

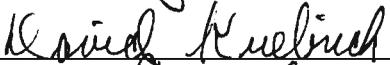
CHAGRINNED

by

Ryan Mackey  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
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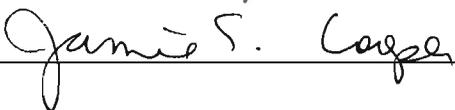
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Chagrined

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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## ABSTRACT

CHAGRINNED

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George Mason University, 2008

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This thesis is a novel that tracks a pivotal year in the lives of two couples. Set in the town of Chagrin, these four individuals home is sprawling into a wealthier community that leaves them alienated and forced into a decision to either move up the economic ladder or move out. In the process, these four characters freefall through a series of events, reacting the best they know how, and salvaging what they can of their relationships.

## Past

It was not suicide as much as tradition gone wrong. While colorful rumors of suicide and murder circled, fact was, the stunt was just foolish. Anyone would have agreed just hearing about it.

Rain or shine, every Fourth of July Frank McFarland stood atop the falls of the Chagrin River engulfed in a ball of fire. It was not really tradition for him to be on fire. Most years he just wore an Uncle Sam suit and beard, but a while back a friend who had a brief career in the stunt business gave Frank a protective suit and some special flammable goop so he could make the jump a bit more memorable.

Red, white and blue decorations were hung on storefronts, lampposts, railings and electrical poles, and Frank stood on his spot atop the falls. Water rushed against his calves and heels as he lit himself. His entire body ignited in a second. Then he made the leap planning to rise to the surface and receive applause from a thoroughly entertained crowd. That last year, however, while he rose to the surface to receive applause, he was slumped and motionless as opposed to rising triumphant.

The story that got around was that some time between jumping and tumbling around in the whitewater at the bottom of the falls, Frank had a heart attack. When the officers on hand rescued him from the water, they tried to resuscitate him as if he'd drowned and not as if Frank's heart stopped.

After that, a sign was put up saying that jumping off the 50-foot waterfall was punishable by law. Supposedly, it was always illegal to jump the falls, but like j-walking or egging a house, police never found it much worth their while to care. One person who did care was Frank's wife, Robin, who could never bring herself to watch the senseless stunt. She said she'd just die if she saw Frank hurt himself. Apparently, hearing about it had the same effect, because she also had a heart attack when they broke the news to her.

A lot of finger pointing came after Frank's death about who should have done what to prevent the tragedy, but it all eventually came down to the fact that it was a dumb and dangerous stunt—a tradition that got out of hand. The blame game faded and people moved on; new life was breathing into the town in the way of businesses and a higher class of homeowners, and what people needed more than anything else was progress.

## Part I

### Chapter 1

After resting at a stop sign at the intersection of Summit and Main, a brown van creeps down a large hill at the north end of town. It passes under overhanging red, orange and brown puffs of leaves, and picks up speed before running the red light at the bottom of the hill. Other drivers at the intersection screech to a stop palming their horns, and onlookers yell for cross walking pedestrians to watch out. As the van runs by the Starbucks, Exxon station, hardware store, and then Key bank, patrons peer out from storefront windows. It maintains its speed, crossing over the river, heading straight for the red taillights of cars stopped at Main and River's traffic light. At the last second, it veers into the left lane in direct line with McFarland's market.

As opposed to the majority of the stores in town, McFarland's market sits by itself—has its own walls. A few fruit bins are outside the front windows; the rest of the produce is inside. Homemade preserves and breads line the shelves, and along the back wall is a brand new refrigerator filled with meats, eggs, dairy and juices. Frank McFarland, the proprietor and only employee, stands at the south wall of the store checking out a customer, while the few outside browsers scurry out of the way of the brown van as it plows over the curb and through the front of the market. It shreds the

wooden stands and fruit-filled crates lining the storefront. The van twists to the left and takes out four aisles inside with its wide side and, before coming to a stop, crashes through the glass doors of the refrigerator spraying a wash of egg-washed juice all over the windshield. Still standing behind the cash register after the spontaneous carnage, Ray holds a bag of onions in one hand and a woman's change in the other.

He shakes some of the shock away, and then looks down at the woman who seconds ago gave him a five-dollar bill for the onions. She's crouched in the fetal position with her hands helmeting her head. A crowd gathers on the sidewalk around the hole created by the van. More cars stop, impeding traffic.

## Chapter 2

The van's windshield is covered in debris. A cloud of dust engulfs the store. Ray steps around the counter and over strewn shards of wood and broken glass, moving toward the van. A lump grows in his stomach as he realizes that at any minute he may see a body part hanging out from under a piece of refrigerator or fruit bin, or he may hear a person writhing in pain. He cringes with every step but never hears or sees a thing.

Pedestrians continue to gather without speaking over a whisper, creating an eerie silence among the commotion, but when Ray reaches the van he hears a voice. As he moves closer to the driver side door and pulls away a large piece of metal from one of the aisle shelves, he finds the voice to be the driver cussing. The driver is on his cell phone explaining to somebody that he has just gotten himself "into a world of shit." Realizing Ray is standing next to him, the driver says, "I gotta go," and then snaps the two hinged halves of his cell phone together.

"Are you okay?" Ray asks.

"Man, just tell me I didn't kill anyone," the driver says. He is on the verge of bawling. "I'm not getting out'a here till you tell me I didn't kill nobody." His eyes are red and filled with tears. All Ray can tell about the man is that he is disgusting. His basketball-sized beer belly nearly presses against the steering wheel, his face is unshaven,

he reeks of stale cigarette smoke, and he just destroyed Ray's market. Ray instantly hates him.

Ray takes a deep breath, drops to one knee. Careful not to place his hands on any broken glass, he lies on his stomach, and then looks under the van. All he finds is more debris and a puddle of juice and milk slowly expanding.

"Oh, God," the driver cries out.

Ray thoroughly searches the rest of the market and then the onlookers, but finds that nobody is dead or injured. He calls out again and again to anyone who might be in distress, but no one(?) calls back. A few other people come out of the crowd to look for themselves and help the three women who were in the store at the time of the accident get out safely. The women walk over debris to the opening where one of the two large windows at the front of the store had been. Two men outside steady them around the shards of glass and into the daylight. Then Ray comes out after them. Ray brushes dust from his hair and mustache, while pacing back and forth trying to assess the damage. Apples and pears are strewn about the sidewalk. For a moment he looks back to see if the driver is trying to get out. He can hear him yelling, "Please tell me nobody's hurt."

*Fuck* him, Ray thinks as he walks over to a sidewalk bench that miraculously went unharmed, brushes fruit flesh from the seat, and then sits down. His head falls into the palms of his hands. Sirens come quietly in the distance, growing louder and closer with every second.

Ray looks up to see a few people searching through the wreckage. He never experienced anything as bizarre as the period between the van crushing his market and

now. It was one of those moments when citizens transform into heroes, cowards, and villains; when ordinary people step out of their daily routine and fend for themselves and for others until order is restored. He does not see himself or anyone as any of these people. They are all just stunned survivors.

A man from the crowd comes up to Ray, and says, “Are you okay?”

Ray looks up to him, then at the store, and says, “No.”

After the police arrive, it takes a while for them to get the driver to leave his van and then out of the store. Ray looks on amazed and stunned that this is what his life has lead up to, that everything he has done and every choice he has made has lead him to this bench, to this day and to this accident. He lives his life well, honors the golden rule, feels he is a productive member of society, and then some schmuck ruins everything in an instant. Against his will, Rays finds himself stripped of his home and business and given a front row seat to watch it all go.

After the driver gets safely out of the store, he sits down on the pavement. The three officers crouch down to talk with him while the fourth, Dave Briggs, an old high school friend, comes over and takes a seat next to Ray.

“You okay, Ray?” Dave says. He is breathing heavy and sweat is beading on his forehead. Dave adjusts his belt trying to get comfortable, but his belly and all the gear on his waist make it hard to sit on the small bench.

“No,” Ray says to Dave, looking at the wreckage. “It’s gone. It’s all gone.”

“I know it looks bad, Ray, but—”

“But what? My home. My market. Everything my parents built is gone, Dave. Everything I had is tied into this place.”

“So you’ll rebuild. You got insurance, right?”

“It isn’t that easy.” Ray stands up and digs his fingers and then palms along his scalp. “Damn it. Damn it,” he yells.

“You’re lucky nobody got hurt.”

“Lucky?” Ray asks, pointing to the upstairs where an apartment is located. “This was all I had left of my parents.”

“Ray?”

“Dave.”

“Could you fill this out?” He hands Ray a clipboard with a crime report form on it. “You need to get the events down while they’re fresh.”

Annoyed, Ray takes the clipboard from Dave. He is still in shock. He expects himself to feel angrier or sadder, but mostly he feels confused. Ray is not a church-goer by any means, but the thought clouding his mind is that he must have really pissed God off something special to deserve this, and since nobody was injured in any way, it just reinforces the fact that this is all exclusively between Ray and his Reaper. As if God decided, *screw you, Ray* and flicked the van like a Hotwheels into a pile of Lincoln Logs. “Do you think you could go away and let me concentrate on this thing?” Ray holds up the report.

Dave stands up and then says, “I told you, and I told your old man. You should sell while the sellin’s good. This here’s prime real estate.”

“What?” Ray says, stunned by the timing of the comment. “Are you actually serious?”

“Hey, I’m just sayin is all, and I wouldn’t be if it weren’t you. I never thought you actually liked runnin this place,” Dave says and then walks over to where a few of the other officers are huddled around the driver of the van.

It is not the first time somebody told Ray he should sell. The building his father built is out of date and full of problems. It is not like the store pulls in a big profit. But this is his life, his parents’ life. It may not be extravagant or exciting, but Ray is not extravagant or exciting, and neither were his parents. They lead honest and content lives, though, and up until now so had Ray. He typically ignores the future and lets it come as it pleases, yet Ray now feels its weight. Every choice he makes in light of the accident will have a direct and lasting effect on the rest of his life. So the thought of selling, which before today he could shrug off as absurd, has a new relevance, leaving Ray with a pang of guilt. Because what he wants more than anything and what has guided his decisions his entire life, is to do what his father would do. However, his sight of what that might be, is getting murkier by the second.

Ray reruns the events as they occurred, but most everything is a blur. He labors over each sentence erasing and rewriting details for 20 minutes until the summary rings as true as possible. When he finishes the front page is only half filled with writing. Looking at the wreckage, Ray wants there to be more. Something happened too fast to remember, but he rereads the paragraph five times and thinks of nothing else. Was there

something the driver did, something suspicious? Ray can not get the image of the bastard on his cell phone out of his mind.

Ray places the clipboard on the bench, and looks up to find Dave and two other officers standing around the driver who is resting against a police cruisers. They are discussing something calmly, but Ray can not make it out.

Ray stands up and walks over toward them. Noticing Ray's approach, Dave leaves the group to cut him off. "You all done there?" Dave asks Ray.

Ray stops and then asks, "What's he saying?"

"What's who sayin?"

"Why the hell aren't you arresting that asshole or at least breathalizing him or something?"

"He ain't drunk. His breaks quit on him. You should just go home now, Ray. You're not thinkin right."

"This is my home!" Ray yells.

"Right. I'm sorry. I forgot."

"I don't get to just go home. That asshole in the van gets to just go home. I have to deal with all this." Ray looks past Dave to the driver.

"Not now you don't. Two of the supports were damaged, so we don't want you going up to the second floor until it's checked out."

"When? What the Hell am I supposed to do until then?"

"We'll figure something out. But for now go somewhere and call your insurance company and then come on back. We'll have this all settled and boarded up by then or

soon after. You filled out the report, right? Now write down the case number and go file a claim . . . best thing you can do.”

“No. Dave, I’m going upstairs.”

Dave steps up to Ray so their faces are inches apart and says softly, “Ray, if you don’t pipe down and get your ass out’a here, you’re the asshole that’s gonna get arrested.”

Ray concedes and turns to leave. He notices the sign: *McFarland’s*. Half is hanging by a bolt while the rest is in two large pieces on the ground. Before the accident it hung above the window, green letters on a yellow sign. Ray remembers how excited his father was when he first hung it up. His dad had a great sense of spirit that Ray always admired and tried to carry on. Seeing the broken sign, Ray feels consumed with hatred for the bastard that drove a van through his parents’ legacy.

Instead of walking away, Ray bends down and picks up three apples and a pear. He turns around to find the driver of the van about 15 feet away leaning against a police cruiser. The guy is smiling and talking to an officer. Holding the apples in his left hand, Ray takes the pear with his right and then throws a fastball at the driver’s crotch. The driver makes a sharp, sudden groan and falls to the ground. The next pitch explodes against the door of the police cruiser, leaving a dent. The third hits the driver in the back of the head, and as he rolls over, the last hits (another word) his stomach. Just when Ray releases the last pitch, Dave tackles him to the ground. Falling against the sidewalk, Dave’s forehead knocks hard against Ray’s brow.

### Chapter 3

Dave Briggs sits at his kitchen table, drinking coffee in large slurps. Before Dave's son had been born, mornings were his favorite time of the day. He and Amanda would wake up early and take their time easing into the day. She would cook breakfast while he read the paper or cleaned his gun.

But now Amanda is usually messing with the baby or catching up on sleep, leaving Dave to start his day by himself. He does not resent anybody for the change in schedule. It is just one of the many unexpected traps of fatherhood.

Dave skims over the police blotter. There are not any reports of actual crimes, only pranks. Manure dumped on the front door of the Chipotle, stink bombs smashed in the Gap, and a few pine trees stolen from the high school's new courtyard. It annoys Dave that they print this stuff. It only encourages more of the same.

In front of Dave is a cold half-Whopper left over from last night's dinner. His belt equipped with cuffs, pepper spray and holster are on the seat next to him. His waist has grown a few sizes since the baby's birth, so his pants are unbuttoned.

Amanda walks into the kitchen, sliding her slippers along the linoleum. She walks up behind Dave, and drapes her arms over his shoulders resting her head on his. Dave turns to give her a kiss, but she turns away in disgust, "Your breath is sick."

"I brushed."

“Brush again.” Amanda leans back against him. “I’m exhausted,” she says. She is wrapped tight in a yellow bathrobe. Even though Amanda gave birth only six months ago, she is already back to her original figure. Dave wants to tell her she is a bit crazy about losing weight and that if she’d cut out some of the exercising she might be less tired, but he does not. She grabs his Whopper, removes one of the burger patties from the bun, and then takes a bite of the meat.

“I thought you felt sick?”

“No,” she says while chewing. “I said your breath was sick.” She puts the sandwich back together, and returns it to its wrapper on the table. Amanda goes to get herself a cup of coffee. Next to the coffee pot is her *#1 Mom* mug. Dave got it from the gift shop when she was in the hospital. After pouring her coffee, she pads over to the table and sits across from him.

“He asleep?” Dave looks at Amanda.

“Uh-huh. He was up crying until about two hours ago.”

“Well, I’ll make it up to you this weekend. I promise. Two full nights of sleep.” He puts the page down and picks up the real estate section. Since Dave works and Amanda stays home, she tends to the baby on the nights before his workdays. No sense in him not sleeping when she is home all day and he has to be sharp as a tack on the job.

“Yeah . . . we’ll see,” she says through a yawn. “How’s the blotter?” Dave knows she gets a big kick out of the pranks in the police blotter. They remind her of being in high school. All they remind him of are idiot kids.

“Nothin. Pranks”

She lets out a tired laugh. "Let me see."

"It's not funny. One of these days somebody's gonna get hurt," Dave says. "These kids do not care about anything. Vandalizing businesses."

"You make it sound so serious," she said. "They're not hurting anyone."

"They're takin away peoples' pay checks is what their doin." Dave gets excited thinking about all the growth of businesses around town. Some people complain that Chagrin is loosing its identity as more city sprawl creeps in, but all Dave sees is his home appreciating and his chances for opportunity increasing. Ten years ago Chagrin had been a real American diner kind of town. Now Dave can get the best burritos he ever had on one street corner and a caramel macchiato coffee on the next. He thinks a lot about all the money changing hands by all these new franchises with barely any risk for investors. He had studied up on them a few weeks back and has been talking about getting involved with one to Amanda ever since. "I know you think I'm crazy, but I really think we should invest one of these franchises."

"During a crime spree? I don't know." she chides him.

"I'm serious."

"Okay, sweetie." Amanda grabs the section with the police blotter. "Let me know how it turns out."

"If we're gonna have more kids we need to be lookin out for ways to make extra cash. A cop's salary ain't that much."

The phone rings from the wall.

"Why is that thing so loud?" she says. "Could you get that . . . quickly?"

“I’m serious,” Dave says, standing up. “This town is a gold mine waiting to happen.”

“Maybe I should just get a job again.”

Dave stands next to the wall. The phone rings. “Amanda, you’re not working.”

“Get the damn phone before it wakes up Davey.”

He picks the receiver up off the wall. “Hello . . . This’s him . . . You’re shittin me? . . . I’ll meet you there in five minutes.” Dave moves quickly to the table and grabs his belt.

Amanda looks up from her paper and says, “What was that about?”

“Some moron ran his car into McFarland’s.”

“My God. Was anybody hurt?”

“Don’t know.” Dave lets out a big exhale, buttons his pants, wraps his belt around his waste, and holsters his gun. Before he walks out, he takes the police blotter from Amanda and then hands her the real estate section. “You want a job? Study some of this. You can be my researcher.”

“Study what?” she calls after him, but he lumbers quickly out the back door leaving it open. “Close the door.” Amanda wads up the real estate section and throws it after him even though he is long gone.

\* \* \*

Driving the police cruiser away from the curb with Ray McFarland handcuffed in the back seat, Dave rubs the welt on his forehead. All he meant to do was restrain Ray, but when Dave saw the two officers pull their guns, he just reacted. It is a good thing he is working on a full night of sleep. He is pretty positive no shots would have been fired, but who knows what would have happened. Mistakes get made.

Through the rearview mirror, Dave sees the lights flashing from the squad cars that are still at the accident site. He looks to either side of the street. People filter back to wherever they were before the accident. He watches the various men wearing suits or just slacks and collared shirts. Men who look like they work in offices, have secretaries and large budgets, and discuss business deals over coffee or lunch; who every night go home to wives who have no problem staying home with the kids and keeping the house; and who are building wealth to pass on to their children.

He is not a misogynist or anything like that, and he does not think all women need to be some sort of aproned Betty Crocker. Dave just wants to make a good life and be sure his wife and kid are happy. The best way he knows how to do that is make enough money so Amanda does not have to waitress while Davey Jr. spends his days at a daycare with strangers.

Dave looks into the rearview mirror at Ray. His eye is swollen shut and dark as a plum. "How's your head?" Dave feels guilty about the situation. It is one thing for Ray to lose his store and home like that, but it is really too bad to have an assault charge slapped on top of everything and to be hauled down for booking. Days can not get much worse.

“Exactly how it looks.” Ray says in a somber, defeated tone. He has not said a word until now. As soon as Dave had tackled him, Ray went limp. He did not resist or say anything at all. Ray just let Dave and the other officers do what they had to do.

“If I didn’t seem so before, Ray, I really am sorry about all this. I mean it.”

“Thanks.”

“I wish I don’t have to arrest you either, but we can’t just let people assault each other, no matter what the circumstance. Between you and me, though, I’d done the same thing. If I had my own business, I can’t imagine what I’d do to the jackass who wrecked it like that.”

Ray looked out the window, not saying anything.

“We’ll get you in and out as soon as possible. I even told one of the boys to call your girlfriend, so you don’t have to worry about that. We’ll get you in and out. I promise.”

“I appreciate that, Dave.”

Dave pulls into the police station parking lot. “You’ll see. Five years from now this’ll be just another little bump in the road. You’ll wonder why you even worried. It seems that’s how it always works.”

“Won’t just be my bump in the road,” Ray says under his breath.

Dave puts the car in park, and then turns to look at Ray. “What’s that?” Dave says, not sure if he heard right.

“People usually have to go all the way up to Solon or Woodmere for what they can’t get at the market. Now they gotta go there for everything.”

Dave thinks about it for a minute. “I guess you’re right.”

“Oh, well.”

Dave opens his door and then gets out. When he opens the back door to let Ray out, he says, “Makes you wonder why nobody ever built a big grocery store around here.”

Ray gives Dave a knowing glance as he awkwardly gets out of the car with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“Your Dad ever talk about that? He ever talk about goin bigger?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

It all hits Dave like an epiphany. It is like luck is finally on his side. As if it is all meant to happen for him. The harmless accident. Tackling Ray and driving him to the station. This is his opportunity. “Might not be a bad idea. You know. People always need food don’t they? And this town’s gettin bigger,” Dave says as he leads Ray toward the doors. “If it ain’t us, it’ll be somebody else, you know.”

