

ROAD STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Road Stories is a collection of three novellas that explore the pull, allure, sanctuary, serendipity, and adventure of life on the open road. The novellas examine how for some, the road holds the promise of a new day, an improved life, a better opportunity, or a deeper love; while for others, it is nothing more than an assortment of jumbled blue lines on a map.

In *Tierra del Fuego*, a man takes to the road to figure out how to deal with the grief and sense of betrayal he feels following the death of his wife.

Lake of the Falls involves a decades-long dispute between a father and son who take to the road and come to realize that home is not always where you live.

In *Back on the Road*, three recent college graduates set off on a road trip inspired by Kerouac's *On the Road* to celebrate the end of their college years and lament the imminent approach of adulthood, only to learn that their lives are soon going to take vastly different paths.

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TIERRA DEL FUEGO

A novella

CHAPTER 1

Light rain dappled the windshield as we made our way through the early morning darkness. Our small car climbed steep, muddy roads up the mountain toward the ferry we hoped would be waiting for us. Sebastian was behind the wheel, awake and alert. I was crumpled in the passenger seat, trying to sleep but failing. The jostling and jarring from the car hitting puddled ruts in the road kept me awake.

We'd left Sebastian's farm, *Finca Fin del Mundo*, at four o'clock that morning. The farm sat in the hills several miles north of Ushuaia, the capital city of the province of Tierra del Fuego and the southernmost city in Argentina. It was April in Tierra del Fuego, autumn in the Southern Hemisphere. The weather was cold and rainy, the air smelling of earthy decay.

Sebastian had both hands on the wheel, his sad, smiling eyes fixed on the narrow road ahead. I marveled to think that a month earlier I hadn't even known him. We had met as strangers, pushed together by circumstances, and we were about to part as friends, knowing that we were unlikely to ever see each other again. His finca had been a safe, albeit unlikely, landing spot for me, and I hated to leave. The thought of simply staying had crossed my mind several times, but I knew I had to go.

Sebastian's little Renault struggled to gain traction going up the muddy mountain road. Several times he had to shift to a lower gear to keep moving forward. The French-made car was small but never faltered, and a little over an hour after we began our journey, we descended the other side of the mountain on our way toward Rio Grande.

The rain fell harder on the way down the mountain and the muddy road became slicker and more treacherous. I was nervous, but Sebastian handled the tricky road with the ease of a seasoned veteran. He was calm, having grown up in these conditions and was used to driving in them. I was sweating it.

The sun climbed in the eastern sky as we made our way down the mountain and I saw cloud-muted rays glinting off the surface of a large lake in the distance.

“What is that?” I asked.

“That’s Lake Fagnano. It is named after Monsignor Fagnano, the Italian priest who came to Tierra del Fuego many years ago to protect the natives who were living here at the time. People also call it Lake Cami, but I prefer Fagnano.”

“It looks pretty big.”

“Oh, yes. It’s very long. We will be driving on the south and east side of the lake. It goes all the way to the west into Chile. You should see it on a sunny day. It is beautiful.”

Although Lake Fagnano was much smaller, it reminded me of Lake Michigan and my home in Chicago. And I couldn’t think of home without thinking of my wife, Lisa, dead now for more than three months. A trickle of sweat ran down my back. I unzipped my coat and struggled to get comfortable in my seat. I tried not to think about Lisa, but I found it impossible. Trying not to think about something seems to guarantee you’ll think about that very thing.

We drove for quite some time under overcast skies with the lake on our left. We were now on flat ground and there were tall trees on either side of the road. Sebastian pointed out Lengua and Coihue trees as we drove past the thick forests. One type of tree was tall, maybe eighty or a hundred feet in height, with a high canopy filled with red and yellow leaves. The

other was even taller with flat, elegant branches, and green leaves. I didn't know which of the trees that I was seeing corresponded to which of the names Sebastian was saying, so I mostly just nodded my head as he spoke, but didn't say anything.

Away from the lake, the landscape turned rocky and barren. The trees gave way to a world that was flat, brown and muddy, punctuated by the occasional tuft of grass or bush with tiny white and yellow flowers. The sun was well up in the sky now, but thick clouds blocked much of its light. Off to our right, a curious guanaco, about the size of a large deer, a coat of tan and white, chewed its cud as it watched us go by.

Sebastian was quiet as we drove through the desolate surroundings. I thought about leaving the sanctuary of Tierra del Fuego and returning home. I knew that all of the things that reminded me of Lisa would be there—her clothes, the furniture she picked out, photos of us together—but Lisa wouldn't. The house would be the same, our friends would be the same, the business I owned with my brother would be the same, but without Lisa, nothing would be the same. Was I ready to go home? I fought the urge to have Sebastian turn the car around so we could return to the refuge of the finca.

CHAPTER 2

After the funeral, I was catatonic. I showed up to business meetings, went to the gym, and joined friends for dinner, but in body only. I listened to people talk, but what they said didn't register. I nodded a lot but usually didn't know why. In the middle of conversations I would politely excuse myself, even though I didn't have anywhere else to be. People asked me how I was doing, and then they got expectant but sympathetic looks on their faces while they waited for me to answer. My wife had just died and I felt like a part of me had died as well. What could I say? I'd claim I was doing fine and then find a way to avoid the conversation and the words of condolence that I knew were sure to follow.

At the commercial real estate management company that my brother and I owned, I took to sitting in my office with the door closed. I refused to take any calls, instead having my assistant tell people I would call them back. Even so, I didn't return the phone calls. When our clients began to complain, my brother Scott returned the phone messages meant for me. After a few days of this, he had all of my calls routed to his office and told me I should just go home.

Being away from the demands of my office didn't help. At home, I was surrounded by all of the things that I shared with Lisa, and everything reminded me of her. The coffee maker reminded me of how we used to sit out on the deck sipping coffee on warm summer mornings. The TV reminded me of how we used to stay in on Friday nights to watch the latest video release. Even our dishes reminded me of the day we spent before our wedding picking out the perfect set of plates and bowls. It was important to Lisa, so it was important to me.

There were other memories too that I couldn't avoid by being at home. I remembered the strange way Lisa started acting around me. It was little things. She was spending more and more time at the office. When she came home late, she would often fall asleep on the couch or go to bed early rather than sit and talk to me the way she used to. She didn't laugh as often, she seemed to stiffen at my touch, and although she said it was just in my mind, I swear she tried to avoid being in the same room with me.

There were more specific things too. Lisa bought new clothes, sexy clothes, in the weeks before her death. She began wearing jewelry I wasn't familiar with, and she had her nails done, something she had never done in the past. Naturally, I became suspicious. I checked her cell phone to see who she had been texting with, but all of her texts had been erased.

A couple of weeks after the New Year, we had an ice storm and I left work early so I could get home before the worst of the storm hit. I spoke to Lisa earlier in the day and she too had agreed to leave her office early. But when I got home, she wasn't there. I called her cell, but there was no answer. When I called her office to find out how much earlier she had left, I was surprised to find she was still at work.

"I thought you were going to leave early," I said.

"I just have a couple of things to finish up," she said. "I'll leave in a little bit."

"The roads are getting bad. You really need to leave now to avoid the worst of it."

"I will," she said, but it was clear she didn't plan on leaving right away.

"What's going on, Lisa?"

"I'll be home, Matt. Just not now." Lisa was speaking in that low, controlled voice she always used when she was trying to avoid saying something she didn't want to say.

“Come on, Lisa.”

The phone was quiet for several moments before Lisa said, “I can’t talk about this right now. I promise, I’ll explain it to you when I get home.”

She never made it home. That was the night she died in the accident. I sat on the couch waiting for her, wondering what it was she had to tell me. I was pretty sure I knew the short version. Things had changed and Lisa wanted out of the marriage. I wasn’t sure about the specifics, but I had felt the pending doom of divorce hanging in the air for some time. But why? What had happened? How had things changed? I was still asking myself those same questions weeks after the funeral when I was once again sitting at home by myself.

My brother had told me to go home, to relax and deal with my grief, but I couldn’t relax and I had no idea how to deal with the grief. The same questions I asked myself on the night Lisa died still consumed me. What was it that Lisa was keeping from me? I couldn’t stand being home alone with my thoughts and I couldn’t function at work. I had nowhere to go, but I had to get away.

The last straw was dealing with Lisa’s life insurance. She had a policy through her office that paid five hundred thousand dollars. I was stunned. We had never discussed our life insurance needs and I didn’t expect to walk away with a bunch of money after Lisa’s death. Why should I get hundreds of thousands of dollars just because my wife died before she could divorce me? There was a part of me that felt lucky she had died before she could tell me she was having an affair or just didn’t love me anymore, but the second I felt lucky, I immediately hated myself for the feeling. I couldn’t take it anymore. I stuck the money in the bank, packed a suitcase, locked the door behind me, and drove away from my home and my life.

CHAPTER 3

I was just about to cross the Mississippi River heading into St. Louis when my phone rang. The caller ID let me know that it was my brother, Scott. I didn't answer. The Gateway Arch appeared and then disappeared to my right. I followed the midday traffic through the city and took I-44 west when it split off from I-55 and I-70.

I stopped near Sullivan, Missouri to get gas and eat. Waiting for my food, I listened to Scott's message.

"Hey, it's me. I'm just checking in to see how you're doing. Give me a call."

I didn't call back.

I drove mindlessly, listening to the radio, reading billboards, comparing gas prices, but no matter what I did, I couldn't stop thinking about Lisa. Between Springfield and Joplin, Scott called again and left another message.

"Hey, where are you? I'm getting concerned. Call me when you get this message," the voice on my voicemail said.

For no reason in particular, I set the GPS for Dallas and then mindlessly did what the little electronic box told me to do. When the robotic voice told me to turn off of I-44 onto U.S. 69, that's what I did. Then it said to turn onto U.S. 75 and I did as I was told. If the GPS said it, I did it.

I knew that at one time, Lisa and I had been very much in love. We spent as much time together as possible, and couldn't be separated for more than a few hours without checking in by

phone. When we were together, we always had to be touching each other, whether we were out for a walk, or driving in the car, or sitting next to each other at dinner or a movie.

As I drove, I remembered back to a time early in our marriage when we spent a long weekend at a lake cabin in Wisconsin. We had spent the morning rafting a local river and we returned to the cabin where we took a nap and ended up making love late into the afternoon. We showered together and then went out for a romantic dinner. When we returned to the cabin, I poured each of us a glass of wine and Lisa cuddled up next to me on the leather sofa. We listened to soft music as we watched the fire in the cabin's stone fireplace.

"I want things to stay like this forever," Lisa said.

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

"I don't mean just here at the cabin with the music and the wine. I mean I want us to stay close and in love. I want us to always be together."

Then I thought back to the night before Lisa's death. She had spent much of the evening on the phone in our bedroom with the door closed. When she came back out into the living room where I was watching TV, she fell asleep on the couch without talking to me. When I was ready to go to bed, I woke her and tried to coax her into the bedroom, but she just fell back asleep on the couch and slept there all night. This had become fairly commonplace.

My feelings for Lisa hadn't changed. I was still in love with her and wanted to be with her all of the time, but at some point, things had changed for Lisa. As I drove, I wondered when they had changed, and why.

*

Somewhere north of Dallas I started to feel sleepy, and decided to get a room for the night. Scott called two more times and left a message each time. With each message, his tone became more and more worried. I went to bed without returning his calls.

To my surprise, I slept pretty well at the hotel. I had been exhausted, and I was grateful for the good night's sleep, but I woke up thinking about Scott and how worried he was about me. It wasn't fair of me to worry him needlessly. He was covering for me at work. The least I could do was return his phone calls.

I stopped at a Dunkin Donuts thinking I could avoid the morning rush hour traffic while having breakfast. I sipped coffee in a booth by myself and called Scott. He answered on the second ring.

"Matt, where are you?"

"Hi to you, too," I said. "I'm in Texas."

"God, what are you doing down there? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, and I'm not really sure what I'm doing down here. Mostly I'm just driving."

Scott started to speak, but stopped. There was a moment of silence and he said, "Seriously, Matt, what are you doing down there? When are you coming home?"

"I don't know. I can't be at home right now. I just need to get away for a little bit."

There was more silence and then Scott said, "Okay, I guess, if you need to get away. Just be careful. Let me hear from you so I know where you are, okay?"

I promised to keep in touch and hung up. I felt the trapped, constrained feeling of home starting to creep in on me again, so I got up from the booth, leaving my donuts on the table, and walked out to my car. I punched San Antonio into the GPS and got back on the road.

CHAPTER 4

I crossed into Mexico on the Pharr International Bridge where I-69C turns into Mexico Route 97 near Reynoso. I had heard horror stories about Americans traveling in Mexico, but it was no different than traveling in the United States. When I needed gas, I stopped at a gas station. When I was hungry, I pulled into a restaurant. And when I got tired, I stopped for the night. That first night I made it to Heroica Veracruz, a city on the Gulf of Mexico. I stayed at a Holiday Inn. It was as if I had never left the U.S.

The next morning I left Heroica Veracruz and drove across the narrowest part of Mexico, crossing from the Gulf to the Pacific Coast and onto Mexico Route 200. Near Tapachula, I stopped for gas before I crossed into Guatemala. As I stood at the pump filling the tank of my Audi, a man approached me and said something in Spanish. He wore faded blue pants that were too short for him and a dirty red t-shirt. He had what looked to be homemade sandals on his feet, constructed from rope and duct tape.

“I don’t speak Spanish,” I said.

The man seemingly didn’t speak English because he repeated what he had said earlier, but this time more loudly and with his hand extended. I couldn’t understand what he was saying, but the meaning was clear. He wanted money.

I pulled a ten dollar bill out of my pocket and handed it to him. Without looking at the money, he stuffed it in his pocket and walked away.

A man filling his car at the next pump looked at me and shook his head. “Why do you give him money?” he asked with a Mexican accent. “That just encourages them.” He was dressed in a black and gold polo shirt and was pumping gas into a late model Mercedes.

I shrugged, feeling lost and stupid.

“Where are you heading, Amigo?” the man asked.

I had to think about his question for a second. I wasn’t going anywhere in particular. I was just heading south. “To Costa Rica,” I said, not at all sure of myself.

“It is not a good idea to drive through Guatemala at night. I would suggest you get a room here in Tapachula tonight and then drive into Honduras in the daylight. I wouldn’t drive in Honduras at night either if I was you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the advice,” I said feeling incompetent. What was I doing down here? Everything had gone fine so far, but it sounded like I was driving toward more dangerous territory. I thought about just turning around and heading back to the safety of home, but the thought of being back there filled me with dread. I decided to follow the advice I had been given and get a room in Tapachula for the night. There I could consider my options.

I ended up at the Hotel Don Miguel on Calle Poniente near Central Park in the middle of town. The room was simple with a single queen size bed and a small table with two chairs. It served my purposes. When I got to the room, it was late afternoon and I decided to take a short nap.

When I awoke I was disoriented. It was dark and I wasn’t sure where I was. An indistinct dream about Lisa filled my mind. As the dream faded, it took me a few dazed seconds to get my bearings and then to find the switch for the light next to the bed. I looked at my watch. It was

five minutes past nine. I was groggy, so I went into the bathroom to splash my face. My stomach growled and I thought about ordering room service. Oddly, I decided I didn't want to be alone. The last few days of being by myself in the car had been enough. I wanted to be around other people, as long as they didn't know me and didn't ask how I was doing after my wife's death.

The restaurant was called Los Jarrones and it was nicer than I expected. The waiters wore starched white shirts and bow ties, and the tables featured candles. Soft music floated down from the speakers in the ceiling. A romantic dinner all by myself was not what I had in mind, but what was I going to do? It was late and I was already there. A beautiful woman with light caramel skin, dark hair and a long gold, form-fitting dress welcomed me in English and led me to my table.

"Enjoy your dinner, sir," she said as I sat down. She walked away and a young waiter replaced her at my table. He spoke English fluently and seemed pleased that he had someone to wait on who did not speak his first language. He took my drink order and then quickly walked off.

As I looked over the menu, I realized that I had not eaten since breakfast in Heroica Veracruz that morning. When the waiter returned with my glass of wine, I ordered a medium-rare steak adobo with Mexican rice and pinto beans. The waiter nodded approvingly as I ordered, thanked me, and then was off again.

The restaurant was about three-quarters full and I couldn't help but notice the number of couples. They held hands, talked quietly, and laughed at a joke one or the other had made. They were together enjoying each other's company, and I was alone. It felt miserable.

Lisa and I had been out to eat at a nice restaurant a few weeks before her accident. We sat quietly, not talking. Although sitting without speaking had become normal in recent months, it made me uncomfortable. We should be talking, I remember thinking. We should have things to say to each other. I broke the silence. "I'd like us to take a few days off and get out of town. Maybe we could head down to Florida or go skiing in Colorado. I don't really care what we do, just as long as we can get away for a while."

Lisa stared at me for a moment, seemingly unsure of how to respond. I read the look on her face as saying that my suggestion had been the furthest thing from her mind and she needed a moment to decipher my words.

"That would be nice," she said, "but things are crazy at work right now and I don't think I can get away for a while." She looked down at her lap and didn't say anything more.

For some time I had been asking her to take time off of work so we could have a vacation together, but she kept putting me off. She was always too busy at work. The time was never right. "Is everything okay," I asked, fearing the answer.

"Yeah, I'm just really busy," she said.

The thought "Busy seeing someone else" went through my mind, but I didn't say anything about it. I had always trusted Lisa, but something was going on and whatever it was, it was consistent with her having an affair.

I was jostled out of my memory when the waiter brought my meal and sat it down in front of me. The rib eye steak was about a half-inch thick and looked tender and juicy. It sat atop a mound of rice and pinto beans.

"Can I get you another glass of wine," the waiter asked in perfect English.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said, cutting into the steak. The dry rub that had been used on the steak prior to cooking gave it a spicy kick and a lot of flavor. The taste of ancho chiles and lime juice filled my mouth and helped to take my mind off of the unpleasant memories I had been recalling just a few moments earlier. I was thankful that despite my situation, I hadn’t lost my appetite or my appreciation for good food.

When I had finished my meal, the waiter asked if I wanted dessert and I declined.

“May I ask you a question?” the waiter asked politely.

“Of course,” I said.

“I know you are from the United States, but from where?” he asked.

“I’m from Chicago.”

“Ah, of course. I should have known. I went to university in Texas and I once traveled to Chicago for a weekend in the summer. I went to Wrigley Field and watched the Cubs play baseball. Sadly, they lost,” he said.

“Yes, they do that a lot,” I said. “Now, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” he said with a smile.

“I was told earlier today that I should not drive through Guatemala or Honduras at night. Is this true or was the person who told me about this just trying to scare me?”

“I’m afraid he was telling you the truth, Senor. My uncle owns a home in Costa Rica near La Cruz and whenever we go down there, we only drive during the day. I have heard stories of robbers blocking the road and stopping cars to steal from them. I also heard of guerilla soldiers kidnapping foreigners and holding them for ransom. Driving at night in these countries is not a good idea.”

The next morning I left early and drove through Guatemala to San Salvador, El Salvador. I only drove during the daylight hours and did the same thing the next day driving through Honduras to Managua, Nicaragua. I spent my days thinking about Lisa and looking for traps along the roadway. At night I tossed and turned, my dreams a confirmation of the thoughts I had all day of Lisa's betrayal.

