out, his cheeks carved into gills, and his teeth broken into jagged stumps. Having never attended a funeral other than her grandpa's when she was just a toddler; Alana couldn't imagine what people would say about the way John would look in his casket.

"Probably used a log on him," Sheriff Stemple surmised in his first news debut of the day, while he speculated this may have been an act of rage as the young man had multiple enemies who were not shy of their ambivalence. The face of a boy she had seen strolling the halls of the high school between classes filled the screen. He explained with a country drawl, "I don't care for that no good... you know...not a'tall. But I wouldn't wish nothing like this on nobody." The boy had looked tough in school, but meek in front of the camera. Sheriff Stemple explained that, alternatively, it could have been the work of a serial killer copycat, perhaps a group of them working together, because his cheeks and kidneys matched crimes committed against other victims in the Midwest over the last 25 years. *A serial killer picked John Krohke out of a crowd and cut him to pieces*, she thought. *Serves him right*. Alana smiled wider, a rare glint of teeth showing through, before she was struck in the side of the nose by something that dropped into her lap. She picked it up between her thumb and index finger.

A McDonald's French fry.

"What the fuck are you grinning at, Mutant?" came Cal's growling voice from the yellowed and coffee-splotched Lay-Z-Boy recliner across the room. Alana turned an expressionless face toward her father, seeing an oil stained drive-through bag in his lap and an

ever-present can of Natural Light in his left hand. In his right hand, he held up another fry as if he would throw it at her, too.

“Sto-op!” she insisted.

“Fu-ck Yo-ou!” he jeered back, mocking the nasal twinge in her voice. But to her relief, Cal folded the greasy fry into his mouth instead, and once again concentrated on the television screen which had left the story of John Krohke and now showed a dog walking on its hind legs with a cone shaped birthday hat secured to its head. Alana typically would have laughed at the biped dog as well, but instead, she recognized the person guiding the dog was a girl in her graduating class, Sherri-Mae, and braced herself for Cal’s inevitable remark.

Alana shot a nervous glance over at her father, her mind recalling numerous comments he would make toward her better-looking peers. It was more than embarrassing when they would walk past her house, for her father would stick his head out the screen door and whistle through his teeth. Once he had their attention, Cal would holler obscenities like “Do you want some candy little girl?” or worse. It was a good thing these girls from her school didn’t know it was her house that they were avoiding by switching to the sidewalk on the other side of the road just before her house, and then switching back just after.

Alana cringed as Cal squinted at the TV, knowing in her heart that he would recognize Sherri-Mae and have a comment to make. There was a look in his eyes, a hint of something evil, when he made those comments. Alana thought she’d stab him in the neck with a fork if he ever turned that gaze on her.

She pushed herself up from the cold, fake leather of the couch in haste, hoping to get away before the comments started, but Cal’s free hand shot out in a STOP! gesture.

Alana froze.

“Do you know that cheerleader girl?” An innocent question.

“Mmm-hmm,” Alana managed.

“Why don’t you ever bring friends with her looks over to spend the night?” A less innocent question.

“I don’t bring *any* friends over to spend the night,” Alana said, unsure of where Cal was headed with his questions. “Why?”

Cal’s seemingly-calm conversation deflated and his flannel print slippers propelled the Lay-Z-Boy to face her square. “Because I was wondering what it is you’re NOT doing, Mutant!” Cal growled this through clenched teeth, his rage clearly instantaneous, his beer can crunching and snapping under the pressure of his right hand. “Wondering why my fifteen-year old girl stays locked up inside her bedroom all day listening to headphones and reading fucking library books like she’s something special, instead of out raking the lawn or doing the dishes. You lounge around here like this is some kind of Holiday Inn...”

“You don’t work!” Alana retorted, even though she knew it would lead to a fight.

“I don’t work, huh?” He bellowed, loud enough that Alana sensed her mother cringing in her bedroom, probably sitting at the computer, playing a crossword puzzle or surfing E-Bay. “No. I don’t work because unemployment is making up for all the hard work I *did* do at that goddamned factory! Now, I *get paid* to sit here and feel the metal dust digging into my lungs. Great, isn’t it?” Cal snarled and sneered at her; Alana rolled her big brown eyes.

She felt guilty at this gesture, for feeling tired of his rants and outbursts, especially because she couldn’t help but notice their genetic similarities. Both her eyes and his sat somewhat close together above long, bridged noses, mouths widened, lips flat.

“You know I asked for a work permit and tried to get a job,” she reminded him. And it was true, she had reported to him every day after applying to every diner in the city, whether they had “help wanted” signs on the windows or not. Alana’s hand had even cramped from filling in all the tiny boxes. She got back a handful of apologetic phrases when she called, but not one of the people accepting her application had looked her in the eye.

“Yeah, but you couldn’t... maybe cause God’s makin’ me pay for every little bad thing I done!” Alana felt the air gain density as Cal stood up on shaky legs, his jeans tucked into his slippers. He held his arms out wide as if to hug the morning sun.

“Calvin Crippler!” His voice boomed, imitating the sound of God coming down from the heavens, “You failed to wipe your boots off and the dog-shit you accidentally stepped in got on the carpet of your car. BANG! Goodbye Camaro.” Alana knew her father was referring to the time he wrapped his 69’ Chevy around a tree before she was born. He made it sound as though he had been on a routine drive, but during an argument once, Alana overheard her mother accusing him of driving in the early hours of a morning when he was *not* on his way to work. Cal had claimed that a brake line popped loose and it caused the accident. Alana had considered cutting the break lines of his rusted out Bronco multiple times, and although she had never been able to muster the courage to do it, she always enjoyed imagining how the crash would play out. His head would hit the windshield. The old glass would shatter in his face, slicing the skin off his skull, but whether he was alive or dead when it happened was always in question. As Cal paced back and forth, ranting in the noon of the day in the middle of their living-room, the intensity growing in his voice, Alana thought about how satisfying it would be to smack him in the shins with a cast-iron skillet and watch him flail.

“Calvin Crippler!” he boomed again, “You had sex before marriage. BANG! Here’s your disfigured kid.”

Alana winced. She hadn’t been expecting that one until the climax of his rant.

“I wasn’t born like this and you know it,” she accused darkly, the swell of anger she usually caged pushing against the bars within her. She clenched her fists at her sides and gritted her teeth.

“Oh, right. I’m sorry. Maybe the pot of boiling water fell on your head because I forgot to put the toilet seat down.” Cal stared her down, challenging her with his eyes.

Alana, already pissed that he threw a French fry at her, that he acted as though she was an adult and not a kid except when it was convenient, that he talked to her like she was a street bum, lost control as she had done many times before.

“How the HELL do you think I feel?” Alana screamed, her voice breaking. “Like I wanna look like this? Like I don’t want friends to stay the night? I wish I could get a job so I could save up some money and move the FUCK away from YOU!”

She strode over to the television, reaching behind it to grasp her second-grade photograph, the last one her mother had posted on the wall, the last one taken before what her parents called “the unfortunate accident.” She wanted to hurl it at Cal’s head and scream *I used to be so beautiful!* But her sleeve caught the rabbit ears atop the Zenith, unused, and knocked it down behind. It clanked loudly. The wires caught and dragged down the other box which they had gotten for free from the government in order to switch the television over from analog to digital and the picture flickered briefly. A dustless black square stared back at her.

“What did *I* do to deserve this?” She asked the room, waving the framed photograph decorated with neon puff paint in stars and hearts and tulips atop that read “Allie.”

Silence ensued until the glass in the frame began to rattle in Alana's shaking grip.

"I don't *know* what you did." He hissed from behind her. "Why don't you tell me?"

Alana spun and their eyes met. As if hate were a streak of color visible to the eye, Alana watched it meet in space between them and explode. She didn't need to look at the photograph in her hand to remember the petite young second-grader, exactly 45 inches tall with straight, shining brown hair, with a mouth full of fresh adult teeth in the front, and with two miraculous green glowing eyes that she had been. She didn't need to see the stunned faces of her classmates as they scanned her face in disbelief the day she returned to her classroom, her knees shaking so badly she almost missed her chair. She didn't need to look in the mirror and remember that for the last eight years she had been Alana with the dull hair and receded scalp, Alana with the lisp, Alana with the watery left eye where the scar tissue twisted.

"You're a disgrace," she spat at him. "How could you treat your own flesh and blood like this? I'm ashamed to call you father. You're..." she paused for breath just as her mother rounded the corner into their living room. Her earrings reflected silvery splotches onto the wall as they glinted in the morning sunlight from the living room window.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on here?"

Alana wondered how many of the heated words her mother had heard as she stared back at her in silence, mouth closed. Cal, too, remained silent, staying put in his chair and staring at the television. Nancy Crippler tilted her head back and closed her eyes at the ceiling for a moment before addressing Alana again.

Then, pointing to the frame in her hand, her mother asked calmly "Alana, why did you take that picture down? You know it's my favorite one, now put it back and explain yourself." Alana followed her mother's eyes which darted nervously to Cal, at his face, the beer clenched in

his hand, at the McDonald's bag on the floor and then back at his face. Her eyes flashed with warning when they met Alana's, but not the kind of warning between allies when danger is near. It had been years since her mother came to her rescue during arguments with Cal. No matter what kinds of obscenities he screamed in Alana's face, how hard he threw things, or if he pulled her down the hallway by her hair, it was always Alana who got the warning glare from her mother's pale green eyes. They told her that if she started it, she was on her own.

Alana did not need to be reminded she was on her own.

"What do you mean your favorite?" she spat. "We just brought school pictures home. You don't like any of the rest from the last eight years?"

"You know why I keep that one up, Alana." Her mother shook her bangs from her forehead and raised her chin. "It reminds everyone of the good times."

"The good times..." Alana, scanned her mother from her toes upward, noted the chipped green toenail polish on her dry knobby feet, her crumpled long-sleeved t-shirt. "Everyone?" She repeated as she noted Nancy's manicured fingernails picking nervously at a stray thread in the cuff. In those moments, Alana recalled neither.

"Screw you both."

Alana strode toward her bedroom, attacking the space between her and the door, her shoulder slicing the way through the thick air. Cal pushed against his chair, the back smacking against the sea foam drywall with a thud, also striking the floor-lamp's cord, causing it to flicker, but still said nothing. Her mother, however, became enraged.

"Screw *US*? After everything we've done for you? That's how you repay us? *Screw US*?"

"Everything you've done?" Alana mocked, laughing, still facing her bedroom door with full intentions of ignoring her mother's challenge and just lying in bed with the covers over her

head. But this time was not like the others and Alana couldn't stop the anger from boiling over, so she spun on her mother who was the same height as she and stared her down as she spoke.

“Everything you *haven't* done, you mean? What about the hair infusions, huh? Why couldn't you have paid the higher co-pay for those? What about that new doctor in Toledo? You refused to even drive to go see him and yet that new medication may have...” She paused, feeling her finely chiseled lips begin to swell as tears beckoned from behind her eyes at even the thought of it. Alana despised the thick sparse strands on the left side of her head which would have been changed into smooth, shiny locks resembling the right side of her head, if only her parents had paid for it. For what she knew about it, the infusions were painless, single strands fused into her scalp one at a time until she had a full head of hair. It had been her freshman year of high school, she had been more self-conscious than ever, and Alana knew she would have fit in better if even just her hair had looked more normal. She wanted to pull the bangs down across her eyebrow in straight line, which was in fashion, and which would cover most of her scar, revealing a normal face to people who saw her for the first time. She choked the tears back but her mother retorted before she could regain her voice.

“Because we didn't have the money for it, just like we don't have the money now and you know it!”

Alana, no longer wanting any part of the conversation and refusing to show emotion in the sight of her parents, turned back to face her bedroom door only a few feet away. “It's forty bucks for a tank of gas. That alone would have made it down to Toledo and back in the Honda.” She explained this with her back to them, her voice reverberating off of the thin panel door, calm and honest.

“And I distinctly remember us stopping at the Marathon on the way home. Dad had to grab a thirty-pack and some lottery tickets, remember?”

“So what!” her mother had cried lacking the poise her daughter was demonstrating, throwing her hands up in the air in surrender and letting them smack back down on her hips. “Your father works hard for his money and deserves to enjoy it.”

Alana’s cheeks tickled again at the thought of John Krohke’s mangled body beneath the bridge. In those moments she mused about what it would have been like if it had been her mother slashed to pieces down there, or her father, stabbed through the eyes and into the brain. The incredulity of her parents’ excuses came to fruition as Alana explained to her mother, “Yeah. I looked at those tickets. Fifty-dollars worth...” but her mother wasn’t registering the connection.

“All losers.” Cal muttered just before he snapped his Zippo open and lit the end of his Marlboro Red.

“And?” her mother questioned impatiently.

A small laugh from Alana, “It was only a hundred bucks extra co-pay, *mom*. He had that much in his wallet.” Feeling as though she had made her point clearly, and imaging her mother standing behind her in shame, Alana headed straight into her bedroom and slammed the door.

“Were we that selfish when we were kids?” She heard her mother ask her father through the door, and before she even realized what she was doing, she was tearing clothes from her dresser and tossing them on the bed. She tried to push the drawer shut, but it had been broken by Cal years ago and refused to move into place. Alana stepped back and kicked as hard as she could. The dresser slammed into the cheap paneling, blowing a hole deep into the center, a loud crash thundering off the walls. It felt good to destroy something.

It was bad enough that for four years on a daily basis, Alana was psychologically jostled by the horrified expressions from teenagers who encountered her for the first time at the big school. At least her classmates all the way through the sixth grade were used to her appearance. Then in seventh and eighth grade she rarely had classes with lowerclassmen, so the emotional onslaught during her freshman year of high school from those who had never seen a burn victim, was unbearable.