Ray turns to look at Dave, “*Us?*”

“Hell, what else’re you gonna do? This is your opportunity to grow.”

Ray stops walking and says, “An hour ago you told me it’s my opportunity to sell out?”

Dave does not know what to say. He looks around at the crummy, old police station and the few cars and one ambulance in parked outside. “Ray, I guess this isn’t the time to talk about this. Maybe tomorrow we should have a lunch meeting.” Dave gives Ray a big smile.

Ray looks at Dave in confusion. “Are you serious?” Ray says.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you out of here in no time.” Dave opens the station door, leading Ray inside for booking.

## Chapter 4

When Ray thinks of a prison cell, he imagines what most people do: three cement walls and one of bars, a cot, and a pot to piss in. The cell he is in, though, is just a room with a door and some benches, but there is a toilet. The bench Ray sits on is bolted to the floor. As he lies back onto the bench, it strikes him as odd that he has never seen this place before. The jail has always been here, but he has never been stupid enough to be arrested.

His purple brow throbs while on his back, so Ray sits up. Dave and Ray have butted figuratively a few times, but never literally. Dave was a catcher on Ray's high school team, so they argued every now and again on the field, and a year ago they Dave had a disagreement concerning the removal of a dead tree in front of Ray's store, but that is the extent of it. The argument about the tree was not real bad, but it is the only real conversation Ray can remember having with Dave in the last few years.

Ray has nothing against Dave, but then again, he does not have much *for* the guy either. When it comes to their relationship, they pretty much keep to themselves. Dave is not a bad guy. He definitely is not in Amanda's league. Whatever he feels toward Dave, he definitely never thinks about going into business with him.

Ray lied to Dave. He talked to his father about building a bigger market, but Frank told him, "Why? We got all we need don't we? Then why complicate things?"

They had left it at that, so Ray never thought about it again. Ray tries to imagine his father sitting in the cell having assaulted a man with produce, but he cannot imagine anything like this ever happening to his father. He knows he could not have done anything to prevent the accident, but for some reason it seems impossible for his Dad to allow anything like that to happen.

After about another hour, Ray is released. Even though he has not been locked up that long, it is true what he has heard, air tastes its best when you get out of a cell.

Dave opens the door behind Ray. “Hey you need a ride anywhere? I can take you home or back to the market if you want?”

“My home is the market.” Ray says.

“Right. Sorry.”

Ray nods.

“Hey, I’m serious about what we were talking about before. Let’s meet for lunch tomorrow. I really think it can make us a lot of money.”

“I’ll call you,” Ray says, though he knows he will not.

“Alright then,” Dave says with a big, excited grin. He ducks back inside the station.

Ray cannot help but smile at the intense enthusiasm Dave fails to suppress. He immediately thinks of the saying, *a kid in a candy store*, but kids have a pretty full understanding of candy. Ray cannot imagine Dave knows anything about running a market or even running a business of any kind. He is a cop. Why all of a sudden does the

guy want to get involved, and why with him? Ray barely keeps his head above water maintaining the books and managing a small operation. He has not the slightest idea about running a large market with a lot of employees.

Walking up to and turning on Main St., Ray looks at the storefronts. They are all different colors but connected like row houses. He notices the signs that distinguish the character of each store. Some storefronts have been the same as long as he can remember; others, for one reason or another, continually house businesses that never last. They seem cursed.

He stops in front of Taggert's Toys, a store older than Ray, and examines the life size replica of a Lego man standing on the sidewalk. The Lego man is dressed in plastic armor with an empty hand stretched out and poised to hold something. There is a sheet of paper taped to the hand that reads, *Will whomever stole my sword please return it. I am powerless against dragons without it.* Ray looks up to find the old shopkeeper frowning at him. Ray can't remember ever seeing the shopkeeper without a facial expression of suspicion. Ray spent a lot of his childhood browsing around the toy store feeling that scowl watching his every move. It is oddly comforting knowing he still has not outgrown the old man's distrust. Ray smiles and waves at him and then moves on toward the market.

He can see yellow caution tape corralling his storefront and plywood covering the front. As he approaches it, Rays sees the van is gone, and Holly poking her head around trying to look inside.

“Watch out,” Ray yells.

Holly jumps back quick, and then finds Ray smiling. “You scared me.” Holly wears a shirt with her company logo of a dogwood tree on the front and blue jeans. Both are faded with dirt. She is a foreman, or forewoman as she calls it, for a landscaping company. She received a degree in horticulture and has worked landscaping for the last six years. Ray likes to tease her occasionally about her job and degree. Not that he looks down on either. He just thinks it funny to go to college to be a landscaper.

“Sorry.”

She gives him an annoyed look.

“Trust me,” Ray says. “Doesn’t come close to a van slamming through a wall coming straight at you.”

“Was he drunk or something?”

“Maybe. I really have no clue,” Ray admits.

“Are you okay?” She hugs him and then kisses him on the cheek.

“I’m fine. Everybody’s fine.”

“I know. It’s completely fucked up.”

“What is?”

“That nobody got hurt. Look at this . . . That’s strange. I mean it’s a blessing, but it’s strange.”

“I agree.”

“Except you.” She places her hand softly on the side of his shiner.

Ray looks at her confused and then remembers he has a huge black eye. “Right.”

He concedes, recognizing that he is a moron.

“How dumb are you?”

“Pretty dumb. I know. Let’s just leave it.”

“It wasn’t bad enough that the store got wrecked, you gotta pelt the guy with fruit?” She smiles at him.

“Thanks,” Ray says. He walks to the store window. “How the hell am I gonna clean this up?”

“Don’t . . . I mean not now. Don’t touch anything until the insurance company sees it.”

“Right.” He looks at her. “It just seems like I’m violating my parents somehow. Like every second it’s like this, I’m letting somebody piss on their grave or something.”

“There’s nothing you, your Dad, or anybody would’ve or could’ve done, Ray.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have gotten arrested. I know he wouldn’t have done that.”

Holly gives him a long stare, smiles and then says, “You’re a moron. I won’t argue with that.” Holly has a knack for pointing out the obvious at the worst times and an instinct to bust Ray’s chops whenever possible. But at other times, she is the life of the party. Having grown up in town, Ray feels he knows a good amount of people, but when he takes Holly out, it seems she knows every person there. She works the room as if it is *her* party. Nights when the bars are crowded, Ray will go in with Holly and not have a

chance to say a word to her until they leave. While it does not bother him now, he can see it eventually annoying him. Sometimes it feels almost like she is avoiding him.

“Thanks. You really know how to kick a guy when he’s down,” Ray says. “I’ll be right back.” Ray walks through the storefront.

“Ray, stop. I’m sorry. I’m only kidding around,” she says sincerely. “I just don’t know what to say . . . I’m really sorry about the market.”

“I know,” Ray says, continuing his careful approach inside. He steps over the debris. He expects it to look the same as he left it, as if the disarray would still feel spontaneous, but it is had time to settle. It is sort of like when a tree falls and the ground starts eating it up and breaking it down. The difference between what he sees now and what he saw before is not much, but it is enough to feel more permanent.

Ray makes his way to the check-out counter. Behind the register on the wall are about 20 photos of him and his parents around Chagrin or at the market with regulars. There are also a few *Times* articles that feature the Market for one reason or another. He thinks to pack them up to take them with him, but there are too many; so he only takes the one of him and his parents on Forth of July from when he was 15. In the picture he stands between his parents. His Dad is smiling a gleaming grin, holding an American flag top hat and wearing a soaking wet Uncle Sam costume. Ray’s mother smiles hesitantly while peering over at Ray’s father. For some reason, whenever he looks at that photo he laughs a little.

Ray grabs a small bag from under the counter and then empties the contents of the register into it for deposit. He grabs the books from the back office and wanders around

the store looking at produce, bread and the rest of the inventory sitting vulnerably on the floor and on the few standing shelves. It is all getting ready to rot. He wants to go upstairs to get a few things, but the thought of his Dad's building crashing down with him in it prevents him from testing fate any further.

“Do you need any help?” Holly says from the sidewalk.

“Holly, come in here.” Ray goes back to the counter and pulls out six large brown bags. Holly slowly finds her way around to Ray. “Here.” He hands her two bags. “It's your lucky day. Have a shopping spree.”

She looks at him unsure of what to do.

“Use it or lose it. Take whatever you want. It's all on me,” Ray says.

## Chapter 5

Amanda puts on her red and black summer running outfit. It is a cold fall morning; it looks like it may rain, but she loves the way spandex hugs her body and thinks she can get one more jog out of it before winter. She walks downstairs into her kitchen onto the grungy, yellowing floor that Dave promised to replace a year ago. The house was filled with Dave's proposed improvement projects, but as he says, "Until the Baby can take care of or pay for itself, we do not have the time or money." When he says this, Amanda always threatens to go back to waiting tables. It is her way to call his bluff, and then he backs down and says he will try to get to whatever it may be at the time.

The truth is she hates working, hates it like a sickness. To be specific, she really just hates waiting tables. Since Amanda never worked anywhere but Dink's, it would be unfair to say she hates working all together. But, as far as serving goes, she cannot imagine a worse feeling than waking every morning having to go to work. It is like constantly having morning sickness.

Her kitchen is messed with newspapers, dishes and baby bottles containing remnants of formula. She walks to the door that leads into the living room. The baby is sleeping in his crib next to Dave, who is asleep in his chair, an ugly leather bark-o lounger. It was the first piece of furniture he ever bought; the only piece that furnished his apartment when they began dating. After they married, he pleaded that she let him

bring it to the house, that he was very attached to it. She would not have agreed had she known he meant it literally. If he spent half the time fixing stuff around the house that he does in that chair “watching the baby” things might actually get done.

She loves Dave. She does, but not like she once had. In the beginning he was so energetic and motivated about life, work, everything, really, but he hit a plateau, and it seems early for that. It is odd to Amanda that Dave or anyone would want to plateau at 35, 40, or ever. She still feels like she is climbing that hill, still wants to climb.

Amanda notices the sunlight in the room brighten, and then looks out the window. Amanda wants to write him a note telling him to clean the place. She wants to tape it to Dave’s shirt, right on his gut, but she does not. This whole business idea has brought out the old energetic Dave that she does not want to discourage with nagging. Instead she blows the baby a kiss and then leaves the kitchen as-is. Maybe he will decide to do it himself. She walks out the backdoor and hits her stride right away jogging down the driveway and then onto the street.

Amanda feels more alive running than doing anything else. Yoga and Pilates are alright, but being confined to her living room with nobody but Davey Jr. and Steve—the cheese-ball video instructor she watched more times than she can count in his same red bandana and unnecessarily tight biker shorts—is just not her idea of working out. She will have a good sweat, but she does not feel like she accomplished anything. When she is running she exhausts herself in every sense, pushing the distance and pace every time. It is her and the road and the elements and nothing else. Nobody looks at her and thinks mother or wife. Not that she minds being a mother or wife, but it is nice to be something

else sometimes. It is nice to see men double take or nice to feel like women admire her or are jealous of her when she runs past them.

As soon as she hits Main St. she feels a cold misty wind in her face, and then like turning on a shower knob, rain pours down. Amanda usually does not mind running in the rain, but this is too cold and too soaking to take, wearing only a sports bra and lightweight shorts. She runs straight for Starbucks knowing it is the only establishment open this early on a Saturday.

## Chapter 6

Holly lies awake in her bed next to a sleeping Ray. While she usually works Saturdays, she took the day off to help him. She wishes she could sleep in a little, but her body is programmed to wake around 6am. Plus, once she is awake, she starts thinking about things she needs to do, and then going back to sleep is out of the question. Obsessed with something she observed while the guy from Nationwide Insurance inspected the accident site the evening before, it takes all her strength not to wake Ray and ask if noticed it too. It is stupid and does not make any difference now, but at the beginning of the summer Ray had complained to the city to cut down a dying tree in front of his market. It just seems like horrible luck to her, that if that tree just lasted one more year, or if Ray would have waited for the tree to die completely, it might have blocked the van. She sits up and looks at Ray. All she has on is a large t-shirt and panties. Alone she sleeps naked but is more self-conscious when Ray sleeps with her.

Between his parents' deaths, the tree, his black eye, getting arrested, and the van crashing into his market, Ray is the unluckiest person she knows. Hell, he is the unluckiest person in town. He had about as bad a day as anyone could have had, which really sucks, because she is tired of playing damage control. She likes Ray a lot, but their whole relationship has become about him and his problems. She does not mind helping him and talking to him about his parents or the market, but it seems that is all they ever

talk about. And it is starting to scare her, because Ray is a good person. The type of guy that wants to settle down and make little heirs to his market. She worries that the rest of her life will be dedicated to consoling the memory of his parents and now their market. She cannot remember the last time she had fun when it was just the two of them, and when Ray gets drunk it is even worse. At bars she avoids talking to him as much as possible, because if they start up in a conversation eventually it gets around to his parents and then he might start crying. It very rarely happens, though when it does, it sucks. It is great that he loved them so much, but it gets kind of trying after a while. He just does not seem capable of moving on. She might not have many problems compared to him, but she still has them, and while he has her to help him through his, all she has is herself.

Rather than sit there and test her self-control any further, Holly decides to drive into town to get coffee. She slides into a pair of jeans. Then she puts a sweatshirt over the t-shirt she slept in, pulls her brown hair back into a ponytail, and slips her feet into rubber clogs. She grabs some cash, her keys, and is out the door.

Holly could not afford the homes in town, so she bought a small two bedroom house a few miles outside. At first it annoyed her to have to drive into town all the time, but it has grown on her. She enjoys the privacy and quiet. Plus anytime she gets too tired or drunk to drive home, she just sleeps above the market with Ray. They never stay at her place, and she prefers it that way. When she wants to be alone, she can just leave.

Thinking about this makes her realize how big a hole she is in. How long will Ray stay with her? These may be unnecessary worries. He did not ask to stay with her or anything. When the guy from Nationwide left, they replaced the plywood on the front of the

market, and then went to her place. There was no discussion about where he would stay that night. They just got into her truck and drove to her house, and when they got there, Ray went right to bed. She assumes he will stay there for a while, though. Who else would he want to stay with?

After the girl in the green apron places Holly's two cups of coffee on the counter, Holly walks over to the sitting area to watch the rain. It began pouring as soon as she walked into Starbucks. Rather than fight the rain back to her truck, she decides to cozy up on a couch and watch it come down. The coffee shop is rarely ever this empty, so she takes advantage of it and postpones going back to her place to play more damage control.

As Holly slips her clogs off and curls her legs under her butt, a woman in a sports bra and jogging shorts comes in out of the rain. She looks very familiar to Holly, and from the look on the soaking wet woman's face, Holly looks familiar to her also. The brief stare they share starts to become uncomfortable until the woman tentatively says, "Hello."

"Hi . . . Do I know you?" Holly says.

"You're Ray McFarland's girlfriend, right?"

"Holly." She reaches out her hand.

"I'm Dave Briggs wife, Amanda."

"Oh, right," she lies.

Amanda's hand is wet. "Sorry." She then wipes it on the top of the couch Holly is on. "I was trying to take a jog and got caught in this downpour. Wouldn't you know it? The one morning I get to take a jog, and I get this."

Neither say a thing, making way for an awkward silence. Then Holly remembers where she met Amanda. She is married to that cop. Earlier in the summer at Rick's bar, her husband and Ray had gotten into an argument over the tree that died in front of McFarland's. She remembers seeing Amanda there because she seemed so uncomfortable sitting next to her husband trying to ignore the argument. "Well I guess this is a good place to stop. Might as well warm up with some coffee or something, right?"

"I don't know. Coffee doesn't sit so well when I'm running."

"Well, it doesn't look like you're going to get much running done."

"Yeah, I think you may be right. It makes no difference, though. I don't have any money. No pockets. I'll just wait out the rain. Maybe it won't last long."

"Here, take this." Holly gives Amanda the coffee she bought for Ray. "I'll just get Ray another before I leave."

"No, that's okay. I don't want to bother you any more."

"Take it. It's just getting cold . . . you can pay me back some day if you like."

"Are you sure?"

"Take it." She hands her the hot, white cardboard cup. "Sit down."

"Thanks. That's really nice of you." Amanda sits down on the green, fuzzy chair across from Holly. She begins to feel ridiculous in her outfit. They sip and sip at their coffees amidst another awkward silence. "This really hits the spot," she says. "You wouldn't think so since I was just running, but it really does."

"Yeah."

"So it's pretty wild about Ray and Dave, huh?"

Holly looks confused.

“Well, about the market and grocery store and all.”

“I’m not following.”

“Well it’s just kind of wild is all. One minute Dave’s tackling Ray, and the next they’re talking about opening a grocery store together.”

“Grocery store? Ray didn’t mention any grocery store.”

“No? It’s all Dave can talk about. Doesn’t it sound wild?” Just then Holly heard a faint crash from someplace outside. Amanda turned her head around to look out the window, and then turned back to Holly. “Huh.” she said referring to the noise. “Anyway, I’m sure Ray had enough to think about last night. It probably slipped his mind.”

“Yeah.” Holly taken back by the information and the energy Amanda seems to be buzzing with as she delivers it. “They’re going to build a grocery store? Like rebuilding the market?”

“I know. Well, Dave comes up with a lot of bad ideas, and thank goodness, he usually forgets about them, but this one isn’t half bad. I mean, I don’t know how the hell they’d do it all, but it makes sense. Doesn’t it?”

“Rebuilding the market?”

“No, bigger. Like a huge grocery store or something. I guess they’d get loans or something? Doesn’t it make sense? I mean who wants to drive 10 miles to that Giant Eagle every time you need to get something, right?” Amanda still breathes faster than normal from her run.

“I guess. Ray didn’t say anything.”

“He had a lot on his mind.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s wild but it’s kind of exciting, right?” Amanda says. “Well, there’s no sense rebuilding that little market, right? It’s just too small.”

“I don’t know. He really liked that place,” Holly says and then drinks from her coffee. “His parents built it, you know.” Holly feels uncomfortable being offended by Amanda’s comment about the market. She does not like to feel obligated to defend him; however she feels threatened by how excited this woman is about Ray not rebuilding the market and the fact that she knows more about the whole thing than Holly does. It is like Amanda is glad it was wrecked.

Amidst the blur of the rain outside the Starbucks’ front window, Holly sees the flashing lights of a police car drive by, and then she sees two more. “What was that?”

“What was that?” Amanda turns around to look out the window.

They stand up to look out the window. The police parked by the market. Holly runs out the door, into the rain and down the sidewalk toward Ray’s market. As she comes to the crosswalk, which leads from her feet across to the market, Holly sees that the entire front has caved in, as if the building is sliced down the middle. The bottom floor is unrecognizable beneath the rubble; the upstairs studio apartment opens up like a dollhouse. Holly sees the kitchen and dinner table, but the rest -- the bed they sleep on, the couch they watch television on, and the entire front side of the apartment -- is swallowed up into the rubble that has crushed the bottom floor market.

“Holly crap,” Amanda says. Holly had not noticed her standing beside her until now. They look at each other, both still holding coffee cups, and then look back to the market. “Nobody was in there, right?”

Holly is speechless.

“Was anybody in there?” Amanda asks again.

Holly pictures Ray sleeping in her bed, certain that the worst is past him. Always certain that the worst is over. “I don’t think so.” The police, draped in hunter orange ponchos, search around the perimeter of the rubble with flashlights.

“What a mess.” Amanda says.

Staring at the insult added to the injury, Holly realizes she has to call and wake Ray to tell him about this. She is the only one who knows where he is. She has to break the news. She does not like pitying Ray. How many times have people had to *break news* to him? She has to get him down here right away. Large drops of rain pat against Holly’s head and stream down her face. “Wild,” she says.

## Chapter 7

Ray wakes up sweating from a dream about stacking the shelves. Holly is sitting at the end of the bed with a cup of coffee. In his dream, people kept coming in and lining up with groceries, but he could not get to them because every time he moved, he'd knock over an entire aisle of food. This kept happening until everything in the market piled up in the center of the store and he was trapped underneath. He was left trying to eat his way out.

Maybe he is tired of being upset, maybe the sleep gave Ray a new perspective, or maybe he is numb. Whatever it is, the news Holly tells does not upset him. He wants what he wants every morning: coffee. He should be frightened that he could have been in the building when it caved in, knows he should want to run down there to see it all, but what good is that going to do? Ray looks past Holly at the rain outside the bedroom window. He went to bed feeling sorry for himself, and now he just feels sorry—as if there were something he should have done to prevent all this from happening.

The way Ray sees it, he has two choices: he will rebuild it or he will not. That is the only decision he has to make. The more he condenses the predicament to this realization the better he feels. His Dad would not have been guilty, depressed and mad, or at least he would not show it. He'd just do what he had to do.

