

Copper

Copyright © Morgan La Femina 2011

All Rights Reserved

Chapter 1

“Joe, Joe, why they make beer with bubbles?” Danny asked with innate curiosity, looking deep into the white foam of his Budweiser.

Joseph peered up at the baseball game, which was playing on a TV in the upper left corner of the bar. Joe lifted up his beer, “I don’t know.” taking a big drink down, “just drink it. I bought it for you.”

“Joe Joe, Yanks doing good so far, huh?”

Joe looked down peering into his mug, “Yep, Dan.”

Danny furrowed his brow a bit, picking at the wood and stone bar top with his dirty fingernails, “Hey Joe is Mama going to be okay?”

Joe looked over at the bartender. Michael was a gruff old man, but good strong counsel when you needed him to be such, “Yeah, I suppose Dan. It’s spring so I suppose.” Joe finished his beer and rubbed his black head of hair. He then gave a stern look at Dan, “You know I get tired of this shit.”

Dan sipped his beer a bit gingerly, winching at his brother's remark, “Joe Joe, I'm sorry you get tired and all.”

Joseph shook his head forlornly, looking down at the base of his empty mug, “Naw Dan, nope.”

Dan smiled happily at Joe, content that he had done no wrong to his brother, “Good Joe, Joe. Hey you gonna get another beer?”

Joe glanced once more at Mike, “Yea, Mike one more?”

Michael was over at the far side of the bar washing mugs and glasses, “Yep, Joe another Bud!” wiping his hands on a rag as he spoke.

Joe took a deep breath. He was so tired these days. A few moments of peace passed. He noticed someone out of the corner of his eye, remembering the beer he had wanted, “Yeah, Mike another one.”

Mike nodded, pulled a frosty cold mug from a lower bar refrigerator, pulling the tap, the amber ale filling the mug, “How is the family doing Joe? You don’t talk much about them anymore.”

“Yeah, I know Mike.” Joe turned a bit in his bar stool to view the raven haired woman at the other end of the bar who was sitting at a small table. She seemed to be watching them and at the same time watching the light traffic on road.

Michael brought the freshly poured beer over to Joseph flipping a cardboard coaster, setting the beer on it. He rubbed his beard, “You really should loosen up a bit, relax Joe...families are families, they all have issues.”

Joe turned to the woman a bit further, “Yeah, Mike.”

The woman gave Joe a crooked smile and took a sip of her scotch on the rocks.

Danny abruptly and quite loud remarking, “Yep Mikee, families do have families!” at what Michael had said to Joseph.

Michael hearing Danny, cheerfully walked away nodding to himself, “That’s true Danny boy, very true.”

Danny smiled, very satisfied to have pleased Michael's sense of humor and irony, “What are we going to do when we get home, Joe?”

Joe shrugged, “Don’t know Dan, don’t know.”

Hearing Joe's answer, Danny began to settle down again. It grew quiet in the bar. Joe sipped his beer and went back to watching the baseball game. Danny suddenly looked far out into space, which he did from time to time. Joe never could figure out why. He had some ideas and brought them up to his mom but Mama Cruse never looked into it. Danny seemed always to be a bit slower than most people were; to the family he just was born that way. Danny was born slow and big, and as he grew up, he grew even bigger. Joe's brother was always a bit of an oddity to most people, especially when he and Danny paired up together to go out in public. Joe didn't mind so much. However, sometimes, and for some unknown reason to Joe, it bothered other people. If Danny's oddities did not bother him so much, Joe figured why should it bother anyone else? After all, it was Joe who had to live with him, besides everyone had their peculiarities. Joe was only five-eight at best, while Danny stood six-foot-five 230 lbs., mostly muscle. Danny seemed to wake from his trance and drank a bit more of his beer, “Joe, you're going to school soon?”

Joe shook his head yes, “Yes, soon. I am soon, but you know Joe, I am just a drive or a phone call away.”

Danny rubbed his face, feeling the stubble that had quickly grown. He never could get shaving down well like his brother, even though he was thirty. “Yep Joe Joe, but I can't drive.”

“No Joe, that's true but I can.”

Dan smiled innocently, “I don't get it.”

Joe smiled back and took another sip of his beer, a bit more cheerfully now, “No, but I do and that's what matters.”

Danny smiled deeper showing more teeth, “Yep, Joe -true.” Danny found the woman in the corner this time as well and smiled at her. She caught his smile and smiled back at him. Danny blushed, returned to his beer and then the TV screen. The Yanks had runners on first and third with two outs in the sixth. Danny looked at Joe scrunching his face, “Clean up, huh?”

Joe nodding, “Yep.”

Danny still a bit auctions, leaned into Joe, “Hey, there is a girl over there.”

Joe whispered to him, “I know Joe, I know.”

Danny a bit louder, speaking enthusiastically, abruptly, “Well go and talk to her!”

Joe yelled quietly at him, “Shut up, Danny!”

Danny frowned, whispering in Joe’s ear, “What I do?”

Joe shook his head and peered over at the woman again, “Nothing Dan...nothing.” She smiled at Joe, tipping her glass to him and meekly motioned for him to come over. Joe put his near empty mug down and with a deep sigh decided to stroll over, Danny bounding behind him; for a big man like Joe that in itself was amazing.

Joe pulled a seat and flipped it around, sitting down, “Hello.”

Danny pulled a seat falling into it, “Hello.”

The woman flipped her long black hair back, “Hello, name is Donna.”

Joe pulled his seat closer, “My name is Joseph, and this is my brother, Danny.”

Danny held out one of his massive hands to her, “Name is Danny, nice to meet you Donna.”

Donna held out her hand a bit awkwardly at Danny's sheer openness, "Hello, Danny."

"Yep, Danny and Joe, Danny and Joe -nice to meet you Donna," Danny said shaking her hand eagerly and a bit too hard.

Joe having a bit too much of it, cut into Danny's eagerness sharply, "I haven't seen you here before. We frequent this bar; it's local for Danny and me. In fact why Mike over there has known us since we were only knee-high to him."

Michael had overheard his name, waved a smile and a wet rag at them, "That's right, of course! Although, I don't think Dan was ever knee-high though," laughing heartily.

Donna laughed quietly to herself as well.

Danny thought about what Mike had said. He was not quite sure that it was funny, but in the end he decided to laugh along with them, while Joe rubbed his forehead, which seemed to be gathering stress.

Joe was getting a headache, "So, Donna what brings you around this town?"

Donna finished her scotch holding it up for Mike to see and placing it back on its coaster, "Well, originally I was looking for a place to live around here. I found a decent rental, and now I am checking out the area. I wanted to see this place and so here I am."

Joe nodded as Mike came over with another scotch, Joseph debating internally whether he should give her his number or something. He had a girlfriend, but he thought it was good to meet new people or at least that was what he tried to convince himself. Joe was just so sick of the way things were. Maybe dreams do come true if you fight for them, maybe he just needed a change, or maybe school would be the thing for an aging

27-year-old. In any event, his thoughts became complicated and so he pulled out of them. However, as Joe was about break his train of thought, giving Donna his phone number, Danny broke it for him, “Your pretty, Donna.”

Joe yelped, but still smiled, “Danny!”

Donna blushed and smiled. Donna’s high cheekbones, red, matching her spring blouse and skirt -yes; he was right but still... Mike was drying mugs watching the exchange from behind his bunker, amused. Joe rubbed his hair, holding his hands out, “Look I am sorry. Dan, Dan...well he is a bit slow.” Dan nodded in partial agreement. Donna gave Danny a warm look of care. Joe frowned, but then forced a smile, “Listen, Dan is right, I would like to give you my number and ah...maybe we could go and do something, nightlife is good around here sometimes.” Donna sipped her drink and thought for a second, looking at Danny, she nodded, “Yeah sure,” She took out a pen and a scrap of paper from her purse, “here you go guys.”

Joe took the paper, and pen wrote his name and number down and gave it to her, “There you go Donna.”

Donna looked at the scrap, “Okay, Joe.”

Joe stood up pulling Danny up as well by the shoulder, “We will see you around hopefully.”

Danny gave a big nod, “I hope so too!”

Donna looked up at them and then at Dan, “I hope so as well.”

Joe went to the bar, gave Mike a twenty, and then left pulling Dan by the shirt-sleeve. They left the tavern. Danny scratched his face, “Should you have paid for her?”

Joe a bit angry, “Shut up Dan, I was nervous okay.”

Danny smiled, "I wasn't."

Joe pulled open the driver's side door of his car, "Get in."

Dan nodded at Joe, "Sure thing, Joe Joe. I hope the Yanks will win that game."

They never did find out.

Joseph pulled his rusted Buick into the parking space in the back of the trailer their mom, Danny and he rented. Joe always remembered the address of the trailer as 69 and ½, because to him it seemed they were not worthy of a full one, only a half of a home to call their own. Joe thought about how idiotic it seemed, but yet so hurtful to how he felt about his family and himself. Oh, well Joe thought one more day in paradise. He saw his mother through the trailer's big plastic window panes. He knew that by the way she was sitting on the couch, in the corner, and partly facing the wall that they were in for trouble.

Luckily, Buick's were full-sized cars, otherwise Danny would not have fit, maybe Joe would have had to strap him to the roof or something, Joe thought to himself. Joe then remembering his mother in the corner directed Danny. "Get out."

Okay, "Joe Joe."

They each closed the doors of the Buick with a slam. Joe thought that one day wanted to jump out of the window on to the ground like the old dukes of hazard used to do. But after a moment he thought better of it, because he probably would break his legs and Dan, well he would just be caught in the door frame. Joe and Danny went up to the steel door of the trailer; trailers were metal after all because they were car-like.

Danny saw Joe fishing for his keys, "Joe, why you getting the keys -momma is

inside.”

Joe looked at him and winced, pulling out his keys, “Yeah, I know Joe I know.”

Joe put the key in, turned the lock and they both entered. As Joe stepped in and before he could say, “hi momma,” she had made her way to the kitchen, picked up a used bowl from the sink and threw it at him. Joe and Danny ducked as the bowl narrowly missed Joe's head and crashed into the door frame.

She screamed, “Get out!”

Joe yelled back, “Mama, wait!”

She screamed again even louder piercing Joseph's ears, “Get out, now! You evil demons!”

Joe moved closer to her holding out his palms sweaty from the ordeal. Danny slunk back behind Joe near the TV, “Listen, Mama it's me, Joe your son!”

“Don't you lie to me, you evil thing you!”

Joe beginning to get angry, “Dam it -what the fuck! Take your medicine, Ma!”

“Don't you force those poison pills on me you Satan!”

Danny stepped forward a bit, “Mama, its Danny!”

Mama Cruse picked up a broom waving it menacingly at Joe and then at Danny, creeping closer to them, “You brutes! You pigs! Get out!”

Joe rubbed his head sweating, “Dan -let me handle it, please.”

Danny was starting to cry, for a big man such as Danny that was simply a rarity, but he was a different kind of man -God broke the mold when he created him, which

according to most who knew Danny was an excellent thing to have happened. Seeing his brother cry, Joe took a deep sigh, “Alright we are going -you happy?”

Mama Cruse took her broom, “Why yes! Now get and don't come back, you pigs!”

Joe motioned to Danny, grabbing his shoulder, pulling him out of the house, and slamming the door behind them. “Don't cry, Dan.”

Danny buried his head in Joe's chest, Joe almost falling over from the weight of Danny's body on him, “Why Joe Joe, why?”

Joe motioned to for him to get into the car, “I don't know, but we got each other brother.”

Danny wiped away his tears and both he and Joe returned to the Buick, “We can't come back?”

Danny always such questions when she got that way, which was becoming more frequent now that Mama Cruse was getting older it seemed.

Joe started the car, “Dan, you know we can come back,” smiling at him half-heartedly, “we can come back tomorrow in the night, then she will be a bit more settled.” For some reason, a reason that Joe did not fully understand, that was true. If Mama Cruse was as sick as she was, as night set in she would usually calm down a bit. Perhaps it was the dark that made it so, but to Joe it didn't matter just the result mattered. Joe pulled the Buick out of 69 and one-half, looking behind in the rear view mirror at the tin can semi-like house. The image reminded him that the rent would be due soon...Joe worried, pinched the bridge of his nose, now suffering from a headache, “Were just going to get a room for the night at the Super 8 and camp out.”

Danny smiled, wiping away the remainder of his tears, “I like camping out.”

Joe smiled bigger, quickly glancing at him and then the traffic out on the main road, “I know you do Dan, and try not to cry.”

Dan looked lovingly at his brother, “Okay, Joe Joe.”

Joe himself reserved his tears for later, he would cry later that night in the bathroom of the Super 8 room they rented for the night on the toilet, sobbing quietly with his hands in his face while Dan slept. He was always and adult never a child, always a parent and never a son...

Joe inserted the key into the door of their hotel room at the Super 8, which happened to be located right down the road from them, only a few miles at best. Craig the night shift manager was there. He was busy downing cup after cup of coffee. Joseph actually thought that might be a good idea himself after they got something to eat, take out, delivery, or whatever they could afford. Joe opened the door to their new home for the night and waved his hand, “Welcome to the king’s palace, Danny.”

“Hey Joe Joe, this is the same room we had last time!”

Joe gave a weak smile, “Well how about that Danny.”

Danny turned on the light then dumped himself on the bed, his rather large frame shaking the bed with the coils in full groan. “Hey, Joe Joe can we make bed tents tonight?”

Joe closed the door behind himself, “Maybe Dan, maybe -how about pizza?”

Danny smiled a big grin. It did not take much to make him happy, which was a

good thing, because for Joe the weight of the world was stacked like bricks upon his back, and he wanted them off, all off.

Joe took another slice of pizza and a sip of his coffee. Danny had another piece already half in his mouth, the sheets, and pillows of his bed all strewn about the motel room. He turned on the TV and after a few minutes of flicking through the channels a commercial for a regional trade school came on the air. Danny thought a moment and looked over at Joe, “Are you going to school this year?”

Joe finished his slice and took a swig of coffee, holding the cup and chewing on it, “I hope so. I am registered and all. I want to do well.”

Dan looked down at his bed, “Do well in school? You’re smart Joe Joe.”

Joseph nodded, “I know but I mean well in life, the whole thing and now, I am in my twenties Dan, and I want to be a success.”

Dan nodded again, “You are Joe Joe.”

“To you Dan, but not to me, I want to help myself, help you, help Mama, and help others.”

Dan looked at the TV switching the channel and then a bit confused about the whole matter, entering in deep thought, “Why?”

Joe took a long sigh and finished his coffee, “Dan you know? Fuck! I want to help people, kids, whomever so they don't get the shit life we have -I have!”

Danny now noticing that Joe was yelling a bit, ending the conversation with, “Okay Joe.”

Joe pulled at the hair at the back of his head, in a low tone, "I have."

Dan waited a few minutes then returned his thoughts to the chaos that was his bed, looking at all the handy work he had accomplished in just a few short hours, "Can we make tents?"

Joe frowned looking at the rows of cheap wooden paneling than lined the walls of their double room, "Yeah sure."

Dan jumped up a bit, "Okay Joe, sure!"

The next day Joe found himself dumping off Dan at their mom's house. It seemed sometimes that Danny gobbled up conversation like an old-fashioned church wife sometimes. Danny was picking at his sizeable teeth, the Buick's windows open to let the morning air into the car, "We got a good morning, Joe Joe!"

Joe looked into his rear-view mirror, "Yeah, Dan sure"

Danny smiled into his side passenger mirror, "Joe why the mirror says 'objects in mirror are closer than they appear?'"

"Don't know Dan."

Danny grinned a toothy grin in the side-view mirror, "It makes my teeth too big."

Joe laughed a bit, glancing at Dan, "Uh, Danny that's because they are big."

Danny gave Joe a dirty look, "Huh?" which made Joe laugh all the more. Dan shook it off like water off a duck's back, "Joe what about that woman?"

Joe was nearing their house, "What woman?"

“The woman yesterday, her name was ah, Donna right?”

“Suppose, Dan.”

“What she around for, is she going to be back at Groos? Can we go there and find out? Huh, Joe Joe?”

Joe pulled along side their trailer, viewing his mother watching a morning show on the TV. She seemed okay, Joseph thinking that she could have gone back on her medication. Joe then motioning to Dan, “Get out.”

Danny gave Joe a forlorn look, “What if she’s nasty again and throws a pan at me?”

“She seems okay, look, she is opening the door for you.”

Actually, she was. Mama Cruse stepped out with her moo-moo nightgown still on, her hair unkept and wild, but she smiled and motioned to them.

Dan said, “Well...”

Joe reached over and pulled the inside handle on Danny's door, “She is okay now. She probably has breakfast for you.”

Danny hearing about food, especially the thought of eggs and bacon made him smile, “What about you?”

Joe shook his head, “No Dan, I got other stuff to do.”

Dan nodded and closed the door behind him not looking back. Joe pulled off without much to do at all.

Joseph drove down Kings Street and found a place to park parallel to Broadway. He was going to step in and see Kevin at his apartment, which was pretty close to a prison with its old steel door and its iron bars on the windows. It was, as far as Joe concerned, a one-unit slum lord dump/bedroom/living-room/kitchen, about as big as his bedroom in their trailer. Kevin did not have to worry about cross-fire from rival gangs but he did have a nasty issue with roaches all about his apartment. Joseph always checked his shoes after visiting him just because of it.

Joe walked along Kings Street running into Paco. Paco was an old-time IV drug user, who still shot up every now and then. People who knew Paco well enough said he was on methadone but no one could verify it. Unfortunately, years of living hard had taken its toll on Paco. He was now a pot-holed old man who had lost his legs. He had reduced himself to sitting in a wheelchair all day outside his own apartment, season after season, unless or until it got too cold for him to do so. Joseph tried to avoid Paco, but Paco yelled at him, practically wheeling Joseph over as he met him on the street.

Paco gave him a toothless yell, “Hey you got smokes?”

“No, Pac.”

Paco pulled at his bundled pants, “Just one cig? One man? Give you a quarter?”

Joe hurried passed him, Paco's face scarred as what was left of his forearms, pasting back his long white ghost hair in the summer heat, Joseph looking back, “No, Pac -no smokes, don't smoke.”

Paco yelled at him one last time, at Joseph's back who was now almost on Broadway, “You putto...you gringo bastard!”

Joseph just sighed and shrugged, he had been called worse by his mom.

Joe found the three-story brick walk-up where Kevin lived. It was like most of the buildings in the lower part of the city, very old and very broken-down. He wondered how some of those building even managed to have indoor plumbing and working electrical outlets. Joe rapped his knuckles on the graffiti riddled steel front door. The ally between the buildings smelled like old urine. The door made a hollow sound. Joseph waited a few minutes, a few people walking by him, wondering why he looked like a tourist in a forbidden land. Joseph itched the back of his neck, it was hot out already. He banged again on the door, this time hurting his hand in the process. The metal door looked like it could take a mortar shell and still hold. A few minutes more passed and then Kevin cracked it open.

Joe looked in, “Hey Kevin. How is it going?”

Kevin nodded, with long lanky black hair and a grizzled goatee. He looked like he had slept a few days in the same clothes, without washing as well. Kevin nodded, “Yeah, I’m living -I guess.”

Joe shrugged okay, “Good, can I come in?”

Kevin rubbed his eyes, “Yeah I -oh yeah come on it, sorry.”

Kevin let Joseph in, and they climbed up the building steep steps to Kevin’s room on the third floor. Kevin wedged open another door and let Joseph in first. Joseph looked around the one-room apartment, which was quite simply a wreck. Everything from used food containers, to old clothes, old garbage bags of odds and ends, computer and electronic junk, to Kevin’s mattress was on the floor. Joseph stepped over the objects that looked most likely to puncture his shoes, “So Kevin?”

Kevin sighed, “Hey man, sorry about the mess.”

Joseph saw some roaches scurry for a place to feel safe in the piles, “Yeah, well what did you need?”

Kevin found a chair and pulled it over to Joe, “You want to sit?”

Joe looked at the stained chair and Kevin’s surrounding again, there was a huge hole in the wall and out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a rat peek out from under some blankets. “Naw, Kevin.”

Kevin seeing Joseph surrender the offer, took the seat himself, rubbing his eyes again and coughing a bit, “I need some money.”

Joseph nodded, “What do you need Kev a 20?”

Kevin shook his head no and coughed again. It was even hotter up on the third floor, “No, I need more.”

“How much more?”

Kevin looked very worn, older than his 30 years of age should put him, “about a thousand.”

Joe’s eyes widened, “Kevin man, what the fuck? Why do you need so much money?” Kevin looked down.

Joe shot a serious stare at him, “What happened? What did you get into?”

“I owe money and in a hard way.”

“To who? For what?”

Kevin pulled his hair back, “Man Joe, I -you know -I owe Omar that money.”

Joseph turned his back at Kevin for a moment, thinking and then turned to him again, “Damn it Kevin, you and your habit -Omar will break your damn legs! If he does not shoot you and dump you up in the Hudson first.”

Kevin was about to cry, “I know.”

“Listen, Kevin, I don't have that kind of money.”

“I know, but maybe some.”

Joe could not believe what was happening, “Kevin you're a fool you know.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kevin placed his head on the back of the chair, “maybe you could give me a bit to get Omar off my back, and then I could get the rest later.”

Joseph frowned, “Kevin what happened to us? It seems like only yesterday we were in high school.”

Chapter 2

“I told you get out! You beast you!” Mama Cruse yelled, pounding up and down the narrow hall of the trailer the Cruse family called home, or hell depending on the day.

Joseph looked at Danny as he packed a few bags, “Danny, I am sorry you have to put up with this from Mama and all.”

Danny gave a frightened look at Mama Cruse, who was slamming things around, pots, pans, the broom. Danny grabbed a few pairs of socks for Joseph, handing them over to him, “Joe what about the TV and all? Why she let it go?”