She imagined Cal sitting stiff in his chair, eyes round and bugging after her outburst. The image of an overweight koala popped into her mind. She swept the contents of her dresser, including the plastic angel lamp that had a ripped shade, to the floor with her arm still holding the photograph, letting it fall. As she rummaged through her drawers searching for her favorite black zip-up hoodie, Alana Crippler got angrier over the things stolen from her life. Dances, sports games, dates, summer bonfires, movies, and boyfriends had been ripped from her nine years before they were even an option, and her parents still took no responsibility. Instead, they punished her and blamed her, causing her to wonder if there was something she may have done to displease God, and just could not remember it.

Unsurprisingly, the night it happened was always vivid in Alana's mind. Her father had stumbled in the door, tossed his lunchbox on the table with such force that it slid off the other side and crashed open on the floor, flinging chocolate Jell-O pudding across the cupboards.

"What the hell, Calvin?" her mother had screamed, already irritated that he hadn't called.

"Where's dinner?" was his only reply.

Nancy's face bore astonishment. "Dinner is still waiting to be cooked, because SOMEONE didn't call!" Alana's mother had been ranting around the house while she waited

for Calvin to get home, muttering “alcoholic” and “lazy” among a slew of other, more derogatory words.

“Well I’m fucking hungry, so get something on.” Alana remembered her mother’s clenched fists.

“How DARE you speak to me like that!” her mother had hollered and the fight began. While Nancy paraded around the kitchen chopping the onions, browning hamburger, opening a can of mushrooms and then slamming it on the counter, Calvin followed her, stumbling, pointing his finger in her face. In the midst of their altercation, neither one noticed Allie was between them with her hands out to both sides, crying for them to stop. Cal had taken a drunken swing at Nancy and missed. His arm hit the handle of the pot on the stove that had reached full boil.

Alana placed the palms of her shaking hands onto the dresser-top and looked down at the dirty gray carpet, her back hunched, her hair hanging down the sides of her face. She reached into the top drawer and stuffed a skinny rubber-banded roll of wrinkled green bills into her front jeans pocket, zipped her sweatshirt up to her chin, and pulled the hood over her head. At the door, she took one look back, something inside her blaring that an item was being left behind. She panicked as she remembered Darcy, her Calico Cat. Alana found Darcy backed into the bedroom corner, covered in t-shirts and hugged and kissed her until she hissed.

“I love you, Darcy.” She cooed and allowed the tears to well up in her eyes and wet her best friend’s long fur. “I will miss you SO MUCH.” Darcy began to purr, and Alana could feel her fine whiskers and cold pink nose at the corner of her eye. It tickled and Alana loved it. Kitty-kisses, she called them. At the slam of a pan ringing out from the kitchen, Darcy stopped purring and forced more of her backside into the corner.

As she stepped out of her bedroom, Alana thought that besides having to leave Darcy behind, she had no want to take anything else. Her media player was already in the zip-up hoodie's left front pocket. Alana yanked the door open and looked out toward the living-room at Cal who still sat stonily in his chair, the television channel unchanged. As if she were literally clicking a photograph in her mind, she noted that scene as her "last look" and rounded the bend for the front door through the kitchen. It could have been the nonchalant demeanor with which Nancy was wiping down the stove, or her failure to turn around and acknowledge Alana's presence that caused her to consider sliding a steak-knife from the wooden block and hurling it at her mother's head.

Instead, one by one, Alana deliberately plucked the freshly washed plates from the strainer and hurled them against the wall beneath the rooster clock. Nancy shrieked at the sound of them shattering while Alana yanked the cupboard door open, doubled a plastic Kroger's bag with a Meijer's one, and filled it with canned goods. Alana didn't even look at what she was grabbing, only filled it as far as it would go. Then, feeling like a rebellious teen rock star for smashing the plates, imitating Joan Jett, perhaps, she tugged her boy's pants upward on her slim hips, flipped her mother the bird, and shouldered her way through the outside door without bothering to press the handle.

The latch broke easily and the noon-day sunshine beat down on her face, although she could only feel it on the right half. Alana smelled the fresh air, noticed the autumn breeze, and closed her eyes to freedom before heading north along the sidewalk.

CHAPTER III

PREMONITION

The journalist had only come into the gas station for a pack of Roloids to appease his heartburn, but the waft of freshly brewed coffee snuck into his nose, and three spoons of sugar and two of powdered creamer later, he found himself at the counter with the coffee, the Roloids, and a Charleston Chew.

“Hello,” he said, grinning as though he had won the lottery.

“Hey.” The cashier replied automatically, obviously bored.

“Been busy tonight?” The journalist instantly realized that just about every customer who had walked into the Seven-Eleven before him had probably asked the cashier the same lame question.

The cashier tossed his long, frizzy, straw-like hair out of his eyes in a manner just a tad more feminine than the journalist was used to seeing in those parts, “Been *a little* busy.” It was clear by his fidgeting that the cashier regarded the journalist with unease, and he wondered how the cashier kept his midnight job if he was always so skittish. The journalist considered his own appearance in the mirror of the sunglasses rack next to the counter. His eyes were probably very bloodshot, something normal to his physical nature when he stayed up working until the wee hours of the morning, but a characteristic easily mistaken by others. The cashier likely surmised the journalist was drunk, or was a reefer smoker. In looking the guy over, though, the journalist didn’t figure the cashier would hold it against him for being high. He watched the cashier shoot a series of nervous glances toward the dark side of the parking lot. *Perhaps he’s waiting for a drug-dealer himself*, the journalist connected. *Probably some guy named Eddy.*

“Lots of stuff goin’ on tonight, looks like.” The journalist concurred. The cashier raised his eyebrows and stuffed his hand in his pockets.

The journalist felt foolish trying to make conversation to some pinhead night-shift store clerk who didn’t have half of his intellect. The difficulty of conversation irritated him. *Is he really afraid of being robbed...by ME? There is no way this guy imagines I would threaten him... Does he?* Two thuggish looking guys in their early twenties had exited the store before he got to the counter. The short one looked like a wannabe rapper. The journalist hoped the cashier would be more wary of their big puffy baseball jackets and low-riding pants in which they could hide things like guns and knives, rather than get all uncomfortable over him. The thuggish kid with the ball-cap sideways on his head had lifted his hand up in what the journalist could only compare to a “peace out” gesture. “Late-ah” the blonde haired clerk had replied with a chin-up nod. The journalist had stood stupefied before making his way to the coffee pot. *In the world we live in, he thought, there is no animosity between the thugs and the white trash... the journalist is the suspicious one.*

“This will definitely keep you awake,” the cashier joked. “I just made it.” The journalist raised the coffee in a cheers motion to signal he knew would be awake for some time.

“Maybe you should have a cup yourself, make your shift feel a little shorter.”

“Heh. No caffeine for me,” the cashier replied, uninterested in the suggestion. Too much time had gone by for the transaction of such simple stature and the kid looked hopefully over the journalist’s shoulder toward a flash of headlights through the window and then back at the register which read \$1.04.

The journalist let the exact change clang onto the counter, disheartened at the guy’s failure at customer service, for he did not even offer him a sack for his purchase. So he stuffed

the Roloids and Charleston Chew deep into the breast-pocket of his plaid button up and turned toward the door just as the familiar tin bells jingled, announcing the arrival of a long brown-haired girl and her mother into the gas station.

“Hello!” the little girl greeted as soon as her black and red shoes crossed from the cement to the tile. It wasn’t clear if she spoke to the journalist, or the cashier, or both. Her mother pushed the back of her head with firm fingers and the girl turned a glare on her, embarrassed. The journalist couldn’t stifle a humored snort. It was something *his* mother would have done.

“Why hello, little lady, how are you tonight?” He recovered, crouching down to be eye level with her, his knees snapping loudly. She watched him with calm.

“I’m good!” Her tight ponytail bobbed as she careened her neck to see around him, almost impatiently. He thought she could be five or six years old if she were small for her age. The mom had dressed her in a red and white checkered dress with lacy white socks. She resembled a candy-cane except for a bruise on her upper arm that was in the shape of a heart.

“I was in a play at school!” she boasted.

“Oh, really? I’ll bet your mommy was proud of you wasn’t she?” The little girl hung on his sentence for a moment and then wrinkled her nose.

“She isn’t my *mommy*. She’s my MOM! Big girls don’t say mommy, *do they* Mommy?” She smiled up at her mother with pride, exposing miniature square teeth, of which the bottom front was missing, clearly expecting her to agree. Her mother couldn’t resist a giggle.

“Nope honey, big girls don’t say mommy.” The mother gave the journalist apologetic, tight-lipped smile, but it didn’t quell his irritation at the child’s rudeness. As though the mother read his mind, she frowned back down at her daughter.

“And big girls know better than to talk to strangers,” her mother added, in a tone that made the little girl shrink back. The journalist took it as his cue to go.

“Well, congratulations and goodnight,” he told the pair, nodding and starting past them, his taste buds again watering as the coffee reached his nose, but which wouldn’t be cooled down enough to drink until he was nearly home. The cashier, who was quiet for the span of their conversation, started talking to the lady before the man had closed the door. He could hear their cordial voices faintly but could not make out their words. *Does this guy know everybody but me?* He wondered.

But then, the little girl’s voice broke through clearly. “Mommy?” He expected her to ask for a Hershey bar or pack of Lifesavers.

“Yes sweetie?”

“Mommy, who was that bad man?”

The journalist did not make the connection that the little girl was referring to him.

“Just a stranger honey.” He heard the mother explain.

“Oh,” the little girl said weakly. “I don’t like strangers...”

The journalist turned to see if maybe the door had stayed ajar, wondering why he was still hearing their conversation when he had already had his hand on the car door handle, but saw it fully closed. Listening harder, the journalist still only heard the sound of motors on the road behind him and the wind far away in the night. *Did I just imagine that?* He asked himself. The little girl was, however, staring suspiciously at him through the glass and sales posters, the gleam of the handle across the door cutting her image in half at the armpits. A shiver ran through him.

CHAPTER IV

FREE BUT NOWHERE TO GO

Alana's rush of adrenaline after telling her parents off, took a long time to subside. *I can't believe I just did that!* She wanted to say out loud, but at the same time, she wasn't surprised because it had been building up for years. Sure, she had fought with them and said horrible things. She even swore at them a few times, but Alana had never imagined she would actually run away. Really, she had nowhere to go. Her family members lived all over the country and Alana didn't even have a cell phone. She shook her head at the negative thoughts though, and enjoyed replaying her "rock star" exit in her mind. *I'm a badass!* She thought.

Alana walked down the sidewalk, careful not to trip over raised cracks in the cement where the weeds grew up. She fingered her rainbow colored friendship bracelet in the same fashion as her mother nervously picked at her sleeve cuffs. It was a gift from the sophomore class officers to all the sophomore girls. They had even taken the time to tie the thousands of knots friendship bracelets were known for, designing each one by with their own hands, instead of taking the easy way out, purchasing catalog key rings or decorative candles. The gift had meant a lot to Alana because although those girls were not her best friends, they never left her out. Sherri-Mae, especially, looked Alana straight in the face when she talked to her. Alana had opened up to Sherri-Mae in brief increments, going over to her house, and even admitting her home-life was less-than-perfect.

When she tried to describe Cal's laziness or rant about her mother's neglect, she often saw the reflection of pity on Sherri-Mae's olive face, the same look people gave her when they saw her scar for the first time. The same look that made Alana feel distanced from everyone else.

“Maybe they just feel really guilty,” the girl had speculated, naïvely.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, maybe you’re mad at them for what happened so you just think they are meaner than they are,” Sherri-Mae had also offered.

Alana sometimes felt as if people related even her most mundane problems to the accident during her seventh year of life instead of seeing it as a normal social incongruence. After the one and only discussion where Sherri-Mae had defended Alana’s parents, she had taken a closer look at the cheerleader’s bedroom, at the posters of the singer “Pink” and actors like Brad Pitt, at the fuzzy-shaded lamp on her desk which had pens and highlighters neatly laid out in a row. Alana noted the flower shaped-wire that held snapshots of the Cheerleading Squad dancing during a halftime show, and close ups of Sherri-Mae and some of the other girls at Cedar Pointe. In response to their obvious differences, Alana reinvented the void between herself and the bright-eyed class secretary, realizing Sherri-Mae would never understand what it was like to be *different*. But that had been months ago, in the early months in the summer and now, confused and frightened by her immediate anger, Alana headed straight for Sherri-Mae’s house for consolation.

The girl’s house was many blocks North of Alana’s, and although it had seemed like a long ride on her mountain bike during the spring, Alana was so deep in thought she nearly passed the front porch of 216 Fourth Street. She noticed the siding above the hose spigot had been replaced. The last time she had been to Sherri-Mae’s house it was shattered on the driveway. Greg, Sherri-Mae’s father, had caught Alana’s questioning look as she toed the bike’s kickstand, and had clarified to her that the stuff was made to look like wood, but was really made of cement. “Because it lasts longer,” he had said. “Really?” Was all Alana had needed to say back,

because Greg took that as an opportunity to describe the many projects he intended for his kitchen floor, fireplace, and back-yard garden. All the while, Alana Crippler had watched his enthusiastic golden eyebrows dance, his blue-green eyes twinkle, and let the soft welcoming tone of his voice soothe her. He was nothing like Cal. Alana thought she could have stayed there all day until Sherri came out of the house and looped her arm into Alana's.