“Coffee?” Holly says. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah,” he says calmly. “I’m really hungry too.”

“Hungry?”

“Yeah.” He stood up. “Hungry. I can’t remember the last time I ate anything.”

“Ray?” She looks at him, confused.

“What?”

“Nothing . . . I’ll go check the fridge.”

“Eggs sound great.”

Holly stands at the stove frying up eggs with cheese and bacon, while Ray sits at the small, round kitchen table with a coffee in front of him, staring at the rain. It streaks down the window to the right of Holly. The kitchen is small and long—the table is at one end and the counter space and appliances at the other end flank Holly. Ray imagines it could fit in a train or RV. He likes being at her house. It makes him feel separated from town and the market, as if taking a mini-vacation. It is tough living where he works. Some weeks he wonders if he even leaves the premises. But here he relaxes. Amidst all his problems, he can sit back and think of something else for a little while.

Holly says, “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yup.” He drinks from his mug.

“Cause I thought you’d be a little more upset. I mean . . . I’d expect anyone to be.”

She seems to be tip-toeing around the subject as if he is gonna break down any minute. He is not used to her being excessively nice. It is nice, so he goes with it. “Well there’s nothing I can do.”

“Okay.” She plows the mixture out of the pan onto a plate. “Then I won’t talk about it?”

“Sounds good,” he says. Ray picks up his silverware and sits up straight as Holly places his plate on the table.

“You want toast?”

“Sure.”

“Can I ask one more question?”

He nods to her while shoveling a forkful of the eggs into his mouth.

Holly sits down across from Ray, and then says, “I bumped into Amanda Briggs this morning. She said something about you and her husband planning to build a grocery store.”

“She did.” he says.

“Yeah. I saw her at Starbucks right before . . . Well, we talked a little while, and that’s what she said.”

“Yeah, Dave mentioned some idea about building some big grocery store. Pretty stupid, huh?”

“Stupid? Why do you say that?”

“Cause it’s stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s that stupid. I mean the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. You know? This town could use it if you think about.”

“The guy’s delusional. He was a moron in high school, and I don’t think he’s changed much.”

“Well what else are you gonna do?”

Ray finishes a swallow and then says, “Like I said, there’s nothing to do right now. So I don’t want to think about it.” A tiny piece of egg shoots from his mouth onto the table as he finishes his sentence.

“So you have no clue?” She appears annoyed. “I find that’s hard to believe.”

“Yeah, I have a clue. I’m gonna rebuild the damn market,” he says. “Why the hell wouldn’t I rebuild my parents’ market?” Another piece of egg shoots out.

“You eat like a damn pig you know that?” She wipes the egg particles into a napkin. As she gets up she says, “You’re so delusional.”

“Holly, what the hell do you care if I rebuild or I don’t?”

“I don’t. Do whatever the hell you want. I don’t think you should just dismiss . . .” She falters trying to remember his name. “Amanda’s husband’s idea. You’re acting like you don’t give a damn about anything.”

“No I’m not. It’s a stupid idea.”

“You’re stupid,” she says loudly. “And you know what else?”

Ray takes a bite of eggs.

“That van never even would’ve wrecked your damn market if you didn’t have to whine and get that tree cut down,” Holly says, and then storms out of the kitchen. That is

the Holly he knows. It is against her grain to walk on eggshells around him. It pains him to realize that she is probably right about the tree; he knows why she is mad, why she thinks he is ambivalent. It is unexpected for him to not dwell on the problem and hold onto the angst with white knuckles. He does care. If anything, he cares too much, and he is exhausted from it. When it stops pouring rain, he will go into town to address his problem. What he is not going to do is run down there in the middle of a storm to obsess about everything. Instead he is going to wait for the weather to subside and then go figure out a solution.

The more he thinks about his argument with Holly, it makes Ray glad that she is upset. It shows that Holly is taking an interest in his future, maybe in their future. Not that Ray believes there is a ying for every yang, a soul mate, but he believes Holly and he work well together. He thinks people have to do the best with what they have, and the people that do it the best are the relationships that last. Like his parents. He never saw them as soul mates. All he knows is they were good together. Hell, any two people who can spend every waking hour living and working together have to be doing something right. Ray is not by any means about to propose to Holly, but that is the direction they are heading.

Ray finishes the last bite of his breakfast, takes a deep breath, and then calls, “Holly?”

She does not answer.

“Thanks for the eggs.” As Ray runs water over his dish, the light brightens on the sink. He looks up to find that the rain—as quickly as it began—stops.

## Chapter 8

Dave wakes to the baby wailing. Categorizing the ways to wake up on your day off, this falls under the worst category: things that make you run around like a headless chicken. The first thought that pops into Dave's head is that the baby hurt himself. He cannot possibly imagine what the hell the kid could have done while trapped in his playpen, but it is still what frightens him into jumping out of his chair, picking up the baby and saying, "What? What? What? Did you hurt something?" To which the baby ignores with a screaming, bright red and wet expression.

Dave walks around bobbing the baby up and down. He enters the kitchen. "Where's your mother? Amanda," he yells up the stairs, frightening the baby even more. "Amanda." He opens the fridge with his foot to find a bottle, "Are you hungry? Is that why you're freaking out?" Seeing the fridge empty of bottles, Dave recalls Amanda saying he should mix up more formula last night. Then he sees the stroller by the back door. "Is that what you want? You want a ride in the stroller? Okay. Let's stretch our legs a bit." The baby cries harder as David buckles him into the stroller. "Just a quick walk around the block."

He cannot find his jacket or shoes, so Dave tightens his robe and walks outside in his slippers. The rain saturated the ground, but the sun seems to be warming everything up. He is surprised that he slept through what looks to have been a heavy storm. Before

he gets halfway down the driveway, he notices the baby is only in pajamas. Leaving the baby in its stroller, Dave runs back into the house to grab Davey Jr.'s little hat from the hook by the back door. He figures that the fleece pajamas, which cover the baby's entire body except for his hands and head, should keep him warm enough for a quick walk.

After fitting Davey Jr.'s mini Indians baseball hat on his head, they continue down the driveway. The storm left a damp, warm breeze, which Dave welcomes. The day before was unseasonably cold for October. Dave hates to think about the cold coming. He has lived in this Chagrin his entire life, though he still hates the winter and everything that comes with it. He thinks snow can be pretty, and he likes the feeling of being cozy in a warm house while there is snow outside. Yet as soon as he steps into the cold and feels the bite on his face and in his lungs, he remembers exactly why he hates winter. Maybe if he did not spend every day driving around in it, helping people pull their cars out of ditches and snow banks, or standing still in it directing traffic after church on Sundays. Maybe then he would not hate it so much. He cannot remember how he felt about snow as a child. He played in it and got cold in it like any other kid, but Dave cannot seem to recall if he had any contempt for it the way he does now.

When he gets to Main St., he notices a cop car and fire truck out front of McFarland's, and then he sees that part of second floor collapsed onto the first. The officer, leaning against the police car and talking on the CB, is Phil Peters. Phil had an older brother that Dave knew back in high school. Paul Peters. Everyone used to call him "Pee Pee Peters." Dave told Phil about this once. Phil did not find it very funny. He just told Dave to 'go fuck himself' and then walked away.

“Hey Phil,” Dave says pushing the stroller up onto the curb.

“Dave,” Phil answers and then reaches through the window to hang up the CB receiver.

“What the hell happened here?”

“Not sure. They say that van did more damage than they could tell before.”

“Whose they?”

Phil points to the end of the fire engine, where two firefighters are talking with Ray.

“What’re they gonna do?”

“What’re they gonna do? They’re gonna tear the whole thing down is what there gonna do. This thing’s a fuckin mess.”

“Huh.”

“Yup.”

Dave swerves the stroller down the sidewalk along the fire engine. He hears Ray thank the two men with the big black hats, and then they walk away. As they walk past Dave, they say “Hi.” Though Dave knows most of the guys in the department, he does not recognize these two. They seem young to him. Maybe rookies.

“Hey Ray.”

“Dave.”

“Ray looks down at the baby.”

“Who’s the Indians fan?”

Dave looks confused for a second, and then says, “Oh. That’s Davey Jr.” Dave finds that Davey is asleep.

“So I heard they’re gonna have to tear it all down.”

“Looks that way.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah,” Ray says. He seems preoccupied. As if he is got something to do, and Dave is holding him up.

“I guess you’re not gonna have time to meet with me today. You want to schedule something for tomorrow? I got Sunday off.”

“I don’t know, Dave. I’m not so sure that’s such a great idea.”

“Well I can meet you anytime. And if tomorrow isn’t good, I can meet you anytime before or after work this week as long as you don’t mind meeting in the evening or early in the—”

“No, Dave. I mean the whole thing. I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“What do you mean it’s not a good idea? It’s very good idea. It’s obviously a good idea. Amanda thinks so too, and the women are who do the shopping, you know. Ask any woman in town if they think it’s a good idea, and they’ll say it is.”

“Yeah. No, it is. It’s a good idea I guess. Maybe what I’m saying is that I just think I would not be a good fit for it. You want somebody more big business to work with you on this. I’m a small business kind of guy, Dave.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Dave says. Ray is not trying to see his vision. “So what are you gonna do?”

“Rebuild, I guess.”

“Rebuild?” Dave says loudly, waking up the baby.

“Yeah rebuild. I just wouldn’t feel right. This was my Mom and Dad’s whole life, you know.”

“So we’ll name the grocery store after them. We’ll put a huge-ass sign in front. *McFarland’s Market*. With huge-ass green letters. Can’t you just see it?” Davey Jr. begins crying again.

A warm breeze blows against Dave’s back. Ray makes a face, and then he looks down at the baby. “Yeah. I don’t think so, Dave. I don’t know if they would’ve been into it.”

“Hell yeah they would’ve been into it. How could they not have been into it? It’s a great fucking idea.” Dave wishes he could take his last comment back. He can tell from Ray’s expression that he went too far. Before Ray can say anything, Dave says, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what they would’ve wanted . . . Just think about it a little more would you? Think about what the town wants. Hell think about what it needs.”

“I made my decision,” Ray says.

Dave does not know what to say. He handled the conversation horribly and tries to think of something to fix it. To make Ray see his vision, but he cannot think over Davey’s crying.

“Dave, it smells like your kid needs a diaper change,” Ray says. Dave looks down at the crying baby. “Listen, I appreciate your interest. It’s a really good idea. It is . . . I just gotta do what I gotta do. Alright?”

Dave, still dejected and confused, says nothing.

“I’ll see you around. I gotta go take care of a few things,” Ray says.

Both men stop and stare across the street, directly past Ray’s truck, at Amanda jogging down Main St. in nothing but that damn bra she calls a *top* and those skimpy shorts. She says it is not a bra, but it is a fucking bra. Dave turns his gaze to Ray, who is gawking at his wife. “Then go.”

Ray shakes out of his stare, and then says, “Right . . . I’ll see you around, Dave.”

## Part II

### Chapter 9

Most winters, snow will come, but with the sun or a warm air front, it always goes. This year, none of the snow ever left. Bulldozers scraped McFarland's lot clean to a patch of dirt. Looking at it now—covered by two feet of ice and snow—nobody would ever know that anything was ever there. Behind McFarland's is the large parking lot that until three weeks ago the middle school and Federated church shared, but now an arsenal of dozers, backhoes, cranes, trucks and dumpsters are fenced in. Amidst an onslaught of snow, they migrated to the site in spurts—three dump trucks and two trailers one day, an excavator and crane the week after. Every morning Ray stares out at the progress from his window booth at Dink's. He spreads the *Times* in front of him each day but cannot ever finish an article since his gaze tends to move with the men in yellow hats walking around the machines. It has been a week now and he still does not know exactly what they will build; he can see that it is going to be big, though. Amanda, his waitress most every day, told him her husband, Dave, thinks it is going to be a bank or drug store. She also said that Dave is full of shit 90 percent of the time, so for all she knows it could be a petting zoo.

After Holly kicked him out of her house two weeks ago and left to winter with her mother in Florida, Ray moved into the ChagrInn and began frequenting Dink's every day for his meals. At first Amanda seemed annoyed by his constant patronage, which he took as resentment for rejecting her husband's business proposal. After talking to her every day for two weeks, however, Ray realizes she just hates her job.

This morning Amanda is particularly perturbed. Forgetting the day of week, Ray examines his paper to find it is Saturday, which may explain why Amanda is so flustered rushing from the counter to the kitchen and back. She hates weekend traffic at Dink's. In about 20 minutes a line will back up at both the front and rear doors. People with their entire families will wait impatiently in a foyer cluster and then wait impatiently at their table.

Ray glances back at his paper to find a picture of the construction site—a view very similar to the one he has now—and it is accompanied with the headline, *Super Giant Eagle to Land in Chagrin*. The article explains that a local investment group bought the large parking lot and, weather permitting, are breaking ground in a week.

Ray flips the pages to the rest of the article, which is given a two-page spread. Included is an architectural rendering of the interior and exterior finish. They even took the time to include mock ups of happy multicultural patrons and employees—a baker hands a cookie over a 30-foot long bakery counter to an excited little girl; all 20 checkout stations are equipped with small lines of patient shoppers and smiling employees; a manager in a white shirt and red tie helps a senior citizen couple load bags into their trunk. Ray should be upset at his discovery. He should feel discouraged and cheated by

the encroachment of this monstrosity of a market. It is obvious that plans to reestablish his business are squashed. What bothers him are the fake, computer generated people. Nobody is alone. It is the same feeling festering in him every morning when he sits down at Dink's and stares down at his paper. In the period of a few years he has been stripped of every meaningful relationship and possession filling his life. Everything that proves his existence has vanished leaving him a bag of clothes and a room at an inn. His parents, home, and livelihood are gone, and he has not talked to Holly in weeks. After her work finished up for the season and she went on unemployment, she decided they need a break and then left to stay with her mother in Florida for an indefinite time period. He has not told anyone of their breakup yet. If people ask where she is, he tells them but quickly changes the subject. The happy families and couples in the pictures are fake but nonetheless painful to look at.

“Ray,” Amanda says.

Ray looks up from his paper and then says, “Hey Amanda.”

“Interesting stuff, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“I bet you wish you had that idea before them.”

“You could say that too.”

She places a cup in front of Ray and then fills it with coffee. Her hair is pulled back tight and fastened with a rubber band. Ray sees the beginnings of bags forming under her eyes. “Ham and cheese omelet?”

“And wheat toast.” She sets the coffee pot down, puts her pencil in her mouth and tightens her apron around her waist. “I can’t believe you just had a baby. You really look great.” He surprises her with compliments when she is in a bad mood.

She smiles. “Have you heard from Holly? How’s Florida?”

“Good.” The worried feeling Ray had when he looked at the paper spreads and sinks deeper in his gut. “I’m thinking of surprising her down there.” Which was not a complete lie. He has been thinking about it, but knows there is no way in hell he would go. His gaze wanders toward the construction sight. “Doesn’t look like I’m going to be in any high demand around here.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Thanks,” Ray says. “There’s gotta be some sort of law against building something so monstrous in this small town.”

“You can’t fight progress, Ray,” Amanda says and then walks back behind the counter to serve her other patrons. She looks up at Ray to catch his stare. She smiles as she gathers the dirty dishes from an old man sitting across from her.

Ray’s stare is broken up when he notices Dave lumbering in through the front door. Ray has not seen much of him since he rejected Dave’s offer to open a supermarket together. The two times he bumped into Dave, he ignored Ray. Dave gives Ray a strange look while walking up to the counter. Though it is fairly uncomfortable to see him this way, Ray does not mind not having to make conversation. However, Dave has a way about him that suggests he has a problem with everyone in the room.

Without looking at Dave, Amanda grabs a to-go cup and lid, fills it with coffee, leaves it in front of Dave on the counter, and then goes back to the kitchen to pick up a few orders. Though he could not care less about Dave and whether he let him down by denying his offer to open the new market, Ray cannot help but feel guilty for contributing to an unhappy marriage. She never admits it to Ray, but she hates Dink's. It is obvious. He faulted himself until today when he discovers a project exactly like Dave's idea is already in the works, and most likely administered by people with far more resources.

With Dave walking behind her until he veers off through the front door, Amanda walks up to his table, places his toast down in front of him, and then says, "You need anything else?"

"No thanks," he says, though his coffee cup is empty. "Wait."

She turns around.

"Are you okay?" he says. "You seem sad."

She looks at his cup. "You need coffee?"

"I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"I'm just dandy, Ray. Really. Do you need coffee?"

"I didn't mean to pry. I'm sorry. You just seem exhausted."

"Exhausted?" She says, "Hell yes I'm exhausted."

"I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"I'm up all night feeding and changing my baby, and since I breastfeed, Dave thinks it gives him the right to sleep all night. Plus he needs to be *sharp* for his job. Apparently you do not need to be as *sharp* to sling eggs and coffee as you do to write

tickets and direct traffic. So even though I'm up all night taking care of his baby, I have to be up by 5:30am to get Davey ready for his sitter so I can run around in this hell-hole all day." Her face tightens.

"I'm—"

"And *happy*? Honey, I'd be a whole lot happier if that van waited another 50 feet and plowed into this place."

"I see," is all Ray can or wants to say.

"I doubt it." Her tense expression loosens. "Listen, I'm sorry. You know more than anyone that we all got our problems. Maybe I should of gone to Florida with Holly."

"She dumped me," Ray blurts out, and it keeps coming, "I've been living at the ChagrInn for two weeks now." It is the first time he hears it out loud, and though he hates how it sounds, he feels a little better.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ray. I mean it."

Feeling vulnerable and a bit embarrassed, Ray stares at Amanda not knowing what else to say. "Thanks."

"I don't really know Holly that well, but she's a nice girl. That's too bad."

"It is."

"I guess it's better that it happens now than down the road," Amanda says. "I don't know if that makes sense, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah. She's probably better off. I have a lot to deal with right now."

"Sure." Holly looks over her shoulder at a counter full off people staring at her. "I have to go, Ray. Sorry."

After breakfast, Ray walks up to the fenced-in construction site. There is a trailer by the gate with a sign that reads *Holt Construction*. A padlock and a chain hold the two gates closed. Ray holds the lock in his hand. It has to be the biggest he has ever seen. Ray looks up at the sound of the trailer door opening. A large man in a heavy duty winter coat walks out. He is at least six inches taller than Ray. He walks quickly toward Ray and appears to be a bit pissed off.

“Stop right there,” he says. “What’s your fuckin name?”

Ray freezes. “Who?” is all he can say. He releases the lock.

“Don’t give me that shit. What’s your name?” The man takes a key ring out of his pocket with one hand and pushes the gate into Ray with the other. He then fumbles through the keys for the one that Ray assumes opens the padlock. Not waiting to see him find the right key, Ray turns and runs away as fast as he can.

## Chapter 10

Dave does not consider himself a competitive man, but when it comes to his wife, he is a winner. He used to take offense when he saw men gawking at her— once he got into a fight with a guy who bought her a drink at Rick's while he was taking a piss. As time went on he learned to accept it and eventually revel in it, but since the baby came, he is bothered by it again. The only difference is a guilty, threatened feeling rather than an angry and offended one. It used to be that the only single men in town were idiot townies; but now that a whole new crop of business men, successful men with money, had moved in, Dave cannot help but be reminded of his wife's job and the home he has them live in.

Today is the first day since Amanda's been back at work that he drops in to see her at Dink's. When they were dating, he used to come in almost every day. As he walks in, Dave immediately notices Ray by the front window and his stomach aches with a pang of regret. He wants to blame Ray for making him miss out on an opportunity, but Dave knows Ray saved him. He learned of the supermarket yesterday and after his initial anger, he realized it would have been constructed whether they opened a new market or not. He would have been in debt for the rest of his life if they stuck their necks out only to be crushed by the Giant Eagle. However, he will hang on to his blame. Ray did not just deny his offer, he denied him. Ray was not apprehensive because he knew about the Giant Eagle, he said no because it was Dave who asked him; and even though he knew

the people who are building the market have no knowledge of him, he blames them for no reason too. That market represents everything he wants to become, which is slowly turning into someone he will never be. When Dave learned yesterday that the project is to be a Giant Eagle, he went to the construction site and jammed the locks full of mud. No matter what he tries to make himself believe, that damn market will always be a symbol of his lack of timing.

Dave walks up to the counter where Amanda is listening intently to a young man in a suit with a laptop computer in front of him on the counter. She looks up at Dave and the smile on her face fades away. She turns around, grabs a Styrofoam cup, pours it full of coffee, adds one creamer, caps it, and puts it on the counter in front of Dave.

“Hungry?” she asks.

“Not any more,” he says and then looks back at Ray, who is busy reading the newspaper. Dave knows he is just finding out about the Giant Eagle, and that knowledge brings him a sense of satisfaction. At first he thinks this sensation comes at Ray’s expense, but mostly it is just nice not being alone at the bottom.