I was grumpy and exhausted when I left Managua. I continued south through Costa Rica and in to David, Panama, arriving about an hour before nightfall. When I pulled into the drive of the Ciudad de David Hotel, I was exhausted, but thankful that, except for a few crazy drivers, I had not met with any trouble during my trip.

Walking from the parking lot into the hotel, my body craved sleep. I had spent my days driving as fast as the roads would permit to avoid a danger that may or may not have existed. At night, I was all keyed up and couldn't sleep. Memories of Lisa, both good and bad, consumed my thoughts. I remembered the way Lisa couldn't keep her hands off me in the early days of our marriage. She always had to be holding my hand or draping her arm around my shoulders. In the months before her death, she barely ever touched me. I thought about how when we were first married, Lisa would call me two or three times during the day just to check in, but how at the end, she rarely even had time to take my calls. The memories were exhausting and I needed a rest. I wasn't on a schedule and I wasn't even sure where I was going. There was no need to push myself. I was supposed to be relaxing, so I decided to stay in David for a couple of days.

Once in my room, I lay down on the bed and immediately fell asleep. I didn't even bother to take off the clothes I had been wearing all day. I slept straight through the night and felt better upon waking than I had in several days. After taking a shower, I went down to the hotel

restaurant for their complimentary breakfast buffet. It was an all-you-can-eat deal and included fruit, eggs, breakfast meats, cereal, pastries, and fruit juices. I loaded up my plate and dug in. It was delicious and I gorged myself. I still had some bacon and two small pastries on my plate when I decided I couldn't eat another bite.

"Looks like your eyes were bigger than your stomach," said the man sitting alone at the table next to me.

"I'm afraid so," I said. "Everything looks so good, but I'm stuffed."

"I know how you feel. I was the same way the first couple of times I stayed in the hotel."

The man introduced himself as Ken Summers, an expat originally from California. He was tall and thin with wispy blond hair and the tanned skin of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors.

I told Ken I was from Chicago and asked, "Do you stay here often?"

"A couple of times a month," he said. "I live in Panama City, but I own some rental property here in David and up in the mountains in Boquete. I come over here to check on the properties and to visit with some of my expat friends. How about you? What brings you to David?"

"I'm just driving south and I ended up here last night," I said, only telling half the story.

"I'm going to stick around for a few days and just take it easy."

Ken looked at me with knowing eyes, but just nodded his head, not saying anything.

"What goes on around here?" I asked, more to break the uncomfortable silence than because I was really interested.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "I have some business to take care of this morning, but how would you like to head up to Boquete with me this afternoon. There's a group of expats up there

that gets together once a month. Today's the big day and I'd like you to join us. I think you'll have fun."

I thought back to a few nights earlier in Tapachula when I had wanted to be with other people only to end up feeling sorry for myself. But the truth was that I still found the idea of being around other people appealing. "Okay, sure," I said.

We made plans to meet and then Ken was gone to his appointment. I wasn't sure what the day held in store for me, but at least I wouldn't be spending it driving south with no purpose. I was looking forward to doing something different for a change.

While I waited for Ken, I went back to my room and called Scott. I had been out of touch for several days and I owed him a call. When he answered, his first question was, "Where are you?"

"I'm in Panama."

"Panama? The country Panama?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm in David and plan on staying here for a couple of days."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay, but I think Lisa was having an affair." The words jumped out of my mouth without me intending to say them. I had not mentioned our marital troubles to Scott previously.

"Why do you think that?" he asked.

I told Scott about how Lisa had been avoiding me for the past few months; how she had gotten into the habit of falling asleep on the couch in the living room and staying there all night;

how my overtures for sex had been met with evasion and excuses; and how she had, on the day she died, promised to tell me what was going on.

“That doesn’t mean she was having an affair, Matt.”

“There were other things too, Scott. That’s all I’ve been thinking about while I’ve been on the road and I can’t come up with a better explanation.”

Scott was quiet for a moment and then said, “I just can’t believe she would do that.”

“Neither can I, but something was going on and not knowing is driving me crazy.”

“Man, I don’t know,” Scott said, and then went quiet for a moment. “I hate to change the subject on you, but Greg Conover has been calling. The contract is up on his properties at the end of April and he wants to meet with you before then. I’ve put him off for now, but I’m not sure how long he’s going to wait.”

I was not in the right frame of mind to think about work-related matters. “Put Greg off for as long as you can,” I said. “I’ll deal with him later.”

When I got off the phone, I felt like getting in my car and hitting the road again. The thoughts of home and the things that went on there made me want to run, to get as far away from Chicago and my life as possible. If I hadn’t already made plans with Ken, I might have left. I desperately needed a distraction and I hoped that going to Boquete with Ken would provide it.

CHAPTER 5

The road between David and Boquete was wide and newly paved. Ken told me that until recently, driving to Boquete was an adventure because you never knew for sure what condition the road would be in. Often, after rains, the road would be washed out. But now, with the newly constructed road, the trip was easy.

During the drive, I learned that Ken had moved to Panama three years earlier after his divorce. His son, his only child, was out of college and living in San Diego, so Ken flew back to California every couple of months to see him. Otherwise, he was perfectly happy living in Panama.

“I love this place,” he told me. “It’s like California was back in the fifties, tons of opportunity and very few rules.”

“What kind of opportunities?” I asked.

“Land and real estate is relatively inexpensive, especially compared to California. Tourists are really starting to flock here, so there are business opportunities with tourism. There’s also money to be made with American franchises, although I happen to think we’d all be better off without them.”

Once we got to Boquete, we drove off of the main road to a home Ken owned. It was a simple one-story house with a small yard. “This is part of what I’m telling you. If I can keep my houses rented to tourists ten to fifteen weeks each year, the rent covers my expenses. But each of them is rented thirty to thirty-five weeks a year, so they’re both making money for me. There’s opportunity like this throughout the country.”

As Ken talked, we pulled into a gravel parking lot in front of a small, yellow, one-story building. “Welcome to Mike’s Global Grill,” Ken said.

I was surprised. I had pictured a bigger, nicer place. Ken had described how good the food was and said that a lot of people would be there. From the outside, the restaurant looked run down and too small to hold many people. When we walked in we were greeted by the man behind the bar.

“Hey, Ken. You’re early,” he said with a slight accent as he reached across the bar to shake Ken’s hand.

“I wanted to get a good seat for the game.” Ken turned toward me. “This is Matt Cravens. Matt, this is Enrique.” I shook his hand. “Enrique is the bartender here, so he’s your new best friend.”

Ken ordered two bottles of Red Stripe and Enrique said, “Jamaican beer? Don’t you want to treat your friend here to a genuine Panamanian beer?”

“I wouldn’t wish that piss water on anyone,” Ken said laughing.

Enrique looked hurt, but served the two Red Stripes, each with a foam koozie to keep the beers cold. We took our drinks out onto a patio on the side of the building. “I thought we’d enjoy the sun for a while before people start showing up,” he said.

We sat in brightly painted wooden Adirondack chairs with a small plastic table between us where we rested our beers. “What’s wrong with the Panamanian beer?” I asked.

“It’s not that bad,” Ken said. “It’s not great, but it’s not horrible either. I just like Red Stripe and I like to give Enrique a hard time.”

I laughed and then we sat quietly listening to the sound of a small stream that ran along the side of the building only a few feet from the patio. I could see that the stream was clear and shallow, with ripples on the surface of the water as it ran over the uneven stream bottom. The sound was soothing and I could feel my body relax into the chair in a way I had not felt in some time. We finished our beers and Enrique brought fresh ones to replace them.

“You were kind of vague yesterday when I asked what brought you to Panama. Now that I’m plying you with alcohol to loosen your tongue, can you be a little more specific?” Ken smiled, his teeth very white.

“I just needed to get away for a while,” I said.

“I can see it’s going to take a few more drinks before you’ll talk,” Ken said. We both laughed.

“I don’t mean to be too mysterious,” I said. “My wife died and I wanted to get away so I didn’t have to think about it or talk about it.”

“Oh, shit. And here I am trying to get you to talk. I’m sorry, Matt.”

“No worries,” I said holding up my nearly empty bottle. “Why don’t you buy me another beer as an act of contrition?”

“Fair enough,” Ken said, and he called for Enrique to bring us “two more of that good Jamaican beer.”

We were still out on the patio when a man in a loud green Hawaiian shirt wandered out of the bar. “It’s just like a couple of Americans to be sitting out in the sun when there’s a perfectly good indoor bar just a few feet away,” he said.

“Spoken like a true Canadian,” Ken said. He introduced the man as Marty Page from Toronto. Marty was heavy set with a red face, a white goatee, and a bald head. We exchanged greetings and handshakes. “Marty is one of the few people around here who is actually retired. Everyone else works their asses off, but Marty just sits around doing nothing all day.”

“I’m old and I live off the largesse of the fine people of Canada.”

I must have had a quizzical look on my face because when Marty looked at me he explained, “I retired from Canada Post, the Canadian postal service.”

Marty told us that several people would be arriving soon so we’d better head inside to get good seats. I followed the two men inside, but I wasn’t at all sure what the good seats were for.

Back inside we sat down at the bar and I took a look around the room. Ken, Marty and I were the only people sitting at the bar. There was a couple at a wooden table against the wall eating nachos and drinking beer. Two men were at another table across the room engrossed in a conversation, highball glasses half-filled with ice and a brownish liquid. Flags from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, Norway, and other countries I couldn’t identify were hung along the walls.

As the afternoon gave way to evening, more and more people filed in. The tables and other barstools were soon full. The whole time, Enrique made sure that we had fresh drinks in front of us.

“Are you boys going to have dinner?yyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy” Marty asked.

“Don’t you have to head home to Lady Pamela?” Ken asked.

“I have permission to stay out tonight and watch the game. Plus, I think she prefers it when I’m not home.”

“Then let’s have dinner,” Ken said.

The food was served to us at the bar. Ken ordered the stir fry with rice, Marty got a hamburger that was so thick he had trouble biting into it, and I got fish and chips, which was served with cole slaw. Just as we were finishing our meal, a tanned man with long brown hair pulled back into a pony tail came into the restaurant. A woman with long, straight blond hair stood next to him. The man took off his sunglasses and waited until his eyes adjusted, then made a beeline for the bar.

“Summers, you are going down tonight,” he said.

Ken turned around at the sound of his name. “Oh God, I was hoping you wouldn’t show up.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss out on the chance to make some easy money off of you,” he said. “Are we still on for a hundred?”

Ken laughed. “I’m not feeling as confident as I was last time I was here, but I’m not going to back out. I’m still in for a hundred.”

“You don’t have to do that, Ken” the woman said. “If you want, I’m sure Danny will let you out of the bet.”

The man she had called Danny gave the woman a hard look and then swatted her with a backhand playfully across her upper arm.

“That’s alright, Christine. I made the bet, so I’ll keep it,” Ken said.

“Whose side are you on?” Danny asked Christine.

As it turned out, the couple was Dan and Christine Longwell. They were originally from Fort Lauderdale, but had moved to Panama five years earlier to start a small coffee farm. Dan

had been a high school biology teacher back in the states, but he gave up his job and the benefits it provided to grow coffee in Panama.

“Not just coffee,” he told me when we were introduced. “We produce high end, certified organic Esmeralda Especial Gesha coffee beans.”

“Don’t get him started talking about coffee,” Christine said. “You won’t be able to get him to shut up.”

“Not tonight. Tonight is all about basketball,” Dan said.

“What are you guys betting on?” I asked.

“The Miami Heat is playing the Lakers,” Dan said. “Ken made the mistake of betting me that Los Angeles would win.”

By the time the game started, I was drunk. I don’t know how many beers I had, but I had plenty. At half time, Marty insisted that we all do tequila shots which I initially refused to do and then did at least three. The Heat won the game and Ken reluctantly handed one hundred dollars to Danny which he used to buy us more drinks. I don’t remember driving back down the mountain to David, nor do I remember making my way to my room.

“You don’t remember losing a beer guzzling contest to Christine or singing at the top of your lungs to ‘Tainted Love,’ either?” Ken asked me the next day before he left to go back to Panama City. My head was pounding and the light hurt my eyes.

“No, not any of it,” I said.

“Yeah, you were a mess, but you seemed to have fun.”

I didn’t remember everything about the previous night, but what I did remember seemed like a good time. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“That’s good. Are you still going to meet me in Panama City tomorrow night?”

I remembered telling Ken that I would meet up with him as I continued my journey south the following day. “Sure, I should be there in time to buy you dinner.”

“I’ll pick the place, you pick up the tab. That sounds fair.”

After Ken left, I showered and started to feel a little better. It felt strange to have gone out with people I didn’t know and to have enjoyed myself. For months, Lisa and I had a strained relationship, yet I rarely went anywhere or did anything without her. Often, if I wasn’t with Lisa, I was alone. I thought about the nights I sat by myself at home while she worked late, or the weekend plans that had to be canceled because she was working on a special project. I remembered how my requests for her to take time off work were met with excuses and promises for future vacations. The thoughts left me cold. If Lisa was bored or unhappy with our marriage, she should have talked to me about it. She should have given us a chance to fix things rather than turn to someone else.

CHAPTER 6

Ken and I met at a restaurant named Manolo Caracol in Casco Viejo, Panama City's historic district. I arrived early, so I sat at the bar and ordered a Panama Beer. I couldn't help but think that back at the bar in Boquete, Enrique had a smile on his face.

I was tired from my drive, but I looked forward to seeing Ken. My mind had been occupied with thoughts of Lisa—her apparent betrayal and her death—during my drive to Panama City. I was looking forward to seeing a familiar face and thinking about something else, anything else.

“Why are you drinking that piss water? Did you lose a bet?” Ken asked.

“I wanted to give it a try while I was in country.”

“What do you think?”

“It's not very good,” I said as I set the bottle on the bar and stood up to shake Ken's hand.

“Let me buy you a decent beer.”

We had a couple of drinks at the bar and made small talk before being seated for dinner.

“I wanted to eat here tonight because the food is the best you can get in Panama,” Ken said.

“You don't order off the menu. You eat what they bring you and everything they bring you is fantastic”

I had eaten at Prix Fixe restaurants before and I normally didn't care for them. I liked having choices and making my own decisions. I didn't need someone I didn't know deciding what I was going to eat. Even so, this was Ken's town, so I trusted his judgment.

The waiter freshened our drinks and then brought a lettuce salad with avocado, shredded beef jerky, and lemon herb vinaigrette. When he walked away from the table I looked at Ken and he had a smile on his face.

“Shredded beef jerky?” I asked.

Ken laughed. “Don’t be a baby. Give it a try.”

I had never had beef jerky on a salad—shredded or otherwise—but I had to admit that it was pretty good. Ken waited to see my reaction after my first bite.

“See, it’s not too bad, is it? Maybe you need to be a little more adventurous in your eating habits.”

Once we were finished with our salads, one waiter cleared our plates while another brought tall, narrow cups of pumpkin soup with cinnamon sprinkled on the top. I just shrugged and took a spoonful. It was delicious. When I had finished my soup, I sat back in my chair and asked, “Whatever made you want to move to Panama?”

I expected Ken to give me a quick, flippant answer, but instead he wiped his mouth with his napkin and seemed to be giving my question serious thought.

“I didn’t think I’d ever leave California,” Ken said. “I was married to a woman I loved and my only child was off at college. Life was good. But then out of the blue one day, my wife tells me that she wants a divorce. She said she was unhappy and didn’t want to be married any more. For a few months I tried to talk her out of it, then one day it hit me that if I had to beg my wife to stay married to me, maybe it wasn’t in my best interest to stay married to her. So I agreed to the divorce and moved out.”

Ken took a long pull on his drink, and motioned to the waiter to bring us new ones.

“I never intended to move to Panama or anywhere else. But I couldn’t stand being around my ex-wife and the home we used to share. Everything reminded me of her and I just felt like I wanted to get away. I did some research and found Panama to be affordable. At the time, I wasn’t concerned about the opportunities here. I just wanted to go somewhere I could afford. So I packed up and headed here with the thought that I’d stay for a few months until I felt ready to go back home. But after a while, Panama started feeling like home.”

“Do you ever think about going back?” I asked.

“Not really. I go back to visit my son, but after a week or two, I’m itching to get back here.”

The waiter set our new drinks down and then motioned to another waiter who brought the main course. “This is pork tenderloin with ancho-saril sauce,” he said.

The small plate had three large slices of pork tenderloin overlapping each other with a dark sauce carefully poured over the center of the pork slices.

“It looks good,” Ken said.

I cut a piece off one of the pork slices and dipped it generously into the sauce. The pork was tender and juicy, and the sauce gave it a slightly sweet cranberry taste, but with an ancho chile kick.

“Delicioso,” I said.

“I didn’t know you knew Spanish,” Ken said.

“I don’t.” We both laughed.

When we had finished our entrees, the waiter brought out the dessert, which he described as naranjilla ice cream with seasonal fruits. On the plate sat two round cups; one with two scoops

of ice cream and one with an assortment of fruit. The ice cream had a citrus flavor to it. Ken scooped up some of the fruit and then added a bit of ice cream on top of it. I followed his lead, not knowing what kind of fruit I was eating, but enjoying it all the same.

“What are your plans for after you leave Panama City?” Ken asked.

“I really don’t have any. For now, at least, I plan to keep driving south. When I feel like I’m ready, I’ll turn around and go home.”

“That could be a problem,” Ken said.

“What do you mean?”

“The road south ends not far from here, at the Darien Gap. There’s no way to drive into Columbia.”

“I hadn’t even bothered to look at a map,” I said. “I just keep following the GPS.”

“You can go about another four hours south, but then the road ends. You can always fly into Columbia, but then what are you going to do for a car?”

“I guess I could sell my car here and buy another one when I get there. Do you know anyone here in Panama who buys cars?”

Ken did know someone and he introduced me to him the next morning. Pedro Rivera looked to me like a Hispanic Danny Devito. He stood about five feet tall, had a round belly, and kept an unlit cigar in his mouth at all times.

“This is a nice car,” he said, “but it might be hard to sell here. Too expensive. Maybe I could ship it to Brazil where they have more money, but shipping’s not cheap.” He scratched his head as he stared at the car. Then he took the unlit cigar out of his mouth, motioned toward me and made an offer to buy the car.

“Pedro, I told you Matt is a friend,” Ken said. “You can do better than that.”

Pedro looked at Ken, then at me, then back at Ken. “I could maybe do a little better,” he said. He made another offer and I took it. We shook hands.

“One other thing. I’m going to need a car when I get to Medellin. Do you know anyone there?” I asked.

“No, not in Medellin. I used to know a guy in Bogota, but he died. Too bad you aren’t flying to Ecuador. My brother is down there and he could help you find a car.”

“Where in Ecuador?” Ken asked.

“Jorge is in Quito. He’s a professor at the Central University there, but he buys and sells cars on the side. He could help you if you were going to Quito.”

Ken and I looked at each other. “Is there any reason you have to re-start your trip in Columbia?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “No, I can start from wherever I want.”

Pedro called his brother and made a deal for me to buy a Kia Rio, a small car that he said wasn’t as nice as my Audi, but would get the job done. When we got back to Ken’s house, I made arrangements to fly to Quito the next day.