"Daaad..." Sherri-Mae had crooned, giving Alana a look of mortification, as if her father was telling jokes about her half-inch thick glasses from elementary school instead of describing his major aesthetic plans. "Alana doesn't want to hear about your boy projects!" He had laughed, and blushed, his blonde bangs just barely falling into his eyes.

"Yeah, you're right honey," he had agreed. "Thanks for listening, Alana."

"Anytime, Mr. Monroe." She said it casually, as if it didn't bother her to turn away from his glowing aura. As if she wouldn't have stood there all day learning the differences between real wood floors and Pergo, secretly imagining what her life would be like with him as a father.

Alana rang the doorbell then, hoping Mr. Monroe would answer with the same enthusiasm he had shown her that day, but Sherri-Mae's mother came to the door instead.

"Hi, Mrs. Monroe." Alana greeted her brightly.

"Hello Alana," Sherri-Mae's mother replied, agreeable, but guarded. She began knotting the belt to her white bathrobe and eyed the grocery bag suspiciously. "What brings you out this way today?"

"I came by to see Sherri-Mae. Is she busy?" Alana glanced into the house through the screen and was making out a television and leather sofa, when Mrs. Monroe pulled the door closed so that her tall body took up the space between it and the door jam. There was faint music

coming from the television and the methodic clank of pots and pans which Alana attributed to the dishwasher.

“Sherri-Mae went to cheerleading camp last week, dear.” Mrs. Monroe looked at Alana in apology. “She won’t be back for another week. She’s hoping to get a Cheerleading Scholarship, did you know that?”

“Uh, yeah,” Alana cringed. She had no idea Sherri-Mae took cheer that seriously. “I guess I forgot.” Mrs. Monroe’s eyebrows gathered as if she would ask Alana a question, but before she could, Alana turned away.

“Sorry to bother you, Mrs. Monroe. I will come back next week!” She rushed, waving good-bye, stepping quickly off the porch, and hurrying for the sidewalk, continued walking north toward Clawfoot City Park.

It wasn’t hard for her to imagine what college was like, or why so many of her classmates wanted to go there. With prestigious-looking buildings, beautiful girls walking hand in hand with beautiful boys, books in their arms, there was little left not to like. These pictures had been on the posters tacked up all over her high school, many with a stack of cards attached which students could rip off and write their names and addresses on and send in, postage paid, to get free information. But Alana Crippler would never send in a card or make an appointment with a college recruiter because all along something told her she would never fit in at college. Moreover, Alana wouldn’t qualify, wouldn’t even apply, for any scholarships. And her parents certainly wouldn’t offer to co-sign for a student loan. She knew this like she knew the placement of every mole on her body.

The education portion of the college experience did not even nag at her mind. It was the idea that everyone else she knew was going to college to *become someone*. As a matter-of-fact,

the only other person Alana knew who wouldn't be going to college either was John Krokke, and he was dead.

An unpleasant flutter developed in her stomach as her black and white Converse carried her farther away from the Monroe home. She purchased them at the mall during school shopping because they were the same ones Kurt Cobain had worn when his band Nirvana was famous. It had been many years since he had supposedly relieved himself of the pressures of fame, shoving a double barrel shotgun into his mouth and pulling the trigger. Alana had often wondered if he didn't take the right road out, a path she considered following at times like today. Weakly recognizing that punch of anxiety, Alana made a conscious effort to distract her thoughts, noting that the maple trees were dropping their leaves around her. A not-quite autumn breeze rushed from across the street and into her face, sending strands of her hair over her eyelashes, tickling her brow-bones. The day was sparkling, literally, as the glare from a Buick windshield pierced her eyes causing her to wince away, but not before she acknowledged the absence of business on the neighborhood street. Even the bakery on the corner just within Alana's sight was quiet despite the "Two-for-One Tuesday" lunch special.

She caught a glimpse of the grass poking up between the cracks in the sidewalk, straining against the weight of the cement, pushing sections up by inches. One particularly uneven triangle had a fully bloomed dandelion growing out of it and Alana let air escape from her mouth in relief as her sneakered toes missed smacking into the edge. *I'm likely to trip over one and go sprawling on my face just as someone drives by*, she thought. She imagined herself sprawled comically across the pavement, cheek scraped raw, and the contents of her bag spilling out and rolling away. Then, remembering the cans, she looked into the bag to see what she had grabbed. *Hopefully some soup*, she thought, since her plan of staying at Sherri-Mae's or any of her other

friends' houses was no longer an option. It was hard for her to walk and look into the heavy bag at the same time, but she saw the three cans on top clearly. Meijer brand diced tomatoes with green chilies stared back at her. Alana grimaced. She hated tomatoes. Her mom used them to make turkey chili, which was fine with her because when she ate it, she didn't even know the tomatoes were there. Those three cans were useless.

Alana cursed her rush to get out of the house and her failure to think things through more, but at the same time gave herself a little leeway. She had been angry, and for good reasons. Her mother had betrayed her trust by not standing up for her many times before, and this morning had been the last straw. Alana told herself she would not contemplate going back, no matter how hard things got, even if she couldn't find a job and had to ask for leftovers at the bread store, or ask for a favor from one of her friends' parents. For now, she still had the faint taste of maple bacon on her lips and a tummy full of scrambled eggs with onion, a breakfast she had cooked for herself. Alana, still looking down at the ground beneath her feet, somewhat hunched over, her hair secluding her from the world, watched simultaneously as the sidewalk turned to asphalt and a horn blared in her face.

By pure instinct, Alana jumped back out of the way as an SUV turned a hard corner in the lane closest to her. It sped through the intersection, not even slowing, despite the warning honk. The driver had the windows down and radio blaring AC/DC "Shook me all night long..." Wide eyed, heart racing, Alana looked both ways and across the four lane road before she tried again. Fear gripped her, heightening her anxiety as in her mind's eye she saw her body sprawled out on the pavement again, but this time with a bloody mass replacing the skull. Vividly, she watched as her imagination showed the driver shrug his shoulders and drive on. With no call to 911, no paramedics would have come, and like an injured-but-not-dead animal, a common

squirrel or bird, she could imagine herself bleeding on the pavement twisting, dying a slow, agonizing death.

Alana questioned whether anyone she knew would miss her if she died. Her friends certainly would not come back from camp for her funeral. *Sherri-Mae might*, she corrected herself, *especially since I saw her mom last*. To her own parents, though, Alana surmised it would probably be a relief above all else. Then they could have pity-party with the neighbors who they currently hated, and who would bring pies and cakes and monetary condolences. Money would undoubtedly make her father happy, a kind of payment for having a “disfigured kid.”

Alana’s mood darkened as she questioned, more seriously, whether or not her parents would even worry about her now that she had left home. She kicked a pebble out of her way. Alana suspected they were not worried, *yet*, at least. She often spent evening hours in the library on the computers, or just walking around the neighborhood, but how would her parents react at night when she didn’t show up at home? Most parents would immediately begin hunting their children down. *Would they call Sherri-Mae’s house? Would they check with the neighbors?* Alana’s gut instinct was that they wouldn’t call anyone for days. “Let her learn her lesson” she imagined her mother saying. Comically, she watched them in her mind dancing to some love song on the radio, celebrating, remembering why they loved one another in the first place. *Could that be true?* Her conscious kept asking. *Really?* But Alana felt it deep within her chest, that at the very least, relief would be their reaction.

She saw her father sweep her mother around in circles, and with a twinge of anger, imagined him tripping over the television remote control, saw the look of surprise on his face and her mother’s manicured hand reaching out as he fell back. And then, Alana mused that her

father would stumble into the corner where he stored a useless old antique helium tank and the nozzle would puncture the back of his skull. Vividly she saw the tank releasing the gas within it, filling his entire head with air until his eyes burst from the sockets like popping popcorn and before they could ooze fluids out onto his cheeks, his entire head would follow suit and repaint the living room red spackle. Alana stifled a giggle. *Well deserved* in her mind, if the scenario became real.

Alana, on the verge of willing the disaster to happen, simultaneously imagined her mother shoving spoonfuls of her father's favorite portabella mushroom casserole into her mouth in a baking-frenzy coping-mechanism. Her mind played the scene where in one swooping movement her mother slipped on a runaway mushroom, went down on the kitchen floor, and choked on her own casserole. She imagined her mother's body writhing on the tiled floor, fingers clawing at her throat, her face changing color like a chameleon's does to match the linoleum around her, while the blood vessels broke inside the skin.

At these atrocious musings, Alana Cripper walked block after block unaware of her destination until she heard someone call her name.

"Yo, Lana!"

She squinted toward the sun to see three boys she knew from school sitting on the front porch of a worn down house with a lawn dying of thirst. Alana crossed the street quickly, letting the handles of the bag slide onto her forearm and stuffing her fists in her pockets. Timmy-Tom Patchouli, Rick Flank, and Justin Crowley each puffed at a cigarette. Timmy was the only Latino in her high school.

"Hey, can I have a couple?" Alana asked unabashedly.

“You smoke?” Timmy-Tom asked as he slid three out of his soft-pack and handed them to her as she climbed the steps.

“Would I be asking you for one if I didn’t?” she retorted.

Justin Crowley whistled through his teeth, something Alana wished she could do.

“You’re a feisty one, eh?” Alana glared at him over the cigarette in her mouth, which she expertly covered with her left hand, lit with Timmy-Tom’s green lighter with her right and took a long cool drag, blowing the smoke out at the three of them. She had started smoking two years ago by stealing them from her father’s pack and sneaking behind the work-shed.

“Nice.” He complimented the drag.

“So, what brings you out this way?” Timmy-Tom questioned, looking Alana up and down in a way that made her uncomfortable. “Did you hear about John Krohke?”

“Croak- Croak- Croak- Eeee!” chirped Rick, who rarely said anything in school and Alana had originally wondered if he was a mute. Nobody laughed.

“What?! Don’t you get it?” He jeered, turning greener with every drag of the Newport. “You know... Croak-ee for his last name, and he croaked, right? Get it now?” Justin gave him a sympathetic snort, but Alana didn’t think it was funny.

“That’s kinda mean, no?” she asked them all. “He was like, chopped up and shit.”

“He was an asshole.” Rick hissed and then started choking on his next drag. Alana didn’t much care for him or Timmy-Tom, but she thought Justin was cute. He had long bleached blonde hair and blue eyes that wouldn’t quit searing right through her chest.

“Didn’t he kiss you?” Timmy-Tom asked. Alana balled her fist up in his face.

“Didn’t you ask me to punch you?” They all three made “whoa” sounds in unison.

“Dang Crippler... you seem really pissed off all the time,” Justin noted. Alana felt ashamed at this because she was really nice inside. At least, she could see herself being nice to *him*.

“You that way cause of what happened to your face?” Rick blurted out.

“Dude! What the fuck!” Timmy-Tom punched him hard in the chest and Rick’s face turned red.

“What, man? I would be...” he said sheepishly. Alana, mortified, felt her tough act falling to pieces.

“Can I feel it?” Justin asked.

“Man, you guys need to chill out and leave her alone.” Timmy-Tom was shifting from foot to foot.

“Why, Timmy? Make you uncomfortable?” Alana challenged, but instantly realized she had challenged the wrong person. Timmy had been on her side.

“Kinda...” he said, abashed. “I mean, it does look kinda fucked up.” Hate filled Alana’s lungs and she slipped Timmy’s lighter into her pocket along with the remaining two cigarettes.

“Fuck you guys!” she said forcefully and with her hands stuffed in her jeans began walking away. It was her second encounter with other living people for the day, and her second time telling someone to piss off.

Suddenly, Alana felt a thump on her back...and heard an ice cube crack on the sidewalk.

“Fuck YOU, bitch! You think you can run up in here, in my house, with your messed up face and tell ME what to do? Lucky you’re a cripple and not a dude or we’d beat you down!” Timmy-Tom hollered, standing tall now. Alana looked out into the yard and saw the water hose-nozzle sprouting small sprays from where the nozzle connected to the green line.

“Oh YEAH?” she jeered and in a smooth sweep gripped the nozzle in her hand and sprayed all the boys on the porch. They screamed and shouted obscenities, hurrying inside and shutting the inside door so water wouldn’t come through the screen.

“My fucking cigarette!” She heard one of them whine and Alana bolted back across the street and sprinted as fast as she could.

CHAPTER V

MICHIGAN CENTRAL STATION 1982

“Barbara! BAR-BAR-A!” The journalist hollered out in a hurry, pulling his briefcase up to gauge the step below, gripping the railing for just a moment longer than was customary from commuters. He had glimpsed the chocolate brown hair swish across the shoulders of the black leather coat, below the knitted white cap, convinced it was she.

“Barbara! Wait up!”

He hollered to no avail.

He careened his neck to follow her hat in the crowd and risked the final step. Boxed in by the other passengers, the journalist placed the thumb and first finger of his right hand between his lips, and whistled. The woman in the white hat turned back and toward him, as if she heard the familiar sound over the chaos and chatter of the moving bodies around them, but only to adjust the white hat on her head. A fresh shopping-bag hung expertly over her shoulder.

He reached an arm up into the air, and waved to get her attention. Something about the way his fiancée, Barbra, had been acting lately bothered him. She usually laughed when he laughed and punched him lightly in the arm. She had a gentle nature, was the kind of woman who would coax turtles out of the road no matter who was watching. Barbara was the kind of woman who got tears in her eyes over baby pictures and during Disney movies. Lately though, she just didn't seem the same. It was hard for him to put his finger on, but she felt...cold.

The journalist knew Barbara liked to shop in the city at the Ballenbus Mall, often for the day's entirety. The man let out a long sigh. The evening never ended well on her shopping days. Money, no matter how freely he allowed her to spend it, was always a point to bicker over.