“Okay.” Amanda walks out from behind the counter and approaches an elderly couple seated at a small table against the wall, and then Dave leaves without looking back in Ray’s direction. Between avoiding Ray and suffering Amanda’s attitude there was no way Dave was going to stay to eat. He has been doing a lot of that lately—walking out. Nearly every night he feels the need to go for a walk until Amanda goes to bed. Amanda’s disinterest in him has become deafening. No matter what he says or asks, she answers him with indifference, and then his stomach wrenches with angst. He can only

take so many deep, cleansing breaths before he just has to get out. The only way they can get their relationship out of its funk is if Dave can pull them out financially, and Dave is finding thought to be impossible when under the same roof as Amanda's indifference. He walks the streets in the middle of the cold night thinking of a feasible investment—a plan that lets him keep his day job and take very little of his own money to initiate. However, the anxiety that has grown from Amanda's seed of disappointment prevents him from considering an idea very long before he dwells on reasons why something will not work. Then his thoughts trail off and dwell on being a failure and are followed by recounting his life-long trail of regrets. Before long he is back home sitting on his front step crying. His walks end this way most every time until last night's stroll to the construction site.

He came home from work and told Amanda about the Giant Eagle. She was obviously stressed because Davey has a cold and has not slept well in days, but after he told her, Amanda's entire body and face relaxed into a sigh and then she told him, "Dave will you just be a father? Can you do that? I don't want to hear about this shit anymore. I just don't care. Just be a father." He could not say a word. He just stood there until she left the room and went up stairs, and then he turned and walked right back out the door.

He walked for over an hour trying to figure out his problem until he found himself running his gloved fingers along the cold metal of the sites' chain link fence. Its presence insulted Dave to the point where he wanted to push it over. In fact, the entire site bothered him. Every pile of dirt, machine, and even the padlock holding the gates closed mocked him with indifference. All of it smacked him with who he is not and who he will never be—a capitalist, an entrepreneur, and a man of risk. Next to where Dave stood was

a frozen pile of clay and dirt. Dave took off his gloves, picked up a gumball-sized piece of clay, and softened it between his hands with warm breaths. Once it reached a more malleable state, Dave smeared it into the keyhole on the padlock. He pictured it infiltrating the tumblers and ruining the lock. Then he released his grip on the lock, took a deep, cleansing breath, and went home to his sleeping family.

## Chapter 11

Fifteen minutes before her shift begins and five minutes before she must leave to drop Davey off at the sitter's, Amanda's phone rings. Betty, her sitter, has to cancel for the day on account that she fell asleep with the curling iron in her hair and is being rushed to the emergency room. Amanda wants to get more details, but Betty has to hang up.

"She did what?" Dave says. He is still lying in bed with the side of his head planted in a pillow. "How the hell did she do that?"

"That's not important. I'm late for work. You have to watch Davey for me."

He rolls onto his back. "I can't. I worked late last night, and I have to work tonight too. I need sleep at some point."

"Bullshit, Dave. I can't take him to work."

"Why not? He's just gonna sit there sleeping."

"Because it's work."

"Yeah, but come on."

"Would you take him to your work?"

"I'm a cop. It wouldn't be safe."

"Since when is writing parking tickets dangerous?"

"You know there's more than that. No matter what I'm doing there's a chance for danger."

“You mean like a paper cut or a renegade windshield-wiper blade?”

“You’re starting to piss me off, Amanda.”

“Dave, find another sitter if you want.”

“Who?”

“I don’t care,” Amanda says. She gathers her coat and purse. “I can’t deal with this right now.” She walks out of the room.

Dave sits up fast. “Amanda,” he yells.

“I’m late,” she calls back.

“Who should I call?”

As she shuts the front door and walks into the early cold, she hears Davey crying. She overreacted, but between her sister being an idiot and Dave being a pain-in-the-ass she could not help getting pissed off. It is not easy for her to work at the same place she has worked at since she was 16. Amanda was fine with being a stay-at-home mom in a working class family, but going back to work to wait on townies and upper-class yuppies who want to be townies somehow makes her feel low. It is one thing for a mother to want to work, but she has to work.

Amanda understands Dave is consumed with a sense of self dissatisfaction, but that is the problem: she understands. She cannot remember ever feeling that he tried to understand her point-of-view. Even his desire for her to not work is more for his well-being than him understanding why she wants it, too.

Amanda is late, but being late to Dinks has never been much of a concern. In fact, she tends to worry more about being early. Her goal is to be five minutes late everyday. It takes her about 10 minutes to walk to work, so she times it accordingly.

As she walks down Main St. the sun bleeds through a heavy set of clouds in the east, leaving the town in a muted light. Amanda sees Dink's sign hanging from under the awning. She walks up to the door, grabs the handle, but then stalls. This is the moment when her day flashes before her. She will run from kitchen to counter or table, clean up spills, hall dishes, set tables, and all the while keep one eye on the clock. Her thoughts stray from Dinks to a curling iron and how it gave her sitter the day off, and she envies Betty. How long has it been since something as insignificant as a curling iron controlled her day? Even if a piano fell on her she would fulfill her daily routine of working, mothering and taking care of the house. A curling iron—it is so simple and benign. Her gloved hand slides off the handle falling to her side, and she backs away from the door.

As Amanda walks back down Main Street, snow flurries swirl around her. She moves slowly, strolling along with no place to be and nothing to do as if walking along the beach while on vacation. She stops in front of the vacant lot where McFarland's once stood. Planting her boot into the 10 inches of snow, Amanda walks around the vacant lot imagining herself in the market with its rows of produce. She sees herself as a young girl pushing the small cart around while her mother picks through the different fruits and vegetables. It feels too surreal with the building so cleanly removed, as if it were never there, as if all her memories of it took place somewhere else or not at all. She looks down to where the old floor boards used to creak under her white Keds, but she only finds the

tops of her boots peaking out of the snow. She squats down and reaches into the snow, pulling it back and then packing it into a large ball. Flakes fly up her coat sleeve chilling the skin on her wrists and forearms. She ignores the cold and continues to pack snow onto the ball until she can begin rolling it around the lot. She stops when it is about three feet in diameter and can barely move it any further. She then starts over building the torso for her snowman.

## Chapter 12

The ChagrInn is more of a bed and breakfast than a motel; when Ray was a child it was more of a dump than a motel. Most of the clientele now are upper-class and in town to visit friends or just on a weekend getaway. Busy season tends to be around the holidays and in the fall while the leaves are coloring. The rooms have their own small bathrooms and a window with a view. They still have original wood floors, which have been refinished, and amidst the smell of potpourri is a musty odor of a building that has been occupied by transients for over a century and a half. In all, the inn holds 10 rooms—three on the first floor, six on the second, and a suite in the attic. Ray’s room is on the first floor. His view is of the restaurant wall next door. Being that it is so late in the winter season and Ray went to high school with the owner, his room rate is drastically decreased to about \$200 a week.

Ray lies on the bed, which takes up about a third of the room, holding the phone to his ear. Listening to it ring, he pictures a small condo surrounded by palm trees and Holly and her mom sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. He has never met Holly’s mom—she will not come up to Ohio anymore—so it is hard to picture her face.

“Hello?” Holly answers.

“Holly?”

“Ray?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“I knew you’d be awake.”

“I thought you weren’t going to call?”

“I thought I wasn’t either.”

“What is it?”

“What’s what?”

“Why’d you call?” She seems more annoyed than he expected.

“I haven’t talked to you in a while, and I wanted to hear your voice. How’s Florida?”

“Fine, I guess. Warm.”

“That’s nice. I forget what that feels like. I can’t remember a worse winter up here.”

“Ray, we agreed you’d give me space to think while I was here.”

“How long does it take to think?”

“Maybe it’s not that I need to think. Maybe I just need to not think for a while, and I don’t know how long it takes to not think.”

“You know that new construction project? It’s going to be a massive new super mega grocery store.”

She does not respond for a moment and then says, “That sucks, Ray. I’m sorry to here that.”

“You are?” Ray asks.

“Of course I am. How could I not be?” A brief silence; then she sighs. “What’re you going to do?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

“Isn’t it nice?”

“What?”

“Not thinking about it.” Another silent pause. “Maybe this is going to be for the best.”

“Why?”

“Maybe you need to get out of there. Start someplace fresh.”

“I don’t wanna leave town. It isn’t the problem.”

“It isn’t the solution either.”

“Where would I go? What would I do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe move down here and open another market.”

“Is that what you’ve been not thinking about?”

“It just came to me.” She says.

He does not believe her. “You want me to move down there with you?” he says.

“I didn’t say that. I don’t know what I want.”

“So then you think I should move by your mom and open a market while you live up here?”

“Ray, I’m just talking.”

“I’ve never even met your mom.”

“Would it be so horrible?”

“Meeting your mom?”

“Living here with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I just don’t see how living there is good for you anymore.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you ballpark it?”

“You’ll be the first person I tell.”

“Even before your mom?”

“Bye, Ray.”

“I’m staying at the Inn.”

“Okay. Bye, Ray.”

He wants to tell her he loves her but cannot get it out of his gut. “Bye,” he says. The idea of moving to Florida or anywhere is absurd, but the fact that she is thinking of ways for them to be together is a very good thing. It is the little glimmer of hope he wanted to get from his phone call. What begins to bother him is the question: *why does it have to be so hard?* If she wants to be together, why put him through this pain? They can deal with problems together. Running to your mom to not think about them for a month or two is not helping either of them.

The phone rings. Ray picks it up expecting to hear Holly on the other end.

“Hello?” he says.

“McFarland?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Dave.”

“Okay,” Ray says. He’s nervous to hear Dave’s voice so early in the morning. “Is something wrong?” He has come to associate calls from police officers with further catastrophe. He tries to remember if he recently heard a siren.

“McFarland, the way I see it, you owe me.”

“What?”

“I believe you owe me a favor.”

“You do?”

“You may not, but I do.”

“You’re right.”

“Fine, then I need a favor from you that I’m not going to feel the need to repay.”

“What do you want, Dave?”

“I need you to come over and watch my boy for a couple hours while I sleep.”

“Dave—“

“Come on. What do have to do today besides ogle my wife while she serves you an omelet?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Will you help me out or what?”

“I don’t know the first thing about kids.”

“There’s nothing to it. You feed him if he’s hungry, change him if he’s crapped or pissed himself and let him sleep if he’s tired,” Dave says. “Besides, I’ll be right upstairs if you need me.”

Maybe it is because he feels sorry for Amanda, or maybe he is curious about taking care of a kid, or maybe he believes he does owe Dave a favor. Whatever the reason, he agrees, “What time do you need me there?”

“Right now.”

Snow flurries swirl around him. He looks up, letting flakes melt against his face. A layer of clouds stretch out in every direction in one shade of gray. It reminds him of standing outside the market in the early morning drinking coffee and waiting deliveries. It used to be his favorite time of the day. Before the crash, every minute of free time felt earned—every morning, afternoon and evening he took off he savored. Now, having nothing but free time, he feels as though he is cheating somebody. It is an odd feeling to have your livelihood stolen from you and still feel like you are the one doing something wrong. These are the thoughts he dwells on. The frustrations fuel his angst. A few moments of every day, it consumes him, starting like this with self-pity and mutating to an intense hatred for the fat slob he found behind the wheel of that van whimpering into his cell phone. Ray pictures the man waking up with his wife and kids, all of which are oblivious to what the head of their household did and continue to do to Ray. The only impact they will ever feel coming from an increased auto insurance bill.

Ray looks up to the top of Grove Hill. Flurries turn into a snowfall. He imagines the brown van careening out of control down through town, and then into the vacant lot where his market once stood and wonders what it must have been like to witness the ordeal. Every time Ray looks at the lot he gets an uneasy feeling in his stomach. It is a feeling he thinks is similar to what New Yorkers might feel walking past the empty lot where the Trade Towers once stood. Ray would avoid walking by it if he could, but it is hard when it sits at the center of town.

Ray belts out a yell from the bottom of his gut, “MOTHER FUCKING COCK SUCKER.” A simple phrase, but nonetheless an effective release—a breath of crisp air he so desperately needed.

“Ray?” the vacant lot calls back.

Ray crosses the street and heads into the lot. “Who is that?” he asks.

“Ray? Is that you? It’s Amanda.”

“Is that a snowman?”

“Not yet. I can’t lift his head off the ground.”

Ray walks up to her so that the snowman’s head is between them. “Hi,” he says.

“Hi”

“Need a hand?”

“No, just a head.”

“Very funny.”

“Yes, I would love a hand with my head,” she says with a faint laugh.

“You’re on a roll.” Ray squats down and then wraps his arms around the underside of the big snowball. Amanda lowers to help him. They slowly rise letting the ball sit against Ray’s chest. It reminds him of working with a medicine ball in high school. They put the head in place and then pack snow at the joint, or neck. “Very nice,” Ray says.

“It’s been a while, but not bad.”

“What’s his name?”

“Whose?”

“The snowman’s.”

“How do you know it’s not a girl.”

“He’s got a bulge.”

“Real nice, Ray.”

“Bad joke.”

“How about, mother fucking cock sucker?”

Ray is shocked, embarrassed and a bit aroused to here Amanda repeat his words.

“So you did hear me?”

“It would’a been hard not to.”

“Sorry about that. Just letting out a little steam.”

“I think you’re entitled to that much.”

“I guess.”

“How’re you doing?”

“Aside from the occasional fit of profanity, I’m fine. One day at a time and all that.”

“Sounds good.”

“What sometimes helps is that I try to make myself believe I’m kind of lucky the van smashed my place.”

“Okay.” She looks at him confused.

“It came to me in the middle of the night. Had I still been here squeezing a living out of this place when that Giant Eagle opens, they’d have drove me into the ground.” He pauses to take in the fact that it is not much of a place anymore. “At least this way I’m getting a good value from the insurance company. At least I hope I am.”

“I guess that’s a good way to look at it.”

“Yeah. I do not really believe it, but I don’t have a choice either.”

“I meant how are you doing with Holly.”

“Oh, to be honest I really don’t know. It’s a very confusing situation.”

“Well, I don’t want to butt in. Just don’t sell yourself short. You’re too good a guy.”

“Thanks,” Ray says. He is not quite sure what she means, but he is embarrassed anyway.

“I mean, you’re a great guy. I don’t want to see you get hurt any worse. I just can’t believe she’s pulling this on you after what all’s happened.”

“Thanks. Aren’t you working today?” Ray says to change the subject.

“I’m not sure yet. Everyone is liable to piss me off lately, so it’s best I stay away from serving people hot coffee,” she says. “Isn’t it a bit early for you to be heading to Dink’s?”

“I’m going to help somebody with something.” Ray figures that everyone especially means Dave, so he chooses not to bring his name up. “What are you gonna to do?”

She thinks for a few seconds and then says, “I have no idea. It’s a good feeling you know.”

“Only in small doses. Trust me.”

“Well, it’s all I got right now and it feels pretty good.”

“If you end up getting yourself fired, let me know where you end up. I can take different food from a different restaurant, but I doubt I can take it from a different waitress.”

“Thanks, Ray.”

## Chapter 13

“All in,” Alice says as she slides four stacks of chips to the center of the table.

“I fold,” Holly Says.

“Big surprise.” Holly’s mom, Sandy, says.

Holly rolls her eyes at her mom’s comment.

Sandy peeks at her two cards, which are face down on the table. She does the exact same thing every time it is her call. She meets the bet. “Turn’em.” Alice beats Sandy’s two-pair. “That’s it. I’m done. You’ve taken enough today.”

“Really, Sandy. It’s never enough when it’s your money,” Alice says. She is Sandy’s best friend and lives in the condo two doors down. She is just about the fittest 70-year-old Holly has ever seen.

“How much is that?” Holly asks Alice.

After she finishes counting her last chip, she looks up at Sandy and says, “\$9.20.”

“Get out of my house,” Sandy says and then gets up from the table.

“Sorry, I lost your money, Mom.”

Sandy looks down at Holly. “Be sorry that you lost it to this hag. Did you have fun losing it?”

“Sure, I guess. I’ve never played before.”

“Then don’t be sorry.”

“Absolutely,” Alice says. “We love having you. Not as much as my checking account loves having you, but we do.” She cleans up the game, organizing all the chips by color and then sliding them into the wooden poker case.

“Sure,” Holly says sarcastically as she gets up from the table.

“How long are you staying this year?”

“Not sure yet. Why?”

“Because, I want to buy a new Caddy, and I want to know how much I’m going to be putting down on it.”

“Funny.”

“Holly is on an indefinite vacation,” Sandy says.

“I’m a horticulturalist for a landscaping company. We’re in our off season.”

“She’s a landscaper collecting unemployment. Her father would be so proud.”

“Why haven’t you vacationed here before?” Alice asks.

“I have. But never for very long. I always had too much to do with my house and work.”

“She’s having man trouble,” Sandy says while pouring white wine into a glass.

“Shut up?” she says to her mom.

“Such a lady.”

“None of my business. I’ll just collect my Caddy fund and be gone. I’ve got a splitting headache. I need to go lie down.”

“Take your money and get the hell out.”

“Precisely.”

“You better bring all that back next week. Holly and I are going to practice, and you’re gonna need it.”

“As you were, ladies,” Alice says before she walks out the room and then the house.

Holly considers scolding her mom for discussing her private affairs but decides not to waste her breath. Instead she walks out into the sun room and then outside to the backyard. They spend so much time in air conditioning. She has to remind herself to go outside and feel the reason she came down here. The Bermuda grass feels like plastic under her bare feet. It is so different from the soft Ohio grass. Holly looks to her right to find Alice walking onto her back patio two condos down. Alice notices Holly, waves and comes closer.

“I’ll bet your going stir crazy living with that old bag,” Alice says with a smile. “What you need is to stretch those legs. Get out a sweat.”

“Exercise?”

“Don’t be so surprised. We fossils still exercise,” Alice says. She is standing on the patio that sits between her condo and Holly’s mom’s.

“I didn’t mean—“

“Relax. I know what you mean.”

“No, I meant that I get enough exercise during the year with my job. I don’t get to sit down until I come here.”

“How would you like to join me tonight on my power walk? Stop. Let me rephrase. I want you to join me on my power walk.”

Holly lets out a small laugh and then says, "I guess I don't have a choice?"

"I'm glad you see it that way."

"You want me to see if Mom wants to join us?"

"The one and only time I asked her, she told me that exercise is for Asians. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I know well enough not to ask twice."

"Sure."

"Sure what?"

"Sure, I'll go."

"You're gonna need more enthusiasm than *sure*. When I say power walk I mean it."

Holly smiles, "Okay."

"Have your sweats on at 5pm," Alice says as she retreats back to her porch.

"We're gonna fill'em up."

\* \* \*

Walking over to Alice's condo in the 85 degrees sun, Holly assumes Alice was joking about wearing sweats, but then she is smacked with the sight of Alice in her doorway dressed from neck to ankle in fluffy pink cotton. Dressed in sandals, jean shorts, and a t-shirt, Holly smiles and then asks, "Aren't you going to be hot in that?"

"Already am. Let's get movin before I cool down."

"Lead the way."

"I always do," Alice says and walks past Holly.

Though Holly follows beside her, she struggles to keep up. Once her body warms up and loosens to the motion, she is able to meet the stride.

“This is much better than jogging,” Holly says.

“Speak for yourself. If my old bones could still take it, I’d be pounding the pavement.”

“So you used to jog a lot?”

“*Jogging* sounds so pedestrian. I ran. Half marathons, five K’s, whatever.”

“Did you compete?”

“Everyday of my life.”

“I meant in running,” Holly says between breaths. She never knew how hard it is to speed walk and talk at the same time.

“I knew what you meant. Every second I ran, I was competing. Whether it was with myself or with some broad in a race. I was always trying to kick somebody’s ass.”

“Did you win a lot?”

“Well, that depends . . . wait. I didn’t ask you to come along so I could tell you my life story. I wanted your company so I could meddle with your life.”

Holly rolls her eyes. “Let’s not. How about we just enjoy the company and the weather and a good sweat out?” Holly says, and then picks up her pace.

Alice matches Holly stride for stride. “No. I can get sweats out anytime. But I can’t live vicariously through youth everyday. So for the next 30 minutes you’re gonna spill your guts and humor an old bag and listen to my advice,” Alice says. “I hear enough

about how so-and-so died or about how some med is giving somebody the runs. Right now I want to hear from somebody who's living a life, not ending one. So spill it."

"You didn't invite me for competition?"

"You're delusional."