“Don't remind me.” Joseph said giving Danny a steely look, but a concerned warm one. He just had to be firm. Joseph knew very well that she did not pay the bill on purpose, “Danny, I will help you pay it this month.”

Danny was very uncomfortable, dancing a bit around, squirming a bit at a pan Mama Cruse dropped onto the floor, “But, Joe I can't.”

Joseph had to get away from this, “Look Danny, I can't be everywhere, and I can't be nowhere, which is here. I can't baby-sit this house and this family forever. I mean where the hell is the rest of this family? Huh?”

Danny found a binder, “This too?”

Joe nodded, “You can put that in my backpack.”

Danny peeked into the other room as Mama Cruse began to quiet down. Mama turned to him and brushed her brunt Auburn hair back, “I hate you and your brother, but you especially! Daemon seed!” Danny seeing this scampered back to Joe his large frames reverberating through the metal trailer frame, pleading “Joe Joe!”

Joe was sick of it, “Danny, listen, she is full of it! Just deal with it. I have been the adult and the parent of this family long enough. I got to go, I have to see Kevin, and then I am out to college for the semester. I won't be that far. I am just a phone call away.”

Danny began to cry a bit, finding some underwear and a tee-shirt and handing them to Joseph, “I ain't smart like you, Joe. I am just Danny.”

Joe closed his eyes and took a deep breath, “I will help you if you should need it, but what you need is time, and I need time. When you really need me, I will be there. You can do more than you every thought you could. I know you Dan, and you're smarter than you think.”

Danny smiled a weak smile, “Yeah, Joe Joe?”

Joseph drove around and found some parking near Kevin's apartment on Broadway. He skipped putting a quarter in the meter. The city never checked those things anyway; they had bigger troubles to deal with on a daily basis. Joseph stepped out of his car, locked the door, and ran up to Kevin's front door. Joseph felt his wallet. He had a hundred dollars cash and he sure did not want to lose it. Joe waited hesitantly, looking back and forth down the sidewalk. Kevin did not answer. Joseph knocked louder hurting his hand once again. He hated steel doors. After a few minutes, Joseph remembered what Kevin had said about Omar and became concerned. He thought a moments and then headed down the street to find Paco.

Paco was trying to hide from the sun under the small overhang of the bar room at the ground floor of his building. Paco was picking at his long, greasy hair, rolling a cigarette from a little loose tobacco someone have given him. He fumbled with the paper and some of the tobacco fell on the ground. Paco looked down, and the cigarette paper

dropped to the sidewalk as well. He reached forlornly for the paper, but he was too high up in his wheel chair, the old cracked tires putting the paper just out of reach of his fingertips. Joe rushed over to him, Paco noticing out of the corner of his eyes, looking up, “What you want, gringo?”

Joe felt his wallet again, “You know where Kevin is?”

“He ain’t my brother.”

Joe wiped the sweat from his brow, “You know everything Paco, you snoop everywhere.”

Paco reached again for the paper. Joe picked it up and held between his thumb and forefinger, creasing it. Paco looked up, “You’re an ass.”

Joseph went to walk away, “Well, Paco I thought I would ask. I am just concerned.”

Paco shook his head holding out his hand, “Check the crack house, he's a pipe sucker anyway.”

Joseph gave him the paper, “Okay Paco, but you're not so hot yourself.”

Paco took the paper and asked, “You have a cigarette?”

Joe began to walk away and waved low behind him disgusted, “No.”

Paco shook his fist at him and in doing so lost the paper again, “You fool! I run your ass over!”

Joseph yelled behind him now down the street, “Thanks, Pac.” Joseph ran down Broadway towards the river. He honestly did not know where to go to find Kevin. He paused catching his breath as he felt the butterfly’s in his stomach. He felt queasy and

turned down a side ally. There by some unknown miracle he found Kevin, wedged in a gutter between two buildings. He was on his knees slumped over, with a wall of one of the buildings holding keeping him from falling over completely. Joseph ran over and pulled him up. Kevin's face was smashed, his cheek and nose fractured, blood all over his face, his shirt and jeans. Joseph shook him a bit, "Kevin what the hell happened?" Kevin tried to talk, but he was half-conscious. Joe shook him again attempting to wake him up that way, "Kevin man! What happened?"

Kevin pulled away, spit blood and teeth, wiping his mouth. "I, someone jumped me..."

Joseph grabbed Kevin and helped him out of the gutter. "Come on Kev, I'll take you to the hospital. I got some money for you too."

Johnny's bar was nothing more than a hole in the wall on Carter Street in Townley. David was sitting half off a ripped bar stool taking double shots of Jack. He was eying his girl Tonya's backside as she moved around the dim room, her jeans one size too small. The bar was dark and musty. The poor old air conditioner wedged into the back wall of the room was struggling to maintain its dignity by cooling off the area, but it was failing miserably. There was a ragged pool table in the center of the bar taking up too much space. Omar was summing up the situation on the table, while a few others were sitting here or there, most of them drunk and sweaty. David with a gold ring on each finger motioned for Tonya to come over to him. David laughed, "Watch him miss that shit."

Omar leaned over the table as he gave a glance over to David and his opponent, an old Jamaican with silvery dreads. Jude looked like he had played pool right from out

of the womb. Omar took a shot and missed. Angrily, Omar pulled the stick back and slammed the base of it on the floor, “Shit!”

Jude smiled a weary smile and set up for his shot. David laughed again, Tonya now sitting on his lap. “You can't play Omar! You got no damn game.”

Omar looked down for a moment, picking up his beer and with a swig, “I got's.”

Jude took his shot, then another, and then cleaned up the game. He held his hand out, “Omar you play like a white boy. You owe me 300.”

Omar wiped the sweat off his brow pulling out his roll. It wasn't much. He pulled off it three hundred-dollar bills and slapped it in his hand. “You are all-right old man.”

Jude dismissed his remark with a wrinkled smirk and pushed his gray-white dreads back, "Double?"

Omar looked uneasy. He had racked up a lot of debt lately, especially in pool. He wanted more, “Yea.”

Tonya spoke low to David, “He is a fool.”

David nodded, “Never said he wasn't.”

Tonya stood up, David slapping her backside as she went over to Omar. She pulled Omar's shirt and whispered into his ear, “Omar, you don't have the money.”

Omar shook his head no, turning to her as Jude racked. “Shut your mouth Tonya. What do you care?”

Tonya shrugged, “You want to bury yourself?”

Omar closed his eyes for a second wiping the sweat from his face with his short sleeve, 'Listen I'll pay back what I owe David.”

Jude smiled, “You break.” He lived long enough to know when to quit, his friend Omar did not.

Susan’s apartment was shabbily decorated with lots of red five and dime paintings. Realistically dollar-store affair was the best she could do. Donna sat down on Susan’s velvet couch, she smiled passing a half-empty body of vodka to Omar. Omar was sitting on a mismatched love-seat with Susan spread limply over him. Omar took the bottle and drank right from it. After a swallow, he tried to pass the bottle to Susan. Susan turned to him half-awake or half passed out, depending on how you looked at the situation. Omar again pushed the bottle, "Here!"

She took a groggy swipe at it, “No!”

Omar pushed the bottle at her, “Here woman! What you can’t take it no more?”

Susan pulled herself up and turned to him, her face plastered with her hair. She pulled it back again, “Omar! Gimmee, I put you under fool.” She grabbed the bottle and drank slopping down a shot and passing the bottle back to Donna.

Omar angry, “Hey, I don't need you or your attitude!”

Susan sat up pointing a finger at him, “I don't need your ass either.”

Donna took a swig of vodka, “Hey, listen.”

Omar leaned back half asleep again, “Yeah, yeah -Man, you all are sounding like David.”

Susan fell back down on Omar, “Least he got.”

Omar showed a bit of teeth, “Got what -nothing.”

“You owe him more than your ass, that is for sure.”

“I owe him yeah, but not that much.”

“You owe him and he will break your legs, my old man.”

Omar leaned over on a pillow, “Whatever woman, whatever...”

Donna stumbled up, held on to the couch, and put on the stereo. The music was loud, reverberating on the floor and into the apartment's walls, “Now cool off.”

Omar closed his eyes, “Kevin owes, I'll shake him again,”

Donna sat back down, expecting the heavy beats to keep Omar awake, but instead it seemed to lull Omar to sleep.

Susan pulled herself up again, looking angrily at Omar, “See, look at him he can't hold shit anyway.”

Omar leaned back snoring loudly. Donna nodded, “Well he is what he is.”

Susan stood up a bit wobbly herself, then grabbing her purse, “He does not want to do nothing with his life but gang-bang. He is going to get killed and leave me with crap. I am getting tired of his weak show.”

Donna shrugged, “Well you do what you need to do, Susan.”

Susan huffed an exhausted breath out, “I am going to the Sammy's”

Sammy's was the corner store. Donna looked for her pack of cigarettes. She found a crumpled one stuffed in the couch. She dug into the pack and found one last cigarette. “Wait” Donna said, finding her purse and pulling out a ten, “Get me a pack.” Susan nodded and when out.

Donna started thinking about Omar and then drifted to Danny. Omar began to wake up again as Donna lit her cigarette. She looked at him for a while, got up and went over to the stereo to change the CD. Omar now more awake watched Donna bend. Donna turned around to see Omar smile at her. Donna moved quietly over to him. Omar slouched further down in the love-seat, “Donna, woman.”

Donna moved in closer to Omar, Omar pulling her toward his body. She leaned down on him, “Omar you need better baby. I know your mind.”

Omar grabbed her waste and the back of her neck, “Donna I need your help.”

Susan got out her old red Chevy, closing the door behind her. She looked up at the brown stone before her, a bit of sun glaring into her eyes. She placed her keys in her purse and walked up to the door. A few guys at near the corner of another brownstone, next to the stoop were eying her. She gave them an icy glance as they held their hands near their crotch. Susan knocked and waited for Donna to come down. After a moment in the late August sun, Donna opened the door. She pushed her hair back, “Hey, Susan come on in.”

Susan took a drink of her beer. Donna was watching some mid-morning talk show on TV. Whatever show it was, the guests seemed to be arguing and fighting, generally beating on each other. Donna sat down with her beer and drank. “I know he needs money, but I don't have any and it's his own damn fault.”

Susan leaned forward, “Listen, he needs bad, and you know he does. David will dump him in the Hudson if he doesn't pay.”

Donna nodded, “And?”

Susan picked at her nails, “I need him right now. He lets me slide on my tab. I ain't got anybody.”

Donna gave out a dismissive sigh and a bit angry, open handed, “Susan that is why he is in the Grave! And you can get who you need.”

“Are you saying he is a fool for lending me a hit or two! He is my man, what have you got?”

Donna got up, “I got Jake, and you got to go!”

Susan put the beer down and stood up, “Listen, I am sorry. I need him, and he'll get you your shit too.”

Donna looked back at an open pack of cigarettes on the coffee table, “Yeah, I will talk to Jake. Tell him to get his score from Kevin. He owes.”

Susan put her beer down and grabbed her purse, “Yeah, I know.”

Donna motioned for Susan to head for the door, “We all got probs, it a screwed up world.”

“I know Donna, I know.”

Joseph rushed into the Greenburgh hospital emergency room entrance, the doors neatly gliding open and then closing behind him. Joe looked hesitantly around finding the intake specialist. He stepped over to the front desk. The young woman looked up at him, “Admitting?” she questioned him.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, taking a deep breath, “Yes, I want to see

my mother.”

She looked matter of fact at him, as if it was all routine, “Name, sir?”

“Cruse, Betty Cruse.”

She typed in the name, “And you name?”

Joe wiped his head again, “Joseph Cruse.”

The admitting specialist looked up the record for Betty, “Ah yes, your down as a contact person.” She looked back pointing, “ER bed 112, here is a tag.” She reached over pulled a clip and handed it to him, “Go through the door and ask the triage nurse to see her.”

Joseph nodded, “Thank you.”

She frowned.

Joseph pushed through the ER doors and found room 112. Mama Cruse was there in the bed. Danny was there, the doctor talking to them, a pale blue curtain providing her with some privacy. Joseph met Mama Cruse’s eyes then Danny's, “Danny? What the hell is going on? How the hell did you get here?”

Danny nodded, “Yup, Joe Joe, I went in the ambulance.”

Joseph was beside himself, “What going on, Mama?”

Mama Cruse looked over to Joseph, “Oh, well son...”

The doctor pulled Joseph aside, “Your Mrs. Cruse other son?”

“Yes, doctor.”

The doctor moved him farther away from his mom and his younger brother. “She has lost a lot of fluids, and her kidneys are in poor condition. How long has she been like this?”

Joseph placed his hands in his pockets, then rubbed the back of his head, “What do you mean? I didn't know any of this was going on. Nobody tells me anything, least of all my mom.”

The doctor looked back at Mama Cruse and Joe, Joe smiling away now, sitting next to Mama, holding her hand, “Well, I would like to keep her for a few days, run some tests.”

Joe nodded, “Yeah, sure -but it is really up to her, she kind of does what she wants.”

The doctor smiled pulling out a pen, “Yes, I see. Is she on any psychotropics, have a mental illness of any kind?”

Joseph looked back at them both, “She is on a whole slew of stuff, yeah that is when she takes them.”

The doctor flipped some pages of the chart he held, pen ready, “Can you list them for me, she doesn't know off hand.”

Joseph turned to the corner for a second, looking at one of the stainless steel trays with all the gauze and gloves on it, turning back to the doctor, “Oh, God...”

The doctor smiled, “Hmmm...yes...”

Chapter 3

Omar walked about the green felt table, in the humidity of Johnny's. The dark only illuminated by the light above the table and near the bar. Omar was smoking a cigarette and fiddling with his pool stick as his opponent hit a combo eliminating two more billiard balls, taking them off the table. The guy smiled, looking up as he prepared for another shot, "Hmmm, Omar maybe I could take this one?"

Omar scoffed at him, taking a puff of his cigarette, and downing a shot of whiskey, rolling it between his teeth and swallowing. He set the empty glass on the table next to him, "Yeah, whatever."

His opponent hit another billiard into a corner pocket, then another in a side and missed his third, "Shit!" he said pounding the butt of the stick on the dirty carpeted floor.

Now Omar smiled and chalked his stick, "Now," He laughed, "now, I get you." As he leaned over the table, lining up the tip of his stick to the cue, "Now, I kick your ass." Omar said as he hit one in and then another, then another and missed his fourth.

They were playing eight ball. The only balls left on the pool table were Omar's thirteen and the nine, while his opponent had only the seven. His opponent smiled, pointing to the corner pocket, "Seven, corner pocket." As he hit the ball in, Omar poured another shot for himself and quickly downed it. Unfortunately, by that time Omar had become very drunk, the liquor affecting his game. However, he did not seem to think it did. His opponent eying Omar take another drink, then moved around the table, as one of his friends finished his game and came over to watch the finish of Omar's. Omar's opponent pointed, "Eight ball in the corner pocket."

Omar nodded as his opponent hit the ball into the pocket, "Shit!"

His opponent and his friend fist pounded. He then held out his hand, "Okay, Omar cough up the money."

Omar pulled some cash out of his pocket. He counted it and handed what he had to the guy, slapping it into his hand, "Here!"

The guy looked at it and counted the crumpled bills, it was about twenty in change, "Hey, Omar, what the hell is this? You owe me a hundred!"

The front doors to the pool hall opened, and Kevin came in. He was still a bit bloody from a few days ago.

Omar glanced quickly at Kevin and then at his opponent, "I ain't got it!"

His opponent and his friend crowded in on Omar, "What do you mean, don't have it?"

Omar pushed his opponent back, "Get out of my face!" The two guys seeing this grabbed at Omar's collar, "Get off me!" Omar yelled, pulling the cue stick and hitting the winner over the shoulder splitting the stick in two. Down he went, slumping over, holding his neck and shoulder. The winner's friend then knocked Omar down, as a crowd including Kevin rushed over. Omar jumped up and knocked over his friend, as the crowd pushed in, Omar staggering up, pulling out his pistol, "Listen, back off!" He cocked the gun, "Listen, back the fuck off, or you have a slug in your head!"

Kevin needing a real fix, not very aware of the seriousness of the situation broke through the slowly dissolving crowd, "Omar!"

Omar looked at him astonishingly, clutching the pistol, "What!"

Kevin fell to his knees, "I need something, just to tide me over!"

Omar with sweat pouring down his face, blood on his lip, shaking with rage, “You, asshole! I told you, I will kill you, you mother fucker!”

Kevin cried out, “Please!”

Everyone in the pool hall could hear the police sirens, the police were on their way. Omar took the butt of his gun and hit the back of Kevin’s head, the impact making cracking sound, “Damn you!” He hit him again in his face, as Kevin fell over, holding his head.

Someone grabbed Omar from behind, Omar turned to assault him, the guy shook him, “Go, Omar! We got to get the hell out of here, popo is coming!”

Joseph leaning, sitting near one of the clothing shops in Greenburgh's midtown mall talking to his girlfriend Trisha on his cell phone, “Yeah, I should be up in a few days. I mean, I got to get out of here.”

Trisha was packing at her house, holding her home phone up to one ear with her shoulder, “We could sign a lease next semester, not this one but next?”

Joe nodded, but frowned at the same time as others in the mall ambled by, “I know, but let me get one semester done first. I got to get out of this town and for good.”

Trisha whispered something to her mom and then back on the phone to her boyfriend, “Yeah, but don't you dream of making it big and then coming back home and building something, helping everyone who could not make it?”

Joseph leaned his neck back, cracking it, “I need to make it first, Trish and these people here want nothing but the mall and players and have no vision.”

Trisha packed a shirt or two in a box, eyeing her laptop, “Yeah, well you’re at the mall too, dear?”

Joseph puckered his lips, and then as he was about to counter her logic, he got another call, it beeped, and he looked at the screen of his cell phone. It was unknown, but local, “Hey Trish I have another call, I got to go.”

Trisha nodded, “Could be the doctor?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay.”

Joe looked at the phone again, “Got to go, Trisha,” he said then switched to the second phone call, placing the phone to his ear again, “Hello?”

“This is Dr. Dhawan, I need you to come to the hospital. I have your mother’s tests back and I need to review them with you and your mom.”

Joe slumped over holding the phone in one hand and his head in another, “Okay, I will be over.”

Joe pulled his Buick into the parking lot of the hospital, motioning for Danny to get out of the car, “Get out Danny.”

Danny opened the door, looking over at Joseph, “Joe, Joe are you coming?”

Joe turned the car off and opened his driver side door, “Yes, I am coming. Go, Danny.”

“Okay Joe Joe,” Danny said with a weak, but comforting smile.

Dr. Dhawan now had Mama Cruse up on the second floor of the hospital, sharing a room with another elderly woman who was watching TV. A curtain separated Mama Cruse from the other patient just as before in the emergency room. The doctor took Joe aside, outside the room into the corridor while Danny sat with their Mama keeping her company. Joe thought forlornly about how during the few times one of his family members ever had to stay in the hospital, they never could afford TV or phone service like other families. They were just too poor for such niceties. The doctor held Mama Cruse's chart in one hand. "I ran some tests, urinalyses, liver enzyme. Your mother came back with elevated white blood count and blood in her urine."

Joseph nodded, "Okay, so then when can she come home?"

"Well right now we have her on antibiotics and IV fluids, but we also took a MRI of her abdominal region, and we found a mass."

Joe's throat tightened. "And?"

"Well, we believe it is cancerous. It could be benign; we will have to do a biopsy."

Joe's heart sunk as he leaned back weakly on the wall behind him. "Well, then do you think it's benign as of right now?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I don't believe so, because the primary lesion has broken through the wall of the right ureter and there are secondary masses in her right kidney, her liver and her lungs. A biopsy of the primary lesion will tell us more."

"Oh, my God..." Joe whimpered to himself, "What can you do?"

"Well, we can take the kidney and the ureter on that side and resect the liver, take the affected lobe out, then run her through chemo, but she also takes several psychotropics and without that kidney and part of her liver we will at the minimum have

to adjust her dosages downward and watch for toxicity. The fact that the cancer has obstructed her right kidney maybe one reason she has been so mentally unstable lately."

Joe burst out angry, "She is always unstable!" then in a lower tone and remorseful, "What are her chances?"

"Well, not that good, the biopsy will tell us how virulent the mass is, its composition and a genetic assay can indicate what our best route is, but I would advise you and your family to take it day by day."

Jake slid open one of the glass back doors to his brick patio carrying two margaritas, as Donna leaned back, pushing her jet black hair to the side. Seeing Jake, she arched her back on the reclining deck chair next to his in-ground pool. Jake watched her in her red bikini. He knew what she was but did not care, at least not unless it affected him in a bad way. With that thought in his mind, he smiled to her and handed her a drink, "Here you go my dear."

She took the drink and pushed the chair up, taking a sip from its straw, "Thanks, doll."

He sat down next to her, both of them tanning in the late-summer sun. He thought about closing the pool. Donna thought about what she could say regarding Omar. She looked out over their shadowy blue reflections shimmering along the pool water, seemed they were all living fake cellophane lives. What was real to her anymore, did it matter? Why did it seem to her that she sold her soul for a few copper pennies? Jake flashed an image in his mind of both of them having sex in the pool. To Jake it was not about making love, but just sex. To Jake it was always about winning the next race, the next win, big or small. He elevated his deck chair, looking passed the pool to the manicured

back lawn, "It's so nice out, Donna."

Donna's pushed her own thoughts away, "Sure is dear."

Jake looked into the pool water and then at her, "Hey want to take a dip? The water is warm today."

Donna sipped her drink awkwardly, "Maybe in a minute," then thinking again about her friends, "Hey, Jake..."

Jake disappointed and showing it, "Yeah?"

Donna was about to say something when the phone began to ring from inside his large and well-appointed house. Jake still annoyed frowned and got up, "I have to get the phone."