Either he would make a jealous comment as she modeled expensive new workout gear, thinking of his own tattered running shoes growing cobwebs in the closet, saying “Why? You have plenty with the tags on still in the drawer.” To which she would become defensive, threatening to take it all back. Or she would play guilty and whine about how her jeans size had gone up even though she barely ate anymore.

One situation was not better than another because both ended with her in tears and him turning the knob on the basement television set trying to find a channel within the static. The man hoped he could catch up with her and escort her home. *Maybe if we talk it over on the walk, he thought, it won't go sour at all.* It was then, though, that the journalist realized she would have been coming from the northbound train if she had been at Ballenbus all day, which didn't arrive at Michigan Central Station for another half-hour. *Maybe she went to Greenwich mall,* he tried to reconcile, afraid that whatever had been gnawing at him lately, darkening her aura, had come to surface. She had never been a cheater...that he knew of. She was organized and persistent. She had wanted to go back to college a few months ago. *No, wait!* His mind corrected. *That was years ago!* They were not able to afford it on his story-by-story wage and he couldn't recall if she had brought it up again. It was true he had gotten wrapped up in his work since that discussion, despite her attempts for his attention, and he worried she had been exploring someone with fewer obligations earlier that day.

No, she was just at the mall, he argued, *which would have put her on the southbound train, the same train I came in on.*

The crowd was thick, but he continued pushing in her direction, even though he could only catch glimpses of her white hat above the crowd. It was a good thing she was taller than the

average woman, standing a healthy five feet nine inches barefoot. He wasn't short, himself, but average, a reason he had hated playing linebacker on his high school football team. He could never see well enough over the helmets and flailing arms of other players to distinguish who had the ball. He pushed past a man in a long overcoat who smelled like a cloud of cigar smoke and who snarled at him to "watch it!" As the throng crowded in the bottleneck going to the stairs, the businesswoman directly in front of the journalist reversed, and stepped square in the middle of his big toenail with her dress-shoe heel. He gritted his teeth at the throbbing, even though he had his arms outstretched in case she did not regain her footing fast enough and took a plunge. Instead of an "excuse me," the woman turned around at him and scowled as if he had stepped on her toe, instead. The journalist rubbed his tired eyes, frustrated.

Where the hell did she go? He wondered, her white hat now absent. He regretted this fact because catching up to her long strides after they hit the open air was nearly impossible. Barbara had multiple circuit routes to their townhouse memorized, and there was no speculating which she would choose today. She prided herself in this endeavor, calling it "a defense against possible predators." The journalist was too exhausted to attempt a guessing game.

Just as he was about to give up the fight, another glimpse of white beckoned back at him like a beacon in the night, closer than before. He triumphed as though he won the game anyway, as the woman he was certain was his fiancée bobbed into the ladies room off to the left. The journalist branched off to that side himself and found solace against a wall. In moments a sewage stench settled in the air around him and the journalist paced, annoyed.

Quite frankly, he was surprised Barbara would even step foot in the public bathroom. Although Michigan Central Station had been gorgeous twenty years ago, it had gone directly

downhill. The photographs of intricate architecture when it was brand new astonished him when he compared it to the dingy walls around him. The journalist figured it was due to the loss of value on the place, having been purchased for less than the original price, and sold for even cheaper multiple times. It wasn't the way property value was supposed to work, and the building was not well-kept. *She probably heard me call out to her and is fixing her hair or makeup*, he thought, and smiled with one half of his mouth. *But what would she be covering up? What was she hiding?* These questions are what nudged his mind.

The journalist watched as the crowd thinned.

He felt confident that she wasn't using the facility within the range of the typical purposes it served. After all, she kept a few packages of Sani-wipes in her purse for more mundane instances. When they shopped at the local Kroger's she insisted on wiping down not just the plastic handle of the metal cart, but the sides where he would place his hands as he guided her through the aisles, as well as the inside where their goods would be stored. It had embarrassed him one time in particular because she stood right in front of the doorway, making other customers go around.

"The stuff on the shelves is probably full of germs too, honey. You gonna wipe each one down as we put it in the cart?" He had chided her once. Not humored, she threw the infectious napkin at his plastic rimmed glasses and glared.

"Fine. YOU get the flu."

The man mused over the last time they had gone to the grocery store. It was another instance where she was acting out of the norm. She hadn't even paused to consider wiping down the cart. The journalist had said nothing, had been careful not to touch the cart either, lest he pick up any of those worrisome germs. He would have chided her again, but that morning he

had noticed his keepsake box, formerly housing a fresh pair of Nike's, but now duct-taped and scratched, was shifted just an inch on the shelf of their bedroom closet, even though he had placed it under stacks of old newspapers. He hadn't brought up the issue so as not to draw attention, but wondered if her strange reaction during grocery shopping meant she had snooped into it. While he waited, that moment tugged at his mind and he wondered what her reaction had been to its contents, if so. Looking at his watch he realized that in eight minutes, the northbound train would come screeching in and another hundred people would cram into the lobby trying to get to the stairs. Nobody else had gone in or come out of the restroom, so the journalist poked his head inside and called out, "Barbara?"

No answer.

"Hey Barbara, is that you in there?" he questioned more loudly.

Again, no answer. He toyed with the idea of screaming something out loud like "FIRE!" to give her a start. Oftentimes he did this at home, hiding under a table until Barbara walked into the room or popping out from behind the closet door. He loved to do this when she was half-naked, sporting only pantyhose and a bra. She would shriek and swing her shirt or a pillow at him. Beaming, she would struggle to speak, "You! You..." The memory lightened his mood for a moment, but urgency immediately situated itself back into him with more strength. He thought he heard a whimper echo out through the door and panic began a slow siege on his heart. Something was wrong. He had felt from the moment he saw her something was amiss.

The journalist looked around him in slight panic for other passengers, but the subway crowd had disbursed almost entirely. The few people lingering smoked coolly across from him and didn't bother a glance his way. He watched one man take a final drag, toss the cigarette butt to the cement, and crush it out with the heel of his black leather boot. The warning which had

manifested inside him urged him to get the smoker's attention, but the journalist decided to take matters into his own hands. With another glance to make sure nobody was watching, he ducked through the door-less entryway into the women's lavatory.

The green of the tiles upset him, faking the gleam of cleanliness. He felt dizzy and blinded by the awful glare. A long black and white marbled counter, absent of sinks, complemented a mammoth mirror the length of the wall. It had a crack across one corner. The black bathroom stalls looked purple to the man who felt the hum of the fluorescent lights overhead in the fillings of his molar teeth. Of the six stalls, only one was closed, the one closest to him.

What's wrong with Barbara? ran like a Goodyear Blimp banner advertising the latest big-screen film across his mind. He fretted that perhaps she gotten diarrhea or started her menstrual cycle and there he was, invading her privacy. He knew most men wouldn't step foot into a woman's bathroom no matter how strange their wives were acting, but the disturbing feeling inside his stomach was one he could not shake. Going in still felt like the wrong thing to do, even though Barbara would often talk to him with the bathroom door ajar while going "number two" at home. His rational side told him to turn around and leave, but the closed door drew him in.

Perhaps she has something else going on with her body or her clothes, his mind suggested, although within its mixed messages it told him he knew better, too. If it was something to that effect, he wondered why Barbara did not say something back.

Perhaps it is not your Barbara, his mind taunted. The reality of that possibility came crashing down on him and the journalist stood poised still for what seemed like hours, barely breathing, but not once hearing her stir.

Well you can't just stand here, the journalist thought and dared to crouch down and peer under the stall out of sheer nervousness. What he saw was a pair of slouchy ribbed socks stuffed into soft suede of her slip-ons to either side of the shopping bag. He could now read Macy's across the side, but it didn't place her at one mall over the other.

Unable to command his voice to call out to her again, and adhering to some strange sensation within him telling him not to interrupt the silence, the journalist looked for a way to get up over the stall to see if she had passed out. If he rattled the door and she was not passed out, she would scream, drawing the attention of anyone waiting for the train. If he talked to her in a normal voice, she would probably do the same. He imagined security guards coming out of the side door, sacked lunch sandwiches in hand, missing one huge bite. He imagined them pinning his cheek to the grimy floor with rough cuffing. Legal reprimand over him stalking his fiancé in a subway restroom would not go over well in the papers, or with his editor.

Those difficulties aside, he just plain did not want to scare her, and decided against announcing his presence. Instead, he went into the stall next to hers and looked over. He moved stealthily, stepping up onto the heavy toilet lid to peer across, making a note to take off and disinfect his shoes before he stepped inside their house.

As he placed his palms to grip the top of the stall wall between hers and his, he felt sickened. He knew through stories he covered for the *Detroit News* that within a few hours, this very place would become an office to city whores. Belligerent and drunken men would stumble as they sloppily kissed women with cheap perfume and bright thick lipstick. Detroit's finest, even, might be in the stalls, laughing, perhaps jeering them with Billy-club threats. He gave the public the inside scoop, so he knew it was true. *Blood enzymes could be dry beneath the paint*, his mind toyed.

Just touching the stall with his bare hands made him cringe.

He typically would have forced the feeling down, meditated on it for a few moments until his mind became clear, and then expelled a long breath to keep it away, a method his advisor in graduate school had taught him. But the journalist forgot everything else as his eyes focused on the sleek black barrel of the gun making a divot in Barbara's cheek. The world spun and the journalist felt as though he had lost his balance, like he had taken a step back off of the toilet when he didn't. A high pitched sound like the one the television made when it wouldn't get a signal pushed his eyes to the edges of their sockets.

Barbara. The Barbara he had proposed to at a picnic celebrating the Renaissance while she ate grapes from a handmade wooden bowl, the Barbara who tore the shower curtain down trying to get away from a Daddy-Long Leg in the tub, the Barbara who asked him to turn the channel when the news showed governments gunning people down in the streets...

That same Barbara now held the tip of a .32 caliber pistol against her cheek, her first-finger white against the trigger.

A FUCKING GUN? His brain shrieked. *What? Why?* Static zipped through him, hot white lightning. *Why?* His mind flailed, his voice mute. *Why? Why? Why? Why?*

The journalist stayed silent to see what Barbara's next action would produce. Her face lacked emotion, as had been the case at home. She was pale and solemn, blinking her eyes every few seconds. There were tears behind the lids, he could sense them, but the calm with which she held the handgun was not in line with what he knew of her. *His* Barbara would never walk into a store and ask to buy a gun.

The journalist thanked the unknown for not having shouted "FIRE!" It could have scared her right into pulling the trigger and taken off half of her face. He weighed the option of

sneaking back out and calling into the door to distract her from her plight without scaring her, but before he could react, shrill feminine laughter bounced through the doorway into the stalls.

How much time has gone by? he wondered. It was a busy public place only when the trains were coming in and out. He doubted the women were just standing in the doorway. They were likely headed into the lavatory. In his imagination he saw the women handing bags and purses to their husbands to hold. The bag between Barbara's feet rustled with her nervous shift and he sensed time running short.

Barbara. He mouthed it. There was no sound with which she could have heard him, but as if she knew he was there all along, she turned her eyes directly up into his and slid the barrel of the gun across her cheek and into her mouth. It clattered against her teeth, had to be cold against the roof of her mouth. The journalist's psyche lurched backward at the intensity of her accusing stare. She had not stopped to look at the door, or at her bag, or at the gun, but had only locked her eyes onto his. He felt time stop as she closed them once, tears squeezing out of the edges down her pale face. He wanted to say something, but couldn't. A short sob shook her. She opened her eyes at him again.

"Your fault," she uttered the phrase barely distinguishable around the gun's barrel, and
CRACK!

The sound was deafening and all he heard afterward was garbled tones. In one corner of his mind, he imagined the women huddled in the tile doorway, cowering against the wall that blocked outsiders from seeing in, bags and purses strewn around them, hands over their ears. His head vibrated as if he had just stepped off of a tilt-o-whirl. In adrenalin-induced panic, the journalist leapt over the stall, crashing into the other side, slamming his knee into the ceramic toilet bowl.

She's still alive!

He gathered her limp body to him, now choked by tears, unconcerned by the dirty floor or the hot blood that was gushing from her body onto his Levis. He clutched her head, not recognizing the wet heat his fingers sank into in the place where her mocha ponytail usually stuck out. He turned her lolling face with wide open eyes, to his. *No! Barbara, No!* He sobbed, intently watching as those big brown eyes filled full of life in a burst, and then the light slowly seeped away, and he continued watching long after, refusing to let her go.

CHAPTER VI

AN UNLIKELY REFUGE

Many blocks down from Timmy-Tom's house, her muscles straining at the exertion, Alana allowed her legs to drop into a jog, then a walk, and finally she stopped altogether, unable to catch her breath. She gasped, pulling air deep into her lungs, hanging her head down, hunched over, her hands on her knees. Briefly, she looked back to see if the boys had followed her. She listened for shouts, but none came, and despite her inability to catch her breath, Alana giggled. *Stupid boys*, she thought. The look on their faces was priceless, mouths open, fear in their eyes. As Alana looked downward between the white toes of her sneakers, she realized that although the sun had been high overhead when she left her house, her shadow did not show.

Straining upward as her hamstrings groaned in protest, Alana saw that gauzy clouds hid the sunshine, changing the fire-reds, golds, and burned oranges of the leaves around her to an earthy brown. As if her hearing too had been muffled by the clouds, Alana recognized the low rumble of engines to her right. Beyond a row of cars parked against the curb, she watched a steady stream of traffic proceed slowly through a stop sign, without stopping. Each vehicle had tiny orange flags mounted on its hood in the familiar form of a funeral procession. A minivan crept by and Alana saw a woman in the passenger seat dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex. In the next vehicle, a couple exchanged heated words but with sad looks on their faces. A child stared out the window at her from the back seat, his nose pressed against the glass.