At dinner that night, Ken said, “You know, there’s nothing that says that you have to keep driving south. You could just stay here in Panama.”

The thought had occurred to me, but staying didn’t feel right. I felt this primal need to keep moving, to keep heading south. Even as I mulled over the thought, I knew it didn’t make any sense. Even so, I couldn’t deny what I was feeling.

“That’s true, but I feel a need to keep driving.” I shook my head.

“I think I know what you mean,” Ken said. “I’ve felt the same thing myself. But that feeling you have, I don’t think you can outrun it. At least for me, the best I could do was settle in somewhere and make a new life for myself. At some point, you have to stop running.”

We were sitting in Viejo Habana, a Cuban restaurant that sat on the corner of Avenida B and Calle 5, midway between the Plaza Bolivar and the Plaza de la Independencia. We were eating Cuban sandwiches and drinking Bucanero beer.

“You may be right, but I’m just not ready to stop running yet.”

Ken nodded his head and then drank from his beer. “The one piece of advice I would give you is don’t be afraid to talk about what you’re going through. Keeping it inside can just make things worse. Let it out.”

“Yeah, maybe. When I’m ready,” I said.

“Sometimes you have to force yourself to be ready.”

I took a bite of my sandwich and thought about what Ken had said. I knew that talking about Lisa would be painful and I wasn’t ready to deal with that pain. I wasn’t sure that I’d ever be ready.

CHAPTER 7

My flight into Quito arrived just after noon. Pedro's brother Jorge met me at baggage claim and then drove me in his Land Rover to a small warehouse near the university. Jorge was taller and thinner than his brother, and he dressed like a professor, not a used car dealer. Unlike Pedro, Jorge was quiet and reserved.

"I hope you like the car," he said. "If not, I have a few others."

"Okay," I said, not sure how to respond. For the first time during my trip, I felt very far from home. That shouldn't have surprised me. I was very far from home. But my car, the Audi, kept me connected to Chicago and the life I led there. Now that it was gone, I felt disconnected.

At the warehouse, Jorge pointed to a red Kia Rio. It was a four door sedan just like the Audi, but much smaller and less luxurious. The seats were cloth rather than leather and the engine was much less powerful.

"This was well taken care of," Jorge said. "It is four years old, but only has sixty-one thousand kilometers on it."

I nodded and continued walking around the car. "Can I hear it run?"

"Of course, Senior." Jorge took a key out of his pocket, got into the car, and started it. The engine turned over immediately and sounded strong. He revved the engine a couple of times and then allowed it to idle.

"Sit inside," he said as he climbed out of the car. "See if you like it."

The car was not what I was used to, but comfortable enough. The interior was clean and didn't have any unusual smells.

“Would you like to drive it?” Jorge asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“If you’d like to see the other cars, I can...”

“No, this one will do.”

I paid Jorge his asking price, put my luggage in the trunk, and drove the little red car out of the warehouse. I made my way through the city to the Anahi Boutique Hotel, which Jorge had recommended. I had planned on taking a nap and going for a late dinner, but when I lay down, I couldn’t sleep. So instead, I went down to the hotel restaurant—a place called Restaurant Orquideas—and had an early dinner.

I was seated at a table on the patio next to a stone fountain. The sound of the fountain was relaxing and the two glasses of wine I had before dinner helped to relax me even more. I ordered sweet plantain ravioli with chorizo and chipotle. It sounded unusual and after Ken’s admonition the day before, I was feeling adventurous. When the waiter brought my food, I ordered another glass of wine.

Unlike traditional ravioli that is made with pasta, this ravioli was made with wonton wrappers, which held the plantain filling. The ravioli was then covered with a spicy mixture of ground chorizo and chipotles in adobo sauce. The result was a delicious combination of sweet and spicy that had me ordering yet another glass of wine before I was finished with my meal. For dessert, I ordered one more glass of wine and then carefully made my way back to my room where I slept soundly through the night.

The next morning, I drove east out of Quito until I came to E25, which I took south. I passed through Quivedo, Babahoyo, Milagro, as well as several smaller towns before I crossed

into Peru near a town called Zapotillo. Somewhere along the way, the road I was on turned into the Pan-American Highway, which I took to Piura in Northern Peru where I stopped for the night.

The next day I was back on the Pan American Highway still heading south when my car began to overheat near the city of Trujillo. I pulled into a service station and the attendant saw the steam coming out from under my hood. He was a tall, skinny kid who couldn't speak English, but understood the problem nonetheless. With a rag covering his hand, he removed the radiator cap, allowing more steam and water to escape. He wiped his hands on his greasy pants and then went inside to get some water and antifreeze to refill the radiator.

“Agua,” he said to me, trying to explain what he was doing. “Mas agua.”

The attendant brought out a large metal bucket that had a long spout for pouring. He leaned under the hood, into the engine bay, and carefully poured the water into the radiator. He emptied the bucket and then poured in the coolant.

As he filled the radiator, I noticed the briny smell of salt in the air. “Are we near the ocean?” I asked the young attendant. He just smiled, not understanding what I was asking. He nodded politely and then put the cap back on the radiator.

“The Pacific Ocean is just east of here,” said a man with a strong accent. He must have walked up behind me when I was speaking to the attendant. I wasn't sure if he worked at the service station or if he just happened to be there.

“We must be pretty close,” I said. “I can smell it.” I raised my head and smelled the breeze.

“Yes, we are not very far. Just a few miles. Have you been to Trujillo before?”

“No, this is my first time and I’m just passing through.”

“You should stay, Senor, and see our pyramids.”

“Your pyramids?” I asked, thinking that he was joking.

“Yes, Huaca del Sol and Huaca da la Luna, the pyramids of the sun and moon. They are very famous.”

I was intrigued. I was tempted to stay and see them, but I was anxious to continue my journey. It was the middle of the day and I could still drive several more hours before dark.

“There is a tour they do from el Gran Marquez. It is very nice. You can stay there tonight and take the tour tomorrow.”

What was my hurry? I was in a mad dash to head south, but why? What was I accomplishing by speeding down the road, not taking the time to really see the countries I was driving through? I didn’t have to be anywhere at any particular time. I could do whatever I wanted. “Maybe I will,” I said. “What is the name of that hotel?”

With a newly refreshed radiator, I followed the directions the man at the service station had given me, and I ended up at the El Gran Marquez Hotel on Calle Diaz de Cienfuegos. It was just a few blocks off of the Pan-American Highway and very close to the Pacific Ocean.

I was booked on the first English-speaking tour of the morning and got down to the lobby just before the bus left for the pyramids of the sun and moon. The bus was modern and comfortable with large, individual seats and air conditioning. During the fifteen minute drive to the pyramids, a beautiful woman with shimmering hair and large eyes stood up in the front of the bus and, using a microphone, told us about the history of the Huacas.

“Huaca del Sol—or Temple of the Sun—was built around 450 AD by the Moche civilization. The civilization thrived here in the Moche Valley from 100 AD to 800 AD. The Huaca del Sol was built from adobe brick, and when it was completed, contained more than 130 million bricks that were made by various communities from around the region.”

Once we crossed the Moche River, we turned left off of the main highway and entered the Moche Valley. The bus stopped at a gate and then proceeded into the park to what the tour guide called the Temple of the Sun. The Pyramid was very impressive, although it had suffered a great deal of damage and wear since it was first constructed.

The tour guide wore a blue blouse with a tan colored skirt, the blouse pulled tight across her breasts. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a ponytail that hung down to the middle of her back. Her lips were full and she smiled brilliantly as she spoke. It had been a long time since I had really noticed a woman in this way, and the realization made my face flush. I could feel sweat bead up on my forehead.

I made myself ignore the tour guide and instead concentrated on the ruins of Huaca del Sol. I viewed the ornate carvings in the walls and the paintings that were made fifteen hundred years earlier. Who were the people who built this place? What were their lives like? Did their wives cheat on them?

“Senor, are you ready to go?”

It was the tour guide and she was looking directly at me. Everyone was walking away from the Temple toward the bus. I was just standing there staring at a painted carving of what looked like a demon with long, sharp teeth.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I said, blushing. I turned to make my way to the bus.

We made the short drive to Huaca da la Luna, or Temple of the Moon. I tried to listen to the tour guide, but I was preoccupied with my attraction to her. It felt odd to be thinking like this after so long and I did my best to put her out of my mind.

Back at the hotel, I rushed off the bus and made my way to the restaurant where I ordered a bloody Mary. It wasn't yet noon, but I felt I needed a drink.

I sat alone at the bar and tried not to think about Lisa. I wanted badly to move on with my life, to no longer feel the pain of her betrayal and death. I knew it would take time, but I was already tired of mourning.

The first bloody Mary went down quickly and I ordered another. When the bartender, a young, thin man named Adelmo, set it down in front of me, he asked if I wanted to see the lunch menu. It still wasn't noon, but it was close enough. I learned from Adelmo that in Peru, lunch is the main meal of the day, which is why the lunch menu featured complete meals rather than the sandwich and fries option I was used to in the states.

I ordered a "set meal," which is a three course meal featuring a starter, an entrée, and a dessert at a "set" price. I chose Causa Rellena, a potato and chicken soup for my starter. The soup was thick and tasty. For my entrée, I took Adelmo's recommendation and ordered the Aji de Gallina, a chicken breast smothered in a spicy aji Amarillo sauce. I was full after the entrée, but Adelmo insisted I try a dessert.

"Our chef is from Spain and is renowned for his baked desserts," he said.

"What would you recommend?"

"The trio is our most popular dessert. I am sure you will like it."

I ordered the trio, even though I wasn't exactly sure what I was ordering. I had just finished my third bloody Mary and decided to switch to wine.

Adelmo brought out the trio and described each dessert to me before I ate it.

"This is an alfajores," he said pointing at what looked like a cookie. "The center is filled with manjar blanco, it's like caramel, and it has powdered sugar on the top."

I took a bite of the alfajore and was surprised at how light and crumbly the cookie was. The manjar blanco held the cookie together as I bit into it. I got powdered sugar on my upper lip and had to wipe my mouth with a napkin after one bite.

"How do you like it?" Adelmo asked.

"It's very good," I said. "Very sweet and messy." My second bite finished off the alfajores.

"Try this one next," Adelmo said, pointing at what looked like a glazed donut with a little syrup poured over the top. "It is a picarones, a sweet potato and squash fritter.

I looked at Adelmo, thinking he might be kidding. "Sweet potato and squash?"

"Yes, it is very good."

Using a fork, I cut a piece of the picarones and dipped it in the syrup. I looked again at Adelmo, who had an encouraging smile on his face, and raised the fork to my mouth. The picarones was delicious. It was deep fried, giving the outside just a little crunch, but the inside was soft and sapid. The syrup, which Adelmo called "chancaca," was sweet and sticky.

"This is really good," I said as I finished another bite of the fritter.

"This one is my favorite," Adelmo said pointing at the last dessert on the plate. "It is a jelly roll called pionono." Adelmo explained that the same manjar blanco that was at the center

of the alfajores was rolled inside a sponge cake and then rolled in powder sugar. I took a bite and understood why the pionono was Andelmo's favorite.

"It is like Heaven, no?" Andelmo asked.

"It is," I said and took another bite.

"Now it is siesta time," Andelmo said, smiling.

I was stuffed and a siesta was exactly what I needed. I signed my check, and thanked Andelmo for his hospitality. When I stood, I was light-headed and felt slightly unsteady on my feet. I had to concentrate on the way back to my room making sure not to stumble.

I lay down fully clothed on the bed and fell asleep quickly. When I awoke, the room was dark and my head was pounding. I groaned as I got up, standing too quickly and feeling dizzy. I sat back down on the edge of the bed and rubbed my temples. I stood again, this time more slowly, and made my way to the bathroom. I badly needed some aspirin to get rid of my headache.

I splashed cold water in my face and took three aspirin. I knew from past experience that what I really needed was a little hair of the dog. Another drink would cure my headache faster than mere aspirin could. I changed clothes and made my way back to the bar.

The restaurant was busier than it had been at lunch and the bar was crowded. I was disappointed to see that Andelmo was not working. I had enjoyed his company. In his place was a large, friendly man with a fat, bearded face.

"What can I get for you?" he asked as I stood at the bar. All of the barstools were taken.

"I need a bloody Mary," I said.

"Will you be dining with us this evening?"

In my room, the idea of eating nauseated me, but now I suddenly felt hungry, although I didn't particularly like the idea of eating at the crowded bar. "Yes. I'd like to get a table."

The bartender, who wore a name tag indicating that he was Esteban, added me to the waiting list for a table.

"It should not be long," he said. "Perhaps twenty minutes."

A seat at the bar opened up next to where I was standing just as Esteban delivered my drink. I drank down half of the bloody Mary, hoping for quick relief from the pain in my head. I was not a big drinker and was not used to having a hangover, especially in the middle of the day. I tilted the drink back and finished it off.

"Did you enjoy the tour this morning?" asked an accented female voice. I turned to see the tour guide standing next to me.

"Hi," I said. "Yes, I enjoyed the tour very much."

"I'm glad. I rarely get a chance to ask people once the tour is over."

"My name is Matt," I said, offering my hand.

"I'm Laura." She shook my hand, her hand soft and her grip firm. The shiny auburn hair that had been pulled back in a ponytail earlier in the day was now down and appeared to have been curled. She wore a red and white dress that hugged her hips, along with white high heel shoes.

"Would you like to sit down?" I asked, offering my barstool.

"No, thank you"

I wasn't sure what to do. She didn't want the barstool, but I didn't feel right sitting down again. I chose to stay standing while leaning on the barstool.

“Are you alone?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m here by myself. How about you?”

“Yes, I just wanted to get out of my apartment. I get a discount here because I work the tour, but I rarely take advantage of it. I decided to treat myself tonight.” Laura’s eyes were brown and incredibly clear. They seemed to sparkle as she spoke.

Esteban interrupted us. “Laura, your table is ready.”

“Are you waiting for a table?” she asked me.

“Yes, I am.”

“You could join me if you like.”

I accepted and we made our way to a table near the back of the restaurant. I was still carrying the empty bloody Mary glass and a waiter came to our table as we were being seated to relieve me of the empty and to take our drink order. We each ordered a glass of wine.

“What brings you to Trujillo?” Laura asked.

“I’m just passing through,” I said, unsure of how to answer. “I’m heading south, down to Argentina.” This was the first time I had ever mentioned Argentina. I wasn’t really heading there. I just knew that was as far as the road went. I regretted my response because I was afraid Laura would ask me why I was going to Argentina and I wouldn’t have anything intelligent to say. Thankfully, she didn’t ask.

“Are you driving?” she asked. “Did you drive from the United States?”

“Most of the way,” I said. “I started in Chicago.”

“Did you go through Columbia?” she asked.

“No, I cheated a little bit and flew from Panama City to Quito.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. Columbia is a beautiful country. More modern than Peru. I am from Bogata.”

“You’re Colombian?” I asked. “I assumed you were from Peru.”

The waiter brought our drinks and asked if we were ready to order. Neither of us had looked at our menus.

“Could you give us a couple of minutes?” I asked.

“Of course, Senor,” the waiter said and walked away.

“What brought you to Peru?” I asked.

“Let’s order first and then I will tell you,” Laura said with a smile.

I looked over the menu, but had a hard time concentrating. Her dress was low-cut in the front and gapped open as she leaned forward, elbows on the table studying her menu. Away from the bar, I could smell her perfume, subtle, but sexy. All of the thoughts I had tried to avoid earlier in the day came rushing back. My head told me I should excuse myself and go back to my room, but my heart insisted that I stick around to see what might happen.

I had been a very faithful husband. Although we never really discussed it, Lisa knew I could be trusted. Fidelity was very important to me, and I never considered straying or breaking our wedding vows. For most of the time I knew Lisa, I thought she felt the same way. Now, being here with Laura, I felt guilty being so attracted to her. I felt I was being unfaithful, but to who? Lisa’s memory?

Laura looked up and smiled when she saw I was staring at her. I looked down at my menu, trying, but failing, to concentrate.

When the waiter returned, Laura ordered something called tiradito. I ordered the same thing, although I didn't know what it was.

"Would you like more wine?" The waiter asked.

"Perhaps we should get a bottle," Laura said.

I agreed. Laura said something to the waiter in Spanish. He nodded and walked away from the table.

"I ordered a bottle of my favorite Spanish wine. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will," I said. "You were about to tell me about why you left Columbia and came to Peru."

"Oh yes. It's not much of a story. I was working as an event planner at the Sonesta Hotel in Bogota. I planned a meeting for a company that mines copper throughout South America and that's how I met my husband, Luis. I followed him back here to Peru and have been living in Trujillo ever since."

So she had a husband. I suddenly felt very uncomfortable having dinner with a married woman. Why had she invited me to share a table with her? Even here in Peru, that couldn't be acceptable.

Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Laura said, "I moved to Trujillo five years ago. Luis and I were married right after I got here. He was killed three years ago in a mining accident. I keep thinking about moving back to Columbia, but I like my job with the tour company and haven't left yet.

"I'm sorry about your husband," I said, my words feeling inadequate.

"Thank you."

The waiter brought a bottle of wine and showed it to Laura. She said something in Spanish and the waiter poured us each a glass.

“Your tiradito will be right out,” the waiter said and then walked away.

“How about you? Are you married?” Laura asked.

“Yes. Well, I was,” I said, correcting myself. “My wife died in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

I nodded. “To happier times,” I said, raising my glass. We clinked glasses and each had a swallow of our wines.

“That’s very good. It has a kind of spicy citrus taste,” I said hoping to change the subject.

“It is a Nessa Albarino. It is one of my favorites,” she said, turning the bottle toward me.

The waiter brought our turadito. The dish consisted of raw fish cut in strips and placed in a piquant lime juice dressing and rocoto crème sauce.

“Have you ever had turadito before?” Laura asked.

“No I haven’t. Is it that obvious?”

Laura laughed. “You seem a little surprised.”

“No, it’s just...”

“It’s okay. This is just like ceviche, but without the onions. I like this better.” Laura took a bite and I followed suit. “What do you think?” she asked.

“I like it,” I said, cutting off another bite of fish and eating it.

“I like to order this when I’m in the mood for something light.”

I poured us each another glass of wine and for the next several minutes we ate in silence.

When we finished our turadito, the waiter came to take our plates and he poured what was left of the wine into our glasses. “Would you like another bottle?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said too quickly, hoping another bottle would extend our evening. My headache was gone and I was again feeling the alcohol buzz I had felt earlier in the day.

Laura smiled at my eagerness to order another bottle of wine. “Now you like it as much as I do,” she said.

We talked about our families and our childhoods, careful to avoid talk of our dead spouses. When we had finished our second bottle of wine, Laura suggested we each have a pisco sour.

“Have you ever had one?” she asked, a slight slur to her words.

“No. I’ve never even heard of one. What is it?”

“It is the national drink of Peru.” She pronounced “national” like the four syllable Spanish word nacional. “It has Peruvian pisco and lime juice and egg whites. Try it. You will like it.” Laura’s accent had become more pronounced.