Holly laughs the most sincere laugh she laughed in as long as she remembers. It feels like therapy. It comes from her core to her mouth releasing tension as the first sweat tingles through her pores. Holly tells Alice everything. About her job, college, her mom, Chagrin, Ray, Ray's parents, the market, everything. By the time she finishes, Holly is crying.

"I guess the question you have to ask yourself," Alice says not breaking her stride, "is what the hell am I doing here?"

"Where?" Holly wipes her eyes.

"What really drove you here? This is more than a vacation, sugar. What do you need from Florida that you couldn't get in Ohio? And the weather doesn't count."

"It isn't him. I think I know that. It's all his baggage. I just don't want it to be mine."

"I don't know about that, but it sounds to me like it can't get worse."

"You'd think so," Holly says sarcastically. "But it always seems to find a way."

"Have you talked to him about this?"

"How do I talk to him about this without sounding like the most insensitive bitch in the world?"

"Good point."

“I was actually thinking that maybe a change in venue for the both of us would help. Maybe if we moved someplace like here we could start fresh.”

“There’s nothing fresh about this place. Just a bunch of old rotten prunes,” Alice says. “Problems don’t leave you alone no matter where you go. Best thing you can do is not leave them alone back.”

“I guess you’re right. Still, I think we need some sort of change. Something we can acclimate to together. There’s just nothing left for us there.” Holly notices she is walking at her fastest pace yet—faster than Alice because Alice is no longer right next to her. Holly turns to see how far ahead she is, and then finds Alice 30 feet back lying face down on the pavement in her pink sweats.

## Chapter 14

After Amanda finishes her snowman, she buys a romance novel from Fireside Books, and cozies into one of the big chairs at Starbucks. On the cover is a man that looks like Brad Pitt on steroids holding a woman wearing a business suit with her hair in a bun. She sits there all day devouring the story. When she finally finishes the book, Amanda looks up at the clock on the wall to find that it is 6:30pm, and she is an hour late to relieve Dave from his Davey shift.

Amanda walks quickly up Main St., past her snowman, and then up her street. When she gets to her house, she is horrified by the absence of Dave's car and the sound of Davey crying. She imagines Dave waking up from a nap in a hurry and leaving for work completely forgetting his son. Twisting the knob of the front door and kicking it open, Amanda says, "Davey, it's Momma. Davey?" As she walks into the living room, she is confused to find Ray bobbing Davey up and down. Ray looks elated when he sees Amanda. She wants to feel angry at Dave but feels instead comfort looking at Ray with her child. A pang of guilt comes up from her stomach at the thought, that Ray with her child is exactly what she hoped to come home to. With a look of relief, Ray hands Davey to Amanda and falls back into the center of the couch. Within a few minutes, Amanda has the baby quiet and asleep.

"I don't get it. I just fed him and changed him," Ray says.

“Sometimes they just cry for no reason, Ray.”

Amanda places the sleeping baby in the living room crib, and then sits on the couch with Ray. Ray’s eyes close as he drifts off to sleep. Once Amanda is confident he is asleep, she leans over and places a soft kiss on his lips. Ray wakes up immediately, with Amanda less than an inch away from his face. He has a puzzled look on his face, but Amanda leans in and kisses him again anyway. He kisses her back. They sit on the couch kissing each other like teenagers a minute until Ray backs away and then stands up.

“I’m sorry, Ray.”

Ray looks as if he is trying to say something, but he stops. Instead, he walks out the front door.

She wants to go after him, but is also in a bit of shock from the kiss, so she sits there touching her lips and staring at where Ray was sitting.

## Chapter 15

Dave had no choice but to leave Davey with Ray and go to Dink's to see why Amanda had not come home yet. After going to Dink's and discovering she never went there either, Dave feels utterly hopeless. He stands frozen on the sidewalk in front of Dink's trying to shake this feeling away.

He notices a light is on in the trailer over at the construction site, and even though it is getting dark, Dave sees a few of the vehicles have moved to a central location. He starts to walk over there but then remembers he is late for work.

\* \* \*

Dave drives up and down the side streets. He tries to convince himself that he is doing his job and policing the neighborhood, but he is looking for her. He wants to catch her doing whatever it is she is doing. He wants to even the score and make her feel the unrest that bothers him. He avoids driving by their house for a while because if she is not home by now she must be gone, and the thought that she abandoned him alone with Davey is terrifying. Dave loves his son completely but could never take care of him the way she does. She has an unshakeable patience. It is as if she is some sort of mothering genius.

When Dave pulls up to his house, his headlights shine on Ray walking down the driveway and onto the sidewalk. A wave of relief melts his tension. He shines his

spotlight on Ray as he pulls next to him. “Ray,” he calls out the passenger window. Ray looks surprised.

“Dave?”

“Where the hell’s your coat?”

Ray looks at himself. “I guess I left it.”

“Well shit man. Let’s go back and get it.”

“I’ll get it later.”

“It throws you for a loop, huh?”

“What?”

“Takin care of baby.”

“Absolutely.”

“Ray, get in the damn car, you’re gonna freeze your butt off.”

“That’s okay. I’ll walk.”

“Amanda is in there safe and sound?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean she’s home alright?”

“Yeah, sure. She’s there.”

“I guess she didn’t go into work today.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Get in the damn car. I’ll take you home.”

“I want to walk.”

“Come on. I need your help with something. You can take care of that favor you owe me.”

“What have I been doing all day?.”

“Go get your jacket.”

“What do you want?”

“I just need your help with something.”

“What?”

“It’s a surprise. I think you’ll really be able to appreciate it though.”

“Fine. But not now. I want to walk home and relax for a minute and make a call.”

“I’ll pick you up at 10pm,” Dave says and drives away.

He heads back into town relieved that his wife is home. He considers confronting her now but coming home worn down from a graveyard shift to find her fully rested will work in his favor. It is not often he has the high ground in an argument.

## Chapter 16

Ray takes a sip of scotch; it stings good. It is the first time since he stopped working that he has felt worthy of having a nice stiff drink. He sits on a stool at Rick's sorting out how he went so quickly from playing homemaker to home-wrecker. Throughout the day he became confident in his ability to care for the child. It was a good practice for the real thing, and though he had some trouble toward the end of the day, Ray came to the realization that he can be a good Father. Then he went and crushed that belief by making out with another man's wife. His father would be so proud.

Ray reads down the bar menu for something quick and easy to order. He should eat something but cannot muster the motivation or appetite. When the bar tender asks him if he wants something else, Ray looks down the menu again and says, "Another double." Ray notices a guy wearing a flannel shirt and jeans staring at him. Ray tries to ignore him but looks back when the guy walks toward Ray. "Can I help you?" Ray asks.

"You're that guy from the other day, aren't you?"

"I tend to be that guy most every night." Ray says, regretting it as it leaves his mouth.

"I'm sure of it," he says.

Now that Ray senses the flannel man's anger, he is certain it was the wrong thing to say. "I actually doubt it. I don't get out much. I sure don't recognize you."

“Yeah, it’s you.” Now he seems pissed. “You were nosin around the gate. I’m sure of it. When I yelled, you took off like a little girl.”

“Listen pal, I’m not your guy.”

“It’s you.” He leans in and pokes Ray in the shoulder. “I want you to listen to me, you white trash townie. I don’t give two shits if you’re upset I’m ruining your precious parking lot. If I catch you anywhere near that construction site I will run you down.

Comprendo?”

Ray envisions himself smashing his whiskey glass against the side of this guy’s head, or grabbing his finger and breaking it. “Listen, I was just out walkin there, I didn’t—“

“Oh so now you were there?”

“Yeah, but—“

“But shit. All you are so full of shit.”

“I’m full of shit?” Ray stands up off his stool. “What about the van you had crush my store? What kind of shit was that?”

He looks at Ray like he is speaking another language, “What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, that was pretty convenient timing, wasn’t it?” Ray knows he is accusing the wrong guy of something he does not really even believe himself, but he does not know what else to say.

“Listen psycho.” He grabs Ray’s coat. “Just remember what I said.” He lets go and then walks out.

One hour and three doubles later, Ray stumbles off his bar stool desperately missing Holly. “You okay, Ray?” the bartender asks.

“For what? Walking down the street?” Ray says. “Yeah, I think I’m fine.” Ray takes five dollars out of his pocket. “Bill, give me five dollars in quarters.”

“What the hell for?”

“Me.”

Bill waits for more of an answer, but when it obviously is not coming, he grabs the money and then makes the change. He cracks open a roll of quarters and slides five neat stacks of four in front of Ray. “Use them wisely.”

Ray takes the stacks one by one and stuffs them into his pocket. He walks back by the bathrooms to the payphone, slips a few coins in and dials Holly’s number. He expects a request for more quarters but instead hears, “Hello?”

“Holly, I miss you. I just needed you to know that.”

“Ray?”

“Yes.”

“Ray, I can’t talk right now.”

“We really need to talk, Holly.”

“My mom’s neighbor died today while we were out walking,” she says while crying.

“Your mom died?”

“No, her neighbor.”

“Oh.”

“Ray, are you drunk?”

“No.”

“Can we talk tomorrow? Her family is here right now. It isn’t a good time.”

“Sure, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

Ray hangs up the phone. He is a little disappointed that the call did not go the way he foresaw it. He thought he would lay everything out in front of her and let her know exactly how he feels and what he wants. Ray collects the quarters into his pocket and then walks out of Rick’s into the frigid air. Walking up Main St., he pictures Holly comforted by Florida’s warm, humid air, sitting in a room surrounded by people sobbing. But he realizes the room he imagines her in is his parents’ living room, and the people he sees are those who filled his parents’ house every July 4<sup>th</sup> and after their funerals. The funerals were horrible. He spent more time consoling others than they consoled him. All he wanted was to be alone the entire time, but people kept going on and on about what great people they were and how the town would never be the same. They said that his dad was a great businessman and Ray had to keep the market going for his sake. He resented them for pressuring him that day, but even more, it made him angry that they thought they knew his own parents better than Ray. Ray has always known his dad was not a great businessman. If people had another choice for groceries, McFarland’s probably would have gone out of business. When Ray took control of the market he quickly realized just how unorganized his parents’ were: the books were extremely inconsistent, and there were no records before 1990. Ray had no idea who the suppliers were or how to

contact them. He had a million questions and nothing or nobody to answer them, and in the weeks it took to straighten everything out he never became angry at his mom or dad. They did the best they could; the people Ray resented were those who insinuated he would disappoint his parents or the town by closing shop. Where are they now? Where will they be in a year? They will be those computer generated, smiling couples shopping at their brand new Giant Eagle.

Ray walks up to the railing of the bridge that overlooks the falls, and stares at the spot where his father leapt from. It seemed like every time he and his dad walked passed this railing he showed Ray exactly the best spot to jump from. Ray can feel the empty lot, about 100 feet behind him, and at that moment he knows it is finished. He will never rebuild. McFarland's Market is gone forever, and the lot is its grave. The people in town will think he is a quitter and that Frank McFarland would never have given up so easily. "Patience is a virtue and good things happen to good people," Frank McFarland used to say to Ray. "Remember these two things, and this business will always be yours." Ray knew this was horrible advice when he received it, but it is not until now that he resents his dad for thinking a corny cliché could help business. Ray counts on his parent's memory for guidance. The lessons he took from them, though, are growing more irrelevant by the day, which is why he has never felt more abandoned and completely alone.

"Ray," a voice calls out like divine intervention. Then a light shines on him.

Ray looks up and softly says, "Dad?"

“Ray,” the voice yells louder. “McFarland, turn around.” Ray turns to find Dave shining his spotlight. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Hey, Dave.”

“Get in the car before you freeze to death.”

Ray looks back at the falls for a minute imagining jumping into the water and fading away into its cold depths, but then he looks back at the blinding light and says,

“Sure, Dave.”

## Chapter 17

Amanda sits at her kitchen table trying to remember the Ray she knew in high school. All she can think of is present-day Ray: him at the market, him pitching in games, and Dave complaining about the way he pitched. She cannot recall exactly what Dave used to say since none of it made much sense. She has no memories of parties, classes or anything else she shared with him, nor can she say if she thought he was cute or thought of him at all. This bothers her. Leafing through her yearbook she finds his picture—a hairier, skinnier, more innocent version of the man she kissed on her couch. How did she miss him?

Not since Davey was born has she felt excited about anything, and then today happens. Every emotion is at her fingertips waiting to be explored, and kissing Ray has set her on fire. It was a wrong. She has no more feelings for him than she had for boys she kissed as a child playing spin-the-bottle, but she would never regret the kiss. The raucous(?) in her nerves makes her feel like she is in high school again. She wants to call a girlfriend and talk to her about the kiss, about life, or anything at all. She reaches back and grabs the phonebook from the counter behind her and lets it thud against the table with the front cover facing down. Trying to think of an old friend to look up, she opens the back cover. Staring up at her is a three by six advertisement with a picture of a woman that looks very familiar. The caption says, *Howard Hannah Knows Homes... Just*

*Ask Vicky.* Amanda thinks she is a girl she knew in high school. It is hard to be sure because her hair is so big and curly, and she is wearing a mess of makeup. If Vicky is the girl Amanda thinks she is, she was one grade younger and, from what she remembers, was very popular. She even won some sort homecoming or prom queen and was on student council. Whether or not she went to college is beyond Amanda's recollection, but she seems like she was the type that would have.

Amanda dials the number on Vicky's ad. Amanda waits for the answering machine but is surprised when after four rings a voice answers, "Thanks for making it a great day at Howard Hannah. This is Vicky." Amanda does not answer. "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this the Vicky from the back of the phonebook?"

"In the flesh. How can I make your day... Oh dear, look at the time. I guess I'm gonna have to make your night."

"You probably don't remember me. My name is, or at least it was Amanda Miller."

"Well, of course I remember you. How the heck are you? I thought I heard you married the police officer we went to school with. What was his name?"

"Dave. And we have a little boy named Davey."

"Wonderful. High school sweethearts, I love it."

"I didn't want to bother you. Actually I planned on just leaving you a message. Do you always work so late?"

"If I didn't you wouldn't have seen my picture."

"What about your family? Don't answer that. I'm such an ass. I'm sorry."

“No that’s okay. I’m not ready yet for Mr. Right. I’m still busy trying to be Ms. Right.”

“I’m sorry. It was none of my business. Sometimes I say such stupid things.”

“Nonsense. So what’s your message?”

“What?”

“You said you were planning to leave a message. Are you selling or buying or both?”

“Neither. I just wanted to talk with you about career advice. I mean you seem like a successful women, and I don’t know. I need to make a change. I want to talk to somebody who isn’t a man.”

“What are you looking to find a career in?”

“I have no idea,” Amanda says. She looks back down at the ad. “Maybe real estate?”

“So you want me to give away all the secrets for free, huh?”

“No, I guess not. I just need to make a change and my husband is always going on about how great the real estate is around here. I suppose I could pay you for your advice, but I can’t really afford that much.”

“Oh honey I was only joking. I tell you what, buy me a coffee tomorrow morning, and I’ll open the vault.”

“Really? That would be great. You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

“Well, your husband is right. You’d be a fool not to take advantage of this market.”

“Okay.” Amanda is not sure if Vicky is talking about the new Giant Eagle or about Ray’s market. She has a strong feeling that she is not talking about either, so she does not ask.

“How about Dinks at 8am? It has been years since I been back there.”

“Maybe not Dink’s.”

## Chapter 18

“What the hell are we doing here?” Ray says as Dave pulls up in front of the same chain link gate that Ray was yelled at and then harassed for touching.

Dave opens his door. “Come on,” he says and pulls himself up out of the car. Ray is slow to get out, and then follows Dave to the trunk. Dave opens it to reveal a shotgun, four cartons of eggs, a pack of bologna, flares, and orange traffic cones.

“What’s with the shotgun?”

“I’m a cop, Ray.”

“Right.”

“Listen. It isn’t just anybody that you can trust with your family. You did me a huge favor today. I just wanted to repay you.”

“But not with money,” Ray says.

“No.”

“With groceries?”

“It’s not the groceries. It’s what we’re gonna do with ’em.” Dave hands Ray the egg cartons in a plastic bag and the bologna.

“Are we making bologna omelets?” Ray jokes, but he is becoming nervous.

“No, you see those machines over there? We’re gonna give ’em a festive makeover.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” Dave says with a tone and look that suggest he is offended by the question.

“Because it is stupid and illegal.”

“You’re with an officer of the law. You’ll be fine.”

“I just don’t know how it’s worth it.”

“Ray, whose to say these people didn’t sabotage your market.”

“What?”

“Yeah. How do you know that van didn’t do exactly what it was supposed to do?

These guys needed you out of the way.”

“What do you know? What did that guy say.”

“I didn’t do the questioning.”

“But you would know.”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“Well, what do the detectives think of everything?”

“What detectives? It was a traffic accident.”

“That’s bullshit, Dave.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Well, don’t.”

“The thing is these people, van or no van, were gonna put you out of business.

They were one way or another gonna wreck what your father built,” Dave says. Ray gives him a curious look not knowing what to think. “We’re not doing any damage here.

Just havin some fun with a prank. Come on, you came into my home and watched my child for me. It isn't often a man can trust another man with his family. This is the least I can do for you."

"I understand what we're doing with the eggs but what the hell is the bologna for?"

Dave smiles at Ray, "You'll see."

Ray follows Dave up the fence with the bag of groceries around his wrist. While maneuvering over the top of the fence, a prong cuts through his jeans scraping Ray's thigh. Feeling the cold pain Ray hurries down the other side to make sure the cut did not go too deep.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Dave asks.

"That fence bit me."

"Huh."

"Nothing. What's the plan."

"What do mean? Aim and throw. And have some fun."

Ray throws an egg at the door of the truck. Committing to the throw, the white sphere arcing through the air, and the hollow smack and splatter as it meets the steel of the inanimate door feels terribly good. He throws four more eggs at a dump truck. Realizing he is burning through his ammo too quickly, he searches for a more desirable target. He notices the trailer where the asshole who harassed Ray at the bar emerged out from to yell at Ray for doing nothing with the gate. He throws an egg hitting the top of the trailer door. After a pausing to take in the hit, Ray throws three more—each hitting

harder than the last. Ray looks around at the machines trying to decide what to hit next. Rather than egg everything a little bit, Ray decides to focus his attention on the trailer. With eight eggs left, he works into a full wind up and then hurls four eggs at the large window. With his fourth egg, he hits the pane of glass just right, shattering it into the trailer.

“Ray!” Dave yells. Ray turns to find him letting the air out of the dump truck’s tires. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Egging.”

“Well, shit man. Quit breaking windows.”

“Okay.” Ray turns back to the trailer and throws the last four eggs through the open window.

Dave walks up behind Ray. “Let’s get out’a here.” He looks down at the bag. “You didn’t use the bologna.”

Ray reaches into the bag for the bologna, takes the pre-sliced stack out of the package, and then hurls the whole thing into the trailer window. “Let’s go.”

“Real Nice. If I knew you were going to do that, I would’ve eaten it.”

“Oh well.”

“You were supposed to place them on windows. They leave marks.”

“That makes sense,” Ray says and then walks to the fence.

Once they are safely in the car, Dave looks at Ray and says, “That was like therapy. Wasn’t it.”

“It did feel good.”

“Damn right it did.”

## Chapter 19

Holly has only been to a few funerals in her life. At those, she always knew the majority of the people attending. Being that the only person she knows is her mother, she cannot help but feel like an intruder. What is worse is that since it is such a small gathering of retirees and family, blending into the crowd is not an option. The priest kept the service short for the elderly, and since she was cremated, they all drove straight to the mercy dinner.

Holly sits at a round table with her mother and eight other people from the condo development. She watches them chat amongst each other. They seem so comfortable here as if it were just another party, and then Holly realizes how very many of these things they must go to in a year. It depresses her to think funerals for them are social events, but what else do they have? They simply sit in the A-C, watch daytime television, and wait to die. It is horrible to think about, but the weirdest thing of all is that they seem okay with it.

Holly leans over to her mom, “Can we get out of here soon? I’m tired.”

Sandy looks offended. “Absolutely not,” she says. “We’re here to pay respect to my friend.”

“I feel like such an imposer.”

“I don’t care.”

“You just don’t want to leave the old folks party.”

“I won’t dignify that with a response.”

“You sure?”

“Stop it right now.”

“Just eat your chicken.”

“Mom?”

“What?”

“Did you think this would be it?”

“What?”

“Your life. Sitting home all day and using funerals as social events. Didn’t you want more out of retirement?”

“I don’t sit around all day,” Sandy says.

“That didn’t come out right.”

“I don’t see how it could have.”

“Don’t you miss working? Being productive?”

“It seems like you’re just going to keep putting your foot in your mouth so I’m gonna help you out here. I got to a point in my life where it seemed like everything I did was for the benefit of somebody else. That pissed me off. I may not be doing much now’a days, but I can say that everything I do I do for me and me alone.”