Bbrrring! Bbrrring! she heard, and looked up to see a middle-aged man on a ten-speed wearing a bright colored helmet riding toward her on the sidewalk. He wasn't going very fast. *Bbrrring*, the sound of the bicycle bell came again and Alana backed up until she felt the heels

of her sneakers touch the grass. The man passed by her even more slowly than the line of vehicles behind him, his feet barely going around the circle of the sprocket. He stared hard at her with intense eye contact, paying no attention to the direction he was travelling. He had one blue eye and one brown eye. As he passed, he nodded his head in the direction of the road and said “someone died” as though it wasn’t already obvious. His eyes lingered, locked on hers for one extra moment before he turned back toward the sidewalk and pedaled away.

Bbrrring-bbrrring the bell came again and Alana watched him drive away a few yards, and then looked back at the funeral procession as goose bumps broke out across her arms. The vehicles were now moving more quickly, the orange flags flapping faster. She wondered if it was John’s funeral they were headed to. She had not seen anyone she knew in the vehicles, though, and assumed he had just been found recently hence the “breaking-news” story. Alana wondered how it was even possible that a human could have two different colored eyes. She saw a dog with different colored eyes and once had seen an albino cat, but not a person. She glanced back at the cyclist, but he had disappeared despite the long stretch of walkway before the next road.

Before she could react to the sudden absence of the strange man, however, a police siren split the air, working Alana’s nerves into a panic. She stuffed her hands into her hoodie pockets making sure the cigarettes were not poking out. She wasn’t worried about being busted for having cigarettes, even though she wouldn’t be able to smoke legally for another three years, but she was afraid her parents might have called the cops on her and the cigarettes would be an additional blow. She tried to decide if breaking her mother’s dishware was a reason to get thrown in jail. She hadn’t been gone long enough to be considered a runaway, and yet Alana felt

guilty, knowing she had no intention of going back to that house. This guilt caused her to feel singled out, ashamed that only hours prior she had told her parents to go screw themselves.

In the beginning stages of panic, Alana swept her hood over her head and began to speed-walk along the cement, pumping her arms as fast as they would go despite the heavy bag of canned goods. The blare of the siren rang father away in the distance, but when Alana's eyes happened on the expanse of emerald green grass to her left, she knew she had found a private place of refuge. The golf course's rolling straightaway lay just beyond a chain-link fence. It glowed despite the hidden sun. Alana judged its height, surveyed the area for gate, and shot two quick glances down the either side of the walkway before she slung her bag over and easily jumped the fence.

She had never been on a golf course, but the open expanse felt safer than the glaring passengers of the funeral procession out on the roadway. She didn't hear the crack of clubs hitting balls, or even of the music of conversation floating toward her in the air, so she felt safe to fondle one delicate cigarette out of her pocket. It was bent, but not broken. Still too self-aware to smoke in the open, Alana struck out across the fairway for the towering willow tree to hide beneath.

Although she had been experiencing folks frowning at her burned face for eight years, Alana couldn't push away the image of the cyclist's penetrating stare. She wondered how much he knew about her, if he had some kind of strange power inside one of his odd eyes. She had no idea where he had come from in the first place.

In moments she was under the cool umbrella of the huge willow. It not only blocked out what little bits of the sun were coming through the clouds, but it also blocked out sounds. The silence was soothing. In that respite, Alana simply opened her fingers, let the bag fall to the

ground, and crumpled into a heap of exhaustion. Her thighs burned and her feet ached. She rarely ever exercised and yet in a single day felt as though she had walked a hundred miles. *Where will I go?* She wondered. With her legs folded beneath her, torso awkwardly twisted on the ground, and cheek cushioned by the grass, Alana felt wetness soaking into her shoulder, into the knees of her jeans, into the hair at her temple, and welcomed it.

She wouldn't have to go home and listen to her mother complain about the grass stains on her jeans this time. Although Alana had intended to smoke, she simply closed her eyes and let herself unwind onto the soft grass and listened to the sounds around her. There were birds chirping, bees buzzing, dry leaves somersaulting over one another.

Just as she started to fall into sleep, she recognized the sound of running water. It was soothing, but unexpected. There was only one river in Clawfoot, and that was Clawfoot Creek. Alana looked down a slope on the opposite side of the fairway and saw the murky green of it just yards away. It moved slowly, silently, as if it dared not disturb the world.

She knew Clawfoot Creek was only a few feet deep in some spots, but was continually curious as to why the city's founders had named *the river* Clawfoot *Creek* anyhow. Clawfoot River would have given people a more accurate sense of the landmark. Suspicious stories surrounded that river, too. Many Alana didn't believe at all, such as sharks living in the deepest holes and one guy's boa constrictor slithering loose along its banks. But others made more sense and caused her some wariness toward the water, such as when a group of campers had seen apparitions of Indians staring out at them from the woods in the middle of the night with yellow eyes. One day at lunch her freshman year, Alana listened intently to a story told by a normally stuck up senior jock. For once, he didn't mind the underclassmen gathered around.

Apparently, he and a bunch of his friends had decided to tube down Clawfoot Creek despite the heavy rains from days before. Alana had never gone tubing, and thought it sounded fun. In this story, however, the adventure was one she could live without. He described the water as moving faster than his mother drove.

“So why didn’t you guys turn back?” A pimple-faced wrestler asked him. “You knew it was dangerous.” According to the senior, the group members had debated the idea, but chose to decide once they got within sight of the river.

“Lizzy really wanted to go, and so she jumped in with her tube and the current immediately started taking her away!” The senior shook his head dramatically. “We couldn’t just leave her by herself!” So, apparently, instead of forcing poor Lizzy to travel the torrents on her own, her actions decided for everyone else in the group and they all jumped in after.

“It was fun... at first,” the senior explained, but when they got east of the school, the river split into two directions.

“There aren’t splits in Clawfoot Creek until Charlestown,” another senior argued. Alana believed him because he had been a gold medal winner in the Science Olympiad three years running.

“I *know*, dorkus maximus,” the senior snarled. “We had never run into that problem before and we tubed the Clawfoot section *hundreds* of times.” Apparently the rain had caused the river to overflow into two sections and the group took a vote on which path to follow and decided on the left 6-2.

“At first,” he explained, “it seemed to be the main part of the creek and we were moving right along, but then, suddenly, the water slowed and it widened wayyy out.” He opened his

arms to either side demonstrating just how wide it was. “Then, one of the girls in the front got a sharp poke in her ass and screeched. A branch almost ripped her bikini right off!”

“Yup, that was Alexis...” Another scrawny boy crooned and the boy next to him smacked him a high five. The senior shook his head in disgust.

“When she tried to twist off of it there was another stabbing her calf, and that’s when we realized the river had flowed over an embankment and pooled over swampland.” To Alana’s horror, he described a treacherous journey of making their way back to the river side. With bare feet and legs, they had to trek through the murky depths, the slimy muck and mossy branches grabbing at them, pulling them down.

“So that’s why Jackie left early today!” the wrestler announced, smacking his hand on the table. Alana had seen her examining some strange rash on the inside of her thigh earlier that morning before the storytelling. *Probably a reaction to something in the muck*, she surmised.

“Dude, she doesn’t like you,” the senior retorted. “Why don’t you just give it up?”

“Hey, is that why you guys all smell like someone crapped in your closets before you put your clothes on today?” one of the nerdy boys asked, laughing.

“Thanks, dick-wad...” The senior rolled his eyes. “But yes, that’s why.”

“Guys, we all showered! Duh! It just stunk really bad.” As he started to explain how they had to salt leeches off of their skin, the senior girl sitting across from the tale-teller in Alana’s row shoved her lunch tray away and rushed into the bathroom with her hand over her mouth. She had been one of the girls on the trip.

Between that creepy story and the fact that John Krohke had been found dead along the river’s banks, Alana wondered if there was something wrong with the river. Now at its edge, she

remembered every detail of that kid's story and eyed it with personal suspicion and followed a leaf as if floated downstream. That's when her eyes happened on the Clawfoot Creek Bridge.

The bridge hadn't occurred to her when she leapt the fence to the golf course, but thinking back she had known it connected the park side to the golf course side all along. The news hadn't mentioned the golf course, though. Probably not wanting to cause negative publicity. After all, the bridge was the only major one on their city's stretch of the river. It was wide enough to fit a single vehicle across but it was reserved for pedestrians. The bridge had been built long before Alana was born, but remodeled only about ten years ago when the boards had finally rotted through. In an effort to gain support from the community, Mallory Frishka, whose name was currently on signs for State Representative, had taken the project on as community service. There were, of course, roadway bridges which crossed the creek, but most people didn't even realize they were driving over a "bridge" at all.

The iron of the Clawfoot Creek Bridge was from recycled train tracks, which the city melted down, ties and all, from the local railroad that hauled coal to the lumberjacks and hauled wood back to the businessmen decades before. The city officials prided themselves on it, but Alana wondered how well the bridge would work for Mrs. Frishka now that John Krohke had gotten himself mangled beneath its beams. The thought of being so close to the place John's carcass had begun to rot sent unease up Alana's spine, but she dismissed the idea. *It isn't like he's still there*, she told herself, although his blood had to have soaked into the ground. Part of her hoped that if she searched the spot, she would find a tooth or a bone shard the forensics "experts" had left behind. Like most people, she had never seen a real human bone before. Just the idea of having one in the pocket of her jeans, or wrapped in her fist against the bare flesh

made Alana feel powerful. She wondered what it looked like up close, if it was white, or yellow, or if it would still be bloody. She wondered if it would emit energy.

After tucking her grocery bag in a crevice forged by the big tree's knobby roots, the contents still unaccounted for, Alana made her way along the grass toward the bridge, keeping safe distance between her feet and the creek embankment. Here and there a golf ball looked back at her from the creek bed. Sometimes it was a white one, but most of them were algae coated. As Alana approached the bridge the embankment sloped more, turned to sand and pebbles, and the water became louder as it leaped and lurched against large stones, probably left over after the bridge's reconstruction. A shrub blocked Alana's view, its dying flowers crumbling into brown bits as she pushed it away, and Alana stopped dead in her tracks as she came face to face with a blue ribbon-bound cross.

"Loving Son," the widest ribbon read in gold lettering. Already, the weather had begun to chip away at the fancy serif edges and it was clear that the sun worked diligently to bleach out the blue. She didn't know how long John had been missing, or how long it had been since he died. Bravely, Alana reached out her hand and squeezed the right arm of the cross. It gave her fingers a comfortable, pillow-like push back. To her, it looked as if a person wrapped the ribbon around it hundreds of times, leaving pockets of air in between. She imagined John's mother, frantically wrapping the ribbon around the awkward wooden cross, her face streaming tears, her lipstick smeared. She imagined his father. In her mind he was a stout farmer with overalls on in her mind, standing, back straightened, hands clenched to his sides as if he had suffered a great blow to the jaw. Neither of these images, however, conjured up what she related to John Krohke.

Alana stepped back and tried to imagine John as a “Loving Son.” It didn’t work in her mind. She saw him throwing his milk glass, swearing at his mother, chewing tobacco during the nightly news. She imagined him destroying the lawn with a jacked up pickup, revving the engine so loud it awoke the baby, if there was a baby at home, and smirking all the while. She imagined he would have been an abusive husband.

At the base of the cross someone had placed a wrought-iron frame with John’s photograph when he was still a kid. His hair was slicked over to one side, a child’s innocent grin on his face, his two front teeth missing. As she looked closer, the image became less innocent, the evil in his eyes more apparent. A “Hot Wheels” Mack truck sat climbing the edge of the photo and in good condition too. Other than these renditions, Alana couldn’t grasp what had been so good about him.

Out of habit, Alana “tried the shoe on the other foot” to see if it made a difference in how she felt about him, because almost every day of her life, she had wished someone had known, really known, how she felt. In every book she read, her favorite characters were those who tried to see things from another’s point of view. Due to her wish that people would rethink the way they reacted toward her, this practice was securely ingrained, and Alana wondered what the scene would look like if it were her cold-fleshed body found under the bridge at the edge of the creek. It was likely her parents would have placed her six-year old photograph, the wooden frame and all, under a similar cross but with pink ribbon. “Loving Daughter,” it would probably read, but on plain wood. Alana couldn’t imagine her mother taking the time to wrap the ribbon around a hundred times. Instead, she saw her mother hustling back and forth in frenzy, ensuring every tiny detail of a ceremony, of the flower arrangements, of the burial clothes, was in place, so that her friends and family would be impressed. Alana wondered if her parents would know

to put her Green Day iron-on patch at the base of her cross to represent the person she was, or if they would pick out an old Barbie from the shed, one of her cousin's dolls even, and put that one at the base of her cross instead.

Alana's feelings, already tenderized by the events of the day, became injured even though these things had not come to pass. She hung her head low, still standing before the cross, until a rumble rolled through the sky overhead. Squinting up at the clouds again, Alana realized it was going to rain and she was stuck out in the middle of nowhere in only a hoodie and canvas shoes. She scanned the course for some form of shelter, even a bathroom, but found none. Instead, her eyes fell on the Clawfoot Creek Bridge again, at the dark triangle of space between the bridge's bottom and the embankment's top. Her mind made itself up and Alana dashed back to the willow tree to get her food. Her stomach rumbled, a copycat of the sky overhead.