We ordered pisco sours and continued our conversation. I knew I didn’t need more alcohol. I was moving from buzzed to drunk, but I was enjoying my time with Laura and I didn’t want it to end. The alcohol was also doing a good job of driving away my feelings of guilt for having a pleasant time with someone other than Lisa. Why should I feel guilty? I wasn’t doing anything wrong. At least I was waiting until after Lisa was dead to look for a replacement. She hadn’t even waited until we were divorced.

An hour and two more pisco sours later we walked out of the bar arm-in-arm. I wasn’t sure where we were going but Laura steered us toward the elevator. For a moment I thought

about begging off, but the thought left my mind when Laura put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

Laura was an eager and energetic lover. I was used to taking my time, but she wasn't interested in waiting around. As we lay next to each other on the bed, she pulled me over so I was on top and guided me in to her. She moaned softly at first, almost like she was humming, but the moans quickly became louder and were soon joined by my own.

When we finished, Laura excused herself to use the bathroom and I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the guilt starting to creep in. My body was telling me that what we were doing was right, but my brain was telling me it was wrong. I must have fallen asleep while Laura was in the bathroom because I woke up when she slid under the covers next to me and put her hand on my chest, running it down the length of my torso.

"I don't think we should," I said without thinking.

"I want to do it again," she said, her accent strong and her words slurred.

"I'm not sure that's..."

As she began to stroke me with her hand I stopped talking and closed my eyes. Why shouldn't we enjoy each other like this? We were both single, consenting adults. There was nothing wrong with what we were doing.

Once I was ready, Laura climbed on top, controlling our movements. This time, she was less in a hurry, more patient. With her hands on my chest, she moved slowly up and down. She had her eyes closed and her head back. She bit her lip and kneaded my chest. Then she leaned forward and put her face close to mine, her hair falling around my head as she softly kissed me. This went on for several minutes, Laura on top, stopping once in a while to linger. Her moans

became louder and her movements more demanding, until she let out a small, high pitched yelp, her breath coming fast, and then she rolled off of me.

We lay in the bed not talking for several minutes. I wanted to say something, to make sure everything was okay, but instead stayed quiet, not sure of what to say. Laura lay with her eyes closed and a look on her face that could have been pain or ecstasy. It was hard to tell.

“That was good,” she said unexpectedly, sighing with pleasure and snuggling her head next to mine. We fell asleep like that.

When I woke in the morning, Laura was gone. My head was pounding and I was having trouble focusing my eyes. I sat up and noticed a piece of paper lying on the side of the bed Laura had occupied.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening,” it said, and it was signed, “Laura.”

I felt both satiated and guilty. The sex had been great, but it shouldn't have happened. My wife had been dead for less than three months. What kind of man jumps into bed with another woman that soon after his wife's death?

I suddenly felt sick to my stomach and rushed into the bathroom. I knelt in front of the toilet just in time to lose the contents of my stomach through my nose and mouth. I held onto the sides of the bowl and retched again, the bile burning as it came up. I stayed there on the hard tile floor for several minutes, breathing hard and spitting the vomit out of my mouth. The whole time I kept thinking to myself, “This is what you deserve.”

When I was able, I took a quick shower, packed my things, and checked out of the hotel. I needed to get away, to leave behind what I had done.

When I got to my car, I quickly pulled out of the parking garage, but realized that I didn't know where I was going. I pulled over and took the GPS unit out of the glove box. I knew that Lima was south of Trujillo, so I punched it into the GPS and followed the directions.

A few blocks from the hotel I noticed a familiar fast food restaurant. My stomach growled and I thought it might be a good idea to get something to eat. The restaurant didn't have a drive-thru, so I went inside. As I stood in line, I thought about Laura and hoped I might run into her, but as soon as I had the thought, my guilt rose up. What would I do if I saw her? What good would it do? I had made a mistake with Laura. Did I really want to compound the problem?

CHAPTER 8

Outside of Lima, in a town called Comas, my car started overheating again. I pulled over at a gas station, but no one there spoke English. Across the street was a dingy looking used car dealer. I picked my way through traffic on Panamericana Norte and pulled into the parking lot.

An eight foot tall cyclone fence with razor wire on the top surrounded the lot. It looked like the type of security I would expect at a prison, not a used car dealership. I walked into the front door of a shabby building in need of paint and was greeted by a man in a dirty yellow t-shirt, sitting behind a small wooden desk.

“Do you speak English?” I asked.

The man shook his head and smiled. I could see he was missing several teeth. He stood up from his desk and held up his hand, indicating he wanted me to wait. He went into the back of the building and when he came back out, he brought a tall, thin, balding man with him. He said something to the balding man in Spanish and then looked at me.

“Do you speak English?” I asked the balding man.”

“You’re bloody right I do. What can I do for you?” The balding man had a big smile.

“You’re English,” I said.

“That’s right. And you’re American.”

I must have looked foolish gawking at this man the way I was, but I didn’t expect to find an Englishman in the middle of Peru.

“I am. Yes, I’m an American and my car is overheating.”

“Bad luck, but we can take a look at it,” he said. He turned to the man with the missing teeth, said something in Spanish, and the man retreated to the back of the building.

“Diego is the best mechanic in Comas,” the Englishman said. “He’ll get you fixed right up.”

The Englishman turned out to be Lawrence Tweed from Darlington in the north of England. He owned the used car dealership and was happy to talk to another English speaker, although he insisted that I spoke American, not English.

After I pulled my car around to the back of the building, Diego looked under the hood and Lawrence invited me in for tea. It was so stereotypical that I almost laughed when he asked.

I was surprised that among the cardboard boxes and loose papers that cluttered his office, Lawrence had a small table with two chairs and a porcelain tea set. He brought a steaming kettle from another room and poured each of us a cup of tea. “I’m afraid we’re out of scones,” he said. “Would you like a cracker? They may be stale.” He held up an open package of Crawford Garabaldi crackers.

“No thanks. The tea will be fine.”

“I’m waiting on a care package from me mum. She sends tea and scones and other goodies from home each month.”

“What brought you here to Peru?” I asked.

Lawrence put his finger to his lips. “Top secret. Can’t talk about it. How about you? Why are you driving around Peru with license plates from Illinois?”

“That’s top secret too,” I said.

“Just a couple of secretive blokes hiding out in Peru.”

I laughed and took a sip of my tea. “This is very good,” I said, gesturing with my cup.

“That’s Yorkshire Tea,” he said. “The best in the world, made by Taylors of Harrogate. You can’t get that here in Peru.”

I took another sip and nodded my head. “Yes, very good.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a cracker?”

This time, I accepted a cracker. He was right. It was stale.

Diego came into the office wiping grease off his hands with a red rag. He said something in Spanish to Lawrence and then Lawrence said to me, “Looks like you blew a head gasket, mate, but we can take care of it.”

“How long do you think it will take?” I asked.

“No more than a few days. We just have to send for the part in Lima and then it won’t take Diego long to swap it out.”

“A few days?” I said. “Isn’t there a faster way?”

“Nothing happens fast down here. The natives move to a different clock.”

“What about a car? You sell cars, right? How about if I trade you my car for one on your lot?”

Lawrence’s face lit up. “Now you’re talking my language.”

The cars on Lawrence’s lot were junk. He admitted as much. Those cars were for the poor residents of Comas. He kept the nice cars—the ones meant for the wealthier residents—in a warehouse next door to his lot. He had a Mercedes and couple of BMWs and even a Ferrari in his warehouse. I settled on a two-year old Volkswagen Jetta. It was black and clean and was nicer than the Kia. Lawrence charged me too much for the car, gave me too little on my trade-in,

and smiled the whole time he took advantage of me. I didn't care. I just wanted to get back on the road.

It was getting late, so I drove an hour to Lima and found a hotel just a few blocks off the main road. The next morning, I got up early and took the Panamericana Sur to Tacna, near Peru's border with Chile. I got there just after dark and felt exhausted, having spent more than sixteen hours on the road.

I stayed at the Hotel Copacabana near the airport in Tacna. It was nice enough and it was on the main road. Because I was tired, I ordered a pizza from the hotel restaurant and ate it in my room. It wasn't very good.

Another reason I stayed in my room was because I had spent the day thinking about Laura and I didn't want a repeat of my time in Trujillo. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake my feelings of guilt over having spent the night with her. I knew that Lisa had cheated on me—or at least I was pretty sure she had—but that didn't make it okay for me to hop into bed with a stranger, no matter how beautiful she was, just three months after my wife's death. I expected more out of myself, and the fact that I had enjoyed myself the previous night in Trujillo made the guilt even worse.

Leaving Tacna the next morning, I set the GPS to Ushuaia, the southernmost city in Argentina. I had been thinking about this for some time and had decided that if I was going to keep driving south, I might as well go as far as the road would take me. There wasn't much more to my decision than that. I wanted a goal to shoot for, and Ushuaia was now my goal.

Over the next three days, I made my way along the Pacific Coast to Chile's Valparaiso Region until finally coming to Santiago, the capital city of Chile. Part of me wanted to stay and

explore Santiago, but I thought better of it. Since I had arrived in Santiago in the middle of the afternoon, I continued driving south through the city and got a room near Puente Alto, a large suburb south of Santiago.

The next day I made it to Victoria, Chile where I spent the night, and then crossed through the Andes Mountains into Argentina. The temperatures had dropped considerably and I was surprised to see snow in the mountains. Thankfully, the roads were clear. When I came down out of the mountains, I took Argentina Route 181 to Route 40 into San Carlos de Bariloche.

My GPS seemed to be confused. It wanted me to swing west again into the Andes. It was getting late, and rather than get lost in the mountains, I decided to stop for the night and research my best route. I got a room at the Villa Sofia Hotel near Lake Nahuel Huapi, a large lake fed by snow melt from the Andes. The hotel was made of roughhewn logs, and had rooms with high beamed ceilings reminiscent of a Swiss ski chalet.

When I checked in, the man at the front desk asked me if I was there to go skiing. When I told him I wasn't, he replied in English, "That is good because the skiing is not very good right now."

I told him about my GPS and how it was trying to send me back into the mountains.

"Yes, that is correct, Senor. The main road goes southwest into the mountains from Bariloche. There really is not much to our east." He showed me on a map how there was just open land to the east and southeast. He also showed me how I would be going across the interior of the country to the Atlantic Coast the next day after going through the mountains.

The area around the hotel was beautiful, with meticulously manicured grounds and surrounded by high mountain peaks. It reminded me of a place Lisa and I had stayed at when we went skiing in Aspen a year or two after we were married. The memory comforted me for a moment until her stand-offish behavior and phone devoid of texts took over my thoughts. I couldn't think about the good times with Lisa without also remembering the bad, so I did my best not to think about her at all.

After having breakfast the next day, I was back on the road listening to music as I drove. At first, it was just for background noise, but when I started thinking about my anger toward Lisa and my guilt over Laura, I turned up the music and sang along. It was as good a trick as any to divert my attention and keep my mind occupied.

In the late afternoon I came upon a large lake near a small town called Sarmiento. The water was choppy and the wind blew hard across it. I thought about getting out for a closer look, but I was warm and comfortable in the car, and decided against it. Instead, I drove into Sarmiento to get a snack, stopping at a restaurant called La Tranquera, which was empty except for two employees, a man and a woman.

Although neither spoke English, I was able to get my point across that I just wanted dessert. "Postre," the man said. "Si. Si." He brought me a menu that was in Spanish. I stared at it for a short time, and finally pointed to the Chocotorta, mostly because the word looked like "chocolate." The man nodded and went into the kitchen. A minute later he brought out a large slice of what looked to be chocolate cake, but with some kind of cream in the center of it. It was delicious. As I studied the cake, I could see that there was also some type of cookie or biscuit in the center that gave it a bit of a crunchy texture.

I thanked the man for his hospitality and paid my bill. He smiled and nodded a lot, but didn't say anything I could understand. I waved as I left and got back in the car.

I made it to Comodoro Rivadavia around eight o'clock that night and got a room at the Lucania Pallazo Hotel, a very nice place in the center of town. The restaurant looked nice, but I was still full from the chocotorta, so I went into the piano bar to get a glass of wine and relax. When I ordered a malbec from the bartender, a man two seats down from me at the bar said, "You're an American."

"I am," I said and raised my hand in a half-hearted greeting. I wasn't looking for company and didn't feel like talking.

"Me too," he said. "From Texas. How about you?"

"Chicago."

The bartender brought my wine and as he did, the Texan scooted down into the barstool next to me. "Hank Pinkney," he said, offering his hand. He was wearing a pair of jeans with a blue and white button down shirt. His sleeves were rolled up.

I introduced myself and turned my attention to my wine.

"What brings you to Argentina?" he asked. As he did, he sat back on his barstool and I could see he was wearing a belt with a big gold buckle. I suspected he was wearing cowboy boots to complete his ensemble. I couldn't help but look. I was right.

"I'm heading down to Ushuaia," I said, hoping he wouldn't ask more.

"Ah, you're going all the way south. I did that once. Do you have business down there or just going to Ushuaia for the experience?"

"Just for the experience," I said. "I'm thinking about staying and exploring the area."

“Good idea if you have the time. I just had the weekend while I was down there. The wife wanted to go to a big music festival they put on every year.”

I nodded, but didn't say anything, hoping Hank would get the message. He didn't.

“I work for Shell Oil. We have some oil fields in this area, so I spend my time going back and forth between here and Houston.”

“Really?” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Yeah, the oil fields down here are dying out though. Not much oil left any more. It wouldn't surprise me if Shell doesn't sell their leases.”

Hank ordered another beer while I sipped my wine.

“Have you ever gone to Rada Tilley?” he asked.

“No, where is it?”

“Just south of here, right on the coast. It's a nice little place. They've got a real long beach, goes on for about two or three miles. The wife likes to go there whenever she comes down here with me. You should check it out.”

The temperature when I got to the hotel was in the low fifties and the wind was blowing about twenty miles an hour. “Seems a little chilly for the beach,” I said.

“Oh, that's true,” Hank said. “Didn't think about that. I think it might warm up some next week.”

I nodded and sipped the last of my wine. “Well, I'm going to head up to my room. You have a good night.”

“You too. Have a good drive down to Ushuaia.”

I shook Hank's hand and waved as I walked out of the bar. I wanted another glass of wine, but didn't feel sociable enough to stick around the bar. At least I didn't take him back to my room. The thought made me shake my head and laugh.

The next day I made it to Rio Gallegos, where I learned from the clerk at the Hotel Patagonia that I would have to take a ferry across the Strait of Magellan to continue my journey to Ushuaia. "Just across the narrows. It is not scary," he said, apparently detecting my fear.

"Why don't they just build a bridge?"

"Why build a bridge for when there is a perfectly good ferry?" he said in broken English.

The restaurant at the hotel was more upscale than I wanted, so I ventured to a place called Pizza Roma Express that the front desk clerk suggested. I was in the mood for pizza, but when I got there and saw their pizza, I decided to get a burger.

I was nearing the end of the road. Once I got there, what was I going to do? Did it really make sense to stay in Ushuaia for a while? I knew nothing about the area other than it was as far south as I could get. It wasn't enough information to base a decision on, but it was all of the information I had.

I left the hotel early the next morning and made it to the ferry launch just a little after eight. The ferry was loading when I got there, so I pulled right onto the boat. I didn't even have to get out of my car.

The wind had died down from the previous day, and the water was relatively smooth. I was grateful for my good fortune.

We landed on the south side of the Straits and I pulled the car off of the ferry onto a rutted, narrow dirt road. The ferry ride had been uneventful and I felt stupid for having worried

about it. I checked my GPS, turned off the dirt road onto Argentina Route 257, and began the final leg of my journey south.

CHAPTER 9

In Ushuaia, I got a room at the Canal Beagle Hotel, a squat, square brick building that sat on the Avenue Maipu across from the commercial port. I arrived without reservations, with very little luggage, and looking generally unkempt. I think my appearance and arrival without reservations alarmed the hotel clerk, who alerted hotel security.

A dark haired man in a black uniform knocked on my door and said something in Spanish. When he found out I couldn't speak his language, he introduced himself in broken English as being with hotel security. He was polite, but his questions were insistent and made me uncomfortable. Why was he interrogating me? He invited himself into my room and asked where I was from. When I told him, he tilted his head to the side like a curious dog and asked, "Chicago? In the United States?"

"Yes, that Chicago," I said.

"Ah, I see" he said, "but I checked with the airlines and they do not have a record of you flying into Argentina. How did you get to Ushuaia?" He stroked his thick black mustache and eyed me suspiciously.

"I drove."

The security man seemed incredulous. "You drove all the way from Chicago in the United States? Why would anyone drive to Ushuaia from Chicago?"

I wanted to ask him why it was any of his business, but instead I said, "I just wanted to get away for a little bit." My answer sounded more evasive than I had intended.

The security officer eyed me suspiciously and was just about to speak when I said, “I’m sorry, but why is this important to you? I can’t imagine that you interrogate all of your guests.”

“No, of course not,” he said, now on the defensive. “I was just curious since I have never met anyone who has driven all of the way here from the United States.

“And now you have.” I walked to the door and opened it for him “I’m really rather tired after my long drive and would like to take a nap.”

At first he didn’t move or say anything. He just stared at me. Then as if waking from a trance he walked toward the door and said, “Of course, Senor Cravens. Please forgive my intrusion.”

I closed and locked the door, then walked over to the large window that looked out at the Port of Ushuaia and across the Beagle Channel to Isla Navarino. I suddenly felt angry. “To hell with him,” I said to the empty room.

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That evening, I walked down the street toward the Canal and found an interesting looking restaurant called Tia Elvira. The specialty of the house was seafood, particularly cod, mussels, trout, and a fish I had never heard of called hake. The seafood didn’t appeal to me and they only offered two different kinds of steak, a sirloin and a tenderloin, although they offered both with a fried egg. I opted for the suprema napolitana, which, from the description, sounded like a cross between chicken cordon bleu and chicken parmesan.

My meal consisted of a large chicken breast with thinly sliced ham on top, covered with mozzarella cheese and smothered in tomato sauce. It was not particularly good. The tomato sauce was bland and the chicken was mushy. I was disappointed.

After dinner, rather than leave the restaurant I went into the bar for a drink. It was almost empty. I sat at one end of the bar and waited for the bartender to take my order.

“Can I help you, Sir?” the bartender asked in English.

“Do you have a beer that is made locally?” I asked.

“Yes sir, Cerveza Beagle.”

I was just about to order it when he said, “It is horrible. I would not recommend it.” He scrunched up his face and shook his head.

I had to laugh at his honesty. “Is there a beer you would recommend?”

“Heineken is a good beer, but you can get that anywhere. Argentina does not have good beer, but we are known for wonderful wines.”

“Can you recommend one?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. I would recommend the Malbec from Bramare Marchiori Vineyards. It is spectacular.”

“Then that’s what I’ll have,” I said.

The bartender poured a small amount of wine into the glass and offered it to me to taste. I always hated this part of ordering wine. Although I liked wine, I didn’t know enough about it to discern the good from the not-quite-as-good. I took the wine, swirled it around in the glass and held it up to the light, then drank the sample, being sure to swish it around in my mouth before swallowing it. “Yes, this is fine,” I said, saying the words I knew I would say even before I tasted the wine. The bartender poured me a glass of the Malbec and set it carefully on a white paper coaster on the bar. As he walked away I took a sip and thought about the charade I had just played. “What a fraud,” I thought to myself.