In a moment, he was back with the phone in his hand arguing with whomever was on the phone, "Yeah, I know, I know we have to get that part of the budget voted on. I know...I know...he has been a bastard...yeah, okay, Randy has been a bastard. I know...okay, bye..." Jake hung up the phone with a press of a button, sat down next to Donna again and then placed the phone on his lap, "Okay, where were we?"

Donna shrugged a bit, "Who was that?"

Jake puffed exasperated, "That was Steve. Randy is on the city council and he has been a pain in my ass, lately."

Donna nodded, "Oh," sipping on her drink, then after a minute, "I need to talk to you about something important, Jake."

Jake still annoyed, blurting out a, "What?"

Now Donna getting a bit angular about her relationship with him, but concealing

it except for the sharp tone in her voice, "I want to talk about Susan and Omar."

Jake placed his margarita on a table next to them both and got up. He walked into his home and came out with a beer, sitting down and opening it up, "What about Omar? That crack-head, what's he want besides money?"

Donna placed her drink down turning to him, "It's not always about money. You always think that."

Jake now quite angry, "He is nothing but a two-bit drug dealer."

Donna smiled a toothy cold grin. She had it and took it, now she gave it, "He is your two-bit dealer, how did you get that hole in your fucking nose J?"

"You're a bitch, you know that?"

Donna got up, "Listen, he needs some cash."

Jake leaned back swallowing down his beer, "We all do, he ain't getting shit from me."

Donna walked over to the pool, her back to him, "Well, I will tell him to hold your junk until I get what I want from you."

Jake now enraged stood up smashing the bottle on the patio, "I'll break his fucking legs!"

Donna turned to him as he grabbed her, slapping him, then scratching his face with her nails, "Don't touch me, don't you touch me!"

Jake held his face, a bit of blood now tracing down his face, "Donna!"

Donna took her keys from one of the tables, "I am out of here!" walked off the patio, down the stone path to the driveway and got into her car. She shivered as she

locked the doors of her car and quickly drove away.

Joseph turned to Danny as a few nurses finished prepping Mama Cruse for surgery. Danny was beside himself, somewhat hysterical. They were in pre-op, a curtain separating the three of them and another patient also waiting for an operation room bed. Joe grabbed Danny, somewhat looking up to him with his expansive frame. Right now though, although Danny had the power of an ox, he seemed weak as a newborn baby lamb. It was all too much for Danny and almost too much for Joe. Joseph had to keep his head, if he did not who would in that family of his. Joe shook Danny, “Danny, keep it together. Mama is just going in to get a few things done, and she will be out in an hour or two.”

Danny looked over at Mama Cruse, who was resting but awake, watching them both from the bed, her covers pulled up to keep her warm, “Mama?”

Mama Cruse looked warmly at Danny and then at Joe, “Mama loves you both very much.”

Joe knew it, unfortunately though when she was off her medication she always said hurtful words that went and cut deep, “I know Mama.”

Danny smiled, “I love you too, Mama,” then turning to Joe wiping his eyes, somewhat whispering, “But Joe, they're taking out CANCER.”

Joseph grabbed both Danny's hand and Mama Cruse's hand, Mama Cruse smiling, “I know Danny, don't worry, think of it like a tune-up for Mama.”

Mama Cruse nodded, “Yes, Danny think about it that way.”

Danny smiled weakly with big expansive eyes toward Joe, “Like what you did

with your Buick, Joe Joe?”

Joe nodded as the surgeon came out to them with scrubs on, “Like that Danny.”

The surgeon stepped over to them as a nurse and two surgical techs followed, “Okay, were ready to go folks.”

Danny turned away cowering from the nurses. Joe grabbed Danny pulling him up as he slumped. He was a heavy burden as Joe as lifted him.

The club beats were loud, the crowd pulsating with the reverberations of bass flickering through the floor and the people themselves. The strobes lights danced around the room, driving the heat of the dancers around them, pulling at those who were content to sit at the bar or watch the moving skin at the tables. The Crash Club was wild that night, some heading over from Townley, or the local Fishkill area. They went to party, to chase the tiger, get their piece, get drunk, or get screwed. Of course, there were the select few who wanted just to soak up the sweat, dance, or watch those who did. Trisha was at the bar sipping on a Mojito, next to Tonya, who was drinking a beer. Tonya turned to Trisha and above the beats, “You know I see a lot of potential in David.” Trisha nodded, not inclined to comment on what Tonya said. Tonya looked over to David who was sitting at a plush corner booth with a few of his friends, “I mean he could be a great business manager. He already is, but I think he could run the world.”

Joe had told Trisha about Kevin, and she felt maybe should could find out more, perhaps she could help Kevin and her boyfriend in the process, “Hey, what's been going on with David and Omar?”

Tonya looked a bit suspiciously at Trisha, but gave a crooked smile, turning about and leaning back somewhat on the bar, “You know, Omar is always up David’s craw. He

is an ass half the time, smoking up what he is supposed to sell and gambling what he is supposed to hand off to David. Omar and his damn primo's, what the hell man. David is getting pressure from above because of Omar.”

Trisha nodded, “Yeah.”

“His people's owe him and he just let's it slide.”

Trisha finished up her drink, looking over to David and then to Joe, who was at a table with Kevin, which she thought was unusual considering what was going on with Kevin and Omar. Joe was talking with Kevin, both with a whiskey sours, “David?”

Kevin hesitantly sipping his whiskey, “Let's go Joe, I don't want to be beat again.”

Joe looked over to Omar, who was moving through the crowds, “Look, I didn't know they would be here tonight. I just wanted to get out and about. I thought you could use some time away from your apartment, have a drink. Maybe I should take you to a rehab instead, I don't know.”

Kevin shook his head now whispering, “Listen, Joe your mom just had surgery and everything, we should go.”

Joe shook his head, “Yeah, she is home resting, Danny is watching her. There is nothing I can do right now.”

Kevin drank the whole whiskey, gulping wiping his face with his sleeve, “Right. I know. Listen can we go, it's not your skin.”

Joe nodded. “Okay, alright.”

“Like now?”

Joseph shook his head, finishing his drink, “Okay!”

Tonya got up, “No, Omar.” and motioned for Trisha to go with her, “Come on; let me show you to David.”

Trisha and Tonya made their way through the heat and sweat, through the dancing and the pounding noise around them. They moved through to the booth that held David and now Donna, who had made her way seemingly at the same time from out of nowhere to sit beside David. Drinking her martini, Donna looked up, brushing her long black hair back, “Hello, Tonya.”

Tonya nodded, “Yeah,” then barrel eying David, “David this is Trisha, one of my friends.”

David eased back, “Hey.”

Trisha looked at him and Donna slyly, “Hello, David and who is this?”

As Donna went to speak, Tonya intercepted and sat down next to David, on one side Donna and on the other side now Tonya, “That was Donna.”

Donna smiled bitterly, looking up at Trisha laughing lightly, but scorned, “Yes, hello, I am Donna.” holding out her hand.

Trisha shook her hand as Omar came over to join the group, “Nice to meet you.”

David lifted his drink to Omar, “Omar.”

Omar stooped down with his drink, his eyes so blood shot red that their color was apparent even in the dimly lit club, and lisped to Trisha, “Hey.”

He seemed very drunk, David grinned, “Why are you here?”

Omar tripped back a bit, “Well, I -hey, to party.”

David frowned, “Yeah,” turning to Tonya, “Hey, baby,” giving her a squeeze and kissing her on the cheek.

Tonya still was not buying it. She pulled away some from David's advances, noticing Kevin. “Omar, your boy is over there.”

Omar fell into the bench, “Who?”

“I don't know, over there,” Tonya pointing, “There, Kevin I think.”

Omar looked over through the crowd, not quite seeing what she was seeing, “Where?”

Tonya pointed again, “There, fool! Man, you must have been a crack baby!”

Omar smiled, grinning standing up sloppily, peering over the crowd, “Oh, yeah - I see.”

David reached over Tonya, grabbing Omar's shirt, “Sit, down.”

Omar now getting angry, “I am going to beat that mother-”

David moved over crowding Tonya in the process, grabbing Omar's collar forcing him into the bench, “Sit down!”

Omar drinking again leaning back, half asleep, Tonya now angry herself, “Get out, Donna,” Donna letting Tonya out of the booth, “I am out of here, don't worry.” Tonya walking away, disappearing in the crowd of pressed flesh.

Trisha quickly excused herself, moved through the crowd and then worked her way over to Joseph and Kevin. Joe and Kevin stood up ready to make a hasty exit. Trisha grabbed Joe, “Joe, you got to go.”

Joe looking stressed, “I know that, Trisha.”

All three of them quickly left the club and got into Joseph's Buick. Joseph turned the key, “Okay, people let’s get the hell out of here.”

Back in the club, Omar finally managed to pull himself away from David, “What the fuck, David!”

David gave Omar the finger, “Listen boy, you’re my Bitch and you know it! Sit down and calm down before I get to you later.”

Omar stumbled up from the bench and swigged down the rest of his drink, turning to David, staggering a bit, “Listen, without me you got shit!”

David stood up, pulling on his black jacket, grabbing Omar, “I am going to kill you!”

Donna quickly grabbed David, “No, baby! Please!”

David pushed Donna back, Omar punching David in the face, missing his jaw instead sinking his knuckles into his right cheek, teeth and bone. David staggered back for a second grabbing Omar’s neck, the crowd scattering a bit, but not much around them, David with his heavy right fist hitting Omar directly in his jaw, the force of impact cracking teeth, sending Omar back and down to the floor.

Donna grabbed David again, “Let it go, David, please!”

Tonya hearing the commotion rushing through the club to them, shaking David, “What are you doing, David!”

David wiping a bit of blood from his lip, “Don't you ever fucking touch me again!”

Omar getting up, spitting teeth and blood, wiping his face with his sleeve, “I got your back, I got it. Okay, David.” Omar spitting on the dance floor, “My bad.” slowly stumbling away, disappearing through the crowd, out of the club, into his car and driving away into the night.

Joseph and Danny were home watching TV, while Mama Cruse was in a back bedroom resting. Joe was clicking through the channels until he found a baseball game. Danny pointed, “Joe Joe, wait, it’s the Red Socks!”

Joe nodded sipping a cup of hot coffee. It seemed funny to others sometimes, when they got a visitor, which was rarely, when they had a pot of coffee on in the middle of the day. Joe smiled a bit, because it seemed to him that was one happy thing they all shared together. They were their own happy coffee clutch, well sometimes... “Yeah, okay we will watch it, the Yanks aren't on anyway.”

Danny was lying on the couch drinking coffee and munching on donuts, “Sounds good, Joe Joe.”

Joe looked out one of the big plastic windows of the old trailer. His mind began to wander. He thought about his past, how he had nothing and even less than nothing. He wondered how his grandparents wrecked his parent's future and then Danny's and his. It seemed that way too much was passed down from generation to generation. I did my best, he thought to himself. I don't know if it is enough, but I did my best. He wanted more, but all he had it seemed was an empire of dust. Joe picked at the arm of the chair. Maybe that was what one of the major problems surrounding his life, that it all seemed this or that, sand or mirrors, but what was actual and real he was not quite sure. Joseph remembered how when Danny was much younger, they used to play outside their old

apartment next to the highway. Back then, it was almost like anything was possible; if your imagination could think it, it became real, a new world to play in and be the master of. Now, Joe did not want to be the master of anything, no king just an average guy with an average life, which was way more than he had now. Maybe, Joe thought, seeing is believing and why couldn't seeing be just as real as the fantasy worlds they created years ago. Those worlds were created by the strength of the imagination and maybe, likewise what he could create with his sweat and his hands could be real too. How much effort do we give to fantasy? Why couldn't that same amount of effort be put to reality? That thought gave him hope and Joe grabbed it for a moment, not wanting to let it go. Maybe God would not let him go. He did not want to fall.

Just then, someone came to the door of the trailer, hollow metallic knocks were heard from the outside in. Joseph peered around the trailers white curtains to barely see the silhouette of a woman. Danny stopped eating donuts for a minute and looked up, “Joe Joe, someone is at the door.” the returned to his sugar fest.

Joe dismissing Danny sarcastic, “I know Danny, thanks,” getting up and opening the door. There standing in from of him was the woman they had met a few weeks earlier at Groos Tavern. He wondered, “Hello Donna -how did you find us?”

Danny looked up from his box of donuts and waved gleefully at her from the couch, “Hi Donna, Hi, Hi! Hi!”

Donna waved at Danny with a big smile, “Hi, Danny bear!”

Danny giggled a bit to himself, blushing a bit and then burying his face in his coffee.

Joseph gave her a suspicious look, “What do you want?”

Donna went to take a step further in and succeeded to do so, “Well, I wanted to see if your brother wanted to go out sometime.”

Danny looked up again and nodded, speaking out quite loudly, “Sure do, Donna! Sure do! What you think Joe Joe! Sure would!”

Mama Cruse could be heard from the back bedroom, yelling from her bed, “Who is at the door!”

Joe yelled back to Mama Cruse, “No one Mama!” then to Donna, “Look, I don't know how you found us, but I was supposed to call you, and we have our hands full right now. I am going off to college in just a week or so and Danny is going to be busy.”

Donna gave a crooked smile, brushing her hair back, “Well, I know. I found you by asking the bartender there your full names and such and asked if you were listed in the phone book. He said most likely, so I looked you up and here I am.”

Joe thought it very odd that a woman as attractive as Donna would want to hook up with someone like Danny. It wasn't that Danny was a bad man it is just that he was a bit slow, too innocent, and too naive for most women. Danny did date once in a while, but the most successful dates were always with women who were similar to him, the more similar the better the dates went. Joe felt a cold chill, she was very attractive and he thought at another time he would have liked to be in a relationship with her, but her going after Danny was to him just very unusual. Joe felt the protective father like part of his personality come out toward Donna, “Look, he is celibate. He has no sex drive.”

Donna looked toward Danny now confused, “Huh?”

Joe hesitated looking back at Danny, “Right Danny?”

Danny looked up from admiring the last donut in the box, “What's celibate, Joe

Joe?”

Donna poked Joe, “See!”

Joe began pushing Donna out the door, “He lost them in a car accident.”

Donna rubbed her head confused, “What?”

Joe completed moving her out to the porch, “Terrible, we mourned for months.”

Danny yelled out the door, “Bye, Donna.”

Donna yelled back to him as the door closed on her, “Bye, Danny bear!”

Joe locked the door behind him, turned around to Danny and leaned back, “Don't say a word Danny, not one word.”

Danny nodded, “Okay, Joe Joe.”

Mama Cruse again yelled from the back bedroom, “I want my lunch! Joe! Joe?”

Joe bit his finger, “Yes, Ma, coming!”

Chapter 4

Omar was driving around out in his old style Saab, windows open with Susan in the passenger seat. They were both driving aimlessly about in the cool late summer air. Omar was thinking where to take Susan and a bit about his troubles. Susan pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of her pocket, disgusted at only finding one left. She looked at Omar frowning, popping the cigarette in her mouth and lighting it. She took a deep inhale and put the lighter back in her pocket. She blew the smoke into Omar's face. Omar accidentally swallowed the smoke coughing, waving his hand over his face and grimacing at her, "Woman, what is up with you lately? You on the rag?"

Susan gave a sad-angry laugh, "No, ass. You need to pay David and get a real job, not dope slinging."

Omar glanced again at her while trying to keep his eyes on the road, a car passing by them, "Listen, you know I am going to make it big, real big and I don't need your bright ideas."

Susan took a puff and this time blew it out the open passenger side window, "You need to get real and not take any more shit from David, get out while you can."

Omar angry, "Listen--"

Omar being quickly cut off by Susan, "No -you listen!"

Omar pushed on the accelerator, the car hitting 70 through the back roads, "I don't want to fight no more, Susan!"

Susan flicked the remains of her cigarette out the wind, "Omar! You owe him 20 grand now! What do you think he is going to do to you! He is going to cut your nuts off!"

And you just keep on gambling and spending and drinking!”

Omar distracted by his anger nearly hitting a passing car, “That's it,” pulling his car off to the side of the road, “I do what I want to do!” and getting out, “You don't tell me what to do!”

Susan speechless watched him as he slammed the driver's side door behind him and began to walk down the road. Then Susan enraged got out her side of the car screaming at him, “Omar!”

Danny looked around the old trailer for something to eat. He checked the cabinets, each one with various objects, dishes, glasses, some oil, flour, a bit of sugar. Danny sighed closing the cabinets and sat down to watch some TV. He was lonely for his brother already. Meanwhile, Mamma Cruse was sleeping soundly in the back bedroom. She wasn't doing so well since the operation. Danny did not want to think of that though, instead he thought of food. He was hungry and after debating eating some of the sugar he decided to check his pockets for some money. He dug in his pockets and found a few crumpled bills. They lived close enough to Groos Tavern that he could walk it if he wanted to so he decided to go over and get something to eat.

Danny sat down at the bar. Mike seeing Danny come in immediately smiled rubbed his beard and came over, “Well, Danny boy how have you been?”

Danny clutching his money forlornly, “Okay.”

Mike noticing Danny's tone, “You don't sound so good, why so sad? Where is your brother?”

Danny shook his head, “Joe Joe went to school. He will be gone a long time.”

Mike comforting, patting Danny on his wide shoulder, “Well, Danny your a grown man. You can take it and if you need anything, you just come over here and ask me. I will set you on the right path.”

Danny nodded, “Thank you.”

Mike gave a warm smile, “How is your mom?”

Danny shrugged a bit unsure, “I guess okay. I think, maybe not so good.”

Mike holding a dish towel leaned over the bar to Danny, “Look, we all go through things Dan, that is what makes us stronger. When you come out through the fire you’re better off than before. Just pray and keep holding on and you will become the person you want to be. But, Dan you can't run, you have to be an adult, because if you run the problems follow you. Am I clear Dan?”

Danny nodded. “Yup, Mike.”

Mike picked up his voice, “Now, enough of this old man preaching stuff. What do you want, a drink, something to eat?”

Danny place the crumpled bills he had on the bar, “I got this and what can I get to eat with it?”

Mike unfolded the bills. “Well you got enough for a burger and fries. But I tell you what, I will tell the back to make what you want on the house.”

Danny thought about it, “A cheese burger, fries, onion rings and a soda.”

Mike, “Okay, Dan you got it.”

Danny sat there fiddling with a beer coaster. He listened to the cars passing down the street and then found himself drifting to the TV. He looked up and noticed that a baseball game was on. He watched it for a few minutes and then remembering that his brother was not there turned his head away. As he turned his head he found Donna sitting at a booth in the corner of the bar. She met Danny's eyes, smiled and waved him over. Danny nodded and went over to her, holding his hand out, "Hello, Donna good to see you, good to see you."

Donna shook his hand. Her small hand swallowed by his meaty palm. Donna pulled her hand back and patted the seat next to her, "Have a seat, Danny."

Danny nodded and sat down next to her. She moved over closer and Danny. Danny a bit uncomfortable by her closeness, but still attracted to her gulped out, "Your pretty."

Donna nodded, brushing her hair back over her shoulder, "Thank you Danny. Your a handsome man yourself."

Danny giggled a bit looking into her eyes, "Shucks, Donna. Thank you."

Donna smiled, sipping her drink through a small straw. She then looking up at him, "Where is your brother?"

Danny looked over to the TV, now far off in the corner, "He is gone."

Mike came back out to peer over at Danny and Donna, a bit surprised and a bit concerned. However, he decided to talk to Danny when he could get him alone. Michael relegated his concern to the background and kept a fatherly eye on Danny while he washed a few glasses.

Donna put her drink down, "Gone?"

Danny poked at the table, “He has gone to school. I miss him already.”

Donna seeing how sad he was, placed her hand on his thigh, “It's okay Danny,” now even closer, looking up again and into his eyes, “I am still your friend.”

Danny wiped a tear away, “Okay, Donna. I like that.”

Mike frowning went back into the kitchen, came out with Danny's meal and brought it over to them, breaking up the closeness between Donna and Danny. He placed the dish down in front of Danny. Donna backed away a bit and smiled at Mike, “Wow, look at that Danny.”

Mike placed the soda, “Here you go Danny.”

Danny looking up at Michael gave a big smile, “This looks good. It will go in my tummy, thank you Mike.”

Mike smiled, “Sure thing Danny, anytime,” then as Danny picked up his burger, taking a big messy bite, looking sternly at Donna, “I see you have found a new friend.”

Danny through a mouthful of burger, “Yup!” crumbs falling out of his mouth and onto his plate.

Donna nodded and patted Danny on the shoulder, “Yes, he is a very good guy.”

Michael rubbed his beard, “Yes, yes he is. He should stay that way.”

Joe slung his back pack down on a chair next to Trisha who was lounging in one of the campus hall chairs. Students were busy coming and going, here and there. Some had a bit of the lost look that usually occurs during the first few weeks of school. Trisha looked up, taking the head phones out of her ears, “Hello, there stranger.” As she got up,

hugged him and gave him a kiss, “How are you getting by?”

Joe hugged her again, “Okay, I got everything situated just so in my dorm room. The guy that shares the room with me seems okay too.”

Trisha motioned for them to sit down, “So, have you called your brother?” smiling warmly, “Is the trailer still in one piece?”

Joe shrugged, still uneasy about leaving Danny in charge, “Well, so far. Danny is taking it okay. I mean, it would have been easier to leave them if Mama did not have that big operation just a few weeks ago.”

Trisha took her music player, shut it down, wrapped the head phones around it and put it in her pocket, “Well, Joseph you have to live your life. You can't exist just to help others, even your family has to fight for itself once in a while.”

Joe, “I know,” rubbing his pants with the palms of his hands, “But, they are just - they're always in a crisis, they can't seem to get shit done. It is not just the immediate family, but the whole thing is off the vine on this one.”

Trisha broke in looking right into his eyes, reaching over and rubbing his leg. It was comforting to Joe, “How is your mom?”