“And Jen? Did she feel like that? She just didn’t seem to fit in to this lifestyle.”

“First of all, you barely knew Jen. And let me tell you something about her. Her entire life she was constantly trying to be someone better than who she was, and that just left her beaten. More than anyone here, that women needed to do nothin.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t. But I tell you this and you can keep it in mind. We are here because we want to be here, and we do what we do because we want to. Can you say that about yourself?”

“I’m sorry for mentioning it,” Holly says.

“I’m not. Hol, what you need to know, sweetheart, and what you are too young and way too stupid to realize is that life is what you make. It is a stupid cliché, but it doesn’t promise anything except exactly what it says.”

“So what have you made?”

“Enough.”

“Really? It’s enough?” Holly gives her mom a critical look.

“Okay. I tried to be nice,” Sandy says and then turns her shoulder square to Holly. “You’re 36, you work like a Mexican for a living, and you just broke off the only substantial relationship you’ve had since college. What are you making?”

“I thought you didn’t like Ray.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Any time I talk about him you loose interest or change the subject.”

“Oh, honey that’s not because I don’t like him. I just don’t give a shit.”

Holly is speechless, unable to know whether to take offense. All she can say is,  
“What?”

“If he makes you happy. Great. If you dump him because he doesn’t. Great. I trust you’ll make the right decision. Is that why you broke up with him? Because you thought I didn’t like him?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Imagine that,” Sandy says. She turns back to her food and finishes eating her chicken.

## Chapter 20

Amanda was afraid to go to sleep the night before out of fear of losing her momentum. As soon as she woke, she burst out of bed leaving Dave dead asleep. She stands out front of Your's Truly restaurant, only about five doors up Main St. from Dink's, where she is scheduled to be working right now. She waits to open the door, convincing herself she is making the right choice. No more wasting time stuck in regret. Amanda opens the door and walks into the busy restaurant. Vicky is sitting in a booth reading a newspaper with a coffee on the table in front of her. Amanda is 10 minutes early, but there Vicky sits as if she has been there for hours. Her nerves begin to feel electric as she approaches the table. "Hi Vicky," Amanda says.

Vicky puts her hands on top of her newspaper. "Hi, Amanda. How are you?" she says. She gets out of her booth and gives Amanda a hug.

As Amanda slides into the seat opposite Vicky, she notices the three different newspapers. "How many papers do you read?"

"Every morning I read the Chagrin Times, the Plain Dealer, and the Sun Herald. It is my guilty pleasure."

"Everyday?"

"Well, I don't read everything. Just what peaks my interest," Vick says. She collects all the pages and pushes them aside. "Talk to me. Why are we sitting here?"

Amanda pulls off her coat, stuffs it on the booth next to her, and then composes herself. “Wait. Before you say anything. I don’t want a prerecorded answer to that question. I want you to really lay it on me. Don’t hold back. I know we’re meeting again for the first time kind’a, but treat me like an old girlfriend, but a pretty one. You aren’t here to impress me, so lay it on the table.”

Amanda takes a deep breath.

“So what’s up?” Vicky continues.

Vicky is right about Amanda having a very static answer to a question like that, even if she wants to use it, her mind is blank. All she can come up with saying is, “I hate my life.”

Vicky waits for more, and then says, “But.”

“But I don’t want to. I want direction and purpose. I want more. I love my son, but I want to love more. I want there to be more. I want to be more. I want a career, and I think I can be good at real estate because I really want to be. I just need somebody to show me how.”

Vicky waits for more again. “How’s that for putting me on the spot,” she says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was aggressive. I like it. Not only that—I believe you. I didn’t think this was going to be a job interview, but I tell you it’s turned into the best one I can remember.”

Amanda smiles as tears well up in her eyes, “Thanks. I’m just done holding it in.”

“You’d have to start as my part-time office assistant to see it works. All you need to do is get your license. Why don’t you start Monday? We’ll figure everything out.”

“Do you mind if we start today?” Amanda says, dabbing her tears with a napkin.

\* \* \*

At 3pm, after a day of orienting herself with Vicky’s office and reading articles on real estate, Amanda walks through her backdoor. She takes off her large winter parka and looks up to find Dave standing in the doorway to the living room with Davey Jr. in his arms.

“How’s your day?” he asks.

“Fine. How has my baby boy been?” she says. Amanda walks over, takes Davey in her arms, and then kisses him all over his face.

“He was good. Was Dink’s busy?”

“That is something we need to talk about.”

“Really.”

“I quit Dink’s. I’m never stepping foot in there again.”

“Well, they called and asked where you’ve been the last few days.”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“What about yesterday? What’ve you been doin?”

“I’m trying to tell you.”

“Then tell me,” Dave says loudly.

“You’re gonna scare Davey.”

“I got a new job,” she says. She cracks a smile. “I saw an old friend from high school, and she gave me a job.”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t understand why you’re getting so upset.”

“Well, you’ve been lying to me making me think you were still at Dink’s,” Dave says. “What if something were wrong? How would I have gotten a hold of you?”

“Honey, I wasn’t going to wake you this morning.”

“Whatever. What is this job?”

“You’re not going to believe this. I’m going to be a real estate agent. Well, not right away, but soon enough. First I’ll be working part time doing office stuff being like an assistant, but I’ll be studying to get my license. It pays so much better than Dink’s, and I’ll be part time so we don’t have to pay for a sitter as much.”

“So you’re like a secretary?”

“At first, yeah, but soon I’ll be selling properties.”

“Who the hell is Vicky, and since when are you interested in real estate?”

“I just told you who Vicky is.” Amanda is becoming upset. “She’s a friend from high school, and she’s an agent for Howard Hannah.”

“You never said she worked for Hannah.”

“Well, she does. And since when have you paid attention to me long enough to know if I were interested in anything?”

“Whatever. Do whatever you want.”

“Why would you say that?” Amanda says with tears welling up in her eyes. She walks past Dave to sit on the couch with Davey.

“I didn’t mean it that way. Maybe I should meet this Vicky to make sure everything is on the up and up.”

“No.”

“What do mean, no? How much is she paying you?”

“Fifteen an hour, and by saying, no, I meant, no. I don’t want you to screw this up for me. If I’m gonna have to be a working Mom I want a career, not a job. This is my only shot. I’m not going to let you mess anything up.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? All I want to do is make sure this girl knows what she’s doing.”

“Dave, I’ve only been working there a day, and already I know you know absolutely nothing about real estate. Please butt out and let me just have this to myself.”

“I don’t like this already. I want you to go talk to Dink’s.”

“No.”

“I’m not asking you, Amanda.”

“What happened to you, Dave? Why are you so mean now?”

“Don’t get all drama on me,” Dave says and then sits down in his chair.

“Keep this up and you’re gonna be alone. I mean you can’t be that blind to think that the way we are going is good? There’s just no way you can think you treat me the way a husband in a happy marriage treats his wife.”

“What about you? The past two days you’ve been lying to me and finding this new job so you could rub it in my face.”

“You’re an ass,” she says getting up from the couch. “I’ve also been making out with Ray McFarland.”

“What?”

“Oh yeah, I wouldn’t want you to leave that out. So if I were you, I’d start figuring out how not to be such a bad husband, because pretty soon I’ll be the bread winner. Then, we won’t need you at all.”

Dave is speechless. All he can do is stand there with his face turning bright red. She thinks he is about to faint, but then he composes himself. “Slut,” he says and grabs his coat and walks out the front door.

## Chapter 21

While deep into his second nap of the day, Ray wakes to his phone ringing. He knows he should not answer it after the day he just had. Ray reaches the phone from its cradle. “Hello,” he says.

“Ray,” Amanda says. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Ray sits up to pull himself fully out of sleep. “About yesterday. I—”

“That’s okay Ray. I think we both know it was a mistake.” She pauses. “Ray. I told Dave.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. We were having a fight. The next thing I knew, it slipped out. I’m so sorry, Ray. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I really wish you would have talked to me first.”

“You should probably go someplace for a few days. Until I settle him down a bit, but I need some time.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. He burst out of here about 10 minutes ago.”

“I really wish you would have talked to me first.”

“I’m sorry, Ray. I really messed things up, I know. I don’t know why I kissed you. I just had such a crazy day yesterday and got caught up in a moment and all. I’m just so sorry.”

“I have to go.”

“You know there can never be anything between us, right Ray? It was a mistake. I don’t want to lead you on.”

Ray rolls his eyes and says, “I have to go. Good bye, Amanda.” He hangs up the phone. “I hate people,” he mutters to himself.

After Ray packs a bag, he walks down the stairs to tell Frank that he will be back in a few days. He then steps out into the cold. As he walks toward his truck, a police car pulls up in front of him. He braces himself to see Dave come out of the car, but after the door opens it is officer Phil Peters.

“Afternoon, Ray,” Phil says.

“Phil.”

“You going somewhere?” He points to the duffle bag.

“Not really.”

“Well, I’m gonna need you to come with me,” Phil approaches Ray.

“What for?” Ray says.

“Ray, we know about last night.

”About what?”

“Drop the bag and turn around, Ray.”

### Part III

#### Chapter 22

As Holly's cab creeps into town at 10am on the Sunday after Christmas, she is glad to see no sign of winter on the ground. Holly went down to Florida with the intention of staying until the mid-January, but since the funeral, everything about where her mother lives reminds her of death. Plus her mother is bugging the crap out of her more each day. Everything Holly says becomes some sort of threat to her mother's ego. It became so tiring that Christmas Day Holly booked the next available flight.

As her cab drives down Grove Hill, she notices the ChagrInn, and though going directly home is the probably her smartest choice, she asks the driver to make a quick stop.

After the driver pulls up to the front door of the inn, Holly gets out and goes through the front door to a deserted lobby. She bellies up to the front desk and then taps the bell. Though she has lived in ChagrInn for a while now, she has never seen the inside of the inn. To no surprise it looks old and is filled with antique furniture. The couches and chairs look uncomfortable and worn, and the wood furniture is rich with dark stain and oil. It reminds her of Ray's parents' house.

Holly has no plan for what she is going to say to Ray. In all the time she had to think in Florida, she managed to make no decisions at all. She figures she will know what say when she sees him.

Right as Holly rings the bell a second time a man comes out from a door behind the counter in an untucked red flannel shirt and sweat pants.

“Hello,” he says. “Do you need a room.”

“Oh no. I’m looking for a friend. Is Ray McFarland still here?”

“He hasn’t been the last week, but he told me to expect him back around today or tomorrow.”

“Could I leave him a note?”

“Sure thing.” He looks down at her empty hand.

“Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah.” He kneels down and rustles through things under the desk. He gives her a pen, a small note card and an envelope.

“Thanks.” Holly writes Ray a note telling him she is back in town and wants to get together. She considers writing something more personal, but she does not want to assume anything about what she feels until she sees him in person. When she finishes personalizing the envelope, Holly hands the note to the innkeeper. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Have a nice day.”

“You too,” she says. She walks back out to the cab that will take her home.

## Chapter 23

Ray sits in a room filled with card tables and folding chairs, watching Regis and Kelly Live with about 30 other inmates, as he has each of the three mornings at the county correctional facility. This is the last of the four day sentence he received for breaking and entering and vandalism. He has seen a lot of prison movies, so he was very nervous on his first day. By the third day, however, he was just bored. One movie he thought a lot about was the shower rape scene in *American History X*, but he is no more in danger here than if he is in a high school shower.

Everyone he has met in prison is in for one minor crime or another. A lot of them are serving short stays for drinking and driving, theft, or probation violation. The whole place is like one big boring waiting room.

Ray's cellmate, Jeff, who has been nicknamed Penis, leans over to Ray and says, "Ray, I think I've fallen for Kelly. If you see a towel hanging on our cell door later today, don't come in."

"Okay."

"I mean it." Kelly is dressed in full catchers gear and a Yankees uniform waiting to take a wiffle ball pitch from Roger Clemens. Then Regis sneaks a wiffle ball bat and stands in front of Kelly.

"Two days ago you told me her eyebrows freak you out."

“When you truly love a person, you love them for their flaws as well as their ass.” Jeff is serving 90 days for his fourth DUI. He told Ray on more than one account that he is not an alcoholic, he is just unlucky. Ray thinks he is both. “So do you feel bad?”

“About what?” Ray says. Regis hit a line drive right back at Roger. The crowd gasps and then explodes with laughter.

“You’re leaving me.”

“Not even a little bit.” Though they have spent the last few nights together telling each other details about their lives the way two people forced to live together in a 14 by 14 foot box would, Ray will not miss knowing Jeff at all. In fact, he hopes he never sees Jeff or anyone else he met in here ever again. Jeff is a decent guy aside from the habitual drunk driving problem, but the last thing Ray wants is a reminder of the most embarrassing period of his life, which is inevitable if he sees Jeff anywhere but the Cuyahoga County Correctional Facility.

“That hurts. But even though you’re a prick, I’m gonna help you,” Jeff says. Unable to turn his attention from Kelly, who is seductively taking off her catchers outfit. “I’ve been thinking about your predicament and came up with a way to give you some closure.”

Ray slowly turns his attention from Kelly to Jeff.

“All you gotta do is go find that fat fuck who drove into your store. You knock on his door, you sucker punch him and then break all his windows. Now, Ray, think about it before you snap to a judgment. You’ll see I’m right about this one.”

“I hope you didn’t think long about that plan.”

“Just think about it. It’s simple but effective. The important thing is that you punch him hard and then break the windows.”

“I promise to give it a considerable consideration.” Ray turns back to the TV and then says, “What about the cop. Should I do the same to him?”

“Hell no. Just do his wife.”

Ray looks back at Jeff. “You’re a good friend, Jeff. Thanks.”

“I thought I should get you a going away gift is all. They wouldn’t let me customize a license plate for you.” They both turn their attention back to Regis and Kelly.

“I can’t even imagine bangin a girl that hot.”

“I’m sure you’ll try.”

“Maybe I’ll write her a letter.”

“It’s a start.”

Ray pictures himself going to the driver’s home. Ray knows it would be insane to go and punch him; he does think it would be a good idea to talk to him. It is about time he started taking other people’s advice considering that he is not doing so well on his own. Even with Dave—maybe he should have started a new store. Even with Giant Eagle, there has to be something he can do along those lines that offers something they cannot. After all, he does not know how to do anything other than run a food market. Maybe Holly is right. Maybe he should move and start a market someplace else, or he could try his luck and apply for a job with the new supermarket. After serving four days for vandalizing it, he is fairly certain his application would stand out.

## Chapter 24

It is a bad feeling when you realize you have taken everything in your life for granted, and it is an even worse one when it all catches up to you. It has been a long time since Dave felt comfortable in his own home. Every move he makes and word he says, he worries he is upsetting Amanda. With one inconsiderate action he could send his marriage into a divorce. Between Amanda's new job and her demonstrated ability to stray, she holds considerably more power over him. Dave has become a yes-man. He cleans when she asks, cooks when she asks, watches Davey when she asks, and he does so with enthusiasm and kindness. He is even repairing the floor in the kitchen with real ceramic tile he purchased instead of the cheap vinyl ones they planned to use. Everything he is doing goes against what he knows a husband should stand for. He is doing it because he has no choice—not because he thinks it is the best course of action, but because he has no idea what else to do. Before the day he turned in Ray, life made sense to him. Now his life has become a series of reactions to what Amanda does or says.

Today he walks down stairs to find Amanda sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, wearing one of her new outfits, and studying one of her books. Her exam is on Friday, and she has been studying nonstop. So even when she is home with Dave, he does everything.

“Good morning,” Dave says.

Without looking up from her book, Amanda says, “Morning.”

“Did you pick out a tile for the floor?”

“I haven’t had time to look at them.” She looks up at Dave. “I’m sure whatever you choose will be fine.”

“I doubt it. It takes about a week for this stuff to ship in, so try and take a look today sometime, will you?”

“I’ll try.”

“I thought you’d like the ceramic tile more than the other crap.”

“Honey, whatever you decide. I don’t care. Really,” she says and then looks back at her book. “I need to finish this section.”

He looks over at Davey, who is playing on a blanket on the floor next to Amanda. “When’s the sitter get here?” he says, and then fills a cup with coffee.

“Same time as always.”

Dave walks over to Davey and gives Davey a smile. Davey looks up with his whole little body and laughs. “He really sits up well for a kid his age. Don’t you think?”

“Uh-huh.” She does not look away from her book.

“You want to go out to eat tonight.”

“I don’t know, Dave, I really need to finish this.” Dave is pretty sure he is annoying her again, and it really pisses him off. How is she the victim? He lives each day with angst. Never in his life did he consider cheating—maybe he fantasized but that is all. When she told him she cheated, she said it like it was an achievement. Still there is no

sign of regret or remorse. He may not be the perfect husband, but she sure as hell is not perfect either. He could really use an apology from her. He deserves that much.

Dave bends down and gives Davey a kiss on the head. “See ya buddy,” Dave says. Then without another word, Dave walks out the door to go to work. Once outside, He looks down at his watch to see he is late.

\* \* \*

After Dave reports to the station and then picks up his patrol car, he drives by the construction site. Since he and Ray vandalized the site, every patrolman has to drive by once an hour. The site is in motion with machines digging and men standing around watching the machines. Since the weather warmed up a little, they have been working away. Though it does not seem like they have been at it very long, Dave is amazed at the progress. After he finishes his drive-by, he turns on to Main Street and drives out of town to route 422. He stays on it for about 20 minutes until he is surrounded by the cornfields and ranch houses of Parkman Township. He takes a left onto a road that has no street sign. After a few 1,000 feet, a fence that is topped with a barbed wire coil appears and runs along side the road. Through the fence Dave sees the brick buildings of Cuyahoga County Correctional Facility.

## Chapter 25

*I am here for me and my son*, Amanda says to herself as she walks up the stairs to Tina's office suite, just as she has said every morning as she ascends the steps. During Amanda's first week Tina told her, "What I want you to do, no what I need you to do, and what you need to do for yourself, is tell yourself every morning before you get here that you're here for you. Not your husband or your son or your parents or your friends and not for me. You are doing this for you and you alone. To be better than you think you can be. Is that too much to ask?" If Tina had a child she would have left out the part about her son, Amanda is sure, but Tina is right about saying the chant. It gives Amanda a little bump of inspiration every morning.

Amanda is exhausted from waiting for her husband to be the man he wants to be. She is tired of accepting him for who he is. What she wants is to be proud of him, and if he can not be proud of himself, it will never happen. She is through waiting for him, from now on he will have to catch up to her or leave. She is not going to waste her life watching him waste his life. Amanda opens the door to the room where her desk and a few bookcases and filing cabinets line the walls. Then she knocks on Tina's office door to give her her newspapers. At first Amanda thought it impressive how Tina could take in all that information every morning, but as time passed she has found the daily ritual to be a waste of valuable time.

“Come on in,” Tina says through the closed door. This is another characteristic of the workplace that Amanda finds odd. They are the only two people in the tiny office suite, yet Tina insists on keeping her office door shut whether she is in it or not.

After Amanda delivers the newspapers, she shuts the door, makes coffee, checks e-mail, and then reviews the board. The board is a four by six foot dry erase board mounted on the wall, listing each property Tina represents plus the address, the asking price, the minimum price the owner will settle for, and any status, which could include appointments or offers. As properties are added they get written on the bottom and the longer the properties are on the market, the higher they rise on the board. The property that has been on the board the longest is at the top, making it a high priority. The odd thing about the property that sits at number one is that there is a lot of inquiry about it but no serious offers to date. It is a commercial property in the next town east—30 acres outfitted by the previous owner as a nursery and tree farm. Also on the property is a three bedroom colonial. The previous owners recently divorced and are selling the property at a loss for \$800,000. However, what scares everyone off is the \$200,000 debt that is attached to the business. The rest of the properties on the board are town homes and colonials in Chagrin, all having lived a fraction of the time on the board that the nursery has filled the top spot. Amanda notices the one blank status box on the board and then knocks on Tina’s door.

“Yes,” Tina calls.

Amanda peeks her head into Tina’s office. “Is there any status on the McGiveron residence?”

“Nope. I should hear something by tomorrow though,” Tina looks back down at her newspaper. Amanda nearly has the door shut again when Tina says, “Oh wait, Mandy.” Amanda hates this name Tina has given her. “Would you do me a major favor?”

“Sure thing,” she says without a second thought. It is her strategy to never turn down a request no matter if she understands or knows how to perform the task.

“It’s my turn to host my book club meeting tonight and I have a fabulous idea to get a rise out of the girls. We’re reading a few Dr. Seuss books. I know it sounds ditzy, right, but we just finished *Little Women*. Anyway it is a long book and I thought it would be fun to take a breather with some kid’s books. Don’t you think that’s a stitch?”