By the time Alana reached the tree and scooped up her bag, the sky had worn thin and cold drops landed in a chaotic sequence on her cheeks. She rushed back to the bridge, the bottoms of her sneakers slipping in the rough, grinding rocks into the sand as she slid down the embankment. It was stuffy underneath, the small stones sending cold upward, but it was better than being soaked by the rain. As she listened to the pitter-patter against the earth, Alana tied the handles of the plastic bag closed, pulled her hands into her sleeves and hugged her knees and torso. *It isn't such a bad place*, she consoled herself, sniffing. She thought she might stay the night there, out of the wind and rain, and consider her situation again in the morning.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST ENTRY IN THE LEATHER-BOUND BOOK

To Whom It May Concern,

I am no writer. I mean, obviously if I am writing this then I am a writer, but not this *kind* of writer. I wish I had more time to learn the craft, expand my vocabulary, play with sentence structure. But life is SHORT and you never know when you're gonna die. Or maybe you do know, you just deny it. I take life by the horns, write it as it comes to me, as it really is, no questions asked. I don't deny who I am.

If you're reading this, I'm probably dead anyway. Try not to be too critical, would you? Try not to make light of my every mistake? "You step on people you're likely to come back as a cockroach," my mother used to say. I hate cockroaches, and I'm sure you probably do too.

Signed, ALT.

Debbie watched the land shrink smaller and smaller below her. Mesmerized by the Boeing's mechanical wings, Debbie did not see him watching her. The little flaps which moved in and down on takeoff, moved out and up now that they were landing. She compared them to bird feathers, so delicately designed and irreplaceably important. If one

were to break, the plane would plummet. The movie of the crash played out in her mind. She would spiral down and down.

Turbulence rocked the plane and she gripped the edges of her seat with both hands. Her ID card hung loosely from her lapel and she heard the familiar click of it tapping against the certification badge beneath it. Even now, in 1987, long after women earned the right to vote, Debbie made less money than her male co-worker who had no certification. The stewardess who had given a simple solution for a crash over water in the form of a joke saying, "If the flight should suddenly become a cruise, your seat cushion works doubly as a floatation device," was clicking her seatbelt into place. Debbie did not find it humorous. She could not float her way out of the horrors her mind imagined.

As if he sensed what she was thinking, the man thought about how she would be incapable of getting away now that she had caught his attention. He looked at his watch, which had moved from 7:13 pm to 7:15 pm. He had thirty more minutes to plan how he would do it. He could not resist the ache inside of him and he leaned forward in anticipation.

The woman adjusted her skirt in the seat. The polyester suit looked crisp all day, never wrinkling, but it itched overtop her pantyhose. She was ready to be off the plane. The weekend had worn her out and she let her head loll to the side. She saw the middle-aged

woman who was sharing the row of three seats with her, who had graying hair, asleep with a small girl in her arms. The girl looked about four years old with bright blonde hair and straight bangs. She snored softly into her mother's chest, wearing pink corduroy pants and gray and purple Velcro shoes. As if sensing Debbie's stare in her sleep, the mother hugged the girl closer. Debbie felt like an intruder and looked hastily away.

She then mused as to why any flight would have open seating. She had always imagined there were records of who sat in which seat on each flight. It made her feel safe and secure knowing there was proof of each person on the plane, before she saw a news report that told her otherwise. It struck her as a danger when terror from the skies as always a constant threat. They had good protective technology for all she knew, metal detectors and stuff at the terminal, but she was the kind of girl who relied on records.

Another quirky detail about the flight was the no smoking signs above each passenger, right next to the air conditioner fan. They were contradictory to the small metal flip-open ashtrays on the arm of each seat. She fingered the cold metal of one, giving up the question and closing her eyes.

The man unsheathed his scissors carefully, the pocket in his pants opening wide to allow the gleam of metal through. Three hairs on her head slid apart from the others, her bright blonde locks arching in restraint, avoiding the headrest in a tangled lump. He clipped

them; and quickly looked around to make sure nobody saw him, something he should have done before he unsheathed the scissors in the first place.

Everyone within his sight was fast asleep. He then used the damp pad of his first finger to pull the severed hairs away, but they were cuddled closer to the others than he had suspected and they caught in protest.

The woman pulled up at the sensation, ran a hand over the back of her head, and checked the tilt of her seat to make sure she was not far back into the passenger behind her. After all, the airplane seats were so crowded, she almost felt claustrophobic. Then, she relaxed again, not even the slightest bit annoyed.

The hairs the man cut fell onto his newspaper with grace. He slid them into an envelope and didn't look at them again for the rest of the flight.

As the plane made its round sweep to land, Debbie's stomach fluttered. The window she sat next to, even double-paned, looked too thin to withstand the pressure outside. The turn skewed the horizon into a mountain to be climbed. From her line of view, the skyscraper buildings jutted out of the land like grippers from a climbing wall, where an athlete could reach out and press against the evening sun with his round thumb after gaining the top. She had looked down on bigger cities, but none had the landing circle as classic as the Detroit Metro.

She could make out rooftops, parking lots, rivers and lakes below her as they descended, and could see the smoggy haze hanging over the city. It was nearing dusk, and traffic was backed up along both I-75 and I-94. She hoped it would disperse before her long drive. Debbie watched the miniature cars until her eye caught a huge pool in one backyard. The movie came back to life in her mind, the plane spiraling down, crashing into the house, half-landing in the pool. The water would come in through her small portal window. She wouldn't be able to get out of her seatbelt and it would drown her before she burned, choking on chlorine chemicals.

The view outside was interrupted by her sudden urge to be gone. She wanted off the plane so badly her stomach knotted. She began to sweat. Drops of her sweat merged into a trickle she felt travel down her neck. Her husband told her all the time that her neck and shoulders were sexy. She remembered the dress in her bag and her stomach fluttered again, but in a warmer, more sensual way. She would wear it to dinner tonight. She could not wait to see his reaction to the little no-strap, black and white dress. He would ache for her and she wanted him to.

Debbie felt the hem of her dress sliding across her thighs before another wave of insecurity washed over her. She looked carefully around, but nobody else seemed to be feeling out of sorts. A report of mishap came across her brain in fuzzy black and white noise.

It was static she could not decipher and so discarded. She had nothing to be so anxious about since the landing was almost over. The plane would soon be on pavement and securely in the airlock. However, her body would not give up the response and another band of salty sweat glided down her temple. It lost mass as each cell it passed borrowed a molecule of water from it, leaving her skin gritty with salt. She closed her eyes yet again to enjoy the cool, quiet peace behind them. By the time she arrived at the terminal, the fears of crashing had disappeared.

As she crossed that three-inch separation between the fuselage door and the gate tunnel, where the yellow painted lines on the cement below winked back, her legs took on a shakiness she could not place. She felt light. The oddest urge to run all the way through the airport, past everyone, with her hair whipping back from her face in tangles, almost took her over. She could feel rush of air drying the sweat from her hairline and hear the echo of her dress flats clicking the tile floor. She could imagine the stares from the other passengers, thinking her a crazy woman. To resist the urge, she took each step deliberately, refusing to rush in getting her luggage and rental keys.

The man did the same, forcing patience into the blood speeding through his veins.

Debbie's small blue suitcase, which she had packed neatly and tightly, rounded the bend of the luggage train. Another woman stood suspiciously still near the claim belt, and

she suspected her of being a thief. She imagined her scooping up someone else's bag and heading out the door. She would have a stern face and no look of guilt, but the woman did not take Debbie's bag, or even acknowledge Debbie was there.

The suitcase was lighter than she had remembered, and twenty-six steps took her from the luggage belt to the door. It opened automatically, letting the damp Michigan air sweep in. The suitcase rolled noisily behind her, clattering over the dip of the grout between each tile. Dusk had come in, and the heat lamps above the sidewalk were on. She wished she had brought a coat, and not for the first time. The coldness of the Michigan air always caught her off guard. Cold as she felt, she still could not wait to slip on the little black dress and hook in the diamond earrings her husband bought her for her birthday two months ago. It would be quite cold when they returned, and she knew her husband would take off his coat to cover her. Debbie could almost smell the scent of Old Spice around her. She imagined the fire roaring before them in of the Jacuzzi suite they had rented for one night. The idea brought warmth to her, but she realized she would first have to cross the chilled pavement to her rental car, and leave the heat of the lamps behind.

With her first step her bowels gurgled. They protested at her holding, as she squeezed her legs together uncertainly. What is the matter with me? She wondered. Consciously, everything around her was normal. She recognized colors and shapes, could

count the square cement blocks beneath her feet. And yet, she felt outside of herself, like her body was on autopilot and registering things different from her mind. It was as if her body was trying to respond to something, preparing her for fight or flight. She looked around yet again for some sure sign of these warnings, but no proof glared back.

The man made his move as soon as she stepped into the rental parking lot. He matched her footsteps exactly, stealthily, which was easy, because her heels clicked loudly against the pavement. As she reminded herself to call her mother first thing in the morning he seized her by the shoulders. He wrapped her long hair around his hand, pulling her head back sharply. She cried out, bringing her left fist up to hit him, but he laughed back, dodging it easily. Had she brought her right up, it would have knocked him reeling, but instead, she kept it tight around her suitcase handle. The fingers of his right hand held the scissors ready, the blades forming the V of an open mouth. They glinted in the parking lot lamps for one flash.

The man cut cleanly through her esophagus. He had sharpened the scissors that morning, and the woman felt the prick of cold metal into her skin -- barbaric kisses. Giving her no time to react, the man tore through the tendons in her neck with a second cut, snapping them like fat rubber-bands. He continued to push the scissors backward and forward, grinding them against her cervical vertebrae, watching the white flakes land like

snow against her flayed muscle, imitating a circle like the landing they each had experienced only an hour prior.

She was remembering the buildings growing bigger and bigger on the flight. They loomed over her now, terrifyingly huge, falling in on her, crushing against her chest. She heaved and heaved, but her life was running out of the hole in her neck, no air coming in or going out through her trachea or lungs.

The man cut off her hair before her life was completely gone, scattering it around her like straw, soaking up her blood. He watched her body go limp against the pavement full of oil and grime.

As the molecules inside her body broke, their lack of oxygen deteriorating them immediately, the finality of her situation became clear, tattooing itself across the gray matter of her brain behind her eyes, coloring her eyes a shade darker than they were before. She had no chance to develop the realization that she would never see her husband or parents again, though, because her brain shut down, permanently.

CHAPTER VIII
TAKING CHANCES

Alana was not surprised that the rain had started, but as she felt the weight of the heavy weather press down around her and against the bridge above, she wished it had been a day where it didn't rain in the afternoon. It was the time of year when rain stopped soothing the skin, but was still salve to the mind, and Alana's attention was oddly drawn to the rolling chill that came in with it. The drops hit brief blades of grass as though they were cushions, still soft from yesterday's drizzle. She would simply wait it out, for the autumn drizzles typically lasted just half an hour, sometimes only minutes.

As the storm pushed down harder, shutting the golf course around her out, Alana thought to herself that the only thing she could do was listen to her media player until the rain stopped, but she had been listening to it that morning and guessed it didn't have much battery left. She could smell the damp as she squatted, settling back on her heels which rooted her into the creek-side, and scooped up a handful of pebbles, varying in different shapes and sizes of round. She momentarily regretted her amusement of the idea of finding even one sliver from John Krohke's busted teeth along the riverbank, and let go of the stones in her hand, all at once. She tried to convince herself that she couldn't possibly have been holding a piece of bone, because she was way up under the bridge instead of where they had found John's body.

If there were body parts to be found they were more likely smashed down into the sand where dirt now packed in tight to the turf. She thought of how many men in official looking jackets trampled the space in the rush at the scene of the crime. It was probably the kind of chaotic moment which occurred during detective shows she watched over dinner; the ones she saw as she hunched over her plate, feet braced against the frame of her bed, torso leaning off the

edge, eyes watching sideways through the crack of her open door. Except, in this case, someone really had found him first, gotten scared half out of their mind by his corpse, and called the police. Alana felt sorry for that person. She imagined it to have been someone from out of town, some “official” person who hit a ball into the rough.

She wriggled her body around, grinding the pebbles together with her shoe soles and faced the river. The space that flowed beneath the bridge survived thousands of divots that the surface suffered on either side, but it was by no means a smooth ride. Wrapping her long slender arms around her knees, resting her chin on the left one, Alana stared ahead at where the stony bed met the river and wondered how fish survived in the pulsing current.

“It’s over there!” someone called out just as Alana recognized the whir of a golf-cart. The maintenance men drove them around her school building cafeteria to pick up the trash. It screeched to a slippery halt not far behind her and Alana sat stone still as the thud-thud-thud of hurried footsteps jarred the boards overhead.

“Awww, Brad! It’s already soaked!” The woman complained above her and the steps going back the other way were not as quick.

“Maybe it will dry out,” a man’s voice assured. Alana crouched down low and crawled up to the edge of the bridge, peering secretly out. At foot level she saw a pair of white and brown sneakers with rounded fronts and an orange poncho covering a pair of legs that were already losing their summer tan to mid-calf. A dripping digital camera swung from its cord in and out of Alana’s vision. The woman mumbled something else she couldn’t make out as the couple rushed away, the wheels spinning out in the grass like pieces of vinyl rubbing together. She didn’t think they saw her, even though the left shoulder of her hoodie was now damp. As she slid backward down the slope, pushing with her elbows so she wouldn’t hit her head, Alana’s

sweatshirt and Nirvana t-shirt rode up at the same time. The chilled rocks gave her a shock and it felt as though a thorn-bush raked across the soft flesh of her skin. She stood up and brushed off the pebbles clinging to her stomach and wedged in the waistband of her pants. They too were damp. In the silence of a few beats, Alana heard the sky crack open and heard the roar of even more water as it cascaded down around her. The rocks beneath the bridge turned dark in runnels that reached out to her like tree branch hands.