“I should not have to be a parent to parents for the rest of my life. I am sick of this shit!”

Trisha grabbed Josephs hand, her hands were soft and warm, “I know Joe, that is what makes you a good man though. You would not be you without all the suffering you and your family has gone through. That is why I love you.”

Joe rubbed her hair, “I love you too, Trish- She is doing okay. The doctor does not know if the cancer will come back, or if the fact they took the kidney will hurt her ability

to deal with the psychotropics she is on. She is on lithium and a few others and everything has to change when you lose a kidney...” He looked her in the eyes adding, “...that's if she takes them, you know.”

Omar and one of his friends were playing video games in front of his big screen TV, while Susan sat in the background, on a love-seat next to them both. Omar had set his apartment up good but lately, to Susan's dismay, he had begun to sell some of his equipment. She thought it may have been more than just his gambling debt, maybe he had been using way too much. She yelled at him, “Omar! Listen, when are we going out!”

Omar caught a catch and ran for a touchdown, “Oh, yeah, take that Jamal!” he yelled cheerfully as he poked at his friend.

Jamal looked at him and grabbed the half empty bottle of vodka from the coffee table, taking a deep drink, “Your a fool. I was on zone-d.”

Susan yelled at him again, “Omar!”

Omar grabbed the bottle out of Jamal's hands, drinking, “What! What do you want, woman?”

She kicked the coffee table, “I want what you promised, that we were going out! All I see you doing here in your crib is playing games. I could have stayed home.”

Omar put the bottle down, “Maybe you should have! Maybe, I should bring you back to your dump of a place.”

Jamal leaned back a bit surprised to hear all this coming out of them both, “Hey, guys come on now.”

Susan reached over the table and grabbed the bottle, “All you have been doing is drinking, smoking your Get On and whatever fucking twigs you get your hands on, that crap ass Nixon you cut up and-” then she lost it. Susan jumped over the coffee table and grabbed Omar by then neck.

Omar dropped the bottle and pushed her off, “Your crazy!”

Jamal seeing this dropped the video game controller and went for the door, “Um, I will see you guy's later, bye,” making a quick retreat, closing the door of Omar's apartment behind him.

Susan jumped on him again, hitting him, “I hate you! Your going to kill yourself and me too!”

Omar grabbed her hands, “Listen, bitch!” pushed her off and slapped her, “I am done with you!”

She staggered back on the carpet, wiping a bit of blood from her lip, “I never should have meet up with you. Your nothing but trash.”

Omar got up, sat up in one of his chairs, and held his head in his hands. He began to cry. He felt lost, like a little boy and he felt he had ruined his life. He had dreams when he was a kid, now they were gone. Omar felt a wave of pain moving through his body, up from underneath his heart. It turned from almost a kind of cool blue sea foam to a frothy white as it washed up into his head. The pain was intense. He had a choice, he saw the road before him split into two, each heading down a separate path. The wave lapped the back of his mind and traveled forward into his temples. It changed from a warm white to hot red and then faded to black. He rubbed his temples and still crying he gave her a bloodshot stare, “Susan, what do you want me to do?”

Susan was so very blunt about the whole matter, “We need to get into Danny's

crib.”

Joseph sipped his beer, in the dim light of a 40-watt bulb in the corner of his dorm room. His roommate left him alone so that he could be alone with Trisha. Trisha sipped her beer. Music was pumping through a small stereo on one of his shelf's. They were sitting on his narrow bed. He reached out and began to kiss her on the lips. She held his jaw as he kissed her, wrapping his arms around her. Trisha's breath began to warm and Joe's palms began to sweat. He reached under her shirt and wrapped his arms around her waist. She grabbed the back of his hair and began to pull. Joe smiled, “honey,” Trisha responding by kissing his neck. Joe turned and worked the buttons down her shirt while he started to kiss her neck and then the middle of her chest. She moaned quietly as she pulled his shirt off him. Joseph unsnapped her bra and leaned her down on his bed. They began to move and turn as one. He made his way down to her naval as she arched her back, grabbing his and pulling him up again for her lips to meet his. Joe kissed her behind the ear, her neck and then went down again. In the corner of his mind he heard his cell phone ring. He tried to ignore it, but it was real. He paused for a moment, Trisha frowning as he again met his lips with hers, but the phone kept ringing. He lifted himself up slightly over her, “Wait, it will stop, give it a moment.”

Trisha kissed his shoulder, “I know honey, no problem.”

The phone did stop ringing. Joe smiled, pulling the back of her hair, Trisha arching her neck to him as he kissed it, her shoulder, and her breast. She felt the small of his back and his broad shoulder blades. He could smell her sweet perfume, she could smell his sweat, but then the phone began to ring again. This time though Joseph sat completely up, putting his head into his hands and then angrily flicking his arms, palms open wide, “Holy, crap I can't take this!”

Trisha sat up, “Well, there is always tomorrow.”

With the phone still ringing, Joe looking at her sarcastically, “No, because my dopey roommate has to study and his girl might want to come over, which means I am over at the library then.”

Trisha pointed to the cell phone next to the stereo, “You should answer it.”

Joe moaned exasperated, got up and picked up the phone. “Hello?” he said a bit upset as he opened the phone, only to have whoever it was just then hang up, “What a pain in the ass.”

Trisha clipped her bra back on, “They hung up? Who was it?”

Joe held out the phone to view the number, “Looks like my mom.” beginning to dial the trailer phone, “Let’s see what pesky wants.”

Mama Cruse answered the phone, “Hello? Who is this?”

“Who do you think?” Joe shaking his head and then sitting down next to Trisha.

Mama Cruse sitting up in her bed, “Oh, I don't know.”

“It is your son. What do you want?”

“Danny, your brother is gone, Joe Joe.”

Joseph leaned back his head hitting the dorm wall, rubbing it, “What do you mean he is gone?”

“He's been going out on and off and staying out long. Mommy needs him you know.”

Joe looked wide-eyed at Trisha who giggled a bit, reaching out and rubbing his

head after he had finished, “Well he can't drive ma, so he has to be walking. Did he say where he was going all this time?”

Mama Cruse looked out one of trailer windows, “He said he had a girlfriend. A car pulls up and he just goes. Mama needs you. I don't feel good you know.”

Joe held the phone so that Mama could not hear him say to Trisha, “Trisha, we got a big problem here, and then Joe holding the phone back to his ear, “Okay Mama, I will deal with it.”

Omar drove quietly with the car's headlights out, up to David's apartment. Susan was next to him, holding a bag and a crow-bar. He spoke quietly in the dark of the night to Susan who was rubbing her neck. She was sweating and breathing heavily, “Hey, remember when I get out, you get in the seat. If you see David or the popo's you beep the horn quick a couple of times.”

Susan looked at him, her eyes bright, scared, but full of adrenaline, “You know where I told you he keeps his roll?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Omar pointed to her window as he turned off the car, “roll your window down a bit so you can hear anything going on out there,” as he did the same on his side of the car. He reached out, “give me the stuff.” She handed it to him, “Here,” as he crept out of the car, quietly closing the door behind him.

She slid over to the driver's side seat, grabbing the keys and holding onto them, which were still in the ignition, ready to turn them in an instant. He looked back at her and paused, “Go!” Susan whispered urging him on.

He nodded and ran to David's door. It was a wooden door, which was good for Omar, but the door had a dead bolt and a regular door lock. For some reason Omar did not expect that while planning the break in. He propped the crowbar in the door between the door-nob and the dead bolt, looked quickly around him, and with all his strength pushed on it. The door gave, popping the door handle off but the deadbolt still partly held. Now sweating profusely, he gave one more push and this time the door opened completely. He pushed the door open with his forearm and closed the door behind him with his boot. He ran upstairs, flicking a light with his sleeve.

He looked around, a couch and a big TV. Omar then ran into the bedroom, a large bed, a dresser and then he found the closet. Omar opened the door of the closet, and found a lock box under some clothes strewn on the closet floor. He cursed to himself; Susan did not say what type of lock box it was. Omar was expecting some tin junk box, not a big industrial one. He propped it between his boots and jammed the crow bar partially into the it. Omar pushed and the bar twisted out of his hands. He placed the box back between his boots and pushed the bar back into the box. Just then, he heard the car horn, three short beeps. He picked up the box, "Shit!" and ran down the steps, falling down the last couple. Omar hit the door with his shoulder, "Damn you Susan!" He pulled the apartment door open and ran to the car.

She moved over, "Get in fool!"

He fell into the car and gave her the box, "Here!"

She looked at it amazed, "What the hell you give me the box for?"

Omar turned on the car, "Who's around?" pulling the car out of park as a man in a wheelchair was yelling halfway down the street.

Susan yelling at him, "That old goat in the wheelchair!"

Omar racing away in his car, passing Paco who was yelling at them shaking his fists, “You Pendejo! You Cabron!”

Omar swerved down the street, “What did you beep the horn for?”

She angrily pushed him, “Cause he saw me.”

“So. It's Paco!”

“Yeah, well...” Susan looked around, “...Where is the crow bar?”

Omar quickly looking about, passing a car, and entering the highway, “I must have forgotten it, damn.”

Susan rolling her eyes, stomping her shoes and pushing him again, “You’re a complete ass, Omar! I told you do it right! You gave me the damn box too! What the hell am I going to do with this damn box?”

“We will open it when we get to my place.”

Omar placed the box on his coffee table. They sat down exhausted. After a few minutes, Susan looked at him, “Are you going to open it?”

Omar took a deep breath, “What am I supposed to open it with Genus? I don't have the crow bar.”

Susan thought for a moment, “How about a butter knife?”

Omar looked at the box, then at Susan and then at the box again, “Your kidding right? You have been drinking too much, woman.”

Susan got up to go into the kitchen, “I have not.”

After a half, an hour Omar finally got the box open with a butter knife and a hammer. They looked into the box as Omar dropped the butter knife disgustedly exhausted. In the box, he saw money and a pistol, looked like a 45. Omar took the money out, quickly counting it, "It looks like 20 grand."

Susan grabbed the money, "Let me see."

Omar took the gun out, releasing the clip into his hand, "Loaded too." He then snapped the clip back in, "I may need this."

Chapter 5

The professor was writing equations on the chalkboard as Joe looked up and then copied them down on his notepad. It was only the first few weeks of school, but to himself he seemed to be getting along okay. He wanted a better life, not what his mother had, not what his father had, not what the past held. He wanted to let go of them, not because he did not love them, but because he could not save them forever. Michael the bartender once told him that you cannot save a drowning man if you yourself can't swim and you cannot save a drowning man who does not want to be saved, he will take you down with him.

What could Joseph do for them that would solve their issues? It was not just theirs but the weight of their forefathers. The family had at one time been upper-middle class, in fact, you could say they were quite well off, but that was several generations ago, in the 1920s. Unfortunately, through years of abuse, neglect and selfishness each new generation fell further into chaos. Joe was determined to break the chains of iniquity. He would break them, even if he had to go halfway around the world and move mountains to do so. Joe had chosen a seat next to the classroom's windows, and he took a minute to look out an open one next to him. He could smell the near fall air, and the sun was bright against the shrubs, trees, and flowers. He would start now and if it took more extreme measures to break the back of the chaos that surrounded his family, his life, he would do it, one-step at a time. For now Joe felt, he had to take it slow because one false step and he could fall into the trap that had enslaved many of his family before.

Joseph's mind drifted to his father. Perhaps it was because he thought of Mike before, perhaps because the math professor was an older gentleman. In any event, he thought about his the last vague recollections of him, when he was just a child, a boy in

the city. How could someone just destroy a family, a wife? How could you just sit your life out gambling at the city tracks, the dirty, filth stained betting parlors while your children went hungry in a small town in the middle of nowhere? Joe thought to himself, “You were a fool Dad; you rejected your sons, two grown men with talents and dreams and love to give you, you missed it all for a few tokens and a few bagels at some shitty city deli. Now you are gone, and you missed it all, your blood. You missed it all.” Joe looked back at the professor and began to write again. His father traded his soul for a handful of copper coins.

As Joseph finally became absorbed in the then and there, his phone began to vibrate. He thought better than to pull it out of his shirt pocket, but he did anyway. Joe looked at the number. It did not look familiar, but the number looked like it could be the hospital. Joe quietly answered the phone, “Hello?”

A young woman somberly asked him over the phone, “Are you Joseph Cruse?”

“I am in class now...I am.”

The professor pointed to him to hang up the phone. Joe pointed to the phone and motioned that it was serious, and the professor allowed him to excuse himself to the hallway. Joseph did so, quietly stepping out of the class and into the hallway. He walked down the hall a bit, “What is going on?”

“Your mother has instructed us to inform you she has been admitted and is doing okay.”

Joe held his head, “What is wrong? Why is she there?”

“She is going through acute kidney failure, so we need to see you. She has also been off several of her medicines. The doctor would like to see you if possible.”

Joe slumped down on his haunches his back to the wall, “Where is my brother?”

“Your mother said she did not know where he was.”

He went to his knees.

David pulled up near his apartment, seeing the door busted, half-open. Disgusted he found a parking spot and slammed the car door behind him angrily. He was quite pissed. Who broke into my apartment? David thought to himself, I am going to kill the fool who did this to me. Tonya got out the passenger side and ran up to him. David was walking briskly, “I am going to break the legs of the fool who did this.”

Tonya grabbed his shoulder, “Wait, calm down, and find out who it was first. You got a few enemies, so find out first.”

David grabbed the doorknob to his place, and it fell off into his hand, “Shit.”

Tonya looked at him, “Ain't nobody called the cops either.”

David gave her a cold stare, “Why would they?”

Just then, he heard the ragged howl of an old man down the street wheeling to him. It was Paco. He was waving to him with one hand and steering his chair with another, “Hey, peddler! Dealer!”

David walked up to him, meeting Paco half-way up the street, “You know who did that?” pointing down the street.

Paco nodded, brushing his now sweaty straggly white hair from his face, “Your Juggler did that.”

David laughed with Tonya now at his side again, “Old man, I got a lot of Rats.

You don't help me much.”

Paco nodded, holding out his hand, “You got a cigarette; I tell you more for a smoke?”

David looked to Tonya, who then fished in her pocket for a crumpled half a pack, “Here, she said giving it to him.”

Paco looked at it, “Mmmm...half pack,” then looking up to them bolt, “He came with his girl last night. You must have been with your girl, huh? He took your box.”

David now quite enraged, grabbing the arm-rest of Paco's chair, “Who! Tell me, before I push you off a bridge!”

Paco held out his palms, looking up smiling, “Easy, my friend. I tell you the whole thing, but I have no matches to smoke with.”

David looked over to Tonya again, “Give him your lighter.”

Tonya growled at him, “What!”

“Do it.”

She fished for her lighter, tossing it to the old man. He caught it and smiled, “Gracias -looked like Omar to me.”

David gritted his teeth, “Okay.”

Joe rushed into the hospital, meeting the hospital's front desk, “I would like to know what room Betty Cruse is in.”

The patient representative scanned the computer, “You are?”

“I am her son, Joseph Cruse.”

She looked down at the computer and then up at him, “She is on this floor, Oncology wing room 137,” taking a blank ticket, writing the room down and visitor, then handing it to him, “Here, clip this on your shirt.”

Joseph took it and clipped it on his shirt, “Thank you.”

She pointed down the hall, “go through that door there and down the hall, take your first left.”

Joe nodded and rushed through the door, down the hall and took the first left. Another set of double doors opened, and he went onto the ward. He looked at the hospital room numbers finding his mothers. He peered in. She was on the near side of the double room, resting with her eyes closed. A doctor stepped up next to him from behind, “Are you the son of Ms. Cruse?”

Joe turned around, “Yes.”

He looked at him, “I am Dr. Feingold, and Dr. Dhawan will be here in about an hour. If you want to wait, it would be most beneficial. He needs to talk to you about your mom's cancer. Your mom's health is very serious. I am assigned to your mom as well. We ran blood work and her lithium levels are leveling off, but her kidney is not functioning well.”

Joe nodded, “Has my brother been here to visit her?”

“I cannot say, I don't think so. Has your mom taken her medicine lately?”

Joe shrugged looking in, “It is hard to say. She usually takes her medicine for a while and then just stops until she gets psychotic and then we have to go and hospitalize her to get her to take them again.”

“It's important for us to know, because she came in with very high levels of lithium in her blood, and if she had stopped taking her medicine several days before, it would give us an indication of how severe her situation really is. She has blood in her urine as well as an elevated white blood count. She came in with Jaundice, dehydrated, and had not eaten well it seemed for several days. Have you been watching her?”

Joe a bit defensive, “I was at school, my brother was supposed to take care of her in my absence.”

The doctor nodded thoughtfully, “I see.”

Omar was on a roll. He was hitting the pool table hard at another bar in the town of Greenburgh. He and David had several bars and clubs they frequented, “Hey, I am going to win this one hands down baby,” he said cheerfully, hiding the burn in his stomach, the pain in his chest, giving Susan a big hug.

She pushed him away, “Fool, let's go.”

Omar pushed back, “I am on a roll. I will win it all, baby!” he cheered, poking her with the butt of the cue stick, Susan pushing him away.

Samos pulled a pick out of his back pocket, picking his graying hair, sipping a beer as he waited for Omar to pick a shot. Samos was one of the best pool players in the area, no doubt his lanky height gave him a bit of an advantage over his opponents. He rarely played local, but this time he was in the neighborhood, “What's it going to be?”

Omar pointed, “Corner pocket,” and carefully took his shot. The ball slammed into the pocket hard, hopping in. “Next, over side pocket,” Omar said smiling, hitting the ball hard again, with a snap and clack, the billiard clipping the bumper and spiraling out,

“Shit!”

Samos smiled, picked his hair again quickly, and then deposited the pick into his back pocket. He took his stick, walked about the table, and a good shot caught his eyes. “Combo, two-ten side corner pocket,” Samos said pointing with his stick. He quickly chalked up and shot. The ten neatly fell into the side pocket. The cue ball then returned to a convenient position on the table. He pointed, “Two into the side pocket,” and then cracked the ball.

Susan grabbed Omar at the collar of his shirt, whispering not too softly in his ear, “Get out of this game alive.”

Omar watched as Samos sank the two into the side pocket, “I will.”

Susan pleaded with him, “No, you don't understand. You never do! You have a thousand dollars on that table!”

Samos looked over to Omar and Susan, “Eight ball,” turning to the table pointing with his cue stick, “corner pocket,” and hit the ball in, “Game over.”

Omar pleaded, “Wait!”

Samos went to take the two grand from the table. Omar quickly reached for the money, his hand covering it before Samos could get to pile of cash. Samos gave him a questioning look, “Yeah, Omar?”

“Listen?”

Samos leaned over him, “Get your hands of my money.”

Omar shrank his hand back, “Let's play again?”

Samos looked at a few who were over in his corner drinking, smiling at them and

then at Omar, “Do you have money to put up?”

“No.”

Samos took the two grand and folded it to put it into his back pocket, “Then you're done.”

Omar shook his head. The pain in his chest became fear, “No, no,” he whispered. He had lost the whole amount he stole from David, “No,” he pulled his pistol out from his pants and pointed it at Samos, “Gimme the money.”

Samos gave him a fierce look, enraged. He yelled, “What!” the people in the bar moving back a bit, whispering, some leaving out the front and back door, Samos turned his fists and with power back-handed Omar with a long-armed reach. Omar fell back from the powerful blow twisting his face as he hit the floor, the pistol kicking out of his hand as it hit the floor hard.

The pistol bounced and slid over near Samos. Susan rushing over, “Omar!” grabbing Samos, Samos pushing her down.

Samos picked up the pistol, grabbed Omar by the neck, and pulled him up, “You point a fucking gun at me!” With Omar's neck in one hand, the pistol in the other. He again leaned over Omar, this time pulling him over the pool table. He pointed the barrel of the gun right to his forehead.

Susan getting up standing, pleading next to Samos, “Please! Don't kill him!”

Samos laughed at her and then growled at Omar, “What do you say?”

Omar sweating, crying, “Please, please...”

Samos, cocked the gun, “Next time I will put a bullet in your head.” He backhanded Omar again, who fell over crumpled on the floor, under the pool table this

time. Samos grabbed the money, now on the floor with Omar, took the clip out of the gun, cleared the chamber, and tossed the gun onto the table. He smiled to the bartender and then Susan, who was crying next to Omar wiping the blood from his mouth. Samos took the clip with him outside and threw it into the parking lot. Samos walked down the street laughing to himself. Some people never learn, He thought. Some people never learn.

Joseph put his key into the trailer doorknob and turned it. He felt the door unlock. He turned the doorknob and entered his home. It seemed a bit alien to him. Joe hoped he would find Danny there. He peered about, “Hello?” but there was no answer. A small chill ran up his spine. Joe closed the door behind him looking about. The place seemed a bit disheveled. There were a few blankets on the couch, some dirty dishes in the sink and one of the upper cabinets was open. He went over to peer in the sink, which upon inspection looked quite disgusting, and took a look into the open cabinet. There was a jar of peanut butter with the top off. Joe found the lid, spun it on and put it back, quietly closing the cabinet door. Joseph then made his way to the back of the trailer. Danny's bed was not made, some of his clothes on the floor next to a nightstand. Joe frowned in heartache and moved to his bed. He saw it made neatly. Finally, he moved to the back bedroom, his mother's bedroom. He found it disheveled. The sheets were strewn, a pillow next to the back door. Both his mother's dressers were open as well. Joseph looked into them. Some clothes must have been hurriedly taken when the ambulance was called. Joe sat on the bed quietly, putting his head in his hands. He sat there for a minute or two, became sleepy fell back and passed out.

Trisha's cell phone began to ring. She looked at the number, it was Tonya. Trisha

was in the campus library, at one of the computer terminals. The phone rang loud causing eyebrows to rise. Unfortunately, because of this she was forced to answer it, “Hello?” Trisha whispered as she quickly logged off the computer, grabbing her book bag and getting ready to leave the library. Of course, it was Tonya, but she answered as such anyway, “It's Tonya, you got a minute? It is really, really important.”