“Senor Craven, how nice to see you again.” I turned to see the security officer from the hotel standing next to me.

“Hello,” I said.

“May I sit down?” he asked pointing to the barstool next to me.

“Of course,” I said, immediately regretting it.

“Senor, I want to apologize for my being such poor behavior this afternoon,” he said in broken English. “We have had much problems with runners of the drugs in Ushuaia recently and I am afraid I suspected you.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just nodded, neither accepting nor rejecting the apology.

“You see, I did some checking and I found out about your wife. I am sorry for your loss, Senor.”

I was stunned that this security guard would check into my background like this. “How did you learn about my wife?” I asked.

“It was nothing, Senor Craven. Just a simple check of the Internet.”

“Do all security guards in Argentina do background checks on hotel guests?” My voice had an edge to it, but I didn’t care. I felt like my privacy had been violated.

“Ah, I see. I am not just a security guard. I do that just part of the time to make extra money. I am a detective with the Ushuaia police. And no, I don’t always check up on hotel guests. You just seemed reluctant to answer my questions, so I became curious about you. That is all.”

My anger was tempered by my knowledge that I had acted more suspicious than necessary at the hotel. If I would have been honest with him, perhaps he wouldn’t have checked

up on me. Also, I had to admit that I looked a little rough when I first arrived. I finished the last of my wine.

“May I buy you a drink to do the apology?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

He smiled and offered his hand. “My name is Eduardo.”

I introduced myself, forgetting that he already knew my name and a lot more.

“Did you enjoy your meal tonight?” he asked.

“Honestly, no, it was not very good,” I said.

Eduardo seemed genuinely surprised. “What did you have?”

“Something called Suprema Napolitano.”

Eduardo and the bartender, who had insinuated himself into our conversation, both shook their heads. “No, no, no. This is a restaurant of seafood. You should not order the pollo. Order the seafood. The king crab is excellent.” The bartender agreed.

“I wish I would have,” I said.

“Next time you will know,” Eduardo said. “I wish I would have found you before the meal.”

We had talked for a little over an hour when I mentioned that I would only be staying at the Canal Beagle for three days because they were going to be full with previous reservations.

“Can you recommend another hotel?” I asked.

“There are many hotels,” he said, “but I’m afraid they will all be full. The Festival De Musica Classica begins this weekend. Many visitors it attracts to Ushuaia.”

I nodded and looked down at my drink. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I had a couple of days to figure it out.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Eduardo asked. “My brother owns a finca outside of town with a guest cabin. He raises sheep. He is looking for someone to assist him on the farm. If you do not have other plans, perhaps you could keep yourself busy helping my brother and you can stay in his cabin.”

I was not looking for a job nor did I have any experience working with sheep. Even so, the idea of doing some physical labor sounded good to me. I spent my life—my life before I left Chicago—sitting at a desk and thinking. Working outdoors might do me some good. I imagined myself working all day and falling into bed exhausted at night; the whole time, too busy and too tired to think about my problems. Plus, it wasn't like I had anywhere else to stay in Ushuaia.

“Yes, I think that might be a good idea,” I said.

“As you say in America, you can kill some birds with the stones,” he said.

CHAPTER 10

Sebastian had been a bit standoffish at first. He didn't seem as keen on the idea of having me work on his farm as his brother had been. As I learned later, Sebastian had not been looking for someone to help him, but he agreed to Eduardo's suggestion anyway. After a few days of living in the cabin and following him around his farm, Sebastian came up with the idea of having me paint his outbuildings, including the cabin. That kept me busy all day and relieved Sebastian of the burden of having to keep an eye on me. It worked out for both of us.

Sebastian was a stout man, a couple of inches shorter than my six feet, but probably thirty or forty pounds heavier. His thick gray hair and beard made him look considerably older than his brother, more like his father than his sibling. I guessed him to be in his fifties, which made him about twenty years my senior. Even so, he worked tirelessly and had the strength of an ox. Even on horseback, Sebastian moved like a man much younger than his age.

When I met Sebastian's wife Eva, she was very shy. At first, she brought my dinner of loco—a navy bean and corn soup—or a stew called carbonada criolla to the cabin. She'd drop it off with very little conversation. Her English was not nearly as good as Sebastian's and my Spanish was worse than Eva's English, so it was difficult for us to communicate. One night, Sebastian asked me to join him and Eva at the main house for a dinner of grilled lamb with chimichurri sauce. After that, I ate every night with my hosts in their home.

During one of our meals, Sebastian said, "Eduardo tells me that your wife has recently died. Is that true?"

The words of the question made it sound as if he doubted what Eduardo had told him, but the way he asked it was full of concern and sympathy. It was hard to know exactly what he was asking.

“Yes, it is true,” I said. I could see in Sebastian and Eva’s eyes that they had questions, but were too polite to ask. They had both been very nice to me during my stay and although I was still not eager to talk about Lisa’s death, I remembered Ken’s advice when we were together in Panama City.

I told them the story, about Lisa’s accident, leaving out the part about our crumbling marriage. When I had finished, Eva said in broken English, “I’m so sorry. Have you children?”

“No, we don’t. We had planned on having kids someday. We thought we had plenty of time.”

“Yes, I am sorry too,” Sebastian said. He looked uncertainly at Eva and then said, “We lost our son four years ago. He had cancer. We took him all the way to Buenos Aires where they have the best doctors, but they could not save him.”

Eva lowered her head and I was afraid she might be crying. There was an uncomfortable silence and then I asked, “How old was your son?”

“Tomas was seventeen when he died. He was a good boy, a beautiful boy. He was tall and was a wonderful soccer player. He was on the junior team in Ushuaia.” Then softly, Sebastian said, “He was our only child.”

Eva got up from the table and took a framed photo off of a shelf and handed it to me. “This is Tomas,” she said. “He would be twenty-one now.”

I was relieved to see that Eva was not crying. I took the photo from her. Tomas was tall and thin in his blue and white soccer uniform. He had curly black hair and an awkward smile. “He’s a good looking kid,” I said.

“Yes he was,” Eva said. She took the photo from me and returned it to the shelf.

The room was quiet until Eva returned to the table and Sebastian asked, “Do you know how long you will be staying?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I don’t feel like I’m ready to go back home yet, but if you need me out of the cabin, I can always try to find a hotel room in town.”

“No, no. You do not have to leave,” Sebastian said, his voice full of apology. “You can stay as long as you like. We enjoy having you here and you are very helpful painting the buildings and helping with the sheep.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That’s very kind.” I was pleased that I would not have to hunt for an open hotel room and relieved that I would not have to return to Chicago. At least not yet.

CHAPTER 11

I was up on a ladder painting the side of the barn when I heard Sebastian call me from inside the shearing shed. When I got there I could see that one side of the interior sheep pen had collapsed and Sebastian had his hands full trying to prop it up. The dozen or so sheep that were in the pen were all trying to get out at once.

The pen was set up in the corner of the barn and the square enclosure consisted of the side and back wall of the barn on two sides and green metal gates on the other two sides. The gates on the front of the pen had come loose from the floor. The weight of the sheep against it had pushed it forward. Sebastian held the gates up as best he could, but the combined weight of the sheep was making it difficult for him.

“What can I do?” I asked Sebastian.

“Come hold this right here so I can put the posts back into the floor.”

As I held the gates in place, Sebastian took two L-shaped metal rods off the wall where they were hanging on a nail, slipped them through collars on the bottom of the two center gates, and pushed the rods down into holes in the concrete floor. The rods anchored the gates at the center of the pen holding them upright and allowing me to let go of them.

“Thank you, my friend,” Sebastian said. “I must have forgotten to replace the support rods yesterday when I took the pen apart to clean.”

I had never been in the shearing shed before and I was surprised at how clean and organized it was. In the back left corner was the pen that had collapsed on Sebastian. The floor in the pen was made of concrete and was very clean. There was a sliding door at the back of the

barn that allowed sheep to come in from outside, and the gates at the front of the pen opened into the shearing pen, which had an even cleaner concrete floor and two cords hanging from the ceiling. At the end of one cord was a toggle-type switch and on the other was electric shears which resembled a large hair trimmer.

As I watched, Sebastian led a sheep into the shearing pen. He sat the sheep down on its hind legs and then gently flipped it up so that none of its feet were on the ground. When he did this, the sheep became very still and did not fight against him or try to get away. Sebastian then expertly sheared the sheep, first cutting carefully around the sheep's crotch, and then starting under the chin, he ran the shears down to the bald spot he had created initially, and proceeded to shear the rest of the sheep in less than four or five minutes. When he was done there was a large, one-piece wool fleece on the floor along with a few smaller pieces.

Sebastian released the sheep into a pen opposite the holding pen. At the rear of the second holding pen was a door that was open to the outside. As Sebastian closed the gate to the second holding pen, the sheep scampered out of the barn into the pasture. Sebastian tossed the fleece into a square metal container then led another of the dozen or so sheep from the first holding pen into the shearing pen, repeating the process.

I sat on an upturned plastic bucket as Sebastian sheared one sheep after another. "You are very good at that," I said.

Sebastian laughed at my comment. "You can get good at anything if you do it long enough," he said, and then added, "except perhaps marriage."

"That's sad, but true."

“I’m not sure if we ever get truly good at marriage. Eva and I have been married for twenty-six years, but I’m still trying to figure out how we can live together and be happy.”

I was a little surprised at Sebastian’s comment. He and Eva seemed very happy together. In fact, often when I watched them, I wished that Lisa and I could have been as close.

“For Lisa and me, it seemed like our earliest days were our happiest. The longer we were married, the further apart we became.” The words were out of my mouth before I even realized I was saying them.

“It is that way sometimes,” Sebastian said.

I had the urge to talk, to unburden myself of all of the thoughts and feelings I was keeping locked up inside. We were quiet for several moments and I thought again about the conversation I had with Ken when I visited him in Panama City. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to talk about Lisa, but like Ken said, sometimes you have to force yourself to be ready.

“Before Lisa died, she was acting very strange. She seemed to be avoiding me, spending extra time at her job and leaving the room when I would come in. Something was going on with her, but I’m not sure what it was.”

Sebastian nodded his head as he listened. “Did you ask her about it?”

“Not at first, but after it had gone on for a few months, I finally confronted her. I told her it was obvious something was wrong. At first, she denied it, just said she was busy or I was imagining things, but one day she promised that she would tell me what was going on when she got home from work. That was the day she died in the car accident. I still don’t know for sure what was going on with her, although I have my suspicions.

“What do you think was wrong?”

“I think she was seeing someone else and she was going to tell me she wanted a divorce.” Hearing the words come out of my mouth was painful, but it was also a relief to get them out in the open.

Sebastian was no longer shearing sheep. He had stopped and was listening to me talk. He examined his hands for a moment, rubbing them together like he was trying to warm them up. “Does it really matter?” he asked. “I don’t mean did it matter before. I mean, does it matter now? Now that Lisa is gone.”

I was about to say, “Yeah, it matters,” but instead I took a moment to think about Sebastian’s question. It hurt me to think that Lisa was seeing someone else, but how important was it now? If she was having an affair, it was over. Lisa was dead. We may have had problems, but when Lisa died, she was still my wife. I had lost sight of the fact that I lost a wife and a marriage when Lisa died. All I could think about was the possibility that she was cheating on me.

“I’m not sure how important it is anymore.”

“My son was a good boy, but he could also be bad. When he was going through treatments in Buenos Aries, Eva and I found some drugs—marijuana and some pills—in his bedroom. We also think that he and his friends stole a car in town. I don’t mean to compare these things to what you have said. It’s just, when Tomas died, none of those other things mattered. I wasn’t angry with him. I wasn’t disappointed in him. I just loved him and my love was too strong, too consumidor—I don’t know the English word—but I couldn’t feel any anger or disappointment.”

I understood what Sebastian was saying. “You think I’m focusing on the wrong thing?”

“I know that the love can make you stronger and can get you through your tough times. Anger makes you weaker. It wouldn’t have done any good for me to be angry at Tomas. It wouldn’t have changed things. So I just felt the love I had for my son.”

*

My time was running out in Ushuaia. I had finished painting all of the buildings on Sebastian’s farm and I knew that my brother could only hold down the fort back home for so long.

“I’m sorry, Matt, but Greg wants to meet with you a week from tomorrow,” Scott said when I called him the night I finished with the painting. “I had promised myself that I wouldn’t pressure you to come back before you were ready, but we really need the Conover contract.”

Scott had been incredibly supportive, and although I didn’t want to go back yet, I knew that I had to. The survival of our company depended on keeping Greg Conover as a client. We had worked too long and too hard to build the company. I couldn’t allow my lingering feelings of grief and betrayal to get in the way of our continued success. “I just need to make the arrangements and then I’ll be home,” I told him.

At dinner that night, we celebrated the painting of the buildings. Eva made cumin pork with sweet potato guiso, one of Sebastian’s favorites. I was glad that I had finished the painting before leaving. I was also happy that Sebastian was pleased with my work.

“The buildings are beautiful,” Sebastian said as we sat down to dinner. “I am proud to own them.”

When we had finished the meal and Eva was going around re-filling our wine glasses, I told them that I had some news. Eva stood behind Sebastian's chair and they both had concerned looks on their faces. I was sure that they knew what I was about to say.

"I spoke to my brother earlier," I said. "There is a meeting soon with a very important client and I need to be there for it. As soon as I can make arrangements, I'm going to be leaving to go back to Chicago."

"Are you sure?" Eva asked. "You are welcome to stay longer."

"Yes, stay longer if you wish," Sebastian said.

"Thank you. You've both been wonderful hosts, but I think it's time for me to go home and get on with my life."

I heard the words come out of my mouth, but I wasn't sure that I completely believed them.

*

The closer Sebastian and I got to Rio Grande, the more traffic we encountered. We left the narrow, mud-covered roads behind us and traded them for wider roads surrounded by homes and businesses. Once in the city, traffic came to a standstill as tourists stopped and snapped pictures of a giant sculpture of a sea trout, its head angled up in the air and its tail the size of an automobile. Banners along the roadway announced Rio Grande as the "International Fly Fishing Capital of the World," a rather audacious claim from a city that looked so worn and dusty.

"I don't know how people live in such a place," Sebastian said. "So much noise and traffic. How do you say, it drives me buggers."

I laughed. "The traffic here reminds me of Chicago, just on a smaller scale."

“And you want to go home to that? You should stay with us.”

I didn't respond. What if I didn't go back to Chicago? What if I returned to the Finca with Sebastian? I knew Scott would be hurt and angry, but I also knew that deep down he would understand and get over it. Did I really want to stay away from my life and my responsibilities or would staying in Argentina just be taking the easy way out? The answer didn't matter. I was heading home whether I liked it or not.

“I'm going to pull over here to get fuel. Do you want to eat?” Sebastian asked.

We had eaten breakfast—medialunas, a small, sweet croissant, with butter—before we left Sebastian's farm, but I was starting to get hungry. “Sure, I can eat something.”

“You are like me,” Sebastian said, laughing. “You can always eat something. I know a good restaurant in town. They have very good pizza. It is my favorite. You probably cannot get good pizza in Chicago, so you should have some before you leave Argentina.”

Sebastian seemed so pleased to be sharing his favorite pizza with me that I couldn't bring myself to tell him about how Chicago is known for its pizza.

We drove into downtown Rio Grande and parked in angled parking on Perito Moreno Street across from a pizzeria named Don Peppone. The restaurant had a large red and green sign that featured a character that looked like a younger version of Chef Boyardee twirling his moustache. As we walked across the street, cars honked their horns and one man shouted at us in Spanish, but Sebastian was unconcerned. The smell of garlic, sausage, and rising dough was in the air, and like a bloodhound, he was locked onto the scent.

Inside the restaurant, we were seated at a small wooden table. The waiter came and Sebastian ordered a pepperoni pie for both of us, and a Cerveza Quilmes for himself. I ordered a

Diet Coke, the first I had had since I arrived in Tierra del Fuego. The pizza had a very thin crust and was covered in pepperoni and tomato slices, but lacking cheese. Sebastian spoke glowingly of the pizza, saying it was the best in Argentina. I agreed that it was the best I had eaten during my time in the country.

“Have you eaten pizza anywhere else in Argentina?” Sebastian asked.

“No, so this is the best I have had, and also the worst.” I said.

Sebastian gestured with his hand as if to dismiss me. He let out a deep laugh and grabbed another slice. He was clearly enjoying the experience.

CHAPTER 12

After lunch, Sebastian and I were back on the road heading north out of Rio Grande. The rain let up as we drove along the road that ran parallel to the sea. “That is my bay,” Sebastian said smiling. “It is named after me.”

“That’s the Bay of the Old Sheep Herder?” I asked.

Sebastian laughed that guttural laugh I had come to appreciate. “A sense of humor can be a dangerous thing, my friend. Especially for a gringo,” he said, wagging his finger at me and smiling. “That is the Bay of San Sebastian.”

The water of the Bay seemed impossibly blue, a deep cobalt, and stood in sharp contrast to the muted brown of the land. The water was tranquil. As we drove, I looked out at it and felt myself relax. The feeling was short lived. When the road turned inland and we moved away from the water out onto the expansive brown plain, I lost the feeling and started thinking too much about the drive, and the flight home, and getting back to work, and about Laura, and of course, about Lisa. Roads branched off in all directions. I never saw any road signs, but Sebastian drove with the confidence of a native who had traveled this way many times. More than once I asked, “Do you know where you are going?”

“Of course,” came the reply. “Relax, my friend, and enjoy the view.”

We drove in silence for a few minutes before Sebastian said, “Are you sure you want to go home? I could find you more work to do.”

I stared out the window at the flat, brown plain and thought about how badly I wanted to return to Sebastian’s finca. It was safe and quiet and most of all, when I was there, I wasn’t

surrounded by all of the things that reminded me of Lisa. I wanted to stay, but I knew I had to leave, to return to my home and my job and my life. I couldn't hide at Sebastian's forever.

"I have to go home sometime," I said to Sebastian. "I guess now is as good a time as any."

Sebastian did not look at me, but simply nodded his head and continued to drive.

*

At times, it seemed we had the road to ourselves. We seldom saw any other vehicles. But as we got closer to the ferry launch, we were encountering more semi-trucks. There were often three or four of them running together. When we approached the trucks from the rear, Sebastian would easily pass them. There were no lines painted on the road, so it was difficult to tell if we were in a passing zone or not. Sebastian didn't seem to care one way or the other.

Although we were driving toward the airport in Rio Gallegos, which is in Argentina, we had to cross into Chile to get there. The border between the two countries is separated by the Strait of Magellan, thus the need for the car ferry.

"How much longer to the ferry?" I asked.

"Not much longer," was Sebastian's non-committal reply.

"I'm going to miss Eva's cooking," I said, just to have something to say.

Sebastian nodded but did not say anything.

"Now with my experience, maybe I can get a job as a painter."

"Or a sheep shearer."

We both laughed uncomfortably. I tried to think of something else to say, but couldn't come up with anything, so we rode in silence.

Sebastian slowed and then turned onto the same unmarked, rutted dirt road I had taken when I got off the ferry on my way to Ushuaia. Unlike the Bay of San Sebastian, the water of the Strait of Magellan was gray and roiling, with whitecaps that made me uncomfortable. “This is where we will meet the ferry,” Sebastian said. “We are first in line.”