Soon her shoes would be wet and only the willow tree had offered anywhere else for her to shelter under, and Alana figured that it was even more soaked anyhow. The girl peered out through the torrential curtain beyond the shelter of the bridge in hopes to catch a glimpse of a pavilion, or a soda stand, but it was difficult to make out anything much more than a few feet away. The colors all blurred and ran, like a watercolor gone out of control. She tapped her foot impatiently.

Now what?

But then, as if it winked at her, Alana's sight was drawn to pale object in the water just at the bend in the stream. It looked like a large object, to her. Of course, Clawfoot Creek was lined with forest almost all the way down, and it was difficult to judge just how far down that bend was.

She continued to scrutinize the thing and speculated it as the fleshy insides of a downed tree, where the trunk tore free from the stump. She couldn't tell whether the colorless object was bobbing on the choppy river or whether the curtain of rain was tampering with her judgment. She thought she made out debris of some sort, too, but during a break in the torrent she distinctly recognized the shape of a boat. It was an anomaly that opposed her idea of a creek more strongly than the name had, and yet, like the name, it made some sort of sense. Her father told her lots of

people fished the creek from the banks in town, hoping to catch bass and bluegill, even though he also said it was probably polluted with nuclear waste and discarded prescription medication. Alana imagined a three-eyed catfish.

The section where she stood was not the widest on the river, but she had a feeling it was deep. It swelled and rushed in places which were still only minutes before. Plus, the banks got much higher down there. Alana thought to herself that something just wasn't right about the way the object sat in the water, and the dock, too, jutted out at a strange angle. The girl tried to see through the trees at the structure which would logically accompany the boat and dock. The trees blocked the images. The edge of a roof, however, came into clear view.

Why didn't I notice that before? She scolded herself. It was probably a storehouse where the owner kept fishing poles and tools. It made sense to Alana that the place was either a weekend cabin and may have been abandoned for the winter, or it was a campsite, likely not in use, either. She thought she might be able to quietly break in, undetected, and sleep for the night out of the rain. Upon their return, the owners wouldn't even know she had stayed there. It wasn't like her to go vandalizing someone's home, but desperation was upon the girl who had just up and told her parents she hated them that morning. Alana Crippler, in those moments standing under the shelter of the bridge thought a better shelter was worth the risk of being caught, even if the cabin was falling apart, only a couple walls standing. The wind was, after all, sweeping the rain under the bridge, misting her face. She would make a run for it, because soon she was going to be soaked anyway.

Once again, Alana gripped the heavy plastic bag in her hand, ducking into the rain. The slippery embankment did not make it easy as she climbed her way toward the bridge and she had

to throw herself upward to keep from sliding back down. Once standing, she pulled her hood over her hair, yanking the ropes threaded through, until just her face showed in an oval-shape.

Buckets full of rain dumped down on her and her soaked shoes squawked across the wooden planks of the bridge. The force of each step sent thundering shivers through the hollow iron supports. She was more cautious at the edge of the ramp's slope; the smooth wood now had a slippery glaze over it. The house with the tractor was still hidden behind the embankment but she felt as though she were miles closer now, and when a car door slammed from the home's vicinity, a startled Alana bolted. The immediacy of the momentum her feet pushed into her caused the turn at the base of the bridge to look a lot less languid. She spun out on the slippery piles of pebbles like a car given too much gas at an intersection of a dirt road. Down she went, onto her knees with a splash, water dripping from her bangs which stuck to her forehead and fell into her eyes, but in her fear of being found out, she was right back up again. It was difficult to make out any path along the river, so Alana plunged into the green growth along the river's bank.

Thorns hooked at her jeans and the plastic bag she held onto, but Alana pushed forward, raising her knees high. Soon the brush was almost as tall as she was, and she had to peel the branches of a young bush apart and step through. Wet leaves slapped lightly at her face. Even through the pummeling rain Alana could hear the roar of the swelling river close on her right. As she broke through the dense patch of saplings and trudged up a hill, the ground under Alana's feet slid out from beneath her, and she fell toward the river.

"Ahh!" she screeched, unable to contain her sudden fear. But by instinct, she reached out to grasp the roots and branches for support.

They held her.

Belly down, legs dangling off the cliff which had given way, Alana dug her sneakers into the dirt and pulled herself up by the brambles and pickers. They dug into her palms painfully. She thought of poison ivy as her sweatshirt and t-shirt both annoyingly rode up again, and the sharp edges of sticks sliced at her already tender tummy. Alana pushed against the embankment, gaining purchase on only a quarter of the sand while the rest fell down into the water, and as soon as she gained footing enough, Alana wrapped her arms around the closest oak tree, breathing heavily, feeling the rough bark against her face.

When she looked down to examine the reality of her plight, Alana saw it had been a steeper embankment than she thought as she struggled, but nothing too treacherous. She wouldn't have wanted to land in the water, but it would have cushioned the fall. She could have regained her footing on the river bottom and sulked her way out of the rushing current, of that she was confident, but Alana wasn't a very good swimmer. It was six feet down to the water's edge which growled, antagonized by the rain.

As Alana let go of the tree she heard a clunking sound simultaneously felt the contents of her bag give way. She spun to catch them, but the cans disappeared in the underbrush and down the embankment and she pulled it back up only to see the handles still around her forearm, the stretched plastic torn stiff beneath. Alana ripped the rest of the bag off, tossed it toward the river and watched the water take it away.

"Damn-it," she stated.

Shoving onward through the brush, her feet slid around inside her soaked shoes. She soon made out the boat and dock she had seen from the other side. Both were in worse condition than she had imagined. The dock's nose fell sharply to the left down under the water. Boards were broken all the way through. The boat was a small two-seater speedboat, with MC1203PG

still legible across the front side. Its entire back half had been claimed by the river. Dark green scum varied in thickness where the water levels had changed over time. Alana made out a crack in the windshield and saw the gold leather interior had been bleached on the top of the headrests by the sun.

She rushed forward and found herself breaking through the undergrowth and stumbling out onto a leaf covered lawn. A rough cut shed made up the structure she saw, and a pair of rusted and red handled shears hung haphazardly on a nail on its side facing the river. Alana put a hand against it for support, trying to regain her breath. Her reservoir of energy from that morning's breakfast had been spent running from Timmy-Tom and his friends. She peered out around the shed to look for a vehicle of some sort indicating the shed was occupied and was awed to see the back-side of a two-story home.

Alana ducked back behind the shed, and heard the shears clank against the wood by her head. "Shit!" she hissed. A cabin was usually empty for more time than it was occupied, but a house... that was different. Sneaking another look, she saw that ivy grew up the walls and a huge wraparound porch held but a single empty wooden rocking chair. Sheets of screen sagged around it in some places, and were altogether absent in others. Alana saw the chair rock back and forth in the wind. The roof was moss-covered, the sides had paint peeling. She saw no sign of light inside and the lawn hadn't been manicured since the leaves began to fall.

It still looks abandoned, she thought.

For minutes, Alana watched the silent house. She looked for any sign of life, any twinkle of light in a window, even the red glow of a cigarette's cherry. She listened for the clunk of a trunk closing, a whisper of conversation, or the clank of a cupboard door. Nothing came back to her senses. Still, the cautious Alana waited.

As she watched the light of the day begin to wane and felt the night coldness really setting in, she imagined the different kinds of people she could open that door to. Many movie-version psychopaths came to her mind, but even a crazy cat lady could complicate things, her living room floor covered solid in litter boxes. She imagined the woman would clunk her over the head with a rolling pin and while she was still alive cut her body up into tiny meat squares to feed her hundreds of cats. Fortunately, not even a swish of a cat's tail in a window, the low whine of a dreaming dog, or the blink of a microwave clock came back to her.

Night was coming in. She could recognize it even through the storm. The rain had let up, but the brightness of the sky had not increased. When shivers began to wrack her body and Alana could no longer feel her feet in her sneakers, she decided to chance it. With arms stretched out for balance, head surveying side to side, knees bent and back hunched over, low, she passed the unlatched shed door, an overgrown flower garden, and the rope-less poles of a neglected clothesline. Alana ducked onto the porch and flattened herself against the house's wooden sides, between a large window and the door, listening again, keeping her breath low and slow.

Nothing sounded back, so Alana reached toward the round and nicked knob on the white door. She figured she would have to break in through a window. With a slow turn, the springs inside groaned for a moment and the knob stuck. It had stopped turning too soon to have unlatched. Alana, even though she had expected it to be locked, felt disappointment wash over her, but when she pushed, the door cracked open.

CHAPTER IX

DETROIT NEWS OFFICE, 1983

At the office, the computer screen was a wall of blue, because instead of writing the journalist was thinking about Barbara. The yellow sticky notes suffocating the glowing monitor displayed a wealth of information and ideas. The others, which overflowed onto just about every surface they could stick to, held references, phone numbers, event dates, due dates, and websites. None of these things compelled him to write a single word, however, and the screen remained void of characters.

The deadlines he had to meet, bosses he had to please, and readers out there he had to satisfy, did not blot out the picture of her in his mind from three months ago. He saw the deep ache in her brown eyes as she sat in that dirty stall, suffering, with the gun to her jaw.

The vision of the life going out of her eyes, the radiance of her soul, then the darkening of color, and finally the absence of her life replayed over and over in his mind, pulled at him and held him with an iron claw.

The glow of the screen seemed to pulse with his heartbeat, which was slowly gaining speed. He could see tiny circles of red and blue and yellow inside it. Millions of little dots made up the whole, just like trillions of atoms had made up her eye, and quadrillions of electric pulses had caused her brain to decide to do herself in, in that fatal way. He did not realize he had been hunching forward on the screen until the phone rang.

It startled him so badly he knocked his empty coffee mug off the desk and bumped his forehead against the screen. It rang many times before he answered it.

“Thornton here.”

“Hi Thor. It’s Karen.”

“Hi Karen.” He raised his rear off the seat to the protest of his numb legs and peered over his machine and lamp toward the other reporter who sat near the office suite. All the other desk lamps were off except for their two. She waved to him with more energy in her wrist than he had in his whole body and he gave a brief half-wave back. They each had a black phone receiver to one ear.

Feeling foolish for being on the phone instead of just talking to the woman five yards away, he slumped back into the orange tweed upholstered chair.

“I am almost done with *my* story. How is yours coming, is the question. We can’t wait to see what the great Thornton has up his sleeve after all this time off!”

“Oh, yeah... it is uh...” He thought about the reputation that followed him before Barbara’s suicide in Michigan Central Station, hoped it was still secure. “To be honest, it is going slowly, Karen. Guess I need to oil the gears,” he joked, but the North bound train’s screeching brakes echoed in his ears, a ghostly sound.

“Well, I don’t have my handy-dandy tool-belt on me right now, Thor, but I’m heading across the street for a coffee. Maybe that would help?”

“Thanks, Karen. That would be great.” His need for coffee of all different styles at all different times of the day was well known to the rest of the staff. He preferred it from the small café across the street with the blue neon coffee cup with four red swirls of steam in the window. But any flavored coffee from a friend’s thermos, the pot in the break room, a gas station, even, would do.

There was a silence while he thought of these things.

“Okay. Well, I’ll be back in a few, then.” She hesitated again. “You okay?”

“Sure. I’m just a little tired. Haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Right-o. No biggie. I’ll get you an extra shot in a latte!” He heard a click before he had a chance to say goodbye and put the weighty receiver down into the four pronged plastic forks. On a typical day, he was busy calling someone and as soon as that conversation was over, dialing the next number, pausing only long enough to push the small opaque button to disconnect. The numbers printed on the metal circle beneath the rotary dial were fading from his relentless efforts. Soon, he heard the door shut and found his eyes at the center of the pitiless screen again.

The journalist was drained. He wished for some kind of magical projector machine to take his thoughts straight from his brain and put them in story form for him. He knew the ideas were in his mind somewhere. He had been trying to brush away the cobwebs which had accumulated in his memories since Barbara’s situation, but as soon as he pushed one away he saw her standing, in his mind, with that empty look in her eyes.

His grief counselor had told him to try picturing her at a time when she was alive when this happened, to ignore how she looked in the casket, in the station stall. So he thought about the day he proposed, how when the sun had shown in her eyes they lightened up into a caramel and her pupils shrunk to the size of a pin’s head. At home, surrounded by candlelight, when the world dropped off at the edge of the bed, the deep mocha of Barbara’s eyes contrasted with her fair skin and sucked him in like a black circle in the center of a white piece paper. It was those eyes that got him, made him feel as though he was falling into them, getting lost in a forest of sensuality, the melanin pigment spaced so tightly across the iris fiber that they solidified in a wall of shadow.

The characteristics of her eyes made up much of what he knew as Barbara, although the sweet smile that played on her lips on good days had warmed him all over. He remembered the feeling and finally found solace in the image of her lovely, lively face and began to relax. The

tightness in the back of his neck seemed to release and a swell of blood rushed back through his veins. He leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands on the back of his head, feeling the short strands of freshly cut hair, balancing the round chair on two wheel-tipped legs.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath in, smelled the faint stench of newspaper ink and opened them again only to see that same the image of her dead eyes, and the blood, and the fluorescent lights all again. It hit his mind with the same force it would have hit him with physically, and he went reeling over backward in the seat.