Trisha shrugged, “I guess, hold on a minute,” and then after quickly leaving the building, “I was in the library. What is going on?”

Tonya could hear passing cars in the background, David driving up to a gas station, “I got only a second here.”

Trisha leaned up against the wall of the library. She was now getting a bit concerned, “What? What is it?”

“Listen, David is going to go after Omar. Omar I think is going to go after Kevin. I called you because your boyfriend is tight with Kevin. Get him out of town...”

Trisha could hear the door of the car open as David got in, “Who you on the phone with?” then Tonya telling David, “Just some wrong number” the phone then going dead.

Trisha looked at the phone's screen. The phone now disconnected. She hung up and looked up at the sky. It was getting cloudy. It looked like rain.

Joe woke up to a meaty hand shaking his shoulder. He opened his eyes briefly and then startled, jumped up, “What!”

Danny leaping back, “Sorry, Joe! Sorry!”

Joseph rubbed his eyes, then smoothed his hair back angrily, “Where the hell have you been?”

Danny now near the corner, backed up to one of Mama Cruse's dressers, “Sorry Joe Joe, I did not mean to scare ya.”

Joe slid over on Mama Cruse's bed, “Here sit.”

Danny nodded agreeably and sat next to Joe, “Sorry, Joe Joe.”

Joe nodded, okay. It was getting dark out and drizzle again hit the roof of the trailer. He reached over to turn on a light, “Where have you been by the way?”

Danny smiled thinking about it, “Oh, I been out with Donna.”

Joe suppressed some anger, “How did you get home?”

“She has a real nice car, and she dropped me off here,” Then Danny blushed, “She gave me a kiss, and we did some other stuff before too.”

Joe looked at the clock, it was mid-afternoon, “Listen, Danny I told you to take care of Mama. It looks like you did not do such a good job.”

Danny sheepishly moved a little off Mama Cruse's bed, “I know Joe Joe, but she wasn't on her pills, and she yelled at me. Nothing I did was good for her.”

Joe nodded understanding just how he felt, “Why didn't you call me?”

“I did not want you to get mad, Joe. Mama was mad and then if you got mad, I would just cry,” Then with a sad look at Joe, “She got real sick. I thought she would get better.”

Joe stood up, “And did you call the ambulance for her?” hearing his cell phone ring, which he had placed on the counter in the kitchen.

“Naw, Joe Joe. I went out and when I came back, she was gone.”

Joseph shook his head a bit, went into the kitchen to grab his phone and answered it, “Hey Trisha, what's up?”

Danny then following Joe entered the kitchen, the rain getting heavier outside now. Danny listening intently, “Who is it, Joe Joe?”

Joe waved a hand of dismissal at Danny and into the phone, “No, well we got a bit of chaos here, yeah, I got a minute...”

Danny seeing as he would have to wait for information, found the cabinet that contained the peanut butter, unscrewed the top and stuck his finger in. Joe seeing him from the corner of his eye pointed, “Get a spoon Danny.”

Danny nodded, “Sure, Joe Joe.”

Then Joe's eyes widened, “What! Huh? Shit! -okay, Trisha, love you...bye.”

Danny seeing his opportunity, “What did she say?” licking his fingers.

Joe looked at him licking his fingers and with the patients of a saint, “I thought I told you to get a spoon?”

Danny smiled, “I know.”

Joe rubbed his temples for a moment, “Listen, I got to get Kevin and take him someplace. I want you to go to the hospital and sit with Ma for a while, a few hours.”

Danny nodded, sticking a finger back in the peanut butter jar, “How, you take me, Joe Joe?”

Joe pulled out his wallet giving Danny some money, “Take a cab, Ace cab. Stay a few hours, you hear me?”

Danny grabbed the money with sticky fingers. "Okay, Ace cab service."

Joe then placing his wallet back in his pocket, his cell phone, and his keys, "Call me before you even think or attempt to leave the hospital, okay?"

Danny nodded again cheerfully, "Okay, Joe Joe." the rain came down now, and it was beginning to get heavy.

Kevin heard a rap on his front door, the steel sounding hollow. He rolled off his mattress, which was still on the floor, pushing off garbage as he got to his knees. The banging on the door continued, "I hear you," Kevin yelled weakly, holding his pounding head. He could hear the rain hit his only window. He grabbed a chair to pull him up, then pushing old food cartons from the chair he sat on it, a roach securing away. He went to pass out again, but again, there was pounding at his door. He stood, "I hear you!" stumbling down the steps. Kevin carefully opened the door, just a crack, finding Omar. Still half-dazed in shock, Kevin attempted to close the door, but he was too slow in his weakened stupor. Omar pushed it in, "I got you now!" he yelled slamming the door behind him.

Joseph rushed over to Kevin's apartment. Joe parked his Buick abruptly, half on the sidewalk and in the pouring rain ran up to his door. He found the door ajar. Joe opened it a crack more, "Kevin?" he yelled up the steps, the rain soaking his head and his shirt. Thunder began to clap outside as Joe carefully moved up Kevin's apartment steps. It was dark, Joe could see very little, except the outlines of the ruin Kevin lived in. Again, Joseph called out, "Kevin?" and a weak moan was heard. Joseph found a usable light switch and flicked it. The overhead light revealed garbage, a chair, blankets, and a bed on

the floor, but not Kevin. Still he heard a bit of movement. Joseph kneeled down near the mattress, "Kevin?" he said as he turned his ear to listen more closely. Finally, Joe grabbed the mattress and turned it over. There under the mattress, lay Kevin in a pool of his own blood. Joe shocked, fell back onto the seat of his pants. He grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911.

Chapter 6

Joseph drove to the hospital, following the ambulance. He then met up with the police who were at the hospital for the second time. Joe finished up a quick debriefing consisting of how he knew Kevin and how he knew that a few people were after him for the bills he owed them, that Kevin was an addict and so on. The police wanted confirmation that Kevin owed a few people, and that Kevin asked him for a few dollars to help him out a while ago. Joe did neglect to tell them that it most surely was Omar who put the two bullets in Kevin's chest.

Joe watched Kevin being rushed into surgery, then with a deep tired sigh, he went downstairs to see him mom. Joseph found his mother's room and entered. He entered expecting to see Danny. He did find his mother sleeping, but Danny was not there. Joe sat there for a while. It was now getting late in the evening, and he was so very tired. Where was Danny, Joe thought to himself. Why was he always looking after his family? Why couldn't he just let them all go, and live his own life? He had already missed several classes. He could not miss too many more even with the kind of circumstances his family was in now. Joseph pushed his thoughts away. He would think about it all later, for now he needed to eat. Joe left the room, left the hospital, and found a dinner that happened to be open all day and all night. He sat down, and the waitress walked over. She gave him a menu, with a pen and pad in the other, "Hello there, would you first like something to drink?"

Joseph looked up at her, picked up the menu, and then looked outside to his car, the night sky, and the rain. Joe unfolded the menu, "Um, coffee."

She nodded, smiling, "You got it," then left to get the pot of coffee and a cup. Again he remembered how tired he was and hungry. Joe thought about the rain, and his

mind drifted back to when he was a kid. It was only recently that he had managed to get a car. Joe remembered how when he was young his mom, and he used to walk to get groceries, how they got caught in the rain once or twice. He remembered how people used to pass them by on the road. They used to drive by dry and warm never really stopped to ask if they needed a ride. Maybe everyone was just in their own little world and wanted it to stay that way. The world, Joe had found out was a scary place sometimes, and it seemed the majority of people he met just wanted to keep themselves behind self-constructed walls. The waitress returned pouring him a cup of coffee asking him, “Would you like to order now?”

Joseph nodded, briefly looking over the menu, “I will have that steak and eggs thing.”

The waitress finished pouring his cup of coffee, left creamer for him, took the menu smiling, “Okay, steak and eggs it is,” and left him again to think.

Joe opened a few of the creamers, pouring them into his coffee. He took a spoon and blankly stirred the cup of coffee. Maybe he needed to just grow up himself, Joe thought. Who did not have issues with their families? Somehow, it seemed that he was missing something. Maybe that something was just the acceptance that life had unknowns in it and he could not answer everything, would he even want to? Did he have to put it in words? Must a person always try to find a hole for every peg? Joe took a sip of coffee. It was strong, but still quite good. Joseph thought he needed to be satisfied more with the simple things that life gave him every day, a cup of coffee, some eggs, steak, a cooling fall rain on his car. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then the steak and eggs came.

The waitress placed the meal in front of him smiling again, “Here is your steak and eggs.” then she handed him a bottle of ketchup, “Anything else?”

Joe smiled at the dinner. He looked sleepily at her, “No, thanks. I am good for now.”

The waitress pleased, “Okay, let me know.” then turning, “You nodded off there for a moment, you okay?”

Joe cut into the steak, “Yes, long night, my mother and my friend are both in the hospital.”

The waitress hearing this, about to leave his table for another, came back for a moment, “Oh, I hope they are okay?”

Joseph nodded, “Yes, everything is fine.” Perhaps it was a lie, perhaps not. Kevin may not have made it through the surgery and with that sobering fact Joe could not help but think of how fortunate he was to be alive to simply enjoy the taste of a steak, He told Kevin to stop using, he told him many times. There was just nothing more he could do until he went back to the hospital. Joe thought uncomfortably about life, death and the frailness of being human. He thought about how they used to say grace when he was a young kid. Joe could not remember why they had stopped or when they had stopped eating together, for that matter. He felt uneasy, but thankful for the food he had and to be alive. Joseph closed his eyes half-asleep and for the first time in a very long time, he said grace. He thanked God for the food in front of him that he could afford to buy it and enjoy it, because he was alive.

The surgeon came out to meet with Joe, who was in the waiting room. He gave a sad look at him, “I am sorry, but your friend did not make it.”

Joseph looked up at him, a crushing weight of sorrow entering his chest, “But, why?”

The surgeon showed him literally by pointing to himself, “The bullets pierced the superior vena cava and the subclavian artery, here,” he said pointing to his shoulder, “Although we were able to stop the bleeding, he had lost so much blood that he went into severe shock.”

Joe looked at the television in the upper corner of the waiting room and then blankly at the surgeon, “Oh.”

The surgeon took a deep breath, “Do you know his parents?”

Joseph looked down at the tile floor, “Yeah, um, I know his mother.”

The surgeon nodded, “Will you be here a while?”

Joe nodded, looking up blankly again, “My mom is downstairs, room 214 -Yes.”

The surgeon gave a weak smile, “Okay, good. A case manager will meet with you downstairs.”

Joe sat in front of his mother’s bed. It was morning and he was there to see her open her eyes, smile, sit up and eat a bit. They had her back on her medications. It was nice to see her more vibrant and in good spirits. Joe tried to hide the grief he was going through with Kevin and the fact that he now knew the cancer his mother had returned, this time spreading. The cancer had metastasized. For now Joseph was grateful he was there with her, and that she was fully aware, happy. She ate her eggs. "Joe, it is so good to have you here with me."

Joseph smiled, sitting next to her, “Yepper, Mama.”

“How has school been?”

Joe popped the lid off his mother's warm cereal, "Okay, very good."

Mama Cruse picked up her decaffeinated coffee, sipping it and frowning, "Mama is so very proud of you."

Joseph caught the frown, "What's wrong, Mama?"

She put the cup down, "Its fake coffee."

Joe laughed, smoothing his mother's hair down, "How do you know?"

She smiled wisely, "I can tell, no zing."

Joe pointed to the warm cereal, "You should eat your oatmeal."

Mama Cruse gave another frown, "I would rather have a real cup of coffee and something sweet," then sitting up further in her bed leaning over to her son, "Do Mama a favor, get her a real cup of coffee and a donut."

Joseph smiled again, "Ah, I wish I could but none till you get home."

Mama Cruse disheartened a bit fell back a bit on her pillows, "Where is your brother?"

Joseph took the oatmeal and began eating it himself. He began thinking about Kevin and his mother, then heartache overwhelming him again. Joe turned to think about his brother...what the hell was going on, "I don't know mom. I just don't know."

Joseph drove over to their trailer, quickly looked inside to see if Danny was there and then left again. He needed to find him, but where?

Donna was driving fast down the road, her Thunderbird flying down the highway. Danny was beside her, looking out the passenger window, which was slightly open to let fresh air in. Donna fumbled for a pack of cigarettes, then shaking a bit she placed one in her mouth and lit it. She took a puff, glancing at Danny, who still looking out his window, “Danny, you know I we got to go to my friend Jake?”

Danny turned to her and nodded, “Yepper, sure. You said you got like what my mom got and-”

Donna took a deep inhale of the cigarette interrupting him, “-Jake has the money for the operation. He has it and you just stand by me there, when we get there.”

Danny a bit concerned, “Yes, Donna,” then thinking about his mother, “Are you going to be okay? Mama is not too good.”

Donna gave a quick, but hesitant smile at Danny, “Yes.”

Danny smiled back giving her a big grin, “Okay,” then, “I need to see my momma soon, Donna.”

Donna nodded, “I will drop you off at the hospital this afternoon.”

Danny thought for a moment, maybe I should have let Joe to buy me that cell phone he wanted me to have. Then Danny had an idea, “Donna, what about your cell phone?”

Donna in deep thought, “Huh?” throwing her half-finished cigarette through the open driver-side window, “Oh -you can call him when we're done, not right now though honey.”

Danny nodded in part agreement and in part question, “Okay?”

Jake had just come home from a business meeting. He took his suit jacket off, took his tie off, and headed for the mini bar. He found the refrigerator and made himself a drink, scotch and water. He put some ice in it and sat on the couch, flicking on his wide-screen television. It was good to be king, Jake thought to himself. He opened the small door of his coffee table. He shuffled the contents of the draw for a moment, found a little box, opened it, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He took it out and closed the draw. Jake began to unfold the paper, but just then was interrupted by the sound of someone pulling into his driveway. By the sound of the engine, it was Donna. He tossed the paper onto the table, took a sip of his drink, and answered the door.

There was Donna and a rather expansive man next to her. Donna smiled weakly, “Hello, Jake.”

“Donna,” Jake said as he opened up the door for them, “who is your friend?”

Danny smiled as they both walked in, “Name, is Danny,” holding out his hand, “Danny.”

She smiled nervously at Danny and then at Jake, “A good friend. He is here to help me out and keep an eye on me.”

Jake thought it a bit odd, but not thinking much of the statement, “Come in, sit down both of you.”

Danny agreeably, “Sure thing, Sir,” with all three of them sitting around the coffee table. Danny sat next to Jake while Donna sat in a chair next to Danny. Jake sat and then stood back up pointing, “Anyone want a drink?”

Danny was about to say yes, but Donna interrupted him, “No, we need to talk and

then go.”

“Oh, okay,” Jake said frowning and then sitting back down. He picked up his drink and sipped it gingerly, “What do you need Donna? Anything we have gone over before?”

Danny begin to look around the room, the expensive lamps and tables. He looked at the coffee table and at the little white paper packet. Jake finding Danny eying the piece of paper scooped it up with his hand and tossed it back into the table’s small drawer. Donna nodded, brushing her long hair back, crossing her legs, “I need you to help me help Omar.”

Jake gave a hearty laugh, “Omar! Why do you bring him up? -as if I should even know him?”

Danny turned to look at Jake laughing. He said nothing but Donna did, “He needs cash and put it bluntly; if he goes your mess goes with it.”

Jake laughed a bit again, sipping his drink, “Yeah, what mess?”

“I will see to it. You will lose your access, your reputation, and me as well.”

Jake put the drink down and stood, “Well, you I can afford to lose.”

Danny watching them intently, “Lose what? Donna is not feeling well.”

“Never mind, Danny,” Donna said tepidly to him, then angrily to Jake, as Jake raised questioning eyebrows to Donna with what Danny had just said, “Let me be clear, I need 10 grand, and I need it by next week.”

Jake disgusted coughing, “You know you're a piece of work, and you always were just a whore. I should have left you wallowing with that old pimp of yours.”

Donna pulled Danny up by the hand, “I got Danny here. He keeps a close eye on me, and he does favors for me if I ask him to, right Danny?”

Danny nodded, “Sure I do Donna,” and then looking right at him, “I would do anything for Donna, Mr. Jake.”

Jake eyed the large man, “You will get it by next week,” sipping his drink, “now leave and close the door behind you.”

Donna took Danny by the hand and just before they left, she turned to Jake and matter-of-fact spoke, “I am a prostitute and you're a John. Always remember that Jake. I did what I needed to, you did what you wanted too.”

Jake closed the door behind Donna, Danny and sat back down on his couch. He took a deep drink of his scotch, found that small paper in the coffee table drawer, opened it and inhaled the contents. Jake then leaned back, closed his eyes for a minute or two then sat up and found the phone next to him on the couch. Jake picked it up and dialed a rarely used number. He waited for a moment, and a terse discussion began. Jake finished his drink and added, “Hey you know Charles, driving is a bitch these days, and everyone has accidents.”

Joseph made his way over to Groos Tavern. He had a strong hunch Mike might know where his brother was. Joe thought to himself as he drove in the now cooling late-summer air. It would be officially fall soon. Joe needed to get back to school, but first he needed to get his mother home and get Danny to take a bit more responsibility for himself and their mother. He felt conflicted about having Danny, he supposed, burdened with his mother, although Joseph tried to convince himself that the term “burdened” was not such a bad one considering Mama was their Mama. Joe did love them both and after all he did

see her at her worst many times and yet still took good care of her and Danny. But, Joseph brooding in thought, Danny needed just a bit more maturity.

He knew that Danny could help their mother and take care of the house if he tried. He had seen Danny's work before, he had seen Danny learn to read and figure out the balance of a check book. Joe had seen Danny even drive okay, though he did not have a permit or license (Joe let him drive the back roads a bit when he could). Joe thought about how he should have bought Danny that cell phone he saw when it was on sale that time. Small oversights can get the better of any situation, but no one is perfect least of all him, Joseph thought. He pulled his Buick into the parking lot of Groos Tavern. There were a few cars, but one of them was not Donna's. Joe closed the car door behind him and entered the Tavern, there he found Mike serving a few people.

Michael seemed to instantly spot Joseph and smiled, "Hey, Joe. How are you?"

Joseph sat down at the bar, Mike meeting him after serving a few people at a tables, "Hey, I did not expect you home, what's new?"

Joe frowned, "Everything, I need a beer too."

Mike nodded, "You bet" giving a fatherly pat on Joe's back, then going behind the bar to pour his beer. As he was pouring Joe's beer, "How is your brother?"

Joseph shrugged, "That is what I would like to know. I am trying to track him down."

Michael came over with his beer, placing it on a coaster and in a lower voice, leaning over to Joseph, "I thought he might be gone, that is why I asked. He may be out with his friend a lot."

Joe looked up at the TV, for the first time in a while it had been off, "Yeah, I

thought of that. She seems to want something from him, but I don't know what.”

Mike rubbed his white beard thoughtfully, scratching it, “Well, Joe you know trying to read minds is hard work. People need and want various things, sometimes they don't even know what they want. They try to find it, but it takes time, and it takes a lot of soul-searching. Do you want to know more Joe?”

Joseph seemed surprised at the question, taking a deep drink of his beer. It was nice and cold, refreshing to him, “Well sure Mike, of course.”

Mike leaned over again, “I may be wrong, but people want to know about themselves, want to grow and heal. So they go and search for answer's outside of themselves. They really need to find what they want by searching within themselves, on the inside. You need to find yourself on the inside first. She may not know what she wants,” then pausing for a moment, “Joe, you need to find out what you want out of life and go for it. Your too young and too smart to let all the outside stuff to distract you, and then you go around the mountain over and over again. Don't do it, you don't need to.”

Mike and Joe talked a bit more. He finished his beer, which was on the house and when over to the trailer hoping to find Danny there.

Joseph did happen to find Danny there. He was sitting on the couch watching TV with a box of donuts in his lap and a quart of milk by his side. He gave Joe a big smile, as he entered the trailer, “Joe Joe! I am glad to see you!”

Joe found a seat and wearily sat down, exhausted, “Yeah, I am glad to see you too.”

Danny took a donut and reached out to hand it to Joe, “Want a donut?”

Joseph figured why not, “Yeah.”

Danny gave it to him and as Joe ate it, “Donna has been real nice to me,” then questioning, “Where is Mama? Still at the hospital?”

Joe swallowed some of the donut, his mouth dry, being a bit exasperated by the whole situation, “Yes, and why did you not stay there like I told you too?”

Danny shrunk back a bit, “Well, Joe Joe, I was there a long time, and I got hungry, real hungry and Mama kept sleeping. She was okay the doctors told me, and I was real hungry, then Donna found me. I don't know how, but then she wanted to get me something to eat.”

Joe had enough of that logic, “Okay Danny, okay.”

Danny still apologizing, “I was real hungry Joe. I mean really hungry.”

Joseph leaned back and then tilting his head back on the living room chair, “I know Danny, I know. I am your brother don't forget, filling that stomach of yours is near impossible.”

Upon hearing that Danny gave a hearty laugh, “You're always funny, Joe.”

Joe sat up again, “Listen, I have to get back to school. Mama is coming home tomorrow, and I need you to promise you will take care of her a bit while I am gone.”

Danny nodded, “Sure thing, Joe Joe.”

Joe needed a bit more convincing, “I need you to promise to me you will take a bit better care of her and call me if you have any problems at all, okay?”

Danny nodded again, drinking milk while he did so, “Sure, I promise Joe Joe - anything for you Joe Joe,” wiping his mouth with his hand, “I love Mama.”

Joe gave a weak smile, "I know you do...make sure she takes her medicine too."

"Sure, Joe Joe."

"And try not to spend time with Donna," Joseph added.