“The water is rough,” I said.

“Yes, but it will be fine,” Sebastian said, dismissing my concerns. His confidence didn’t assuage my fears.

We had only waited a few minutes when two large Scania semi-trucks pulled in behind us. They were both blue and each carried a cargo container. The drivers got out, waved at us, and then stood next to their trucks smoking and gesturing with their hands as they spoke. Sebastian pointed to a sign nailed to a wooden post off to the side of the road. It said that the ferry would be back in about twenty minutes.

Conversation with Sebastian suddenly felt strained. I think we both understood that once we boarded the ferry and made our way across the water, we’d soon be at the airport and then I would be gone. So we talked about the weather, about Eva’s cooking, and about a large sheep farm we had seen earlier in our trip. The discussion was forced and I felt bad that after all of the wonderful conversations Sebastian and I had shared, we were now unable to talk to each other easily and naturally.

A few minutes later another Scania truck pulled into the line. That made three large trucks and us.

“Here comes the ferry now,” Sebastian said.

In the distance, against the white-capped waves, the ferry seemed small and insubstantial. As it drew closer, I saw that it carried only one truck from the other side.

The ferry pulled right up to the shore at the end of the road and lowered a ramp from the end of the boat. It reminded me of landing crafts I had seen in films of the D-Day invasion at Normandy. I was hopeful that our journey across the Strait would be less eventful than what I had seen in those films.

The truck that was on the ferry pulled off and drove away up the dirt road. We were then waved onto the boat followed by the three Scania trucks. Although we fit on the ferry, I was concerned about the weight.

Sebastian must have sensed my unease. “It will be fine,” he said once again, and then pointed out at the water. “This is called the First Narrows. It is the narrowest part of the Straits. We’ll be in Patagonia soon.” I smiled and nodded, my stomach continuing to twist into knots.

As the ferry pulled away from shore, I began to think about my journey home. Was I really ready to go back to Chicago to face life without Lisa? Truthfully, I wasn’t sure, but there was only one way to find out. I knew I would likely never make my way to Ushuaia again. It wasn’t the kind of place you stopped on your way to somewhere else. In fact, being at the end of the road, it wasn’t on the way to somewhere else.

I didn’t know what was going on with Lisa in those weeks and months before her accident, but whatever it was, maybe it didn’t matter anymore. What mattered was that she had been my wife, and at least for a while, we had loved each other. I needed to remember that, to focus on it, and to forget everything else.

Although he was standing right next to me, I was already starting to miss Sebastian. He had become a good friend. Even so, I knew that my future was back in Chicago, not here in Tierra del Fuego and not at Sebastian's finca. This place had been a refuge at a time I needed to hide, but Chicago was still home.

"Next stop, Rio Gallegos," Sebastian said smiling.

"And then home," I said. Ready or not, here I come.

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LAKE OF THE FALLS

A novella

Making plans to spend the weekend with my dad was a mistake. I knew it when I promised him I'd do it several weeks earlier, and I was certain of it when I pulled up in front of the clean, cream colored brick building with the freshly paved parking lot, the neatly trimmed bushes, and the finely manicured lawn. Despite it being picture perfect, it depressed me every time I saw it.

This was the place that my dad now called home. Actually, that's not exactly true. My dad lived here in this building, but he would never call it home. Home was about six hours north of here on twenty-five wooded acres in Mercer, Wisconsin that he had not seen in nearly three years. Home was in the Northwoods on the shores of Crystal Lake. Home was a burned out shell of a house where nobody lived anymore. To Dad, that was still home.

I walked in the front door and was greeted by a large banner that said "Make it a great day" along with the logo for Golden Age, Incorporated, the company that ran Newport Landing, the independent living facility where my dad lived. They owned this place and about twenty others across the Midwest. There was money to be made catering to the needs of old people.

"May I help you?" the white-haired woman at the front desk asked.

"I'm here to check my dad out for the weekend," I said, feeling like I was at a library checking out a book.

The woman slid a form in front of me. "Just fill this out and you'll be all set."

I hated the feeling of having to get permission to take my dad out of his home. It was unnatural. Dad had been so independent, so capable all of his life and now he was living in a place where he couldn't even leave without forms being completed and the right people notified.

I told Dad I'd pick him up at nine, which meant he'd be up at six with his bags packed. It was ten after nine and even though I was a grown man and we weren't on a schedule, I dreaded being late.

When I approached his apartment door, I could see that it was propped open a few inches. I walked in to find him sitting in his chair staring at a blank TV screen. If Dad was excited to see me, his face and body language sure didn't show it. He sat slump-shouldered with a bit of a scowl on his face. "Good morning, Kevin. You're late."

"Morning, Dad. Are you ready to go?" I asked picking up his suitcase.

"Sure," he said, taking the bag from me. "Let's go."

#

"What kind of car is this?"

We had been on the road riding in silence for about fifteen minutes. Dad had spent most of his time quietly looking out of the passenger side window.

"It's a BMW 750 li," I said.

"It's nice," he said without much enthusiasm and then resumed his watch out of the window. I could feel where this conversation was heading, and I didn't like it. I figured the best thing to do was to just be quiet. A few more minutes passed in silence, then Dad asked, "So how much did it cost?"

That's exactly what I was expecting him to ask. He couldn't leave well enough alone and simply say that the car was nice. He had to know how much I paid for it. And the thing was, I didn't mind telling him, but I knew where the conversation was going to go from there.

"How much did what cost?" I asked.

“The car. How much was the car?”

“I don’t remember,” I said.

“How long have you had it?”

“About a year.” I said. The conversation made me feel like I was going down a long, steep slide and I couldn’t stop myself.

“You bought the car a year ago and you can’t remember how much you paid for it?” Dad asked, his voice rising in volume and incredulity.

“I don’t remember exactly,” I said. “There was a trade-in involved and I bought some extra stuff.”

Dad turned away from the window and was looking directly at me, gesticulating with his hands. “Give me a ballpark. What did the car cost you in round numbers? I’m just curious.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It was around seventy-five thousand dollars.” I involuntarily coughed as I was saying the price.

“I’m sorry, how much?”

“Seventy-five thousand dollars,” I said again, but this time without the cough.

“Are you serious? That’s three times what your mother and I paid for our house.” Dad based the value of just about everything on how it compared to what it had cost him to buy his home in Mercer.

“Yeah, I know, Dad. But that was a long time ago.”

“It was thirty-four years ago and now you’re paying three times as much for a car.”

“That’s my point exactly,” I said. “That was thirty-four years ago. Today you could sell that land for ten times what you paid for it.”

Dad slumped in his seat and turned glumly toward the window again. “Is that what you think I should do? Sell the land?” Dad was sulking. We had had this conversation before and he knew that I didn’t feel strongly one way or the other about what he did with the land.

“Dad, I don’t care if you sell the land. That’s up to you. I’m just saying, you bought the land a long time ago and I bought my car last year. Things have changed.”

We were back to talking about the car, and Dad was bolstered. “You’re not kidding they’ve changed. Seventy-five thousand dollars for a car? Did you have to spend that much? Don’t they make cars for less than that?”

“Of course, they make less expensive cars. But I like this one and I can afford it. What’s wrong with buying something nice?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” he said. “It’s just not necessary. What do you need with an expensive car? You drive from your house to the parking lot at work and you leave it in the parking lot while you work sixteen hours every day. Then you drive back home, park the car again and leave it there while you sleep. Why do you need an expensive car to do that?”

“I don’t work sixteen hours every day, Dad. Once in a while it’s necessary, but on most days I’m only in the office for ten or twelve hours.” The words were out of my mouth before I realized I had just given Dad more ammunition.

“Twelve hours is your average work day? You only spend half your life working. So you have plenty of time to enjoy your expensive car.”

“Why does this bother you so much, Dad? What difference does it make how much I spend on a car?”

“It’s not just the car. It’s the way you live. You’re killing yourself to make money so you can have nice things and impress your friends. But your things wear out, they break, they get old. So you have to work more to make more money to buy more things. It’s a vicious cycle.”

“You’re exaggerating, Dad. I’m not killing myself. I work a lot of hours, but that’s what lawyers do. If I don’t do it, someone else will and I’ll be out on the street. If I had chosen to do something else with my life, things might be different. But if I want to do well at the law firm, I have to keep working.”

“You’re a partner. Shouldn’t you get more time off?”

I looked out the side window and laughed. We were leaving Illinois and crossing into Wisconsin. “No, just the opposite,” I said. “As a partner, I’m expected to be there more and lead by example. The clients expect more out of me because they’re paying more to have me involved in their case. And the firm expects more out of me because I’m making more money. Being a partner isn’t the same as retiring.”

Dad was silent for a long time before he said, “I just think you should spend your time enjoying your life instead of spending it to make money.”

“I know, Dad,” I said, “but...” Dad looked at me, waiting to hear what I had to say. I wanted to argue, but what could I tell him? That my partners would miss me if I spent my time enjoying my life? They wouldn’t miss me. They would just replace me and move on.

What about my friends? That one hurt. I didn’t really have any. I had lost touch with my friends from high school and college. I was always too busy to visit them or meet with them when they came to Chicago. My replies to their emails were always short with promises of writing again when I had more time. I never had more time, so my promises were never kept. I

would meet people every so often, but I never had time to get to know them. I didn't have a good response for what Dad had just said.

"Just forget it," I said. "I don't want to fight."

Dad turned to look out the window again and we rode in silence.

#

Near Portage we followed I-39 north and pulled off the Interstate at Coloma to eat lunch at an A&W on Highway 21. I noticed that the farther north we traveled, the more energy Dad seemed to have. He ordered a cheeseburger and promptly set out to devour it. I had a chili cheese dog, the first I had had in many years.

Dad sipped his root beer and then looked at me. "What ever happened with you and Becky?"

Rebecca was my ex-wife. Dad was the only person in the world who called her Becky. We had been divorced for almost eight years.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You know what happened. We got divorced."

"I know that," he said. "But why did you get divorced?"

"I don't know, Dad. Sometimes marriages just don't work out."

Even as I said it, I knew I wasn't being completely truthful. Rebecca had been an assistant curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago when I met her. We were in our late twenties and we were both working hard to establish our careers. Rebecca was smart and funny and beautiful. She was everything I wanted in a wife. After dating for a year, we were married and bought a house in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

At first, things were fun and exciting. We'd work hard during the week, play hard on the weekends, and every couple of months we'd head up to Mercer to see my mom and dad. It was actually more Rebecca's idea to visit my parents than it was mine. When I left Mercer, I wanted to get away from the small town, the isolation, and maybe most of all, my dad. But Rebecca loved my parents and missed them if she didn't see them every couple of months.

My parents returned the love to Rebecca. Mom took her blueberry picking, and they would sit for hours down on the dock just talking. Dad used to tease her about being afraid to take a fish off the hook and would show her off to his friends when we went into town. Rebecca brought something out in my dad that I hadn't seen from him while I was growing up.

After a couple of years of marriage, things began to sour. I started working more hours, and most of my weekends were spent at the office. Rebecca tried to be understanding but she didn't get married just to spend her time alone in an empty house. She'd plan special dinners or weekend getaways but more often than not, I cancelled them because I was so busy making a name for myself at the office. Even if we did get away for the weekend, I would spend most of my time doing work.

When Rebecca started talking about having kids, I tried to avoid the conversation. I was pushing hard at work to become a partner, and I really didn't have time for kids. I told her that after I became a partner, then we could start a family.

This went on for years until Rebecca finally insisted that we visit a marriage counselor. I fought the idea at first. Marriage counselors were for couples involved in abusive relationships plagued by alcohol or drug abuse. They weren't for "normal" people who just worked hard. At least that's what I thought. Eventually, Rebecca won out and we saw a marriage counselor.

I went through the motions, but my heart just wasn't in the counseling sessions. It's not that I didn't want our marriage to work out. I did. But working out to me meant maintaining the status quo. I wanted to be able to work as many hours as I needed to work and I wanted my wife to be home when I got there.

Finally, Rebecca had enough and told me she wanted a divorce. At first I protested, then I became angry. I accused Rebecca of not caring how hard I was working to make a better life for us. I told her that everyone I knew worked as many hours as I did and that she was being selfish, expecting me to sacrifice my career. I also knew that everything I was saying was a lie.

I worked such long hours to get ahead and make a name for myself in the law firm, not to create a better life for us. And even though I did know some people who worked as many hours as I did, they were the ones who were either divorced or had a crappy home life. I knew I was wrong, but I wasn't willing to give up all of the hard work I had put in at the office. The damage had been done. If Rebecca wanted a divorce, then I would give her a divorce. It was a horrible, horrible mistake.

“Well, it's too bad,” Dad said. “I really liked Becky.”

“Yeah,” I said, “me too.”

#

As we drove across Lake Dubay near Stevens Point, I noticed that the leaves were in the midst of changing. Dad was wide awake and was taking in all of the scenery.

“You know, your mom just loved this time of year,” he said. “She loved the cooler weather and the changing colors. She would have loved this.” Dad swept his hand across in front of him, indicating the colorful fall foliage.

“I was always more of a summer guy,” I said. “I loved the heat and being out on the water.”

“I know you did. If we were ever looking for you, the first place we’d look was down at the dock. You were always swimming or fishing or just hanging out. You loved the water. That’s why I always figured you’d move back to Mercer after law school.”

“You did?” I asked.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “I mean, your mom and I were there and I just thought you loved it up in the Northwoods.”

I was surprised that Dad didn’t seem to recognize that I never had any intention of going back to Mercer. In fact, I was running away from Mercer as fast as I could. Dad also didn’t seem to realize that he was one of the main reasons I didn’t want to go back.

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said. “I guess it was just time to grow up.”

Dad gave me a quizzical look. He never understood how much I resented him for uprooting our family and moving to Mercer. I was happy growing up in Aurora, just outside of Chicago. I had no desire to go anywhere else. I was twelve years old and had my own group of friends. But without ever talking to me about it, he just decided that he wanted to live in the middle of nowhere.

I remember talking to my mom the day after we arrived in Mercer. Dad was outside doing something and I let Mom know how unhappy I was.

“This isn’t fair, Mom,” I said. “I don’t want to live here. This isn’t even a house. It’s a shack. I want to be back by my friends. There are no kids up here. There aren’t even any houses next to us. This is all Dad’s fault and it’s not fair to you or me.”

Mom was sympathetic, but she wasn't going to talk against Dad. "You're going to grow to love it up here, Kevin. There's so much to do. You can swim and fish and hike. And I'm sure there are kids your age up here. You just haven't met them yet. Your dad is going to fix up this house and you'll learn to love it just like we do."

Mom's devotion to Dad never waned. Even years later on her deathbed, Mom asked me, "Are you still angry at your father for moving you to Mercer?"

At that point, I was forty-three years old and Mom knew that I still held a grudge against Dad. "No, Mom," I lied. "That was a long time ago."

"Just remember," she said, "he did what he thought was best." Even at the end, Mom was still defending Dad.

"I remember when you first learned to water ski," Dad said, looking out of the window. "You couldn't figure out that the tips of your skis had to be out of the water when the boat started pulling you. And then when you'd start to fall, you'd walk right out of your skis and try to walk on top of the water. Oh God, your mom and I used to laugh so hard about that." Dad was looking at me now and laughing.

"I'm glad I was such a source of amusement for you," I said, laughing. "I guess I wasn't a very fast learner."

"No, but you got to be really good. I always enjoyed watching you ski."

Dad's comment kind of caught me by surprise. It wasn't like him to say anything that nice. "Well, it's been a long time since I went skiing. I probably couldn't even do it anymore."

"Ah, it's like riding a bike," he said. "You'd get the hang of it again."

#

In Tomahawk the four-lane Interstate gave way to two-lane U.S. Route 51, the main artery of Northern Wisconsin. It was the road we were on when I first laid eyes on Mercer as a boy.

I was sitting in the back seat of our station wagon and was feeling confused and angry. It didn't matter to me what Mercer was like. It could have been a beautiful town with gold paved streets. I wouldn't have cared. I had my mind made up that I was going to hate it.

As we approached town, my mom excitedly said, "There's the water tower. We're here. We're in Mercer." I saw my dad's face light up. I looked around, but all I saw were trees.

"There's nothing here," I said.

"Just wait a second. The town's right up the road," Dad said. Neither Mom nor Dad seemed to care that I didn't want to be there.

As we entered the town, I saw a grocery store and a motel. There was an old brick building on the corner and some sort of store with a big wooden Indian across the street. There were a few more storefronts along Route 51 and then it was back to more trees.

"What? That was it? That was the whole town?" I asked.

"Settle down, Kevin," Dad said. "There's more to the town than that. But we're going to go out to our new house now."

We drove north on Route 51 for another mile or two then turned left onto County Road FF. It was one of the windiest roads I had ever been on. After we drove for a while, Dad turned off the blacktop and onto a dirt road that wound through the woods. There were narrow white signs in the shape of arrows nailed to the trees. The signs had names on them, but I didn't see our name.

We pulled off of the dirt road onto an even narrower dirt path. As it turned out, that was our driveway. We drove up to a small house that was in bad need of paint. It had been white at one time, but the paint had flaked off of most of the house. There was no garage and no yard. It was just a rundown shack in the middle of the woods.

“Welcome home,” my mom said. I felt like I was going to get sick.

The house sat on twenty-five acres of woods and we had two hundred feet of frontage on Crystal Lake. What we lacked in grass we more than made up for in trees.

In time, I learned my way around the woods and I grew to love the lake. We met some of the other people who lived in the area, and when school started that year, I made several new friends. I got involved in school activities, played sports and learned my way around town. After a while, people stopped looking at me like the new kid, but the whole time, my anger toward my father continued to grow. I could never get over the fact that he had pulled me away from my home and my friends without even asking me about it.

Over time, Dad fixed up the house and built an addition. He converted what had once been a shack into a comfortable home. He also added a two car garage and attached a basketball hoop above the pull-down door. Even so, I could never bring myself to accept that the house in the woods was my home. I always held out hope that living in Mercer was just a temporary situation.

#

As we drove into Minocqua, Dad and I both marveled at how much the town had grown. There were stores and restaurants lining both sides of the road. Traffic was heavy for an off-season Thursday afternoon.

We drove across Lake Minocqua and I remembered my first water skiing tournament. Just as I was about to say something about it, Dad said, “It was right down there that we took you to your first water skiing tournament.” I was surprised that he remembered. “You hadn’t been skiing for very long, but you still finished fifth out of seventeen skiers in your age bracket. Do you remember that?”

I was stunned. “Yeah, I remember. I’m surprised you do.”

“Oh, I remember. After the tournament, we went down to Bosacki’s to celebrate. Your mom and I were both proud of you, but all you could talk about was how you should have done better.”

“Really? I don’t remember that.”

“You’ve always been hard on yourself, Kevin. You’re never satisfied, always wanting more. Rather than being happy with what you have, you’ve always focused on what you don’t have.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I’m satisfied with what I have.”

“Is that why you work so many hours at your job? Or why you have to have such an expensive car? Trust me, Kevin, I know how you feel. I used to be that way myself. I always wanted more. That was one reason your mom and I decided to move to Mercer.”