“Okay.” She is standing still in the doorway waiting for Tina to make sense, but Tina continues waiting for validation from Amanda. Unsure of what else to add, Amanda says, “That sounds nice.”

“Well, I want to get a hat for Polly.” Tina’s cat is named Polly. She is very proud of how clever it is to give a cat the name of a bird. She has a picture of her cat on her desk. It is orange and white and sitting on a large pillow that has the phrase, ‘Polly want a birdie?’, stitched on the side.

“Okay.”

“Well, what would be a big help is if you would shop around today for a little hat that might fit her. I’d do it myself, but with all my appointments today, I just don’t have time.”

“Tina, I was really hoping to get some studying in today being that the exam is on Saturday.”

“Please, that test is a breeze. If you looked at the book even for an hour already you’ll be fine. Besides who doesn’t want to be paid to go shopping? Is it not the ideal job?” Tina laughs.

“I really think my time would be better served studying. Plus I have a lot to do here, and I need to go clean the Thomas house for tomorrow’s appointment”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, why don’t you just shop around for a couple hours. If you see something, great. If not, my cat will go hatless.”

“So you want me to spend my morning shopping for your cat?”

“Or afternoon, it really doesn’t matter. If you want, I can help you study a bit after my appointments. Trust me I’ll tell you exactly what you need to know. Those books fill you up with such useless information.”

“I would really appreciate it if you could do that for me.”

“It’d be no problem.”

Amanda collects her things so she can get Tina’s insane task over with early. She straightens her desk, puts her coat back on, and then walks out the door to begin her mission to hat a cat.

## Chapter 26

Assuming he will have to take a bus or cab back to town, he is quite surprised to learn somebody is waiting outside to give him a ride. Walking through the chain-link tunnel to the free soil and air, Ray figures that he has two chances: either Holly came back early and wants to surprise him or Amanda, feeling guilty and wanting more than a kiss, has come to his rescue. There is a ravine of difference between the two scenarios, and though Ray knows his luck will produce the latter, he desperately hopes he will find Holly standing against the truck with a disapproving smile on her face. If it is not Holly or Amanda, Ray really does not have a clue who would pick him up. He does not have any other friends that would do something like this. He has never been good at cultivating anything more than an acquaintance. As a child he became a good athlete from playing sports at school and in organized leagues, not from running around with friends in pick-up games. He was very friendly with and well liked by kids, but all his free time went to being at the market with his parents. Dragging his fingers along the chain links, Ray remembers a handful of times when his mother ran him out of the store telling him to go find some friends, but like every other time he dwells on the market, he is interrupted by an image of the fat bastard who destroyed the only link he had to his parents. It may not seem like a good childhood to spend all your free time working with your parents, but to

Ray it was perfect. He has a flash image of himself pulling the driver from the van after the dust cleared from the impact and then strangling every inch of life out of his fat neck.

As Ray reaches the large steel door, the two guards immediately open it and release him. Ray is smacked in the face by the side of a police car and Dave. Ray walks up to Dave and the figurative feeling of being smacked across the face is erased by the actual feeling when the back of Dave's hand collides with Ray's cheek. Then the feeling is erased by Dave's fist as it drives into Ray's stomach. Ray falls to his knees hugging his own stomach.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I don't know what just got into me," Dave says.

Ray catches his breath. He opens his mouth as if he is about to say something, but then uppercuts Dave in the testicles, sending him down into a fetal position on the cold asphalt. "She kissed me, Dave. *She* kissed me," Ray says. He doubts Dave hears him through his heavy breathing. "*She* kissed me. All I did was get up and leave. Do you hear me?" Ray yells.

"Fuck you, Ray."

"It's the truth."

Dave relaxes out of the fetal position and onto his back, regaining his normal breathing. He gazes blankly up at the grey sky. "I know," Dave says.

Ray stands up and then looks over at the door he just came out of, and he sees the two guards laughing hysterically. "Thanks Dave," a guard says as he shuts the door.

"What the hell are you doing then," Ray asks. "Why the hell did you hit me? Why the fuck did I just do four days in that place? What the fuck, Dave?"

“Just get in the car.”

“No. What the hell is going on?”

“Ray, I’m freezing my ass off and my balls are killing me. Let’s get in the warm car.” Without helping Dave up, Ray walks to the front passenger door and gets into the car. Dave grunts as he gets up onto his feet, and then walks around to the driver side door with a double limp. After he shuts himself into the car with Ray, Dave says, “I came here to apologize.”

“No shit,” Ray says sarcastically.

“I’m serious. I don’t know why that just happened.”

“Could it be because you’re an asshole?”

“I deserve that.” Dave starts the car and shifts it into drive.

“No shit.”

“Listen, my life has been completely turned on its ass. I don’t know which way is up anymore. Amanda’s got me thinking that it was me who screwed up. She’s going around sucking face and I’m the one who feels like I cheated. Do you believe that crap?”

“I’m sorry Dave, but I really don’t care at all. Honestly.”

“I guess you wouldn’t.”

“I still don’t get why you’re here.”

“Well, it’s my fault you’re here, I thought I’d at least give you a ride home. Hell, you could’ve ratted on me at any time in there. They would have laughed in your face, but you could’ve.”

“But I didn’t.”

“I know,” Dave says with a puzzled look. “Why?”

“What the hell good would it do? You’ve got a wife and a kid at home. Why would I get you fired and arrested for a stupid prank?”

“You’re a good person, Ray. A better man than me.”

Ray does not say anything because it is good to here somebody say that to him. The source might be questionable, but it feels good. He wishes his Dad could have heard Dave. “A lot of good it’s done me.”

“Ray, I want to do you a favor. I want to make it up to you.”

“Is that why you hit me?”

“I said I was sorry about that.”

Ray looks over at Dave and says, “No you didn’t?”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“You know what for. For everything.”

“What?”

“For hitting you and the whole prison thing and getting you in trouble. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” Dave says. “So tell me whatever you need. I want to make this up to you.”

Without hesitating Ray says, “I want the driver.”

“What driver?”

“The one that ruined my life. The guy who drove into my store. I want his name, address, and phone number. I want to know exactly what he told you guys.”

“Ray, I don’t know. I could get into some deep shit.”

“I’m not gonna tell anyone. I can obviously keep a secret, Dave”

“Well, I can’t get you the file, but I can get you the rest of the information.”

“Fine.”

“So you think it was foul play,” Dave says as he drives the car toward Chagrin. “I kind’a wondered that myself.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?”

“You’ve kind’a been pissing me off lately.”

“Huh.”

“Well, you gotta admit it’s kind’a a weird coincidence that only a little while after a guy plows into your store like a suicide bomber another market swoops in.”

“I just want to talk to him.”

“I didn’t ask. You do whatever you want.”

“Fine.”

“One condition.”

“You have a catch for everything. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know what that means, but what I want is to come with you when you confront him.”

“Why?”

“A hunch.”

## Chapter 27

Amanda walks into the Chagrin Department Store and heads straight for the newborn section. She grabs the first hat she sees, buys it, and decides to screw going back to work. Instead she goes to Starbucks to study for Saturday's exam. On her way down Main St. she notices Dave driving with Ray, whom she has not seen since their kiss, in the passenger seat. A nervous, guilty tension wrenches her stomach. It is the same feeling she gets every time she thinks about that night, and how stupid she was for kissing him. It is the only part of that day she regrets. She is proud of everything else; it will go down as the most important day of her life. She is sure it will. She does not even regret telling Dave about the kiss. She feels guilty for Ray and knows that if her husband is not taking out his frustration on her he must be taking it out on him. However, it is important for her to declare her worth, to show Dave what he is wasting and how easily he can lose her. In an odd way, seeing Ray sitting in the front seat with her husband and not behind the cage in the back seat makes her think that things are fine between them. Perhaps she underestimated Dave. Perhaps he can change. She watches Dave pull into the ChagrInn for a few minutes and then leave.

As Amanda crosses the street, she sees Ray walking down the sidewalk a block up from Starbucks, and then she sees him notice her. She quickens her pace and then ducks into Starbucks, proceeding to the end of the line while loosening her scarf and coat.

When she makes it up to the counter she orders a half-caff no fat latte. The bells on the door jingle as Ray opens it and then lets it close. She pretends not to notice him, huddling with the rest of the people who wait for their drinks to be placed on the counter.

“Amanda,” Ray says.

She turns and fakes surprise. “Oh hi, Ray,” she says. “Did you just walk in?” She smiles.

“Yeah. I was walking to the falls and saw you out on the street so I thought I’d come say hello.”

“I’m so glad you did.” She blanks and fails to say anything more. She looks at Ray pleading with her eyes for him not to say anything about the kiss.

“I haven’t seen you in a while. I never got a chance to—“ he stalls. His face turns red. She wants him to stop and pretend it never happened. “I wanted to apologize for that night. I never should have—“

The smile drains from her face. “Stop. Can you please stop?” she says. Ray has a blank look on his face. “Can we forget it? Can’t we?”

“Okay,” he says. “Absolutely.” They stand looking at each other with nothing more to say.

Amanda looks past Ray wondering what is taking her drink order so long. “Are you getting a coffee?” She points to the cashier, who looks back at her with an excessive smile.

“Oh, no. No I just wanted to say hi. I guess I’ll just get going.”

”How’s Holly? Have you heard from her?”

Ray looks at Amanda suspiciously.

“I’ve been away, so no.”

“Right. Sorry. Are you okay? Nobody tried to hurt you did they?” she asks. “I’m sorry, that’s a stupid question. Please don’t answer it.”

“If you mean hurt my brain with daytime TV, then yes they hurt me very much.”

“I want you to know that I don’t judge you for what you did. I couldn’t imagine what a smack in the face it would be if the same—“

“Dave tells me you got a new job,” he cuts her off. “How’s that going?” he asks though he seems less than interested in an answer. Ray’s eyes continually drifts from her eyes to something out the window.

She cannot remember being stuck in a worse conversation. She is tempted to fake being faint, but thinks it will make the situation worse. She looks for her coffee again.

Nothing. “Boy, these guys take forever to mix a cup of coffee, don’t they.”

“I can’t say I come here enough to know.”

“Good and bad, I guess.”

“What?”

“My new job. It’s mostly good though. I’m testing to get my license tomorrow.”

She wishes she did not tell him about the test. She is petrified to have to tell people if she fails it. “I came here to do a little studying.”

“Sell any houses yet?”

“Gotta get the license first.”

“Well, I may be your first customer. My welcome is wearing thin over at the Inn.”

“What’s your price range?”

“I don’t know. Anything around town in the middle to low 100s?”

“Not even close. Most homes in town are going for around 250 and getting higher.”

“Shit. What about outside of town?”

“Not right now. Unless you want a house attached to a plant nursery and a whole lot of debt.”

“I guess I’ll be renting for a while.” Throughout their conversation, Ray looks past her at the window again.

She turns quickly to see what he is so interested in. “What are you looking at?”

Ray looks surprised and says. “Oh, sorry. The falls I guess. I think I’m gonna jump’em.”

“Really? You know that’s illegal?” She says, wishing she had just said nothing.

“So nothing in my price range?”

“Oh, you know what? Old Mr. McGiveron is trying to sell his house over on Russell Rd. for about 200. I could show you that one next week if you want. Well, I have to pass my exam first, which I probably won’t.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay, just let me know. Where’d you see Dave?” She knows the answer, but wants to know why they were driving together.

“What?”

“You said Dave told you about my job.”

“Oh, he picked me up from the clink. He thought we needed to talk.”

“Tell me that’s not why your cheek is swollen?”

“He’s very opinionated.”

“I’m so sorry, Dave. I don’t know why I told him. I just wanted to wake him up a little.”

“We’re forgetting.”

“Right sorry. How is he?”

“Who?”

“Dave.”

“Talk to your husband, Amanda.”

She gives Ray a guilty smile. “You’re right.” The guy behind the counter in the green apron calls out her drink and places on the counter. “Finally.”

“I’m gonna go so you can study and sell me a garage in town to live in. I actually have something I’ve got to do.”

“I’m sorry, Ray.” She says. He looks past her out the window again. “Ray, you’re not planning on jumping the falls now are you?”

“Do you ever get the feeling that you just can’t seem to do anything right?” He walks by her to the window. “That you’re doing more bad than good and you’re not even trying?”

“Are you okay?”

“Not really.”

“What are you looking at?”

“Do you remember when my dad used to jump these falls?”

“It’s kind’a impossible to forget.”

“Not him dying. Do you remember how everyone used to gather around all over to watch him? I mean when you were a kid?”

“Sure it was a lot of fun. The Fourth used to be a great little celebration for town.”

“It was this town’s identity.”

“What,” she asks, but he seems to ignore her while staring out the window.

“Ray?” No response. His eyes widen, and then he walks past her to the front door. It jingles as he leaves Starbucks.

## Chapter 28

Ray walks across the bridge that straddles the falls. Though the water rolls frigidly to the pool below, he cannot fight his unsettling urge to jump, and waiting until warmer weather arrives would render the whole thing pointless. He stops for a few seconds to locate where his father told him was the best spot to jump off.

On the other side of the bridge is a three foot wood gate, which is locked over the winter. Ray steps over the gate and walks down the long staircase to the observation deck at the base of the falls. From there he climbs up a small path that is partially covered with snow. He cannot imagine his father ever came up here this time of year.

Ray carefully makes his way to the bank of the river at the top of the falls. In a couple of months everything will thaw and the river will rush about a foot higher, but for now it only covers Ray's boots midway up the laces. Water creeps into every crevice as he walks out to where the river bed peaks out the furthest over the falls. Ray takes each step slowly and with precision. The water is chilly but his adrenalin is rushing too hard for him to feel the cold. An image pops into his head of the fat old men in the Cleveland Polar bear club who make the news every year. Lake Erie is nothing compared to this.

Once Ray makes his way to his spot, he stares down at the frothy bottom of the falls and looks down the river as it winds down through the woods. A light snow begins to swirl around him. He has seen this site from the bridge behind him, but standing in the

water at the height of the falls, he can almost feel what he sees. The water rushes around his feet, and with pure ambivalence it falls and moves on. It is as if the falls are no more a factor than a rock the water ripples over.

Ray's feet begin to throb. He looks back at the bridge behind him and notices how deserted it stands. He imagines himself as a young boy looking down from it at his father. People along the rail on either side of him spanning the length of the bridge. Then he looks over at the observation deck where every square foot would be occupied by somebody cheering for his father to jump. They all came for just a few seconds of excitement, and to congratulate him as he climbs back to the deck in his soaking wet costume.

Ray believes he needs the jump. Lately he is a pedestrian and a victim, and if he does not do something drastic and start fresh, life is bound to get worse. He has no clue what to do after his jump to continue the drive, but this seems like a good first step. At least it did until now. Standing there on top of the falls in the cold like this, Ray has never felt more confused and alone. He walks quickly back to the river bank, feeling little more than a tingling in his feet. From there he slides down the path to the observation deck, climbs up the stairs to the street, and then runs as fast as his frozen feet will allow back to the ChagrInn.

## Chapter 29

Holly sits on her couch sipping a coffee, watching the snow while her answering machine plays a message from her boss, Nick, informing her about an upcoming meeting. She starts earlier in the season than any other employee since she organizes the purchasing and logistics for their construction projects. He wants to discuss the housing development they are starting in March. It is the fifth development they have been contracted for, and all of them sit just outside of town. Usually Holly loves going back to work in February. She cozies up in the office with coffee all day, coordinating schedules, suppliers, and crews. It is quiet and professional, and it feels like a real job. This year, though, the thought of going back makes her sick to her stomach. She traps herself there more with every year. The longer she works there, the more impossible it will be for her to market herself into a better career. She has fooled herself into thinking she is in the field she wants to be in, that an opportunity will present itself.

Holly plays the message back and before Nick can say “Hey Hol” again, she deletes the message. She looks around her home and all she sees are the projects she intended to finish during her off-season, and the more she sees, the madder she becomes. It is not her off-season. It is Nick’s. She is merely laid off. Everything screams of Nick’s time and Nick’s money. Her life is dedicated to his wellbeing, and rather than burning it

all down to the ground, Holly forces herself to get the hell out of the house and go for a ride.

By the time Holly drives up Bell to Chillecothe and into Bainbridge Township, the snow has turned to slush and then to a heavy rain. At work they call Chillecothe, Nursery Row, due to the nine nurseries that line a 20 mile stretch. She knows most all of them and their owners. She is stopped at an intersection, staring at the red traffic light wiggle through the rain water running down her windshield. What worries her most about her situation is that she is 36-years old and stuck. She is no closer to a career than when she finished college. Ever since high school she has deluded herself into thinking she is a career woman and not a homemaker. As soon as she went to college she knew what she wanted to study. Unlike her friends she stuck with her major all the way through, and as soon as she graduated she went right to work. All her horticulture professors told her to work with a landscaping company for a year; that it is a great way to learn applied practices while deciding how to specialize. Unfortunately and unbeknownst to her, she specialized when she took the job with Nick.

As the wiper blade plows the water off the windshield, the traffic light turns green. She accelerates through the intersection. A half mile later, she drives by another nursery, Gnome's Knoll, and notices it is empty with a For Sale sign on the front gate. Usually this time of year the parking lot is full with people buying chochka from the gift shop. Five seconds later Holly slams on the brakes and swerves over to the side of the road. She puts the gear in reverse and slowly backs up the side of the road. An oncoming

car honks at Holly, so she puts the hazards on, parks the truck, and then gets out into the cold rain. She runs the rest of the way back to the real estate sign where she sees a picture of a woman smiling through the rain at Holly. Below the picture it says, 'Call me to make this dream *YOUR* reality.'

## Chapter 30

It is not like the SAT where the people who scored the test had the good grace to wait about a month before telling her she had failed miserably and would never go to college. These days, scaring you with a book of questions that look nothing like what you studied is not enough. Every time Amanda touches the wrong answer on the computer screen, she is given a blaring red “X” and a blinking “Incorrect.” There are a total of 150 questions. If Amanda misses 40 of them, she fails. After answering 115 questions she has missed 23, and every time she sees that red “X” a horribly frightening sensation shakes her nerves. She whispers to herself, “Stop it. If you fail, you fail. You can take it again next month.” However, as she says this over and over again she realizes that the mere failure itself is not the cause of her anxiety; it is the smug image of Dave’s face. It is the idea that he will take some sort of comfort in her failure. So she closes her eyes, pictures her little boy, and counts to 10; she wants to count to 20, but she is on the clock. Once she is poised to continue, Amanda opens her eyes and focuses on the question.

Coupled with her anxiety over every wrong answer is an increasing anger at Tina for abandoning her last evening and never helping her study. When Amanda got back to the office after fetching Tina a hat for Polly, she was gone. Tina left a message that she had to run out for a last minute showing of the nursery in Bainbridge, and since it is at the top of the list, the showing took priority. Amanda stayed in the office studying until after

10pm, but images of Tina sipping wine with her friends and laughing at her fat-ass hatted-cat kept interrupting her studies.

Amanda answers the 129<sup>th</sup> question wrong; the big red “X” flashes. She freezes and her hands begin to shake. “Don’t worry about it,” he’d say. “What the hell do you need a job like that anyway?” She closes her eyes to find Davey sitting in her kitchen sink with soap suds floating on the water around him. After a few deep breaths, she answers the next five questions correctly. She begins to cry and then looks around the room to see if anyone is looking at her. They all seem very calm and confident taking their exam. She reads the next question and fails to make sense of the four choices. Bracing herself for red “X” and another image of Dave patronizing her, she picks the one most feasible. The screen blanks and she can not breathe. She closes her eyes and takes two deep breaths before she opens them again. There is a message on the screen indicating that she does not need to continue since she can no longer answer enough questions wrong to fail. She weeps. The moderator hurries to her side.

“Are you okay, Miss?” he says.

She replies that she is fine, but it comes out as nonsense through her sobbing.

He sees on the screen that she passed, and then says, “Is there anything I can do?”

She wipes at her eyes and takes a few deep breaths. “No, I’m sorry.” She gathers her purse and coat. “I think I’m getting a divorce.”

## Chapter 31

Dave looks over his right shoulder through the metal cage divider into the backseat to make sure Davey is still asleep. Rationalizing to himself that no body would dare steal a baby from a police car in Chagrin, Dave gets out of the car and runs as fast as his beer belly will let him into the ChagrInn, past the front desk, and then up to Ray's room. He knocks vigorously on the door until it opens.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ray says. His eyes are squinted and his hair is mussed from having been asleep.

"Can't talk," Dave says through heavy breathing. "Davey's in the car. Get dressed and meet me outside." Dave runs back down the stairs past the manager, who stands behind the front desk, and then outside where he finds Davey still at peace in the backseat.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Ray walks out of the inn dressed for the day. "What the hell is going on?"