A group of men waited out on the corner, near Omar's apartment, a couple of them smoking. Omar and Susan were anxiously watching TV. He thought about playing his video games, but could not concentrate. He was drinking heavily, sitting on the edge of his couch, while Susan was now at the end of her second pack of cigarettes, half off the love seat. Susan looked inside her pack, angrily, "Omar, we can't just hide out here forever!"

Omar emptied the beer in his hand. He was developing a collection next to him near the couch, "We don't know who is out there. Why don't we wait for a while longer, it's still not that late?"

Susan rubbed out one of her last cigarettes in the ashtray, which was on the end table next to her, "You know...", sighing deeply, "...you know, you got yourself into this. You need to get yourself out, not me."

"You know I need you, baby."

Susan sat back, pulling out her last cigarette from her last pack. She was so tired. Her mind flashed back to high school and one of her first boyfriends Deshawn, "You know Omar, I had it going on, and you wrecked my life," Deshawn was a good man. He went to college. He got his Master's degree, and now he was married with two kids"

Omar had a feeling. He knew now what was to be them, how did he lose his way?
"But baby please."

Susan could have been with Deshawn, and she wanted to go to college with him, but Omar came along, had some money, a place, and a nice car. What for, from what she heard Deshawn's family lived on a couple acres in the Hampton's, "You know Omar, I took the wide road, the short cuts. It's my fault. I listened to all your bullshit. You talked good and all, but you had your part too."

As she stood up, grabbing her purse, "But...baby please, I'll make it right. I will you'll see."

Susan went to the door, "I don't want no more of anything you have to offer. I did try to convince you to make more of your life. You could have done it."

Susan left Omar's apartment, down the steps she went and closed the second building door behind her, instinctively locking as she went. It was dark out. Her car was parallel parked down the street. There was a small group of guys midway between her and where her car was parked. She took a deep breath; there wasn't anyone on the street, although lights could be seen from the various apartments downtown. Susan clutched her purse and took a shallow breath. Breathing rapidly, putting her head down she went crossing their path. They eyed her as she moved through the group. One of them brushed up against her, but then they let her through. Not looking back Susan stepped to her car, quietly opened her driver-side door, and then sunk deep into her seat. She could see the group in dark shadow's before her.

She quickly inhaled another shallow breath and swallowed hard, starting the car, locking the door, and driving off, passing them. Her car lights exposing them, from the shadow to light, it seemed they had blood in their eyes, watching her as she drive off. She locked her car doors, fumbled with her cell phone, and pulled it out. Holding it in one

hand Susan went to call Omar, but then she hesitated. She briefly looked at her phone and then at the road. Susan swallowed again and then for many reasons, many she did not even know about consciously, she tossed the phone to the passenger-side seat and cried heavy tears.

Omar finished another beer. He gave it a look and then placed it next to the other empties. There were about a dozen and a half now next to his couch. As he did so, Omar could hear hard knocking on the downstairs door. Startling him, he knocked the empty beers over, the sound of glass against the glass crackling in the stale apartment air. Could it be Susan, he thought to himself. But the knocking only came harder and heavier this time. Omar now full of fear went to stand up, but in his drunken stupor he tripped over one of the legs of his coffee table, hitting the floor, his head hitting the glass of his entertainment center. The glass shattered, cutting his scalp, his face. Omar groaned, holding his face, blood dripping through his fingers as the group of men sent after him broke the front door down. He could hear them rushing up the stairs. Quickly, Omar pulled himself up and went to find his pistol. But there was no time as they rammed the upstairs door. He ran for the bedroom still holding the side of his face. The men broke through as Omar ran for his bedroom window. He opened the window and spilled out of his apartment on to the building's fire escape. One of the men reached him first, grabbing Omar from inside his apartment, "Come here you mother fucker!"

Omar kicked at his face, bleeding his nose. The man yelped in pain releasing his grip on Omar. Omar stumbled down the fire escape, now with the rest of the men after him. Down the steps, Omar fled, tripping and falling. He tumbled down the remaining steps, missing the first floor ladder and falling. Hitting the ally sidewalk hard, Omar felt and heard his leg snap. It had cracked itself below the knee, the spiral fractured bone

piercing through his skin, under his pants. The group of men climbed down the first floor ladder and surrounded him. One of the bigger men picked Omar up, who was now limp in pain, “Come here you dead beat.”

Omar struggled, “No, please!” the man then hitting him with his fist back down to the ground. The group picked him up, dragging him into the corner of the alley, the darkest spot. It smelled of urine, feces and rotting food. There they beat him and when they were done, one of them pulled out a pistol and a 22-caliber bullet was lodged neatly into his brain. There in the darkest of alleys, on the darkest of nights, Omar was left to die in the piss and shit of his own making.

Chapter 7

After class, Joseph and Trisha walked off campus to a small local restaurant. He wanted to get away a bit after what he had gone through at home and after the couple of tests, he had taken unprepared when he went back to school. He could not help but thinking, “What could you do?” as they were seated. The waitress served them wine and took their order. There they sat opposite each other, a candle centerpiece flickering between them. The place had a few couples in it and was quiet, romantic. He needed the quiet, and the romantic part soothed his wounded heart. He sipped the wine, “So, Trisha what has been going on with these classes since I have been gone?”

Trisha looked at him a bit worried, but her eyes softened and became warm, the reflection of the candle flame dancing in her eyes, “Well quite a lot, labs were rough and that technical writing class has been nothing but work for me.”

Joseph nodded, “Have you got a chance to see your mother since last time?”

Trisha smiled nodding as she sipped her glass of wine, flicking her hair back, “I had a whole bunch of laundry to do, so I took it home last weekend.” then her eyes showing concern again, “Joe you know what happened to Kevin was not your fault.”

“No, but I should have known better. We grew up together. I mean maybe I could have done more with him, kept him out of trouble.”

Trisha a bit perturbed, “But, Joe you can't parent everyone. You need to live your life.”

Joseph turned his head away looking for a window that was not there, “I know, but people don't do what they're supposed to do.”

“What is that, Joe?”

“They are supposed to act like adults, work to become better people, stay out of troubled...whatever...”

Trisha a bit angrily, “Joe you can't control people's lives; some people don't want to be helped.”

Joseph dismissive, “I know that, Trish.”

Trisha now still angrier, “Look, Joe it just seems like your life revolves around your brother and your mother and everyone else who you have to rescue.”

Joe interrupting, now angry himself, “So, what are you saying? I am some type of co-dependent dope?”

Trisha hurt, “No, it's just you need to take care of yourself. You are carrying too many bricks on your back. It's hard for me to see you like this.”

The waitress served them, interrupting their argument and then Joe continued as he ate his stake, “It is too much for you, what about me? I have had to live it.”

Trisha taking a bite of her food, “You know you act like you're the only one who goes through things, well look at your friend Kevin.”

Joe now positively angry, “I know! Kevin lived in a crack hole! He slept in garbage!”

Trisha now pleading, “I can't take this Joe -you need to focus on yourself!”

Joe pushing his plate away, “That is the whole fucking problem! Everyone wants to focus on themselves! You know, no one wants to talk about anything. Nothing -No one wants to talk about mental illness, mental retardation, no one wants to talk about drug

addiction. No one wants to talk about abuse, divorce, or poverty! We all walk out the door in the morning and put on our game faces and pretend like we all are wonderful perfect pretty people, with fake plastic lives and nothing gets fixed because we never get around to being honest with each other.”

Trisha began to quietly cry, “Joe, I need to think about us for a while.”

Joe got up from the table, pulling out his wallet, “Well then -I am me, I will talk, and I will deal, if you or anyone else doesn't want to, or want to come along...,” taking money out and placing it on the table, “...then they don't need to cross the bridge with me,” then walking out of the restaurant.

Trisha was sitting in her dorm room. She was reading one of her textbooks and generally studying for her classes. She found it hard because she was still upset about what was happening to her relationship with Joe and what was happening between Joe and his family. Her cell phone began to ring. She looked at it. It was Susan. She answered the phone hesitantly, “Hello?”

Susan's voice cracked as she spoke in low tones, “Its Susan.”

Trisha tossed a book from her lap to bed, “I know. What is going on Susan, you don't sound too good?”

Susan's voice was trembling, “My boyfriend is gone.”

Trisha leaned back, “What do you mean...gone?”

“I mean they killed him, Trisha,” Susan whisperer in horror.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“David's peoples.”

Trisha held her head, “What am I supposed to do? Who is David? You need to call the cops, Susan!”

Susan paused for a moment, then, “David was his boss. My boyfriend was a dope dealer. He owed a lot of money to David, and he was your boyfriend’s friend, Kevin's dealer.”

Trisha stood up, now pacing the small room, “What!”

“I know, please Trisha. Omar put a hit out on him on Kevin.”

Trisha placed an elbow on a dresser and held her head, “Call the police like I am Susan. Goodbye,” she said hanging up the phone.

Joseph was sitting at a bench under a tree, near the campus gym. He just sat there in the evening breeze, as the sunset, the overhead campus lighting flickering to life. He sipped a cup of coffee, thinking about his mother, about how sick she was, then about Danny. Joe thought about how innocent his brother was and how he had too good a heart for the kind of world they lived in. Danny only got hurt when others just did not. Hell, the world was tough even for himself. Joe felt out of place and unequipped for what was happening in his life. He felt he had been unprepared by his mother and was angry about it. Joe took a deep breath to relieve the stress, and his anger began to fade as the stars above began to wink into view one at a time. He took another sip of his coffee, his phone ringing. He picked it up. It was Trisha. He and Trisha were not really talking since their argument, but he was not one to keep grudges too long. He answered his cell phone, “Hey?”

Trisha spoke in a heavy concerned tone, “Joe, I need to talk to you about something really bad.”

“How bad?”

“Real bad Joe, real bad.”

Joseph took another sip of his coffee, still not quite realizing just what they were going to talk about or how serious it would be, “Okay, tell me Trish.”

Trisha held her breath for a minute and then as she let it out, “Joe, Kevin was set up by his dealer and now his dealer is dead.”

Joseph sighed, one hand sweaty clutching the phone, the other holding his head. This was all so unreal he thought to himself.

Tonya climbed up the fire escape to Omar’s now vacant apartment. She mumbled to herself, “I always have to do this, if I get caught...” she found the window to Omar’s apartment, looked around, slowly lifted the window, and then climbed in. The apartment was dark and a bit dank with a humid smell to it. She turned on a light, looking at the disheveled mess that was left behind from the hit. Tonya began to search for the missing money. According to her, David was absolutely sure that even a fool like Omar could not have pissed away that much money. He must have some of it left, somewhere in the house. She of course, looking at Omar from a slightly different angle considered him a big enough fool to piss that much money away and more.

Tonya looked under his bed, in his dresser, under his dresser and in his closet. She found David’s lock box buried under a pile of dirty clothes in the closet. Angrily, she opened the busted lock-box. It was empty. She cursed to herself quietly. Tonya continued

to rummage through Omar's closet until she found another box. This time it was a small plastic container. She popped the lid off and inside found a stack of pictures. Tonya went to toss the container aside when she gave it a second glance. The top picture caught her eyes. It was a picture of Omar in a suite. She placed the plastic box on her lap, taking the picture out. Omar looked younger, "must be from high school," Tonya thought to herself. Tonya began to look at the pile of pictures, another catching her eyes. It was a picture of him and his girlfriend at the time, at the beach, on the boardwalk. Tonya thought to herself, "They look happy together." she didn't think Omar was every happy.

She continued to looked through the pictures until she got to the last one. On the bottom of the pile was a picture of what seemed to be Omar's grandmother. Tonya held up the picture and sighed, thinking where was she now? What happened to them all? Why did everything turn out wrong for them when they all were on the right track? Tonya ended her train of thought, refusing to answer the questions she brought up. She carefully placed the container aside and began searching the rest of the apartment. After what seemed to be an hour Tonya left as she came, without the money, but with a somewhat different impression of Omar.

Tonya came back, unlocking the door to David's apartment. She stepped in as David was reclining on his couch. He asked her impatiently, "Well, did you find the money?"

She tossed her purse alongside the couch, pushing his feet off it and sitting where his legs had been, "No I did not!"

David now angry as well, sat up, "What do you mean you did not find it?"

Tonya gave David a stern look, "Just what I said."

David grabbed the warm beer that was on his coffee table, “How could that fool spend it all?”

Tonya did not answer for a while then she asked him, “David, what did you do to him?”

David took a sip of his beer, not quite knowing what the question meant, “What do you mean? I did nothing to that fool.”

“I mean, you basically took him out of high school and turned him into a dope dealer...for you.”

David glanced at her briefly laughing, “Me? I didn't do nothing to him. He came to me and wanted quick cash.”

“You could have said no.”

David when to reach out to her with an arm, “Hey, baby you know I run a business.”

Tonya moved away from his embrace, “Not a legit one.”

“I make good.”

Tonya moved further away from him on the couch and then turned toward him, “No you don't. You make death; you kill people with rock and gatt. If that is a business, then I don't know what is.”

David laughed again, a bit softer now and more reflective than dismissive, “I need you to check Kevin's apartment too.”

Tonya frowned, “Listen to you got other problems, David.”

David gave Tonya another smile, “Yeah, how so?”

Tonya gave a faraway look, and then looked down finally at David, “Susan told me she talked to her friend Trisha. She told me she knows you put a hit on her boyfriend's friend.”

David furrowed his eyebrows, “Really now?”

“You are not legit, David, you're not. You just ain't and I don't think you ever will be.”

Tonya climbed up the stairs to Kevin's apartment. There she found an older gentleman standing in the doorway of Kevin's apartment, looking over the mess that Kevin used to live in. Seeing Tonya he gave a half smile, then a bit concerned, “Are you one of Kevin's friends?”

Tonya looked sheepishly at him, nodding, “Yeah. Sure...who are you, his father?”

The man looked at her, then forlornly at the mess that was Kevin's previous life. “No, thank goodness. I would have whipped his ass several times,” He turned to her, letting her into the apartment, “If you could get away with that these days -I am, was landlord. Now I have to clean up the crap he left behind.”

Tonya moved some of the garbage around with the tip of one of her shoes, seeing a roach scurry away, “You let him live like this?”

The man wiped a hand on his jeans, “I gave him an eviction notice. He told me he needed a little more time, so I gave him a week more, but I guess he never needed it,” then catching up to the accusation, “No, but people live like this all down here. They live like this, and we rent to them. They destroy our apartments, don't pay any rent, and leave the mess for us to clean up.”

Tonya shuffled through the wreckage of a young man's life, "Then why do you rent down here? You don't need to own this building. Sell the building and buy one in the town, then you could rent to more 'so called respectable' people."

The man got a bit angry turning to head out, "As it is I got to get trash haulers to get his crap out of here." walking down the stairs, "lock up as you leave."

Now alone, Tonya found an overturned chair, turned it right side up and then sat in it. She looked over the expanse of ruin. A castle built on sand. Where could she even begin to start looking for the money? That is if there even was any money to be found there. She found a band in her pocket and pulled her hair back to keep it clean. Tonya picked up a blanket, a pillow without a pillowcase, the mattress, a few roaches, and several ants scurrying back into the recesses. She found a dresser. Inside a drawer was a dime bag, and a pipe. She looked in the closet, but hesitated to dig into the pile of clothes, old papers, used food cartons and other more unusual collected items. Careful not to wipe her face with her hands, Tonya instead wiped her forehead with a forearm. She then made her way back to the chair and sat down again. She could not help but think, "What am I doing?"

Danny flicked through the TV channels, preoccupied with thoughts of his mother, who was resting somewhat uneasy in the back bedroom. She had been complaining the last several days about pain and was not eating or drinking anything substantial. He needed to figure out how to make her eat more, but somehow a good idea on how just to do that escaped his mind. To Danny, she was getting quite ill. He had talked to his brother the other day, and he had said that there was not much that he or Danny could do, but to try to get her to eat and drink more and call him if anything else happened. He did not quite understand why Joe would not give him more instructions that, but Danny like a

good brother took his brother's word that he knew what he was doing. Danny drank his coffee. He could not find a baseball game on and instead found a college football game. Danny began to watch it as his mother called for him, a bit weakly, from the back bedroom, "Danny!"

Danny answered in sort of a meek howl from where he sat, "Yes, Mama?"

His mother yelled for him a bit louder and with more concern, "Danny, please?"

Danny heard the twinge of pain in her voice, "Yes, Mama, I am coming," and hurried to her bedroom.

She tried to sit up in her bed, struggling to do so, "Danny, there you are."

He sat next to her on her bed, helping her with her pillows and helping her sit up, "Yes, Mama. You're still in a lot of pain? Huh, Mama?"

She looked at him with a bit of fear, then love and finally a bit bravely, "I am trying son. I am trying. I hurt all over though."

Danny grabbed both her hands and clasped them, "I know Mama. I wish I could help. Joe Joe don't think he even can help."

She smiled a bit as Danny pet her hair, smoothing it back down, "I know Danny, but you can't, nor can Joseph."

Danny seemed like he was about to cry, but then suppressed it down deep. "If Joe Joe can't help, then I can't."

Mama Cruse coughed a bit, "I want to tell you I love you."

Danny looked away for a moment, then back to her, "I know you do."

She held a cough with a clenched fist to her mouth, and then began again, "I love

you and Joe both very much, and I am sorry I could not do more for you both.”

Danny tried a weak smile, “I know you do good, Mama.”

Mama Cruse gave into another cough, “It was hard without Daddy. I tried to be both your Mama and your father. I am sorry,” then coughing again, Danny holding her for a moment, letting her back down on the pillows, “I am sorry I got sick. It was a lot for me and the stress of raising two kids alone got to me.”

Danny did not quite understand all the words behind what she was saying, but understood all the feelings that went along with what Mama Cruse was saying, “I know, Mama.”

She coughed again, this time in her hand, then glancing at it. Her hand had blood in it. Mama Cruse looked at him again in a bit of fear, “Danny?”

Danny seeing the blood began to cry a bit, “Mama?” holding her.

Mama Cruse grabbing Danny, “Call your brother, let him know I am getting worse, but I am okay.”

Danny nodded his head in agreement and pulled away. He gave Mama Cruse a tissue to wipe her hands. To Danny, the two words 'worse' and 'okay' did not seem to fit together, but he would tell Joe what she said and also about the blood she was coughing up.

Danny dialed the number to Joe's cell phone. He let it ring for a while, and then it went to his messaging system. He left a message telling Joe to call him back. Danny now more concerned than before the phone call, sat down on a kitchen chair. He looked up at the kitchen clock. Danny thought that maybe Joe was in class. If that was the case, then

he could try again in an hour. Danny thought that it was a good decision, yet somehow the comfort of Joseph being in class as the reason for him not answering the phone did not ease his mind much. He anxiously watched the clock and waited. Danny could hear his mother coughing, and his mind turned from her to Donna. What was she doing? Could she help him? Danny waited anxiously, watching the football game and then the clock. He tried not to think about calling Joe early, but after a half an hour, he gave in and called. He went over to the kitchen wall, picked up the receiver and dialed Joe's number. Danny let it ring for a while, and then hung up when the call transferred to his voicemail. Frustrated, Danny placed the phone back on the hook and thought for a minute. He picked the phone back up and dialed Donna. After a few rings, she answered, "Hello?"

Danny spoke first in a broken tone, "This...this is Danny."

She spoke in warm tones, though with an undercurrent of concern, "Hey, Danny how are you?"

Danny rubbed his head, dragging the phone cord and receiver with him to the kitchen table. He sat heavily, "Not, good Donna. Mama is bad and Joe don't answer his phone."

"Well how sick is she?"

He glanced back toward his mother's bedroom, "Not good, she is coughing blood."

Donna thought for a moment, "Well, I am not doing too good either. I am starting to get sick like your Mama."

Danny's eyes widened in fright, "What should I do?"

Donna thought some more, "I tell you what, I will come over, and we can

straighten things out. That money that Jake promised me will do us all good -get us all better.”

Danny rubbed his head again, “Okay, Donna, whatever you need to get us all better.”

After an hour, more Joe called up Danny. He found a spot on campus with a large tree and sat under it, “Danny?”

Danny answered, “Hey Joe Joe, where were you? I called and there was no answer?”

Joseph placed his book-bag next to him, “I know, I had a lab.”

Danny tried to understand, “A lab?”

Joe leaned back on the tree, watching the unconcerned walk along one of the many campus roads in front of him. Some were walking alone, some holding hands and some in groups, many enjoying the fall sunshine and air, “It is like a really long class, a couple of hours.”

Danny still not quite sure why Joe would have to take a class that long, “Okay, Joe Joe, but Mama is real sick. She is coughing up blood.”

Joe pulled up his legs, wrapping one arm around his knees, “She is coughing up blood?”

“Uh huh...I am scared, Joe.”

What could Joseph do? What could he do when there was nothing he could do for his mother? Her cancer had metastasized; there was nothing they could do. The cancer

was terminal and nothing short of a miracle granted by almighty God himself could cure her. How could he make Danny understand that? How could he make Danny understand that even if he left school again and came home nothing would change? She was going to die and there was nothing Danny, he or the doctors could do about it. Now Joseph was faced with going home and withdrawing from his classes or looking like the bad guy, the cold-hearted son and staying at school when in either case, the end result would be the same. He could do nothing to change the situation, either way he was fucked, “Listen, Danny, take her to the hospital. Call an ambulance and take her to the hospital. Tell the doctors that if it gets critical for them to call me, and I will come back, but I cannot do anything that the doctors can't do. In fact, the doctors can do much more than I can. I need you to do as I say, okay?”

Danny nodded, “Right, take her to the hospital. But, Joe Joe, why can't you come home? I need you real bad, Mama needs you real bad.”

Joseph felt so bad, the rotten cold-hearted son. You could do everything you could and more and yet you still felt like you did nothing and meant it, why? “I know, take her to the hospital.”

Danny nodded feeling quite abandoned, “Okay, Joe Joe.”