“What? I’ve never heard that.”

“Never heard what? That I used to be like you or that one of the reasons we moved to Mercer was to get out of the rat race?”

“Both. I’ve never thought of you as someone who was very ambitious. I don’t remember you ever talking about things you wanted to buy or plans you had for the future.” I could feel my face turning red when I realized how insulting my words were.

“It’s not really a matter of being ambitious,” he said, apparently not taking offense to my statement. “My focus was always on what I lacked, not what I had. When we lived back in Aurora, I took on an extra part-time job so I could afford some of the material things that I wanted, like a nicer car, a bigger home, a new boat. So in that way, I was ambitious. But taking on that extra job also meant taking time away from you and your mom. She and I talked about it and she made me realize what it was really costing me to have all of these things I wanted. She also made me realize how unhappy I was working my job at the factory. We made a plan to live the kind of life we wanted and then we worked on that plan. I found out that I could be a lot happier in life and it didn’t require working all of the time to buy things I didn’t really need. So I guess I’ve always been ambitious, but I learned not to be ambitious for material things.”

I was in shock. I had never heard my dad say anything like that before. “Why haven’t you ever told me about that?”

“I don’t know. I guess it was never that important before,” he said. “Plus, you never seemed overly interested in hearing what I had to say.”

What Dad said was true. I had always considered him a bit of a failure. We lived in a small home in the middle of nowhere, he and Mom drove older cars, and it always struck me as odd that Dad was perfectly happy living that kind of lifestyle. He never wanted to improve himself or do better in life. In fact, I was kind of embarrassed by him. That’s why I was never very interested in what he had to say.

“That’s not true, Dad,” I said. “Why wouldn’t I want to hear what you had to say?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s just how it always seemed to me.”

We became quiet again and continued driving north on Route 51.

#

The landmarks were becoming more familiar as we approached Mercer. There was Little Bohemia where John Dillinger once hid out and got into a gun fight with the FBI; the Manitowish Waters Airport; County Road W that went down to LaPorte’s IGA grocery store and the Rest Lake ski bowl where I used to waterski with the Manitowish Waters Skiing Skeeters; and then we were in Iron County.

Dad’s face lit up when we came to State Route 47 and he saw the Ding-A-Ling Supper Club. The Ding-A-Ling had been Mom and Dad’s favorite place to eat.

“We had some good meals in there,” Dad said, his voice thick with nostalgia.

As soon as the Mercer water tower came into view over the trees, Dad said, “There it is,” as if he had just seen the Taj Mahal. “What do you want to do first?” Dad asked.

“I thought we should probably go check into the hotel and maybe you can take a quick nap before we go out for dinner.”

“I don’t need a nap,” Dad said, waving his hand dismissively. “Let’s go have a drink at the Heart.”

“I thought you quit drinking,” I said.

“I haven’t had a drink in three years, but that doesn’t mean that I quit.”

We both laughed. “All right, let’s go have a drink at The Heart.”

When I was still in high school, Dad used to go to The Heart of the North bar after my basketball games. It was a ritual with him. He'd drop Mom and me off at the house and then head back into town. Mom was always happy to let him go, but I thought it was weird that he had to go out drinking after every basketball game. I resented the fact that he decided to go drinking instead of spending time with us.

When we walked into The Heart, Dad stopped inside the door and looked around. Everything was just as I remembered it. We walked up to the bar and sat down.

"Can I help you fellas?" the bartender asked.

"Two Leinies," Dad said, ordering for both of us.

The bartender brought the beers and Dad said, "Boy, this place hasn't changed much."

"No, I suppose not," the bartender said, laughing. "So you've been here before?"

"Oh yeah, we used to live up here," Dad said. "Does Frank Althaus still own the bar?"

"No, I'm afraid not," the bartender said. "Frank had a heart attack a little over a year ago. After he died, I bought the place from Mrs. Althaus."

"No kidding. Frank is dead?" Dad said. "I hadn't heard."

"I'm Charlie Payne," the bartender said, extending his hand.

"I'm Stan Hargrove," Dad said. "And this is my son, Kevin."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Hargrove? Are you the Hargrove that used to be the forest ranger?"

"That's me," Dad said.

"Then you must be the famous basketball player," Charlie said to me.

"I played basketball," I said, laughing, "but I'm certainly not famous."

“Oh, you are. Look at this,” Charlie said. He walked over to the wall next to the bar, took down a framed photo and brought it over to us. “Mrs. Althaus told me all about this picture when I bought the bar.” It was a photo of me in my high school basketball uniform taking a jump shot. “Mrs. Althaus said it was one of Frank’s favorite pictures and that he was good friends with your dad.”

I was a little embarrassed. I hadn’t lived in Mercer for almost thirty years and they still had a picture of me up in the bar.

“That was a game against Hurley during Kevin’s senior year,” Dad said. “Hurley had a 15 point lead, but Mercer came back in the fourth quarter. That shot by Kevin tied the game and sent it into overtime. Mercer ended up winning the game, and Kevin scored twenty of the team’s final twenty-five points.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” Charlie said. “No wonder Frank liked that picture so much.”

“How do you remember that, Dad?” I asked.

“I usually can’t remember what I had for lunch, but I’ll always remember what you did in that game,” Dad said. “Coming up here to The Heart after games and bragging on you to Frank and some of the other guys was one of my favorite things to do.” He and Charlie were both laughing, but I was too stunned to speak.

#

Mom had been sick for about a year before she died. She had been diagnosed with cancer and died eleven months later. Dad was a mess. Mom ran things at home and when she died, Dad went to pieces. He started drinking a lot and he rarely went into town. He started losing weight and looked like a man who had given up hope.

One day, I got a call from Jess Kopinsky, one of Dad's friends in Mercer. Jess said that Dad looked real sick and he thought I should come up to talk to him about getting some help. When I got to the house, Dad was unshaven and was passed out on the couch. It smelled like he had thrown up on himself. I had never seen him in such bad shape.

After I got him sobered up, we talked about his health. Dad insisted that his health was fine, but that he just didn't want to live without Mom. I told Dad that I thought it would be best for him to move down to Chicago so he could be nearer to me, but he wouldn't hear of it. When I left, I wasn't sure if I would ever see him alive again.

About three weeks later I got another call from Jess. It was a little after eleven o'clock at night and I had just gotten home from the office. Jess was nearly hysterical. He was talking fast and I was having trouble understanding everything he was saying. What I did understand was that there had been a fire and Dad was in the hospital.

I threw a few things into a suitcase and headed north. The trip seemed to take forever even though I was rushing to get to the hospital in Hurley. A couple of times I looked down at the speedometer and saw that I was going more than 90 mph. I finally settled down, set the cruise control, and started to pray for my dad.

When I finally got to the hospital it was almost six o'clock in the morning and I was exhausted, but in a hurry. I rushed in through the automatic doors, and a cold, antiseptic smell rushed past me. I got directions to my dad's room and was standing in the doorway when a nurse asked if I needed help. I told her who I was and she told me that Dad was in a drug-induced coma. He was in rough shape. I sat down in the chair next to his bed and waited for him to wake up.

I'm not sure what time I fell asleep in the chair, but it was late in the afternoon when my dad's coughing woke me up. Two nurses rushed in to attend to him and his coughing subsided. One of the nurses said to me, "Your dad's vitals are looking better. The doctor plans on bringing him out of the coma early tomorrow."

I slept in the chair next to Dad's bed that night and woke up before sunrise the next morning. A nurse was standing next to me taking Dad's pulse. My back was stiff, I was hungry, and I was in desperate need of a shower. The nurse must have sensed my discomfort and asked if I'd like to use the visitor's shower down the hall. I told her that I absolutely would.

When I got back to my dad's room, the doctor was there and Dad was awake. He looked weak, but I was just happy he was alive.

"Hi, Kevin," Dad said in a soft, raspy voice.

"Hi, Dad. How do you feel?"

"Fantastic," he said. "How about you?"

We all laughed at his obvious overstatement.

I sat with Dad for a couple of hours until he fell back asleep. It was almost noon when I left the hospital to drive the twenty-some miles to Mercer to see what kind of damage the house had sustained.

Considering Dad's injuries, I knew the fire must have been bad, but I was surprised when I drove down the driveway to see nothing left of the house but the old brick chimney and a few charred two-by-fours sticking up here and there. Otherwise, the house was gone.

As I walked around the ruins, I could smell smoldering wood and plastic. The stench was sickening. I didn't dig through the rubble, but it was obvious that everything in the house had been destroyed.

Back at the hospital, I told Dad what I had found. As could be expected, he was depressed and even embarrassed for having started the fire in the first place. According to Dad, he had been cooking something on the stove and had fallen asleep on the couch. What he didn't say—what he didn't have to say—was that he was drunk when he had done this.

With nowhere else to go, Dad reluctantly agreed to move into an independent living apartment near my home in Chicago. I knew he didn't want to, but I think the combination of the fire and the drugs they had him on helped to convince him that he really didn't have any other choice.

The move was good for Dad's health. He stopped drinking and was getting some exercise, but it didn't do much for his spirits. Dad had been miserable ever since Mom's death, and living in Chicago, let alone in a tiny apartment, hadn't done anything to improve his disposition. Since he had moved to Chicago almost three years earlier, he hadn't been back to Mercer even once.

Dad didn't have any finances to speak of. He had a decent pension from the Forestry Service, and he collected some social security, but that was all he had to live on. Now that he was in a rather expensive apartment, both his pension and social security went to pay for his housing, and I made up the extra each month.

Shortly after Dad moved into the apartment, I mentioned that he should think about selling his property in Mercer. He had twenty-five acres of lakefront land and the value of the

property had gone up substantially since he had purchased it more than thirty years earlier. Dad was furious that I would even mention selling the property.

“After I’m dead, you can do whatever you want with that property,” he said. “But until then, I’m not selling it.”

“Dad, you don’t have a need for that property right now, but you do need money to live on.”

“Is that what this is about?” he asked. “You’re just worried about what you have to pay to keep me in this prison? Well, you don’t have to worry. I’ll live in a tent on my property in Mercer if that’s what it takes. You can stop paying for this hell hole anytime you want. I’ll be happy to get out of here.”

I tried to explain that I was only thinking about what was best for him and that I didn’t mind helping out with his living expenses, but Dad wasn’t hearing any of it. That was the first and last time I ever brought up the idea of selling his property.

#

We’d checked into the Great Northern Lodge and were getting cleaned up to go out for German food at The Pines, one of our favorite restaurants in Mercer. As I was getting dressed, Dad said, “Kevin, I want to apologize to you.”

“Apologize to me? For what?”

“For everything. For giving you a hard time about how much you spent on your car, and for everything I put you through after your mom died. I really am sorry for the mess I made of things.”

“Dad, you don’t have to apologize,” I said. “I completely understand—”

“No, I do need to apologize. I was so dependent on your mom, I just didn’t know what to do when she died. I fell apart and you were just trying to help. I understand that now. But it doesn’t excuse my drinking and it sure doesn’t excuse me burning down the house and putting you through so much. You have your own life to live and I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “You’re not a burden.”

We grew silent and neither of us knew where to take the conversation from there.

“Are you ready to get going?” I asked.

“Sure, let’s go.”

The food at The Pines was as good as we remembered. We saw several people we hadn’t seen in years. Dad was in his element. He was back in Mercer and he was surrounded by his friends. He laughed more talking to old friends while we were at dinner than I had seen him laugh in the previous three years.

When we were done eating, Dad said, “Kevin, what do you say we go have a drink up at Club 51?”

Dad had already had a beer at The Heart and two more drinks with dinner. I knew he was having a good time, but I didn’t want him to drink too much. “Are you sure you want to have another drink?” I asked.

“I’m fine, Kevin. Don’t worry, I won’t get drunk.”

“Well, okay then. Let’s go.”

As soon as we walked into Club 51, Dad spotted Jess sitting with his wife, Maggie, at the bar. Jess was so excited he jumped up out of his chair and gave Dad a big bear hug. “My God,

Stan, it's so good to see you," Jess said. While Dad gave Maggie a hug, Jess gave me one of his bear hugs.

"What are you fellas doing back up in the Northwoods?" Maggie asked.

"I just couldn't stay away from you, Maggie," Dad said.

"It's good to see you're still full of shit," Maggie said and we all laughed.

We joined Jess and Maggie at the bar, and they got us caught up on the latest gossip.

I had been away from Mercer for nearly thirty years, but in some ways it felt like I had never left. Sure, some things in town had changed. Billy Capone's old hotel with the Rathskeller Bar in the basement had been torn down and had been replaced by a gas station. There were a few other changes too, but overall the place had the same feel it had when I was a boy. Oddly, it didn't feel bad at all.

#

In high school, I dated Annie Hayes. She had moved to Mercer from Colorado when we were both sophomores. We became friends because we both liked sports and both played on the school's basketball teams. We started dating that year and we dated straight through to graduation.

Annie was funny and outgoing. She was a natural athlete who didn't have any pretenses. She was a beautiful girl, with long ginger blond hair and a slim, fit body, but she never felt like she had to be all made up or wear fancy clothes. Everything about her was natural and understated.

After high school, I moved to Madison to attend the University of Wisconsin, and Annie went to the University of Colorado. We agreed that we'd keep dating, but it was difficult to sustain a relationship being that far apart. Rather than seeing each other, we wrote letters.

The letters were frequent at first. We'd write to each other once or twice a week. In time, that dwindled down to a letter every couple of weeks and then maybe once per month. Right after we started college, Annie's dad died and her mom and younger brother moved back to Colorado. So even during school breaks, we didn't get the chance to see each other.

I was lonely in Madison without Annie. I had the chance to date other women, but I just didn't feel right about it. When we were in high school, Annie and I had talked about getting married, and although our talk of marriage had faded once we were in college, I couldn't help but feel like we were still going to end up together.

After freshman year, we talked about seeing each other during the summer, but it never happened. At the start of sophomore year, the tone of Annie's letters changed. She wrote like a friend rather than a girlfriend, and although I looked forward to her letters, it broke my heart to read them.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I borrowed a friend's car and drove to Boulder. I had made up my mind that if she was still interested, I was going to transfer to the University of Colorado to be near her.

Annie was surprised to see me when she answered her apartment door. She was wearing a gray University of Colorado sweatshirt and a pair of black sweatpants. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She was even more beautiful than I remembered.

“Kevin, my God. What are you doing here?” I had expected a kiss or at least a hug, but Annie just stood in the door staring.

“I came to see you,” I said, and leaned forward to kiss her. Annie turned her head, gave me a quick hug, and then backed away.

“Come on in. There’s someone I’d like you to meet,” she said.

As we walked into the apartment, I could tell something wasn’t right.

“Kevin, I’d like you to meet Aaron. Aaron, this is Kevin. He’s an old high school friend from Wisconsin.”

A tall, good looking guy stood up from the couch and shook my hand. “Nice to meet you, Kevin.”

“Nice to meet you,” I mumbled.

Aaron looked the way I thought a guy from Colorado should look, with a big mop of dark hair and a physique built by hiking mountain trails and gliding down ski slopes. I immediately hated him.

“Kevin, can I get you a drink? We have Pepsi.”

“Sure, that would be great.”

Annie handed me the can of pop, then walked across the room and sat on the couch next to Aaron.

“It’s good to see you, Kevin,” Annie said “and I have some news for you.” Annie grabbed Aaron’s hand and moved closer to him on the couch. “Aaron and I are engaged. We’re going to be married next summer.”

I stared in disbelief. Annie kept talking, but what she was saying wasn't registering with me. I was in shock.

I remember shaking Aaron's hand again and saying something about being happy for them, but everything else was just a blur. I got a lump in my throat and the room started to spin. I wanted to be anywhere but there. I don't remember leaving. The next thing I remember, I was sitting in the car in the parking lot, crying. That was the last time I saw Annie.

#

We were having breakfast at a table near the back of Tom's Café. The air smelled of coffee and cooked bacon. Dad was eager to get a start on the day. He wanted to go everywhere and see everything at the same time.

"When we're done here, we're going to go out to the house, aren't we?" he asked.

I didn't want to remind him that there was no house there anymore, but I knew what he meant. "Yeah, we'll drive out there as soon as we're done eating."

"Oh, Kevin, it's so good to be back up here. Seeing everyone last night was great. Thank you for bringing me back home."

Dad was much happier than I had seen him in a long time, and he was much more humble than I had ever seen him. "That's okay, Dad. I'm enjoying it too." Dad looked at me with a bit of a smirk, but he didn't say anything else.

#

We were driving down County Road FF. The day was warm and the changing leaves painted the sides of the road red, orange and yellow.

"God, I miss this place," Dad said.

“I forgot how beautiful it can be up here this time of year.”

“Your mother and I used to spend our Sundays in the fall walking through the woods admiring the colors or just driving the back roads. There’s something about being out in nature that’s good for the soul.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I guess there is.”

As we turned onto the dirt road that led back to our old house, you could almost feel Dad’s excitement. He rode with one hand on the door handle and he was trying to look everywhere at once.

The driveway had become overgrown. We could still drive through, but weeds and grass were in the process of reclaiming the narrow dirt path. The parking area in front of the garage was almost completely covered with long, wispy grass.

When I parked the car, instead of eagerly jumping out like I expected, Dad sat quietly and slowly scanned the scene. With the exception of the chimney, there was very little of the house left standing. The underbrush had crept out of the woods and was beginning to take over the area around the house and garage. The path leading down to the lake was hard to discern because of the overgrown grass and weeds.

Dad slowly got out of the car and stood quietly looking around. “Are you okay, Dad?” I asked.

He turned toward me, his eyes moist. “I guess it’s not much to look at anymore, but it’s still good to be here,” he said.

We walked around the perimeter of what used to be the house. There wasn't much left but the charred remains of boards and other unidentifiable items. Nature was beginning to take back the area where the house had once stood. Dad leaned on the chimney and looked at me.

"The night the house burned down, I remember waking up and flames were all around me. The smoke was thick and it was hard to breathe." Dad paused, looking down at the ground. "You know, I thought about just staying in the house, not even trying to get out. I missed your mom so bad. My first thought was that this would be a chance to be with her." Dad looked up at me with a sad smile. "But then I thought about you. I thought about never seeing you again and I knew I couldn't die right then, not that night. I found my way out of the house and ended up collapsing in the driveway. The next thing I knew, I was in an ambulance on the way to the hospital."

"I'm glad you made it," I said. A hug was called for, but we weren't the type of people who hugged. For whatever reason, we never had been.

"Let's go down to the dock," Dad said, breaking the awkward silence.

Although the path down to the lake was overgrown, it still felt familiar under my feet. I remembered the location of each rock and tree root. I was surprised that the memory of each twist and turn of the path was so fresh in my mind.

The dock wasn't in the lake. Someone had taken it out and stored it on the shore. If it had been left in the lake, the winter ice would have crushed it years earlier.

Just like the path, the edge of the lake had become overgrown. Dad ran his hand over the top of the long grass as he looked out at the water.

“There are a lot of memories out there in that water,” he said. “You swam out there, you learned to ski, and I took you fishing for the first time. It feels like that lake is a part of our family.”

When we first moved to Mercer, I spent my days down at the lake. I didn’t know anyone, so the lake became my best friend. Over the years, the lake had been like a constant companion. It was always there when I needed it.