It was an understatement that he vividly remembered the moments before life left her body. A drip from the sink in the subway bathroom had resounded loudly to his adrenaline tuned ears. His nerves had been pulled taut, like a chairlift wire in the middle of winter, strained and brittle. His muscles had been poised for motion, similar to a runner waiting to start a race, expecting the shot. Her thumb was on the trigger from the moment he found her, at the ready. One jerk and it would have gone off, sending a bullet through the barrel that was up against her cheek, through her skull. *No more Mr. Nice Guy*, he had thought as he contemplated and ever since those couple of quick lines from the Alice Cooper song played foolishly in his head. A fierce pain stabbed into his side and he was pulled out of his stupor back into the real world.

He rolled over to find he had fallen on a stapler when the chair tumbled. He righted the chair, tossed the stapler back on the desk with a clank, ran his hands through his hair, and rubbed his palms briskly up and down his smooth, clean-shaven face.

Karen's cubicle light was still off.

He slumped down in the chair back in front of the computer and put his head in his hands, thankful to be alone. Consciously, he decided he could spare a few moments to think realistically about Barbara, instead of trying to avoid it at every turn. He tried to consider

practical things surrounding Barbara's decision. He wondered what ran through her mind at that very moment she pulled the trigger. She had been looking at him, but did she *see* him? Had she been planning it for long? Was there a possibility she had been on drugs and he did not know about? Or that her birth control, which he had done an article on two short weeks before the incident, was affecting her thinking? So many questions ravaged his mind, and the answers he would never know left bottomless holes inside him.

The smell of coffee crept into the Thornton's nostrils and as if she had just appeared out of nowhere, Karen stood next to him with one elbow on the wall, and her hand fingering nervously at her earlobe. Her golden red hair was spilled over her navy suite and her eyes bore into his. She slid seductively onto his desktop, shoved the coffee tray into a pile of papers with a crunch, and ran her hand through his hair. He felt the chill of her fingers, non-Barbara fingers, on him and tried to put down a shudder. He was perfectly still, unable to move. He did not want this woman. He wanted Barbara. *Barbara.*

The next thing he knew, he had her pinned on the desk. Her long, lean legs were spread open, squeezing the sides of his thighs. He breathed hard through his clenched teeth.

His back muscles screamed fiercely as he clamped his fingers down, gripping the sides of her throat. She kicked out but he held tight, his fingertips digging into her flesh, causing runnels of blood to leak out of her skin and under his nails. He clenched his teeth harder and dug in deeper, reaching inside her body. A choked gargle came out instead of the scream she attempted, and that is when he grabbed the scissors out of the pencil holder. He chose the orange handled scissors he used to cut his own articles out of the printed papers for his three-ring-bound portfolio.

Without a thought the man opened them and drove one sharp scissor leg deep into the soft tissue of her stomach.

She thrashed in pain trying to sit up against the weight of his hand on her throat, and he watched her eyes bulge outward, tongue reaching out from her open mouth, arms flailing. Papers went flying. Sticky notes had come off the screen and the desk and stuck to her nylons. He saw it all in a blur, and kept shoving the closed scissors downward. He plunged them into her body over and over. It was like popping a waterbed mattress full of gel. Her skin protested for a moment and then the scissors sank deep, the meat of her organs surrounding it and squeezing the metal before he yanked it free.

Finally, she quit thrashing, and he let her mangled body go limp on his desk. A post-rage calm came over him and he wiped the blood from his hands onto his Dickies. Then, he pulled his chair back up toward desk. With his hands folded neatly beneath his chin, Thornton examined the holes in her body, watching the blood run off the side of the desk and pool on blue carpet beneath, when a voice scolded him.

“Thornton! How could you?”

He stood up in a daze. His heart beating so hard he thought it would escape his chest. *What did I do?* His mind screamed. *NO! Why?* Everyone would know he had done it. His life was over. He thought he would faint until calm washed over him.

The journalist turned to face his accuser.

Karen stood defiantly, her eyes huge. She held two super-sized cups, one in each hand.

“I kicked the door three times hoping you would open it for me! No gentlemanly manners from you today?” she teased. A hesitant smile played across her lips as she leaned in close to him and sat his cup on his desk.

He stood perfectly still, feeling the brush of air between them and smelling the sweetness of her perfume, before collapsing back into his chair. There was no body on his desk, or fog in his mind. He glanced at his hands, but there was no blood there. Had he imagined it all?

“I...I’m sorry,” he stuttered, “I didn’t even hear you.”

Karen was looking at the computer screen and he followed her eyes to it. It was no longer blank for at some point during his delusion, he had typed a single word in bold letters.

“Barbara,” Karen read with what little breath must have been left in her lungs.

He felt his body go limp and began to shake. What was wrong with him? He needed a drink. *You don’t drink*, he thought, but that was beside the point.

Karen was pale and when she spoke.

“Thor. I know you’ve been gone for a while already, but I am going to call Ralph first thing in the morning.” He nodded on autopilot. “I think you need a few more days off.”

“Yes,” he replied, also automatically, his hopes of existing back in his normal life fading. “Yes, I think so too.” Karen placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he did not look up at her. Thornton stared at that one word. He heard her heels thump against the floor, the ruffle of papers from her desk, and the click of the latch on the workroom door.

Imagining killing Karen felt so real, he thought. Part of him wanted to tell his grief counselor, afraid of what it meant, what it could mean. He could still feel the pain in his hands where he had choked her in his hallucination. The journalist looked down at them to verify that there was no blood, and found them clean. He would see the doctor tomorrow. *They’ll think you’re crazy*, his acknowledged. He quickly decided against seeing the doctor. Maybe some rest would help. But something told him he would not rest.

The image in his mind, Barbara's dying eyes, challenged him to a showdown. He didn't notice the blood splattered across the gleaming tiles when it happened. The gory details of her ending had not registered in his mind's picture.

He saw them now.

He clearly saw the jagged, bloody slivers of teeth which the kick of the handgun had replaced her beautiful smile with. He saw the mat of hair sticking up where the bullet had exited her skull and the chunks of brain smashed against the wall, now cracked and exploded, behind her. He saw the veins in her face, purple and swollen, as the blood ran freely, and felt the newly serrated edge of her absent skull, his hands digging into the soaking warmth of her body. If he went home now, he would not sleep.

He continued seeing Barbara's eyes in his mind, but something else happened. Thornton suddenly remembered everything regarding the story of the economic deterioration surrounding Detroit Metro Station. Yes, it was the place where Barbara had ended her own life, but it was also a story his boss had been hoping someone would continue writing about due to the impending threat to shut it down if business did not pick up. Thornton had never been interested in that story before. He found it boring. With renewed energy, however, Thornton took a deep swig of coffee, felt it burn his tongue and throat, and began to type.

CHAPTER X
FRIEND OR FOE

It wasn't until she held the door open wide that she saw him. With just the hint of light falling down through the treetops, the door opened to a wall almost directly aligned with the doorjamb. It was covered in a long stretch of wallpaper surrounding a chipped light switch which was the first thing to come into view. The darkness between the side of the door and the doorjamb soiled what could have been clean and bright, and Alana's eyes saw the blue roses and lines as another dingy indicator that the place was abandoned. Aware enough of her predicament she didn't even toy with the idea of trying the electricity and hoped enough light from the disappearing day remained to guide her. With the fingertips of her right hand splayed wide, gripping the dry paper, Alana pushed the door open with her left hand until it tapped the wall behind it and moved inside.

The glass behind the curtains of the door rattled and Alana froze. She held her breath and faced forward balanced on one foot. After a moment of stillness and an extra moment of holding her breath, Alana scooted the rest of her body into the door and with one last look out toward the river, closed it. The blackness enveloped her immediately and her hands refused to let go of the door knob. It had taken all her courage to make her way to the door, and open it. There was nothing saved for stepping blindly into darkness.

But Alana didn't have to take that step into darkness because just as she loosened her fingers from around the handle, the hallway went bright in a fluorescent flood. An old man stood before her, shock in his slack jaw and raised eyebrows. He pinched a switch identical to the one next to her between his thumb and first-finger on the opposite side of the hallway. Like raccoon caught in a cage, Alana backed up hard against the door, closing it with a loud bang, and

releasing the air suspended between the walls of her lungs in a “humph.” The gauzy curtain cushioned behind her hooded head and she thought she felt the brush of it on her cheek.

The man raised his arm up, the solid heavy handle of a large MAG light stuck out the top of his hand. The bottom highlighted a small circle on triangle-patterned rug between them. He started to raise it up along the side of his head, which Alana registered as a threat, and immediately scrambled to get out of the door. The sudden effort of the lurching turn pushed the rug out from beneath her feet and Alana’s upper half smacked into the brittle wooden panes that made up a six windowed square. Alana stiffened as a bolt of white seared the backs of her eyes.

“Hey!” He called out, demanding her attention.

“Hey.” His voice came again, quieter, closer to a talking tone. “You okay? You okay, kid?” He was obviously shaken, too, for Alana made out a wavering beneath his voice, unsteadiness in his energy. His hand clasped her forearm and she imagined she felt its coldness through the sweatshirt fabric. Alana raised her eyes to his face in response to that physical contact. Almost as if her brain were a radio station losing its channel, his face became a chaos of dancing shapes and colors for a moment, and then refocused more clearly on a bulbous red-tinted nose.

“You in some kind of trouble?” he asked her. It was such a generic question, but wasn’t she? Hadn’t she run away from home without telling anyone and broken into an elderly person’s house? *The door was unlocked*, her conscious told her, but that made no difference to her swelling guilt. Alana knew she should never have tried the knob.

“No...” she stammered. “No trouble.” She hunkered against the door as another burst of singeing sparks flared through her head. She winced. She felt weak, as though she were falling asleep standing up. The man tightened his grip and pulled on her arm. With his help and a great

pushed with her legs, she was up and on her feet, but unsteady. Her head had turned into an angry beehive, so she followed the guiding arm through a doorway and into a straight-backed chair which screeched roughly across a wood floor as it was pulled back. Her head was so heavy that Alana attempted to rest it backward but instead sent her hood dropping off and her head lolling until she jerked it forward and banged her chin on her breastbone.

“Just a minute,” she heard him say as she felt a warm wetness on the corner of her mouth. When she flicked her tongue out at it, she tasted salt and iron. Alana was bleeding. During the ensuing moments, she was well aware of everything around her. She felt the brush of his hands against her forehead. She felt a sharp pang of something disinfecting and bright in the flesh above her eyes. She even felt the awkwardness of her skin being pulled tight together, but dazed into stupor, Alana focused only on the cold metal of the zipper against her chin.

“This might burn a bit,” he warned, just as Alana’s nostrils burst into flames. She reared back, instantly awake, and would have knocked the chair over if the man hadn’t steadied it for her. “Easy does it.” The man cooed. He put his other hand on the tabletop and leaned down to look her in the face. A smile grew across his mouth and the folds of skin beneath his eyes multiplied.

“Now that’s better!” he announced, taking the hand off the table and putting it out to her for a shake, still leaning on the backrest with the other. “I’m Thornton. Well, Alex is my first name, but everybody calls me by my last.”

At her silence he added, “What’s yours?”

Alana’s tongue felt thick and swollen against the backs of her teeth. “Alana.”

“A-lah-nah?” the old man sounded it out as if it were a new word in a dictionary. She nodded her head. His smile hadn’t wavered and the girl thought he actually seemed quite

pleasant. She could faintly smell his cologne and was close enough to see white stubble on his cheeks and chin. “A lot of people say it wrong,” she explained, “...like banana, instead.”

“I’ll have to avoid that mistake,” he replied and stuck his hand out a few more inches in her direction. She pulled her left up and shook his. His fingers were rough like leather, her own palms and fingertips sticky with nervous sweat.

“So what brings you in my back door, kid?”

The guilt invaded her again and Alana looked toward the floor. What would she tell him? He was sure to call her parents if she told him the truth. Alana looked around at a dimly lit kitchen. A stack of mail spilled over the sides of a basket on the table before her. A set of four glass jars, each one growing taller, dominated the counter, which was clean and bare except for an open jar of Kosher dill pickles with a fork sticking out of the top. Alana imagined the man was getting a snack when he saw her cross the backyard, or maybe heard her come in. It surprised her that in her careful inspection of the window from the outside, she had failed to see the light from the refrigerator door flicker a warning signal. Even so, the home was *warm*.

The man straightened up with a series of cracks from his knees and popping from his back. He deliberately scooted into the wooden chair kitty-corner of Alana. She thought he had patient eyes and lurched into her story.

“Well, to be honest, I wanted to get out of the rain...Sir.” she added, careful to look at the floor and not him. “I uh,... I thought your house was abandoned.”

“Abandoned!?” The man let out a low snort, “Yeah that ivy needs to come down. She needs painting, too.” Alana remembered her conversation over Mr. Monroe’s cement siding. She wondered if this man, Thornton, knew about cement siding, but didn’t ask.

“Actually, it was the boat that made me think it,” she explained. “It really needs some work if you ever hope to use it again.” The man waved the statement off with his hand, indicating that he did not care about the boat, but wanted to hear more of her explanation, so she stammered on. “I was trying to stay out of the rain under the Clawfoot Creek Bridge and barely noticed it around the bend.” The man scrutinized her with harder eyes.

“What were you doing over there?” he quizzed. Alana realized that this man had probably seen the news too and knew all about John Krohke, and now here she was, showing up out of the middle of nowhere, breaking in.

“Well...” She took a deep breath. “I kind of just ended up there. My parents and I got in a huge fight this morning and I just started walking.” Alana kicked her feet beneath the chair and chewed her lip. She felt somewhat relieved that she had been honest, but didn’t feel as though it were enough. She glanced up at his eyes and then back down.

“I just needed to cool off,” she lied.

“By the shivers on ya, girl, I think you got more than you bargained for.”

The man pushed back off the chair and headed through the door-less opening to her right, into the dark, as a bang of thunder shook the house around them.