Donna drove fast in her Thunderbird. She dialed Jake's number as she swerved a bit, the sound of loud music pumping from her car taking her and driving her anger. She had been without a hit for several days now that Omar was gone. She would have to find another connection, and yet she was too proud to walk the streets of lower Greenberg like many of the other dope fiends in the dark of the night to get her score. She might have to resort to such a demise, Donna thought to herself, “Hey, she answered as soon as Jake

picked up his phone.”

“Yeah, what do you want from me this time, Donna?”

“I want my money.”

Jake was sitting out near his pool. He would have to close it up for the season soon, “You aren't getting shit from me.”

Donna took an exit off the highway and down the main thoroughfare she drove, her anger beginning to boil, her hands beginning to shake. She took a glance at her hand, the one holding her cell phone, narrowly missing an oncoming car. The driver in the other car blared his horn. Donna drove on looking for the road that would lead to Danny's trailer, “I want my money. You owe it to me and to Omar, and if I don't get it, my big friend, the one I took to your house will gladly do what I say, which is to break you real hard.”

Jake burning hot with anger, “Fuck you,” hanging up the phone and throwing it into the pool, then with one hand tossing the table and the drink upon it aside, the glass shattering along his patio.

Mama Cruse began to have a fit of coughing. She called out to Danny, “Danny, please...get me some more tissues.”

Danny got up from the couch. He was still quite worried about his mother and yet still did not have any answers. He wanted to call the ambulance, but yet he was afraid to do it. Danny called back to his mother, “Coming Mama,” as he looked for a box of tissues. He did not find any, so he took a roll of toilet paper from the cabinet and brought it to her. There he found his mother with blood on her hands and on her bed sheets.

Danny shook from frayed nerves as he gave his mother the roll of paper, “Mama, I have to call the ambulance.”

She started unrolling the paper and wiping herself down, “No, Danny.”

Danny pleaded, “But, Mama.”

Mama Cruse began coughing again, and Danny ran to the phone in the kitchen. He dialed 911 and gave them the information they needed. Danny hung up the phone and waited for the ambulance to arrive. But, after a minute or two more of hearing his mother suffer and him being alone with her to hear it, he broke. Danny began to cry and in sobs, he stumbled to the door and left the trailer. He began to shake again, to think irrationally. He just needed to run he thought. He just needed to leave. Danny could not think, fear had taken over, loneliness had taken over. Danny thought of blood and death as he staggered down the street weeping, wiping his tears away. He heard a car down the road, and then he saw it, it was Donna's. She hit her breaks hard, squelching them. She pulled off to the side of the road, intersecting his path. Danny stopped and stood in front of Donna's car. He just stood there crying. Donna turned off her car, stepped out and hugged him, “What are you doing crying out in the middle of the road?”

“My mother is coughing up blood! She is dying Donna, and the people aren't coming!”

Donna motioned for him to get in the car, “Get in -who isn't coming?”

Both Danny and Donna got in the car, and as she pulled back onto the road to drive, “The ambulance people and Joe Joe”

She took the short remaining drive left to Danny's trailer, “What? Okay.” telling him to get out of the car as she stepped out, “Come on Danny, let's see what you're talking about,” as an ambulance pulled up to the end of the trailer.

Dontrall was standing near one of the several corner stores that dotted the inner lanes of Greenburgh. He was trying to make good with the local gang and was still a bit uneasy about it all. Against his mother's wishes he had dropped out of school and now was supported by a new family, one tied to the street. He needed a way to get past being a B.G. Of course, he waited for the opportunity and it did come by. David drove up next to Dontrall. He rolled the passenger window down, "Hey kid, get in."

Dontrall opened the door and got in. David drove off and down the road. He gave him a glance while watching the road, "You still a B.G aren't you kid?"

Dontrall nodded, "Yeah, so?"

David smiled, "How old are you now?"

Dontrall gave him a look, "I am seventeen."

David nodded, "You need to qualify my friend, and I need someone to catch cold."

Dontrall looked out the window suspiciously, "Yeah, who?"

"Tell you after you agree. I give you ten-g and if you get caught, you say nothing. If you do get tripped up you'll be in juv, quick nap and you're out, plus no more B.G. you'll be a full member."

Dontrall looked at David and what he had on and around him, "What do I have to do?"

"Just say yes."

Chapter 8

Donna and Danny followed in her car behind the ambulance, which was taking Mama Cruse to the hospital. Danny was still sobbing a bit, “I think she is going.”

Donna a bit consumed by withdrawal, “Going where?”

Danny unsure what to say just looked out the window and mumbled something inaudible, “Errmm...”

Donna gave him a glance, “What?” then when Danny did not answer, “Danny dear, Donna is real sick too just like your Mama, but I can help take care of you and your family. But, again I need your help you know.”

Danny nodded still looking out the passenger side window, “Uhhmmnn...”

Donna shook her head.

Once they rushed Mama Cruse into the hospital and got her into an emergency-room bed, Danny used Donna's phone to call his brother. Joseph's cell phone rang once then twice, then he picked it. He saw the phone number, and it did not look familiar, “Hello?”

Danny turned away from both Mama Cruse and Donna, who were standing near the nurse, “Joe Joe, Mama is really bad. I did what you said.”

“How bad?”

Danny having never been exposed to so much in such a short a time revealed the pain and fear through the tremble of the answer, “Real bad, Joe Joe...very, very bad...”

Donna is here too.”

Donna hearing this turned to him and briefly frowned.

Joe looked at his cell phone for a second then pressed it back to his ear, now so very concerned. Donna was there, which only complicated the situation more, “I will be there. It is going to take me a little while, please, don't go anywhere...that includes going anywhere with Donna.”

The fall evening came early, and the shroud of autumn dusk quickly enveloped the campus. Trisha had been studying for midterms in the library, and now she made her way down the path that led to her dormitory. She briefly thought about getting off campus housing the following year, but then her mind shifted to Joe. She looked up at the campus streetlights. They would be coming on in the next few minutes; however, between the uncomfortable bridge between day and night they did not shine. It seemed they had a mind of their own, each trying to decide between light and dark, until one by one they would give into the logic that night came before day, day before night. She loved Joe, but Joe seemed always wrapped in the deep personal pain of a family gone awry. She thought, “When you grow up abused you are damaged.” Trisha did not want to think that way, but what could she do. Was she relying on what she had been taught or what she knew? Was what she was debating the truth or just a short cut assumption her mind made like so many others? Maybe she was afraid to see the truth. Maybe she just did not want to think about it anymore. As Trisha strolled down the path, she noticed the shrubs and trees, how they cast a shadowing claim on the ground she walked. She had been debating whether or not to break it off permanently with Joe. She had been approached several times by other young gentlemen while at school and her answer was always no, now she debated on changing her mind and the answer.

Trisha in deep thought watched the trees and the shadows, a shallow soft rustle near a tree and then the quick movement of one of those shadows. She stopped for a moment and looked about. Did she see a shadow just move? Trisha looked around, she was alone. Trisha shifted her book bag to the other shoulder and quickened her pace. Again, she heard a rustle. One by one, the campus street-lights began to flicker on. Trisha took a deep breath and turned next to one of the big pine trees lining the path to her dormitory. In an instant, a hand grabbed her from behind, pulling her behind the tree and as the streetlights flooded the night with fire, the sound of a gunshot echoed, a bullet piercing through the back of her skull, exiting her forehead. Trisha fell broken, blood and bone everywhere. A young man not truly understanding what he had done quickly ran away into the night, avoiding the light.

Joseph entered the hospital. There a couple of police officers met him. There he was told that he should go down to the precinct for questioning on the murder of his girlfriend. In astonishment, he quickly prioritized his scattered thoughts through the fear, through the terror, hurt, and told the front desk to tell his mother that he would be back later. The officers gave him a ride downtown. He was placed in a small room with a cup of coffee and told to wait. After quite some time sobbing, crying, and alone, he was formally questioned. He looked at them with red shot eyes, “Listen, how could I murder my girlfriend, I was on the road rushing to see my mother die from cancer.”

Tonya was enraged, “You gave him the gun! You gave him the gun!”

David pulled the car over at a gas station, “Listen, I need to get some gas and beer. You want to calm down and let me go?”

She pushed him from her front passenger seat, “I can't believe you did this! They'll pin everything on that boy!”

David reached over to her, grabbing her shoulder hard, “You need to keep everything quiet,” pushing down, his fingers pressing into her arm, “Like I said, calm down and forget about the gun.”

Tonya wincing in pain, buckling a bit, “David -David you're hurting me.”

Donna looked at her watch. She had been sitting with Danny next to his mother for over two hours. The doctors had informed Danny that because Mrs. Cruse condition was rapidly deteriorating, they would transfer her to the intensive care unit. Two transporters came over, one saying to both Danny and Donna as they stood up, “Where here to transfer her to the ICU.”

Danny looked over to Donna, “What should I do?”

Donna peered over to Mrs. Cruse, who now was wearing an oxygen mask, was hooked up to various equipment and had an IV inserted into her arm, “Go up with them to the ICU.”

Danny pulled at one of the transporters, “Do I go with you guys?”

The transporter nodded unlocking the wheel breaks of the bed, “You can for now, but then you have to leave so the doctors can treat her.”

Danny became even more nervous, “Where do I go then?”

They began to wheel Mama Cruse away, “You can wait in the lobby here, or go home until tomorrow.”

Donna began to walk away, down the hall and toward the main entrance. Danny went to go with her then stopped, “Donna?” then went to follow his mother, still looking back. She was already gone, and he felt so very alone.

Susan tried to call Trisha again, but she did not answer her phone. Susan couldn't figure out why, and she was worried. It was past midnight, and she was afraid for Trisha and for herself. Could something have happened to her, she thought to herself? Unable to sit put on her couch, she flicked through TV. She missed her boyfriend, and the police had complicated everything. She tried to say as little as possible to them, but they kept their heat on her. Susan did not want any of it, but she got it all, shovels full she thought to herself. She tried dialing Trisha's number again and was going to leave a voicemail, but then thought better of it. What if something happened to her, Susan thought, and then she left a voicemail and the police found out? Susan closed her cell phone, placed it on an end table, went to her kitchen, and found a bottle of ibuprofen. She took two and went back to her couch. She had such a headache. Susan closed her eyes, once, twice and then fell fast asleep. She awoke a few hours later. Startled she looked at the wall clock, which was illuminated by the TV playing an early morning infomercial. The clock read 3:00 am. She picked up her phone, and this time called Tonya.

After several rings, Tonya picked up the phone, still half-asleep, “Hey?”

“I need to see you.”

Tonya rolled over in her bed, turning on the light, “Why?”

Susan wanted to talk on the phone, but she did not feel safe and seeing her seemed the best thing to do when she really did not know what to do, “I can't talk on the phone. I need to see you.”

Tonya sat up, now concerned, “Well, I can't see you, and I really can't talk on the phone. Listen, Susan call me some other time, it's still early.”

Susan pleaded, “But, Tonya I...,” the phone disconnecting at the other end. Tonya had hung up. Susan called again, but this time there was no answer. There Susan sat, unsure what she could do, then deciding to go pay a visit to Tonya anyway.

Susan pulled up to the lower Greenburgh sidewalk, put her car in park, and hurriedly slammed the driver-side door behind her. She rushed up the street toward Tonya's apartment. It was still dark out and cold. The morning chill had begun to set in, as autumn began to work its way toward the fullness of its season. She shook a bit, partly from the cold and partly from the fear in her heart. She knocked on Tonya's door, waited, and then knocked again when there was no answer. She waited for another minute or two and knocked again. Still, there was no answer. Susan sighed, brushed her hair back, and headed back to her car. As she looked over her shoulder, she could see the faint glimmer of a sunrise, red and then turning yellow bright. It was inviting to her, and she felt the fear she held inside her begin to fade.

Joseph was allowed to leave the precinct. Once he was free to go, Joseph got back into his car and headed for the hospital again. Once he got there, he entered, seeing the patient registrar, “I need to see my mother.”

The registrar asked for the person's name, who he was, then she looked it up and looked up at him, “She is in ICU,” handing him a clip to wear, “Here take this and when you go to the ICU ask to see the charge nurse first. It's on the third floor, take the elevator up other there, and follow the signs.”

Joseph nodded, putting on the clip, “Okay,” as he made his way to the elevator. He stepped in and pressed the third-floor button. The doors closed and when they opened, he stepped out and down the corridor. Joe found a waiting area near a set of double doors. He looked around and found his brother sitting there. Danny had his head buried in his hands. Joseph sat next to him. Danny did not seem to notice him, to Joe Danny did not seem to be crying, perhaps he was asleep. Joseph shook Danny a bit. Danny pulled his head up from his hands, “Huh,” turning to his brother, “Oh, Joe Joe,” rubbing his eyes, “Mama is doing really bad.”

Joseph looked into his brother's eyes, “You look tired Danny. I need to take you home.”

Danny shook his head, “No...Mama needs us.”

“Look,” Joseph putting his hand on Danny's shoulder, “There is nothing we can do, let me go see the nurse and then if we need to we'll go home and come back.”

“Okay, Joe Joe.”

Joe left his brother and walked through one set of double doors, then another. He went to the charge nurse, “My mother is in here.”

She went over to a mobile kiosk and called up a screen, “Name?”

Joe looked at the units, each one with a patient in them, all very ill. Arrayed around each bed was various equipment, to Joe it looked like too much and each patient looked too sick. He wanted to go home, he wanted to take his mother home, and he wanted to take Trisha in his arms and say he was sorry. Why was all this happening? Maybe he should have never met up again with Kevin. He was only trying to help, and it seemed to all turn to dust.

The nurse looked up at him again, “Name sir, her name?”

Joseph rubbed his chin, “Betty Cruse.”

The nurse looked her up and then gave a quick glance at Joseph, “Okay, you’re her son?”

Joseph talked with the nurse, the doctor on call and then sat briefly with his mother. She was connected to a variety of equipment, she seemed flaccid and her color was gone. She looked so very pale. Joe took her hand; it was warm, but not as warm as when she was home. Mama Cruse was sleeping and when Joe took her hand, she briefly opened her eyes, smiled and drifted back off to sleep. Joseph said a quick prayer and then left to go get Danny still waiting for him.

Danny looked up from his hands again, “She is not doing good, huh Joe Joe?”

Joe shook his head, “No, Danny and I don't think she will be getting any better. Complicating everything is that she only has one kidney, and they were factoring in all the psychotropics she had been taking.”

Danny sat a bit more upright, “She still taking her pills?”

Joe motioned for his brother to get up, which he did, a bit stiffly from sitting too long, “No, in her condition it will hinder her more than help. The biggest one they were worried about was the lithium. They needed to titrate it down so her kidney could deal with another stuff, I suppose. Right now, they just got her on plain Haldol, which will give her some rest as well. They are giving it to her through her IV.”

Danny made a wrinkled face, “Oh, nasty stuff.”

Joseph shook his head no, “Come on Danny let's go home, there is nothing we can do right now,” then he put his arm around his brother, which was no small feat considering his size, “Haldol still has its place in the world and you know what they say Danny, there is nothing new under the sun.”

Tonya got up early that morning, left David's bed, took a shower, got dressed and made a quick cup of coffee. David had asked her where she was going once, and once she brushed the question off, now he asked a second time after she took a sip of her coffee in the kitchen, lighting a cigarette and taking a drag, “Where are you going Ton?”

Tonya took another puff, exhaled and drank a final good gulp of coffee, “I need to head out, you know I do have an apartment of my own to keep up.”

Danny gave her a kiss on the cheek, “I thought you wanted me 24/7?”

Tonya gently pushed him away, “Hardly,” and then went to the living room to slip her shoes on and leave, “I will be back later.”

Tonya walked toward her car, which was parallel parked about two blocks from David's apartment, on Broadway this time. It was cold that morning and Tonya found herself wishing she had worn a long sleeve shirt or blouse. Down the road a bit she saw Paco in his wheelchair. She frowned and tried to avoid him, but he came wheeling up to her, confidently blocking her way. Paco held out his hand, “You got a smoke?”

Tonya grabbed her pack of cigarettes and looked inside, there were only a few left, “You know you're a real pain in the ass.”

Paco smiled, “I sit all day, chica.” then holding his hand out again, “Got a smoke I

see, got one for me?"

Tonya pulled a cigarette out and gave it to him, "Here, now leave me alone."

Paco took it and placed it between his lips, "You got a light to for Paco, chica?"

Tonya looked about, there was no, none on the street except Paco. She thought to her herself, why? "Here," she pulled out a lighter, gave him a light and then, "Now can I go?"

Paco rolled his wheelchair back, "I only bother the ones, I love my friend." brushing his long white hair back, smiling, happily puffing on his cigarette, "It's cold my friend, you should wear a sweatshirt like me."

Tonya nodded in part irritation and in part agreement, "Yeah Pac, okay," and walked by, getting to her car, she put the key into the door unlocking it, thinking to herself it was odd that the old man said that he cared. She did not think he ever said something like that to anyone before. The thought worried her, but she brushed it aside. She had something she desperately needed to do.

Tonya walked into the Greenburgh police precinct. She walked over to the front desk and through the thick glass portal, the police officer spoke to her, "Can I help you maim?"

Tonya took a deep breath, "Yes, I know information about a murder and who did it."

Donna pulled up to her apartment. She grabbed her purse, her phone and closed

the driver-side door behind her. She glanced up, and the glare caught her eyes. She winced in pain and lowered her head. She felt dizzy and had a pounding headache. She turned and slumped to the car, leaning on it. She rested on her head where the car door meets the frame. Donna rubbed her head and her eyes, and then she opened the car door again only to fall back onto the driver's seat. She opened her cell phone and looked through the numbers. She found David's number and hesitantly called him, as soon as he answered, "Hello, this David?"

David questioned, "Who is this?"

"David, this is Omar's friend Donna remember?"

He could hear David shuffle in the background, "Omar had no friends. What do you want with me, I am busy?"

Donna swallowed, "You know he was my dealer. I need a hit really bad."

"Bad for you. I don't deal direct."

Donna almost in tears, resting on her head on the steering wheel, her hair limply falling, "Listen, I will pay you real good and do what you need. I was reliable, please, I need something."

"You know where the pool hall is on Broadway?"

Donna nodded her head while it was still on the steering wheel, "Yeah."

"Go over there around six."

Donna pulled her head up, angrily, "But that is too long."

"Hey, you want a dime you wait."

Donna wiping some tears from her face, "Okay," as David hung up. Donna

dropped the phone and began to cry in her hands. She pulled out some tissue from the glove compartment box and wiped her nose. She thought to herself, why did she have to be that way? She thought maybe after this last hit. I will go into a rehab, make a better life for myself. Donna thought maybe she could move away, start fresh...just one more hit and what she needed to get it, that was all she needed.

Chapter 9

Joe and Danny were eating breakfast a bit late, but then again after what when on the night before who could blame them. They had eggs and toast. Danny loved eggs. Unfortunately, you could only make him so many, because he would eat the whole carton if you let him. Joseph sipped his coffee, then Danny seeing him did the same, “Danny, I want you to know you're a good brother okay?”

Danny finished his eggs and ate the last piece of toast, “I feel bad, a bad brother Joe Joe. I ain't too smart and take up all your time. I never let you have any fun.”

Joe laughed warmly, “No, Danny we are a family. Who says what is normal, what is the best way to be? We live in a trailer, so what. Why, because Daddy wasn't there? We have a mother who takes medicine, so, you know how many people do? She got cancer; you know how many people do?”

Danny looked down for a moment, “They don't have brothers like me, you know...special.”

Joseph sighed and thought for a moment, “It must be hard for him sometimes.” He never really thought about it from the other end of life, “You know Danny, we all have our limitations. If it's not one thing, it's another. You just don't hear about it much because people don't talk about it as an everyday type casual thing, they hide it.”

Danny finished his coffee, “What do you mean, Joe Joe?”

“Well, when I first meet someone she doesn't say to me, 'Hi, I am Jane Doe, nice to meet you. I have high cholesterol and my mother is a diabetic.' and I don't say, 'Nice to meet you Jane, I am Joe and I have arthritis in my knee, because I chipped it years ago and heart disease runs in my family.'”

Danny seemed surprised, “Does it?”

Joe fiddled with his cup, “No, Danny, we don't have heart disease in our family, I guess cancer...but look, we live in stained glass houses. They look great. We look great until you get in and sit down. Once you sit down you realize the floor boards are rotting, there is no heat in winter, and the carpet has tape on it to keep it together.”

Danny was trying to absorb as much of it as he could, “Ah, okay. You mean people seem better than they are for real?”

Joe nodded, “Yes, but you my friends are who you are, what you seem to be is what you really are. If that makes sense?”

Danny smiled, “That's good Joe, Joe right?”

“Oh, yeah Danny, you bet it is,” Just then the house phone rang. Joe reached over to the kitchen wall and picked it up, “Hello?” then, “Yes, this is Joseph Cruse,” and then closing his eyes, “Okay.” he hung up the phone and looked sadly at his brother, “Listen, I need to go and see Mama. She is going, Danny.”

Danny turned away, “Oh.”

“Do you want to go with me?”

Danny turned back to his brother, “I -I never seen anyone pass before Joe Joe, let alone Mama.”

“Do you want to go with me to see her?”

Danny gave a faraway look, out to a place only he knew and then returned, looking into his brother's eyes, scrunching his face, “No, Joe Joe. I need to be alone. I will see her pretty-ed up the way she always used to be at the wake.”

Joseph nodded his head, gave Danny some cash to get something to eat at Groos if he got hungry, grabbed his keys, and headed out to his car. He thought about what Danny had said, although he could force his brother to go, the shock could be too much for him. Sometimes, Danny amazed him; sometimes he thought Danny was the smartest person he ever met.

Tonya got in her car. She locked her doors and put the key in the ignition. She started the car and pulled out her phone. Her palms were sweaty, and she was worried. She wiped her hands on her jeans and gave Susan a call, “Susan?”