"Shut up," Dave says. He points back through the cage at Davey's car seat.

"What the hell is going on?" Ray whispers.

"I got the address."

"What are you talking about?"

“The driver’s address.”

Ray looks at Dave with a blank stare.

“His name is Cliff Bunker,” Dave continues.

“Okay.”

“Are you following me?”

“Yeah. I’m just trying to process.”

“That’s weird.”

“Why?”

“I forget.” Dave looks at the wheel trying to remember. “I just remember thinking it was weird.”

“What?”

“So you ready to go?”

“Now?”

“Well yeah. I thought this is important.”

“It is. It’s just that...”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Ray says. He settles back into his seat, staring out the windshield. He looks back at Dave. “You really think we should be taking a cop car there?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you planning on assaulting him with a pear?”

“No.”

“Do you have any produce of any kind on your person?”

Ray gives Dave an annoyed look.

“Just don’t break any laws,” Dave says.

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll report you or something?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Listen, Amanda has the car today, and I have this one because I worked last night. Just be glad we have a car that makes you look important.”

“Why do I need to look important?”

“In case he gets any bright ideas.”

“We don’t have to go today.”

“Chicken?”

“Screw you.”

“I thought this was important to you?”

“It is.”

“Then sack up.”

“Fifty percent of the time I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“So I’m batting 500. That’s not bad.”

“Do you even understand yourself?” Ray says. “I’m just saying that I don’t want to drag you and your son there if I don’t have to.”

“We’ll be fine. You’re just talking to the guy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have someplace else to be?”

“No. It’s just that Holly’s up in my room. She just got back.”

“And she’s leaving tonight on a train and never coming back?”

“No.”

“Did you tell her about making out with my wife?”

“No.”

“So you’ll see her later.”

Ray settles again into his seat and then says, “What’s the address?”

Cliff Bunker lives in a small one level house on a large piece of land in Newbury Township, a rural community east of Chagrin. As they creep down the gravel driveway, they pass the remains of the totaled van. “Have you thought about what you’re going to say?” Dave asks.

“A lot,” Ray says while staring at the van.

“Yeah?”

“What?”

“What are you gonna to say?”

“I’m not sure.”

“That makes sense.” Dave shifts the car into park and then looks back at Davey.

“Man, that kid will sleep through a bomb if he’s in a carseat.”

Ray looks at Dave and says, “So he wasn’t drunk right? You guys tested him back at the station, right?”

“He wouldn’t be at this address if he were drunk. In fact you two probably would have shared a shower last week.”

“Why did you wait until now to tell me that?”

“I don’t know,” Dave says. “Maybe you were pissing me off and making out with Amanda.”

“Right,” Ray says and then opens his door.

“Sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“No, you should stay with your infant child who’s sleeping behind you.”

“Then signal me if you need help,” Dave says.

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“How’bout I throw an apple at your balls?”

“How’bout you don’t?”

## Chapter 32

At about 10pm the night before Dave picked Ray up to face the man who demolished his market, Holly came to Ray at the Inn. Before Ray said a word, she walked past him, peeled the wet clothes from her body, and then climbed into bed. From underneath the blankets, she said, “Come in here before I freeze to death.” He removed his clothing and covered her body with his. It was not until after they made love that she gave the ultimatum. “I’m not positive why, but ever since your parents died you’ve been blaming me for something. At first I thought it was because I never got to know your parents very well, and maybe it was them who didn’t want to get to know me. I thought maybe you were ashamed, but then I realized all I ever did was be myself, so I’m not going to feel responsible. Whatever the case, my empathy and consoling was never enough. I think it actually made you more depressed.

“Coming home from Florida, I realized that I want to give you another chance. One, because I waited until now to tell you all this, and two, because I still am in love with you, so I’m giving you the opportunity.”

“Holly—“ Ray tried to interject.

“No. I’m going to say this and then we’re going to sleep. You can talk after you have a night to think about all this. Ray, we are over 35 and I think that courting around for another few years is a waste of our time. It is time to make a commitment to each

other. We deserve that much. I found a place I think we could build a very happy and productive life together. Then again maybe it's a money pit, but we need to give it a look. It is a nursery out in Bainbridge. We can look at it and if it seems good, great. If not, fine. Then we'll keep looking for something. My mom gave me a decent amount of money when she moved, and I have a good savings, and with the sale of my house and your settlement from the market, I think we can generate enough of a down payment on something and start our lives together. I think we can be happy, Ray. This is a good step forward. I really believe that, Ray. I do." She was crying by the time she finished talking. Ray did not respond. He only held her until she stopped crying; then, they both fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Other than a few concrete blocks placed under the front door there is nothing leading to the house from the drive except grass. The lack of a pathway strikes Ray as being terribly uninviting. Staring at the house of the man whose actions might give Ray the opportunity to create a life with Holly, he is not sure the revelation that came to him in prison is not foolish. He tries to think of what he will say when the door opens, but all he can think about is Holly's warm body asleep in his bed. A nervous desire to run back to the ChagrInn begins to burn. He does not want to be here. He needs to be back with Holly, but all he can do about it is climb the concrete blocks and knock. Almost exactly as his knuckles collide with the wood door, Ray sees the flashing lights of Dave's car bounce against the house. Then a loud pop rings out followed by the shattering glass of the bay window. Ray turns around and sees Dave pointing a gun over the open car door.

“What the hell, Dave!” Ray yells.

“Get down, Ray! Get Down now!” Dave yells back. Two more shots pop out the bay window and ricochet off the windshield. Ray jumps off the concrete blocks and huddles against the house. He thinks he is pissing himself, but then realizes it is the cold, muddy grass soaking his pants. Ray hears a door slamming open around the back of the house. Ray looks up to see Dave waddling toward him in a crouch. “Stay low and get in the car and lock the doors. Back-up is coming.” Before Ray can think to reply, Dave is around the corner of the house and out of sight. Ray follows Dave long enough to be able to peek around the house. He hugs the corner and sees a large field. It is so big it makes the two overweight men, Dave and the asshole driver, appear to be running in slow motion. Dave slows his pace until he is stooped, points his shotgun straight up and fires a shot. The man who Ray believes to be Cliff Bunker does not stop running so much as he falls face first into the ground. Ray hears a faint sound in the distance that he thinks for a moment is a distant siren, but then quickly runs back to the front yard realizing it is the sound of a screaming baby in the backseat of Dave’s police car.

## Chapter 33

Annoyed at the force with which Ray slams the car door shut, Dave checks to make sure the loud thud did not wake his child. He envies his son's ability to sleep so and trusting of his surroundings. If Dave were to wake him up before Davey is ready to be woken, the boy will cry violently. It is a sound of desperation that hurts Dave like a sucker punch. Some days they will let him sleep through mealtimes or with a poopy diaper for hours in fear of, as they call it, waking the beast.

Dave looks out the windshield at Ray standing in front of the front door. He notices a man peaking out the bay window at Ray. It appears as if he is holing a gun in his right hand. Dave opens his door, grabs the shotgun from between the two front seats, and then positions himself behind the open door with the gun aimed at the man. Dave gets a better look and is now certain the guy has a handgun, so he leans in to turn on the siren and lights. As he reaches around the steering wheel with his left hand still on the trigger, Dave accidentally fires a shot that shatters the front window. Ray yells something at Dave, but he cannot hear him. "Get down, Ray! Get down now!" Dave yells back. The man fires a few shots back through the window. When Dave looks up, he can see the man run into a back room. Dave quickly radios for assistance and then shuts his door. In a crouch, he makes a break for the side of the house where Ray is huddled. When he gets to Ray he tells him, "Stay low and get in the car and lock the doors. Back-up is coming."

Dave rounds the corner to the side yard. He slides his back along the side of the house, stepping slowly until he can see around the corner at the backyard. The man with the gun running into a field toward a densely wooded area. Dave breaks in to a full sprint with the shot gun in his hands. Being that the man is fatter and a lot slower, Dave is able to get within about 20feet of the man after about 100 yards of running. Rather than having to continue running and possibly tackle him, Dave stops and then fires a shot into the air. Without Dave having to say a word, the man drops to the ground.

After catching his breath, Dave yells, “Throw your gun aside and put your hands behind your head.” The man does not budge. Dave walks slowly toward him. “Throw your fucking gun and put your hands on your head.” Still nothing. Dave walks up slowly until he can step firmly on the hand that is holding the gun. He steps so hard that he feels and hear a finger break. Still the man does not move a twitch. “Hey, you alright?” Dave asks.

Nothing.

## Chapter 34

His face is terribly red as he squeezes tears out his eyes. Ray melts with guilt for leaving him alone. Davey does not care that Dave is chasing down a gunman, or that Ray is confronting the man who crushed his life. All he cares about is not being alone, and he needed them as much as anyone can need anything.

“I’m sorry, Davey. I’m sorry,” Ray says over and over until he releases him from the car seat restraints and holds him to his chest. He clutches as firm as he can without harming the child. Ray frees one of his hands long enough to close the door. He bounces in the backseat gently shushing. Davey takes gulping breaths until he stops crying. Then he pushes at Ray’s chest so he can look at him. Davey gives Ray a smile and then rest his head back against his chest. Ray cannot help the tears welling up in his eyes.

When the two other cop cars show up with sirens blaring, Ray has to calm Davey down again, but it is far easier this time. Officer Peters approaches the car. He has a very confused look on his face. Ray opens the door.

“What the Hell’s going on here?”

“Dave chased that asshole into the backyard. I’m pretty sure he got him.”

“What asshole?”

“The guy who lives here. Cliff Bunker. Shut the door.”

“What.”

“You want to freeze this kid to death? Shut the damn door.”

Peters gives Ray an annoyed look. “Don’t go anywhere,” he says and then shuts the door.

“Really?” Ray says through the glass.

Peters walks over to the other four cops. They form a huddle. Just as they are breaking up, Dave rounds the corner. He is out of breath and, despite the cold weather, sweating profusely.

“Radio an ambulance now,” Dave says.

The four men look at Dave as if he is speaking another language. “Call a fucking ambulance. Move. He’s in cardiac arrest.” One of the cops hustles back to the car.

They huddle again. Except this time it is around Dave. Peters stands back giving Dave the same look with which he left Ray. Dave gives one of the cops a handgun, and then Peters and the other cop run around the side of the house.

Dave walks over to Ray, opens the driver door, and then says, “You guys okay? How’s my boy?”

“Safe and sound... or safe and no sound.”

“Good. Can you stay put for a little while?”

“I don’t know, can we?”

“Just grab a bottle out of that bag over there, and if you’re really feeling adventurous, you can try and change his diaper.”

“I’m not sure you want me to do that.”

“I’m not gonna be able to get away from here for a while. I’ll get one of these guys to take you home. Just make sure to drop him off with Amanda.”

“At your house?”

“Yeah. You think you can go there and not grope my wife?” Dave says with a smile. “Bustin chops.”

“Sure. You think you can wrap this all up here without framing me?”

“Ray.” Dave’s voice takes on a serious tone. “If anyone asks you why we are here, you found out on your own where this guy lives, but you wouldn’t tell me how. Got it? You just wanted me here in case anything went wrong.”

“That was good thinking on my part.”

## Chapter 35

It is odd that it took this long to admit her marriage is over. Driving back to Chagrin, she tells herself guilt is not an option. Guilt is a waste of time. What she needs is to celebrate. She is starting fresh. It feels incredible. It is the way life should feel, and she wants to share it with a friend, but she has nobody. All of her girlfriends are wives of other cops, and she has no family around anymore. Seeing Ray would be a horrible idea; the idea of going home just depresses her. She decides to go to the office to find Tina. Her boss is not her first choice, but at least she would be willing to celebrate.

\* \* \*

Not until Amanda unlocks the office door does she remember it is Saturday. Walking into the middle of the office suite and then into Tina's office, she sees it all again for the first time. It feels smaller than she remembers. Amanda begins to feel claustrophobic being surrounded by all Tina's stuff, and being overcome with the feeling that all she will ever be here is exactly what the little black sign says on her desk: *Receptionist*. It may have been enough when she was slinging plates at Dink's, but now she wants more. She knows she's too inexperienced to go out on her own, but if she ever wants to achieve that goal, she has to get out of here. Whether it is Dave or Tina, the longer she is with them the more she becomes a means to their goals and to their happiness.

Amanda walks out of the office, locking it before she descends to the street and into the cold. She continues down the street and along the bridge taking deep whiffs of the brown water that rushes violently below her. It is the thaw she smells; the ice releasing itself from the land and flowing into the river and then down to Lake Erie. Though weather has roller coastered from warm to cold lately, this is the first she senses winter breaking into spring. She stops at the rail, looks down at the water, and pictures it on its journey to the lake.

“Amanda?” a voice wakes her from her daydream.

She turns to identify the voice. “Holly,” she says with a sense of relief. “You are just the person I was looking for.”

“Who told you I came home?”

“What?”

“Did you see, Ray?”

“No,” She says. “You look wonderful.”

“I do?” Holly blushes.

“You look... healthy.”

“Laying around in the sun for a month will do that.”

“I honestly can’t even remotely remember what that would feel like.”

“How’s Davey?”

“Good and not-so-good, but always getting better,” Amanda says. It is her standard reply when asked how her son is. “Actually, he’s wonderful.”

“I’m glad.”

“From what Ray told me I didn’t think you were ever coming back.”

Holly seems a bit shocked by Amanda’s comment. “Really.”

“Didn’t you break it off?”

“I’m not sure. You haven’t seen him today?”

“No, why?”

“No reason.”

“I’ve been taking an exam all morning to get my real estate brokers license.”

“Oh?” Holly says.

“Yeah. I’m officially an agent now.”

“Are you working anywhere yet?”

“I kind of work with Howard Hannah right now.”

“With Tina?”

“You know Tina?”

“No. I talked with her yesterday about a property, but she kind of stood me up last night.

“What property?”

“It’s this nursery out on Chillecothe.”

“Did you give her your name?”

“I’m not sure. I told her I was waiting out at the property and all, but my phone went dead because of the rain. I’m not quite sure what all she heard.”

“Holly, I know it’s only about noon and all, but would you like to get a drink with me?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, I really need to celebrate, and to be honest, I wouldn’t rather do it with anyone else. Do you have anywhere you need to be?”

Holly thinks for a few seconds and then says, “Actually, a drink sounds great.”

## Chapter 36

Four glasses of wine later, Holly feels as though she knows everything about Amanda. Since Holly has not been able to interject more than a few words into Amanda's life story, she is fairly certain Amanda not know anything about her. It is annoying at first, but as Amanda continues, Holly finds herself relieved to just listen and entertain herself with the drama of somebody else's life.

"You see, I guess I just got to a point where I was tired of trying to make myself be happy with what I have. I realized that I'm allowed to go after what makes me happy," Amanda says and then she drinks the last sip of her wine.

"What is that exactly?" Holly asks. For the last drink Amanda has been dancing around this notion of being happy and not settling, basically saying the same thing with different analogies.

"I don't know right now. Maybe it is the journey. I mean I definitely haven't gotten anything yet that makes me happy, but I've found a path to follow, and the excitement of that is thrilling."

"I have to admit for somebody who's planning on leaving their husband, you don't seem too depressed."

“Well, when you’re living with a dead leg sometimes being an amputee is an upgrade,” Amanda says. Her analogies have become worse with each sip of wine. “It’s addition by subtraction.”

“Whatever you say.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What can you do to make yourself happy?”

“What makes you think I’m not happy?”

“I guess it takes one to know one.”

“For starters, you could talk the seller down on their asking price for that nursery. The listing price is a bit absurd.”

“We’ve been trying to talk them down for over a year now.”

“*We have, or Tina has?*”

“Well, Tina has.”

“Maybe you’d have better luck.”

“I could try.”

“You sure could. If you’re going to be representing somebody who is seriously interested, you might have better luck.”

“Should we have another?” Amanda asks.

“I shouldn’t. I’m gonna go back to Ray’s and see if he’s there.”

“Let’s at least go for a walk and shake off some of this buzz.”

Walking up and down the neighborhood streets, the two women are silent for the first time since they met that day. Occasionally Amanda will point to a house and tell Holly who lives or used to live there. She usually has a funny memory for a few of them, but mostly she just says if she likes the person or not. They stop in front of a small colonial that is in serious need of a paint job.

“What’s with this house?”

“Nothing.”

“No story for this one?”

“I’ve got plenty.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ve been listening to them all day.”

Holly looks at Amanda. “Huh?”

“I live here.”

Holly tilts her head and then focuses on a police cruiser driving toward them. When it stops at the curb about 10 feet from where they are standing, she sees Ray sitting in the back next to Davey. Ray struggles to release the car seat. Amanda opens the door and then says, “Ray, what is going on?”

“How the hell do you get this damn thing out of here?”

“Pull that red thing in the back and lift up at the same time.” Ray still cannot manage to release it, so Amanda ducks in and, within seconds, has the seat free and out the door.

“Are you sure?” the Officer says into the car radio. “No shit.” He looks back at Ray. “Hey, I gotta get out of here. Are you guys all through back there? I gotta get back, Ray.”

“What the hell’s going on, Ray?” Amanda asks.

Holly nearly asks where Dave is, but then holds her breath at the thought that he is probably hurt or in some sort of trouble. Amanda sees the odd look on Holly’s face, and, as though she were reading her mind, asks, “Where the hell is Dave, Ray?” Amanda puts the seat down and then unbuckles Davey. He is being oddly calm through all this.

“How’s my baby boy?” She lifts him up to her chest.

“Thanks. You’re all set,” Ray tells the cop and then shuts the back door. He drives off immediately. “Dave’s fine.”

“What’s going on, Ray?” Holly asks. “Where were you?”

“He had to go in at the last minute because of a bust at a house in Newbury.”

“What happened?” Amanda asks.

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think it was the guy who drove into my market.”

“What’d he do?”

Ray stalls for a few seconds and then says, “Uh, I think he shot at Dave.”

“Where was Davey during all this?”

“He was with me.”

The two women stand side by side interrogating Ray. “And where were you?” Holly asks.

“We were in the car.”

Holly steps up so her face is very close to Ray. “Ray, honey, what the fuck is going on?”

## Chapter 37

Ray's family never had much money. If it were not for owning a food market, they would have struggled at times to get meals on the table. Outside of the pantry and fridge, excess was nowhere to be found in the McFarland household. The furniture and everything else that finished his parents' home when he was born was the same when they died. When Ray sold the home to cover his cost for the funerals, he barely had \$100 left. Every penny they had went back into the market so that by the time Ray took it over, it was completely paid off. Considering how foreign excess cash is in Ray's world, his shock comes as no surprise when he first sees \$355,350.00 printed and spelled out on the insurance check.

"What is it, Ray?" Holly says as she sits down on the bed next to him and peaks at the slip of paper in his hand. "How much is it for?" Ray lays back on the bed and hands her the check. "Oh my gosh, Ray. This is a lot of money. I mean this is a lot of money. Did you know it was worth all this?"

Ray is overcome with a wave of guilt. That his parents' hard work is summed up into this piece of paper, and though he cannot believe he is saying this to himself, he can't figure if it is too much or not enough. He wonders if any number would have been enough. "Yes and no, but mostly no."

"I mean this doesn't even count the property, right?"

“Of course not.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. It’s just that.” He sits up.

“What, Ray?”

“The business was mine, but it wasn’t, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know what I mean,” he says, but he does know. His parents gave it to him so he could give it to his kids, and not cash it in and move on. “It just seems so final I guess.”

“How is it final?”

“Everything they built is gone, and I’d be stupid to rebuild.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Your parents will live on in whatever you choose to do with that money and wherever you choose to do it.”

“Yeah, but this is home.”

“Since when? This place doesn’t belong to you anymore. We need to go where we can make lemonade out of all this. I mean that’s what your Dad did, isn’t it. He moved his family where he had a chance to build a life outside a steel mill. This wasn’t his home either, but he made it into just that.”

Ray sits up on the side of the bed and stares down at his lap. He pictures his dad’s face under the big Uncle Sam hat as they walked down to the falls. Once when Ray was about 13, he asked his dad why he jumps the falls every year, and he told him, ‘To be honest, we got a little drunk one year at our party and some guy bet me I couldn’t do it.

People got such a rise out of it, I did it the next year. Then it just turned into a tradition, and people love tradition. It brings 'em together, and it's because of me. Knowin that feels real good.'

It is one of Ray's favorite memories of his father. He saw a glimpse into him that he had never seen, but it is not until now that it makes sense. Ray has no more traditions left here. He has lost his connection to Chagrin. He looks up at Holly and says, "Okay."

"Okay, what, Ray?"

THE END

## Curriculum Vitae

Ryan Mackey graduated from Walsh Jesuit High School, Stow, Ohio, in 1995. He received his Bachelor of Arts from University of Dayton.