Susan answered, “Tonya, I thought you didn't want to talk to me?”

Tonya pulled out of the precinct parking lot, “I know, Listen, things are going down quick. We can meet at the pool hall and find a way out of this.”

“Okay.”

“Meet me there around six okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Tonya set the phone down and drove off to her apartment to wait for a while before heading back out. “Well”, she thought to herself, “I could always go back down to South Carolina.”

Danny left all alone to himself, just sat there on the couch looking at the TV, which wasn't on this time. He did not want to watch any sports. He did not feel like doing much of anything. He wanted his mother home, but she would never be coming home.

Danny remembered when he was a child; his mother was so strong then. They used to have to walk for a lot of their food, but she always used to always buy a box of doughnuts and milk along the way and share them with both Danny and Joseph. She used to say to them when they were kids, “Someday you two will have just each other, that is why I had you both.” Now it seems that it was going to come true. Danny thought about the kids that used to pick on him in school, told him he was dumb and had a welfare mom. They didn't seem to realize it was the heart that mattered, and when a father who made very good money left, what was a mother to do? It was not Mama's fault, she was sick. She needed medicine and it almost never worked the way it should have, at least no with her. It never made her better to the point of being completely healthy. The medicine worked for a while, then it didn't, or it did, and then she took herself off and it didn't. When the medicine didn't or when she took herself off, Mama Cruse said mean things too, like the school kids, but she was an adult and their mom, which made it worse for him. Danny thought it made it worse for Joseph too. There were times when mom just would not speak, or she would scream for days, and Danny would hear Joseph crying in his bedroom. Sometimes Danny would take a peak to see what was really going on and sure enough, he always would find his brother crying. He asked himself why he never had the courage to go in when Joe was crying and tell him it would be okay, that he loved him.

It all just seemed so complicated to Danny, and he found himself struggling to make sense of it all. He thought to himself, “well it's over, no more and our Mama is gone.” Thinking about it, he himself began to cry. Danny cried for several moments and then with a bit of resolve wiped his eyes with his shirt, went to the kitchen counter and found the money Joseph gave him. Danny decided he would go to the tavern and eat. Maybe Michael would have something nice to say to him. He was a good friend, a very good friend.

Danny sheepishly walked into Groos Tavern. Michael was busy behind the bar cleaning glasses, seeing Danny, he wiped his hands on a dishtowel and waved him in, “Hey, Danny come over.” Danny frowned a bit then sat down at the bar. Mike seeing the pain on his face, “What's going on Danny? Is it your mom?” Danny nodded, “What's wrong, she in the hospital again?”

Danny pulled out his money, “She is dying.” forlornly counting the money to himself.

Mike grabbed Danny's hands to stop him from picking at the dollars, “Danny, what do you mean? It's that bad?”

Danny looked up and almost in tears, “Yes -She won't make tonight, I think.”

Mike took a deep breath and rubbed his beard, “Listen, go sit at a booth. I will bring you a chocolate shake, a burger and fries. You'll owe me later.”

Danny grabbed his money, stood and sat in a corner booth. There he slumped into the corner and into the padded seat. He wished he had gone with his brother to see his mom. He had made a mistake.

David flipped through the channels nothing seemed to be on. He looked around and found a half-full beer. He took a sip, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Just as he closed his eyes, he heard a loud knock at the door downstairs. It sounded heavy and important. David ran down the steps, looking through the keyhole. The small image produced four officers in uniform and two plain-clothes detectives, “Who is it?”

One of the officers, “This is the police. We need to talk to you.”

David now anxious, “Who do you need to see?”

“David,” Then they shuffled a bit outside, nodding to themselves, “We would like to talk to you. We have a warrant out for your arrest.”

David thought quickly, even though he was fully clothed, “Yeah, I -I am -butt naked. I need to get on some draws at least,” then running up stairs, he ran to his bedroom and locked the door behind him.

The officers pulled their pistols, and one split the door open with a well-placed boot to it. They rushed up the stairs as David found his second gun and jumped out the window. He stumbled down the fire escape, ran through the small backyard, climbed over the fence, and ran.

Donna rifled through the clothes at a local boutique. She kept her sunglasses low, her headache now pouring down her forehead and through her back. Donna could not stop shaking, and she was very nauseous. She felt she needed to vomit, but held the bile in. She didn't have much money on her, with Jake her main John and the fact that he kept her well, she didn't worry for much. Now she thought she may have to hit the dark streets again, and she did not relish that fact. Donna struggling to stand found a seat. She pulled out her phone and called Danny. Danny's home phone rang once, twice, then several times and yet there was no answer. She thought for a moment, carefully stood up and headed out the shop to her car.

There is no best way to pass; there is no good place to die. No time is right. No reason is sufficient to make someone feel better about a love one leaving family and friends behind. There Joseph sat, next to his mother, holding her hand. She was sedated now, and her breathing was shallow. The curtain was partially closed behind them to give

Joseph some privacy, even though the intensive care unit gave none. He felt so conflicted. She was a good mother, but she had her bad moments, maybe more than some, less than others. He remembered how as a child she would go into a rage and scream. Joe would go outside and play. One day he found an ant pile, and there he saw how they all worked together, how each was treated the same. It seemed so rational, so calm those ants were, so reasonable to one another, so normal. Of course, they were ants, and he was a little boy, but why couldn't the world function in such an orderly way? Why did animals treat each other better than humans? Why could God forgive you, but another human being could not? Maybe, that is why he had such a hard time with God. He didn't understand, maybe he would find the answers as time went on, for now he was with his mother and his mother was with him. Joseph leaned over to her and rubbed her hair. It was soft. He smiled a bit, and tears began to stream down his face. A hard life had taken its toll on her, and he found himself wanting to try life again, but he could not. He wiped the tears from his face, brushed her cheek, and whispered into her ear, "You were a good Mama. You raised your kids good. I love you, Danny loves you very much," then gave her a kiss on the forehead. Joseph would make it right. He would not take the path his family had taken, but another. He would break that mountain in two.

Michael came out with Danny's burger and fries, placing the plate on the table, "There you go, Danny."

Danny reluctantly eyed the burger and began to nibble on the fries, "Thank you."

"You know you and your brother did all you could."

Danny looked up unsure, "Yeah?"

Michael nodded, rubbing his white beard, then his hands on his apron, "You know

I know your mom, since we were kids.”

Danny took another French fry, “Yeah?”

Mike remembered back, “In fact, I remember your mother’s mother. She was very bad to your mother. Your mother didn’t want any part of it as she got older and the family wouldn’t have it, so they left her to herself to raise you guys,” turning to head back to the bar, “Danny, she did well raising you guys. I mean just look at you guys now.”

Danny looked down at his plate thinking, “look at us now.” As he thought those words, the tavern door opened and Donna walked in. She had her sunglasses on and looked worn. She glanced about and found Danny sitting there. She waved at him, and Danny waved weakly back. Donna came over, sat down next to him, and gave him a kiss on his cheek, “Hello, honey.”

Danny shied away a bit, “Hi.”

Donna noticing, grabbing his hand and holding it, “Danny, what’s wrong?”

Danny took a bite of his burger, not looking at her, “You left me at the hospital, and my mother is dying.”

Donna let his hand go. She gave a big sigh, rubbing her temples, her jet-black hair falling in front of her face. She pushed her hair away, “I know, but there is nothing I can do about it and I am new to the situation, so I just thought I would leave and let you and your brother deal with it. It’s your family, not mine.”

Danny put the burger down, “Okay.”

Donna rubbed his leg, “Listen, I will make it up to you. I took you to the hospital remember? What is going to be is going to be, you need to live for yourself and your brother too.”

Danny felt Donna's hand on his thigh and awkward, moving a bit away from her, "I know, but we're family. I just don't know you too well, Donna."

Michael seeing this decided to go over to their table, "Hey there, how are you Donna?"

Donna pulled her hand back from Danny's leg, "I am doing good. I just got a bit of a headache."

"I see," then pulling out a pad and pen, "Would you like something to eat?"

Donna did not want to eat anything. She wanted to vomit, but nodded, "I will have a cup of chicken soup."

"Okay, anything else?"

She pushed her sunglasses up, her hands shaking, "No."

Michael put the pad away, "Okay, it will be out in a few minutes. Danny, if you need anything let me know."

Danny looked up, sipping on his milkshake, "Okay."

Mike left with a strong glance at Donna. Donna frowned and then when Mike was gone, "I know, but if I get the help I need, I will be around a long time, and we could all be a happy family."

Danny looked at her, through her sunglasses, "You're not as sick as my Mama Donna."

Donna gave a bit of a shocked smile the recovering, brushing her hair back, "I am getting there, why just look at me Danny?" holding onto Danny's shoulder, "Look your mother is going to pass away, and your brother is going back to college. He is going to

leave and go on with his life. You have me, but what if you all alone? What would you do back in that trailer? Who would pay the bills? Who would cook? Who would take you places, keep you company? Be your friend?"

Danny having not thought about that yet, "I don't know."

Donna opening her purse, taking out some money, "Come, you're not that hungry, neither am I. Let me pay for this, and we can take a ride and talk. I'll keep you company until Joe gets back from the hospital."

"I would rather go to the hospital to be with him and mom."

Donna thought for a moment, and then put money down on the table, "Yeah, will drive, do a couple of quick things, and then we will go to the hospital."

Danny reluctantly agreeing, "Okay," it feeling wrong. It felt bad, but he was scared, and he felt alone.

They both then stood up from the booth and left the tavern. Michael had briefly stepped back into the kitchen to get the soup, when he returned with it he found money on Danny's table, but both of them were gone. Seeing this, Michael became worried. He became very worried.

David met up with Jamal, "I need your car."

Jamal was sitting on the stoop of his apartment, David looking around quickly, covering his head with a hooded sweatshirt, "Why? You in trouble?"

David shook his head no, "No -let me borrow your car, mines is getting fixed. I bring it back tonight with a full tank of gas."

Jamal, pulled out his car keys, “You sure you ain't in trouble? I mean Omar and shit?”

David held his hand out nervously, “No, that kid hit Omar and some woman. I don't know, there are a lot of crazy people out there. I deal, but I ain't a gang banger.”

Jamal thought about the full tank of gas, “It's almost on empty.”

“What did I just say?”

“Well okay, just saying,” tossing him the keys, “Don't wreck it.”

David took the keys and as he left to hop into the car, “Jamal, this thing has been around since the 70s.”

Jamal watched as he pulled out, “Just saying,” then pulled at his jacket. It was getting colder with each passing day.

David kept thinking to himself, “I know I will find you bitch, I will find you.” He drove around a bit aimlessly, but as his anger and fear began to solidify. He became more rational. David decided he would look at a few places and then go to the pool hall. Tonya could have gone there as well. If she wasn't there he would wait until the evening and go to her apartment using the fire escape to see if she was there instead. Things were too hot right then for him to go to her apartment directly. He would have to wait, but in the meantime, he could check a few of the places she frequented. Maybe, he would spot her on the street. Once he found her, he would have a talk and then split that town and go out of state where the police wouldn't find him.

Joe walked down the hallways of the hospital. There he found himself a place to sit and took it. He was tired, wiping his face with his sleeve. He felt like he needed to wash his hands, his face, but he did not. Joseph wondered what he would do in the coming days, all the plans he would have to make. He wondered what he would do after all those plans had been finished. What do you do when the quiet comes? What do you do when you wake up at night feeling alone and feeling like you failed your life? You were given a life to live, and you failed at living it. How hard the world was, Joe thought to himself. How many times they walked to get food, in the heat, in the rain and in the snow, yet no one would pick them up, not even when a relative would drive by. His relatives would honk and wave from their air-conditioned car, but would not take them that last mile home when they had blisters on their feet. Joseph knew he had to live for himself. He had to, not because he had to be cold to those in need, but because if he destroyed himself helping others, would they get him back on his feet? Would anyone take care of himself like himself?

Seemed like a simple question, though it had profound answers. It wasn't that you didn't want to help others, but in the end if you could not help yourself to what good would your help be to someone else? Joe stretched out on the chair, leaning back. Joe took out his cell phone. He shook his head in disbelief. He could not help others who would not help themselves, who made excuses as to why they could not move an inch. There were plenty of good, reasonable reasons why someone could not do something, but those reasons, which were tossed into the wind like so many butterflies making their yearly migration, those so casual excuses, ready made in the pocket, to be pulled out at a moment's notice, then forming an iron wall to thwart those who care, were to be walked away from.

No, he would not help those people because they wanted to be just the way they were, for some reason, they got a benefit from the suffering. Joe would not be one of

those people anymore, and he would not help people like that anymore. No one would give him a slice of bread first unless he tried first to provide it to himself. If he failed, then so be it, but at least he took the chance to live. What happened to Kevin, why? Why did he destroy himself? He told Kevin in high school not to mess with certain people, not to go drinking. They had their group, why was it not enough? Joseph told Kevin, they all had it rough, that he was not alone. Why did he not believe him? Maybe, maybe it was because Joe thought he was alone himself and who could believe a liar when it is written on the persons face? Joe was sick of it; he was done. He had been brought to this cross roads, and it had lasted several months, now he would take the narrow road. The road less traveled. Joe let out a strange laugh, went into one of the hospital bathrooms, looked in the mirror, washed his hands, his face and then wet his hair a bit. Joe looked in the mirror again, dried himself, left the bathroom, and pulled out his phone again. He called home. Joseph let it ring a few times, but there was no answer. He sat for several minutes becoming a bit worried and then called again, but there was still no answer. Joe put the phone back in his pocket and left the hospital.

David drove for a while, he went from street to street, then went to a gas station bought a pack of cigarettes, a beer and went to part of the waterfront which was somewhat deserted. David sat there for several minutes, drinking his beer and smoking. When he was finished with the beer and halfway finished with his pack, he decided to look for Tonya again. It was getting late. At that point, he did not care about dealing, he was a wanted man, but he did care about grabbing the woman who destroyed his life. David put the car in reverse and then drove off again. He drove down one street and then another, mindful of any police cars or unmarked vehicles. As he drove, he felt panic well up in him.

Joe quickly pulled up to his trailer. He put the key in the lock turned it, opened the door and glanced in. He found no one. Joe hurried down into the back of the trailer and looked into the bathroom; still he did not find his brother. Concerned he thought about Donna. Joseph went back up to the kitchen and found the money gone. He rubbed his chin, closed and locked the trailer door behind him and went over to the tavern.

“When are we going to get to the hospital, Donna?”

Donna gave Danny a quick glance as she drove around, “We will get there. We just need to stop by a place where me and a few friends are to meet. I need to talk to them for a moment, and then we will be there.”

Danny squirmed in his seat a bit, “But, Joe Joe will be worried and Mama is sick.”

Donna gave him a fierce look, “You know I am sick too! We all have problems.”

Danny turned away, looking out his passenger side window, “Can I use your phone to call Joe Joe?”

“No,” Donna said abruptly as they pulled onto a side street next to the pool hall, “Let’s go.”

There she was! There was Tonya, rushing down Broadway to the pool hall. David gritted his teeth. He was enraged. He could see her. He could see another car, a Thunderbird. David could see two unmarked police cars double-parked. Anger and fear,

anxiety and hate began to swell in his chest, then down and up through his body. He began to shake, to sweat, eyes wide. David abruptly pulled off to the side of the road, “Fuck you, fuck the cops, fuck all of you...,” then quietly to himself, “every last one of you.”

Danny got out of the car, “Where are we going?”

Donna got out and closed the driver-side door behind her, pointing a block down the street, “Right there.”

Danny could hear a car driving up the street as they walked, “Donna, you -”

She could see one car pull quickly up to the curb, on the other side of the road. It looked like David, but it wasn't his car. He was rushing over. Donna looked down the block and could see Tonya. She was quickly walking to the pool hall. It looked like David was heading right for Tonya. Donna now could hear another car too, this time not David's, but another. She turned to look behind her, it was a van and it was moving fast, “What, Danny, what?”

Danny turned to see the van as well, it was racing towards them, now concerned about the vehicle, “Donna, the car!” pointing as it barreled toward them, almost at her.

Tonya turned to see what was occurring and then saw David racing toward her. She began to run.

Donna shocked, “Shit,” both of them running, the van swerving, aiming right for Donna. She broke from Danny's side and tried to reach the safety of the brown stone apartment walls, but could not outrun the car. The van jumped the curb, clipping her legs. She screamed as the van went up over her, its front left wheel, pulling her under, crushing

her back, then pulling away, speeding down the road. Danny stopped, turned and ran over to her. There Donna lay in a pool of blood. He kneeled down in shock, crying, scooping her up, “Donna!”

She turned her head, “Danny?”

Danny held her close, “Donna, I am sorry. I am sorry.”

One of the officers leaped out of the patrol car, “Shit, we're going in,” several other police officers and detectives rushing out, pulling their weapons.

David rushed toward Tonya. He looked back at the unmarked cars, grabbing Tonya, “Your coming with me!”

Tonya screamed, “Get off me!”

David pulled her into the pool hall, “Come on...”

Donna opened her eyes, went to say something, but the pain was intense, taking her breath away. Her body was shattered. She convulsed, clenching her jaw, gritting her teeth. Danny loosened his grip on her. She stopped for a moment, looked at him, when to reach up, convulsed for a second time, and collapsed again. Danny gently laid her back down and stood up, turning about, not sure what to do or where to go. He looked at his hands, full of blood. He began to panic, fear setting in. Danny looked down at his shirt, and jeans soaked with blood and bile. He could not understand it. He could not understand any of it. Danny's brain began to overload, his chest beginning to get sharp pains, welling up and driving him to insanity. Danny looked around, he needed to hide, to get away, to run and run. He saw the sign of the pool hall and without understanding took the quickest, widest path he could find. He ran for the hall. Danny ran, weeping as he went, stumbling into the hall. There inside was David, Tonya in his grip, Susan by them pleading, “Please!”

Danny stood shocked, and then suddenly becoming unfazed, “What is going on?”

Joseph drove down Broadway, seeing the chaos that was occurring before him. He pulled up to the pool hall. He could see Donna, crumpled and soaked in her own blood. He stumbled out of his car, running for the pool hall, the police just before him.

David cocked the gun, holding it to Tonya's temple as the police rushed in, “I will kill her!”

Each of the officers arrayed, everyone in the hall frozen in fear, under a table, behind the bar, locked in the bathroom, in a corner huddled, one officer, “Let her go, don't make this any worse, David.”

Tonya shrieked, “Do what he says!”

Joseph stumbling in, out of breath and between gasps, “Danny!”

David his arm around Tonya's neck, squeezing, as she clutched it, “Shut up, bitch!”

Danny turned, “Joe Joe?”

David looked over to him, “Who is this stupid shit?”

Another police officer, “Just put the gun down, David. You don't want to hurt her.”

Susan crying, looking at Tonya, at Joe and Danny, “Please!”

David, shaking Tonya, “Shut up!”

The police creeping closer, Danny getting a confused look in his eyes, scrunching his face, “Mama died. Donna died -Everyone dies.”

David slinking back, dragging Tonya a bit, “Shut up! Don't anyone come any closer!”

“Drop the gun!”

“Everyone dies. It's my fault,” He looked at Joe, “It's my fault,” moving in-between David and Tonya, and the police officers.

Joe stepping a bit closer, “Danny!” the police ordering everyone, “Get back, everyone!”

David shaking Tonya, “Look at this fool!”

Danny turned to David, “No more,” as he moved it toward David.

David pushed Tonya out of the way, pointing the pistol at Danny, “You fuck! I will kill you! I will!”

“Everyone, get back!”

Joseph, “Danny please!”

Susan, “Don't, David, don't!”

Danny went to grab David's gun, then the police rushed David. There were shots and bodies slumped to the floor. There David lay dead, Danny holding his stomach, blood and intestine in his clutches, the police calling for ambulances, seeing if David was alive and then doing what they could for Danny. Joe went to Danny, but an officer held him back, “I am his brother! Let me see him!” the officer releasing him, several other officers rushing back to the cars to get their emergency kits. Joseph kneeled down to Danny, as

the police tried to pack the wound with what was available, until the kits were brought in from the cars, “Danny, why?”

Danny rolling in pain, now in a near ball, clutching himself, “Joe Joe, I never helped you. I saw you cry all the time and let you!”

Joseph grabbing Danny, turning him and his face to him, “What? What do you mean?”

Danny rolling, the officers trying to pull his arms and hands from the wound, blood pouring out, the officer yelling “Let go, Danny, let go of your stomach!” Danny looking at his brother, spasming, arching his back in shock, “I was stupid. I was dumb Joe!”

Joe holding his head, “Danny?”

Danny gritting his teeth, shaking, getting limp, “Joe, Joe,”

Joe knowing, “Yes, Danny?”

Danny shaking, rolling a bit, stiffening, “I-” then limp again, “-love..” then turned his body, then bled away.

Joe shook him, “Danny?” there was no response, “Daniel!” the police grabbing Danny, starting CPR on him, taking him from Joe. Joe standing covered in blood. He looked at his hands, looked at Susan and Tonya, then David, his hands again, then finally at Danny, the officers pounding on his chest, “I love you too.” Danny was not dumb, Joe whispering to himself, “Brother, you were the smartest man I ever knew.”

A winter, a spring, a few seasons of change, each day passes into the night, and

the morning sun rises to meet the horizon. Joseph rolled down the windows of his car as he drove along. He looked in the side mirror, the rear-view mirror and then up out onto the long road ahead. It stretched for many miles, the grass green, and the trees budding in the background. Joseph took a deep breath, the air sweet with new life. He had a destination to go to, what lie in the background, beyond the hills. Joe looked at the dash, then at the passenger seat where is backpack lay. He looked out to the sun rise up and over the wane of nighttime. The highway was free of traffic. The road was clear. The path was clear. That day was going to be a very good day.