“We had a lot of good times out there,” I said.

“I remember you, your mom and me sitting out on the dock one night,” Dad said. “It was right after we moved up here. It was a clear night and there seemed to be more stars than I had ever seen. Then the Northern Lights started putting on a show for us. The sky turned pink and green, and the colors danced up above us. I was having doubts about our move to Mercer. I knew you were angry, missing Aurora, and I was worried about you. But when I saw those lights, I knew we had made the right decision.”

“We didn’t make the decision,” I snapped. “You did.” Suddenly my anger from so long ago came back. It was unexpected and it surprised me.

“What do you mean?” Dad asked.

“You know what I mean,” I said, an edge to my voice. “You made the decision to come up here. I didn’t. You never talked to me about it. You didn’t ask if I wanted to move away from my home and my friends. You just made the decision yourself.”

Dad was surprised by my sudden anger. “Kevin, you were just a kid,” he said. “Your mom and I had to make the best decision we could for the whole family.”

I was suddenly a twelve-year-old boy in the body of a forty-six-year-old man. All of the old emotions, the anger, the bitterness, the frustration, came rushing back. “You made the best decision you could make for you, not for me. How could you have thought pulling me away from my friends and the only home I had ever known would be what was best for me? You didn’t, because you didn’t think about me. You only thought about yourself.”

All of the emotions that had been boiling just below the surface for so many years had come out all at once. I felt the same hurt and bitterness I had felt so long ago. It had never gone away.

“My gosh, Kevin. Why are you so angry?” Dad asked. “That was a long time ago. I had no idea you felt that way.” It was obvious that Dad had been hurt by my sudden outburst.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” I said. “Let’s go back up the hill.”

I knew I was being childish and I didn’t want to make things worse. But I couldn’t deny the anger I was feeling toward my dad or the emotions that had been stirred up again by being back in Mercer.

“Kevin, wait...” Dad said, but I was already heading up the hill.

#

Back at the hotel, I told Dad that I had to call the office and it might take some time. The truth was, I just needed a break to calm down and sort out what I was feeling. My outburst had caught me by surprise and I didn’t want my out-of-control emotions to jump out like that again. At the same time, I wanted to understand why I was still so angry at my dad for a decision he had made more than thirty years earlier.

Dad had gone up to the room to lie down while I sat in the hotel lobby. The emotions were still swirling.

When we first moved to Mercer, I was miserable. I missed my friends, I missed my home, and I missed the comfortable feeling I had knowing my way around the neighborhood. In Mercer, everything was new. I didn't know anyone and I didn't know my way around. I was completely dependent on my parents for everything. What little independence I had gained back in Aurora had been lost.

I wasn't shy about letting my parents know how unhappy I was. Actually, the truth was that I told my Mom how unhappy I was, but I didn't talk to my Dad about it. I just *showed* him how unhappy I was. I'd get grumpy or depressed whenever he was around. I made it obvious how I felt, but he seemed oblivious to my feelings. He was too caught up in his own happiness.

I remember complaining to Mom one time a couple years after the move about being unhappy living in Mercer. She said, "Why are you still miserable? You've made new friends, you're involved in a bunch of activities, and you have every reason to be happy. Why can't you just let it go?"

Later, I thought about her question. Why didn't I just let it go? What was it that was keeping me so angry? I realized that I really didn't hate living in Mercer. In fact, I had grown to like it. I had a new group of friends and I had gained even more independence than I had in Aurora. Growing up on a lake surrounded by acre upon acre of woods was a great environment for a young boy. I didn't know why I couldn't get over the anger, but one thing was certain, it was still there and it was as strong as ever.

#

I was still crying when I pulled out of the parking lot at Annie's apartment and started to head home. She was engaged and the hope that I had for a future with her was now dead. Rather than heading back to school, I drove to Mercer. I'm not sure why. I didn't really think it through. I just wanted to be where I felt comfortable and safe.

I pulled into town at about seven o'clock in the morning. Rather than going home, I drove down to Lake of the Falls County Park. It was one of my favorite places in Mercer and it was a place where I could be by myself to think.

The morning was cool and a thin fog hung over the water of the falls. I put on a sweatshirt and sat down on a large rock near the water.

What now? I didn't know what to do. My future had been tied up in Annie. Without her, I didn't want to do anything, including going back to school. Of course, it's not like I had a lot of options. I could either return to school or move back home. Those were my only choices.

I felt lost and alone. If Annie wasn't going to be a part of my future, then what did the future hold? The thoughts and questions came too quickly. My brain was too garbled to make sense of it all.

I sat watching the water tumble over the rocks of the falls and felt a quiet come over me. The sound of the rushing water calmed me. My mind began to slow down. I can't say I felt happy, but I had a feeling come over me that said without words, "Everything is going to be all right." It was the same feeling I felt every time I returned to the falls with a problem.

#

I was sitting in an overstuffed chair staring out at the lake behind the hotel when Dad walked up behind me. “Did you talk to your office?” he asked. I nodded, even though I hadn’t bothered to make the call.

“Listen, I wonder if you could do me a favor. If you don’t have any other plans, would you mind driving me out to Lake of the Falls Park?”

I was a little surprised by Dad’s question since I had just been thinking about the falls. “Sure,” I said.

At the park, Dad asked me to pull over just past the bridge that crossed the falls. He got out of the car, walked down the bank and sat on the same rock I had sat on so many years earlier. He got comfortable on the rock and stared into the falls.

I stayed in the car and could see Dad from the small parking area. Although he hadn’t said it, I sensed he wanted to be alone. After several minutes, I got out of the car, but rather than going down to the bank, I walked over and stood on the concrete bridge.

The water tumbled over the rocks directly below me and the sound of the falls was all I could hear. To the north was the calm water of the Turtle River and beyond that beautiful Lake of the Falls. To the south the Turtle River rushed toward the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage.

The park had changed some since I had been there last. Gone was the covered wooden bridge, replaced by a concrete bridge built for snowmobilers. The parking area was not as rustic as it had once been. But what hadn’t changed was the peace I felt when I got near the falls. There was a positive energy, a kind of life force, at the falls that I never felt anywhere else.

I looked down at Dad still sitting on the rock, and I knew that I had to apologize. The hard feelings I had carried around with me for so long had to go. Too many years had passed. It

was time to let go of the hurt and anger of that twelve-year-old boy. The sound of the water rushed over me and I closed my eyes. The peace of the falls washed away the last remnants of those earlier emotions. For the first time in more than thirty years, I felt free of the resentment I had harbored toward my father. He had done the best he could, what he felt was best for his family.

I don't know how long I stood on the bridge with my eyes closed. When I opened them, I saw that Dad was still sitting on the rock at the base of the falls. I walked down to join him. I wanted to apologize for my earlier childish tantrum.

Before I could say anything, Dad said, "You know, Kevin, when you were young, I used to come out here a lot. Every time I had a problem, whether something had happened at work or your mom and I had a fight or it was something with you, I would come out here to sit on this rock and stare at the falls. I'm not sure how it started, but it seemed like every time I came out here, I felt better. I didn't always come away with the answers I was looking for, but I knew that things would work out."

I started to speak, but Dad put up his hand.

"You surprised me earlier when you got angry out at the house. But the truth is, I've always known that you resented me for moving us to Mercer. Your mom told me about your anger when you were younger and I guess I could see it in the way you acted, too. I just wasn't sure how to respond. I tried to be supportive and to help you in any way I could, but the one thing I never did was discuss it with you. I just thought if enough time went by, you'd lose the anger and come to love Mercer as much as I did. Obviously, I was wrong and I'm sorry, Kevin. I'm sorry that I never talked to you about what you were feeling."

“I’m sorry too, Dad,” I said. “If I had talked to you about what I was feeling instead of complaining to Mom all of the time, maybe we would have talked this out back when I was a kid. And I’m sorry for my outburst back at the house. That was the outburst of a twelve-year-old. I should have gotten over that a long time ago.”

“I guess neither of us is very good at talking,” Dad said. He stood up from the rock. “We should try to get better at that.”

“Yeah, we should,” I said.

“I have an idea,” Dad said. “I know we have reservations at the hotel, but what do you say we stay at the house tonight?”

“Dad, there is no house.”

Dad laughed. “I didn’t mean in the house. I was thinking we could camp out at the top of the hill in front of the garage. I’ll bet we can rent a tent and sleeping bags at the sporting goods store in town.”

“Do you feel up to sleeping on the ground?” I asked, the doubt evident in my voice.

“Don’t write me off yet,” Dad said. “I’ll be just fine.

“Well, if you think you’ll be okay, then sure.”

“Great,” Dad said as he put his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go get what we’ll need.”

#

In town, we parked in front of the store that used to be called Mercer Sports. The sign indicated it was now called Flowage Outfitters and the building had been re-sided with cedar. It looked more rustic and inviting.

When we walked in we were greeted by an older woman. “Welcome to Flowage Outfitters,” she said. Can I help you find—Oh, aren’t you Kevin Hargrove?”

“Yeah,” I said, surprised to have been recognized. I looked closer at the woman and suddenly realized who it was.

“Wait here,” she said excitedly. “I’ll be right back.” The woman rushed to the back of the store and in a moment, Annie came running out.

“Kevin!” Annie exclaimed as she embraced me excitedly. “Oh my gosh, it’s so good to see you. How are you?” Annie was talking fast.

“Hi Annie,” I said. “I’m good. How are you?” I turned to the older woman. “Hi, Mrs. Hayes.” I said, sounding surprisingly like a teenage boy.

Mrs. Hayes hugged me and said, “It’s good to see you, Kevin. And I think you’re old enough now that you can call me Emma instead of Mrs. Hayes.”

“Annie and Emma,” I said, “do you remember my dad? This is Stan Hargrove.”

“Of course,” they both said. Emma extended her hand to Dad. “Stan, it’s nice to see you again.” Annie gave Dad a hug.

“So, what brings you two into town?” Annie asked.

“Do you own this place?” I asked.

“Mom and I moved back into town about a year ago and bought the store. We changed the name and cleaned it up a little.”

“It looks great,” I said. “We’re in town just for a visit, and we came to get some camping equipment.”

“Well, you’re in the right place,” Emma said. “Stan, let me show you our camping section.”

As Dad and Emma walked away, Annie grabbed my arm. “It is so good to see you,” she said. “Tell me what’s going on in your life.”

“Well, I’m a lawyer in Chicago. I’m divorced and I work way too much. That’s my life in a nutshell. How about you?”

“I’m divorced too, for almost 10 years now. After the divorce I moved in with my mom, but after a while, it became obvious that we were both unhappy with our lives in Denver. We drove to Mercer for a visit, saw that this store was for sale, and before we headed back west, we decided to buy it and move back to town.”

“How do you liking living in Mercer again?”

“It’s been great. I forgot how much I loved living here,” Annie said. “And working with my mom here at the store has been a lot of fun. It’s been a good move for both us. “Do you like living in Chicago?”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, I never gave it much thought. I mostly just go to work and then go back home. I don’t really take advantage of the city.”

“I’m surprised you moved away from Mercer.”

“Really? I couldn’t wait to get away from here,” I said.

“I didn’t know that. I always thought you loved living here. It sure seemed like it when we were in school.”

“Yeah, that’s what my dad thought too. Have you two been talking?” We both laughed.

“We’re all set,” Dad said, as he and Emma walked to the front of the store where Annie and I were still standing.

“Stan had a great idea,” Emma said. “After the two of you go set up camp, we’re all going to get together for supper at the Ding-A-Ling.”

“That sounds great,” Annie said.

“We’ll meet you at the restaurant at about seven. Will that work?” Dad asked.

“It will,” Annie said, her smile bringing back a flood of memories.

“Great,” Dad said. “Kevin, let’s get the gear loaded up. We still need to stop at Snow’s to get food and then we can go make camp.”

#

At dinner, the conversation was flowing. Dad and Emma carried on a conversation about Dad’s days as a forest ranger, and Annie and I talked almost like we had never been apart.

As we were talking, Lori Briggs, a classmate of ours from high school spotted us. She was tall and thin, with dark hair and an overbite.

“Oh my gosh, Annie and Kevin! It’s so good to see you,” Lori said.

Annie remembered Lori, and I think she sensed that I didn’t, so she introduced her to Emma and Dad as a way of letting me know Lori’s name.

We talked for several minutes when Lori said, “I don’t want to keep you from your meal. I just wanted to say hi and tell you how good it is to see you back together.”

My mouth opened, but no words came out. Annie put her hand on my arm and said, “It was good seeing you, Lori.”

When Lori walked away, Annie patted my arm and said, “You’re not going to hyperventilate, are you? You look kind of pale.” She laughed.

“Annie, she thought we were together,” I said.

“That’s okay. It will give her something to talk about with her friends.” Annie smiled, just as full of confidence as I remembered.

After dinner, we each ordered another drink. It was amazing how Annie talked to me as if there hadn’t been a twenty-five year gap in our relationship. I was so engrossed in my conversation with her that I almost forgot that Emma and Dad were still at the table with us.

“I’m going to give Stan a ride home,” Emma said. “You two can stay and talk, but us old folks need our rest. Kevin, do you mind giving Annie a ride home?”

“No,” I said, somewhat caught off guard. “No, that’s—Annie, do you want to stick around for a while?” I felt like a shy teenager again.

“Sure,” Annie said. “You guys go ahead. Kevin can drop me off later.”

After Emma and Dad left, Annie and I went into the bar and sat down. We took two seats at one end of the half-circle bar.

“What was the deal with you when we were talking to Lori?” Annie asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You were so shocked when she thought we were a couple.”

“Yeah, I guess it just sort of surprised me. It didn’t dawn on me that anyone would think we were together like that.

“Well, it was funny watching you squirm.” We both laughed.

“Why didn’t you tell her the truth?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Lori’s a big gossip, so I figured I’d give her something to gossip about. Why, you weren’t embarrassed, were you?”

“No, not embarrassed, just surprised.”

Once we finished our drinks, Annie said, “Why don’t we go for a drive?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s just drive around a little. It will be easier to talk away from so many people.”

As we drove, Annie pointed out different landmarks and we recalled stories from our high school days.

“See that empty building right there?” Annie said. We were driving through town on Route 51.

“Yeah, that used to be Carl Lawson’s law office.”

“It was up until about a year ago,” Annie said. “Carl and his wife moved to Arizona. His wife wasn’t in the best of health and Carl was seventy-five. He figured it was time to retire.”

“Really? What do people do for a lawyer now?”

“They either go up to Hurley or down to Minocqua. Carl was the only lawyer in town.”

“Hmm,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“You know, you could move up here and start your own practice,” Annie said.

“I have my Wisconsin license, but I don’t think there’s much call up here for the kind of law I practice.”

“Well, it’s just an idea.” Annie said.

After a while, the conversation started to wind down. I drove Annie to the house on Echo Lake she shared with her mom. We sat in the car talking for a few minutes more when Annie asked, “Am I going to see you again before you head home?”

“I don’t know what Dad has planned for tomorrow, but why don’t we plan on having dinner tomorrow night?”

“Dinner? You really are a Chicagoan. We still call it supper up here,” Annie said with a laugh.

“Okay. Let’s have supper tomorrow night.”

“That sounds good. Why don’t you call the store sometime tomorrow and we’ll make plans.”

Annie leaned across the console and kissed my cheek. Without really giving it any thought, I turned and kissed her gently on the lips. She returned the kiss.

“See you tomorrow night,” she said as she got out of the car.

I watched her walk up to the front door of her house. “Wow!”

#

When I woke up the next morning, Dad was already up making breakfast over an open fire. He looked more alive than I had seen him in a long time.

“Good morning, Kevin. How did you sleep?”

“Pretty good,” I said rubbing my eyes. “How about you?”

“That was the best sleep I’ve had in a long time. I feel ten years younger this morning.”

The smell of wood smoke and bacon filled the early morning air. Dad poured a cup of coffee and handed it to me. “This should help you wake up.”

Dad served the eggs and bacon, and sat down in the lawn chair next to me. “How was your time with Annie last night?”

“It was good to see her again. It was certainly unexpected,” I said with a bit of a laugh.

“I’ll bet. She hasn’t changed much since high school. She still has those bright eyes and that fun-loving personality.”

“Yeah, it almost felt like we were back in high school. It was kind of weird.”

“What do you mean?” Dad asked, eating his eggs.

“I don’t know. Just being back up here, seeing Annie. Everything just felt weird.”

Dad let out a little laugh and then asked, “So what’s on the agenda for today?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“I just want to hang around here. I’d like to clean up over there,” he said, pointing to an overgrown area where the driveway used to be. “I even thought about going down to the lake for a swim if it gets warm enough.”

“Annie wants us all to go out to dinner—I mean, supper—again tonight. Does that sound okay with you?”

“I think I’d like to go back to Snow’s this afternoon to pick up some food to cook over the fire and just stay here tonight. You and Annie go ahead and go out.”

“Are you sure, Dad?”

“Yeah, I want to spend as much time as I can here at the house.”

#

I pulled up to Annie’s house and before I could get out of the car, she came out the front door. She was dressed in faded jeans and a blue top with a white sweater around her shoulders.

Her ginger blond hair was down and it was curled. She slid into the passenger seat and turned toward me with a big smile. “Hi, Kevin.”

“Hi,” I said. “Where’s your mom?”

“I’m a big girl. She lets me go out on my own now,” Annie said. We both laughed.

“I thought she was going to go with us.”

“No. Mom said she didn’t want to get in the way. Where’s your dad?”

“He’s back at the house. Or at least where the house used to be. When I left, he was cooking a steak over an open fire and was happy as a clam.”

“It looks like it’s just you and me and no chaperones tonight,” Annie said.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Before we go eat, let’s drive out to Lake of the Falls Park.”

I was surprised. “Why do you want to go out there?”

“I just like it at the falls,” Annie said. “It’s peaceful and it will give us a chance to be alone and talk.”

When we got to the falls, I parked in the same place I had parked the day before with my dad. Annie got out of the car and I followed her down to the water.

Annie turned toward me and sat down on the same rock Dad had sat on a day earlier. Annie’s back was to the water. “I don’t know what it is about this place, but it always helps me to relax and think clearly. I call this the Thinking Rock,” she said.

“I used to come out here when I was a kid,” I said. “Whenever I had a problem or there was something I had on my mind, I’d get on my bike and ride down here. I used to sit on this rock all of the time too.”

“Really? I guess it’s kind of a magical place for both of us,” Annie said. “I’m surprised we never ran into each other here.” We both laughed. “Kevin, I’ve been thinking all day and I want to say something to you. I’m afraid you’re going to think I’m nuts or something, but I’m just going to come out and say it.”

“I’m not going to think you’re nuts. What do you have on your mind?”

“I thought a lot about what I said last night. You know, about you buying Carl Lawson’s old law office and starting your own law practice up here. The more I think about it, the better of an idea I think it is.”

“You are nuts,” I said, laughing. Annie punched me in the arm.

“Seriously, just think about it. You could move up here with your dad. You know he’s just dying to get back. The area needs a lawyer, so you’d be helping out the community. It could work out great.”

“And I could see you,” I said.

“Yeah,” Annie said softly. “I know we were just kids, but I made a big mistake when I let you go the first time. I don’t want to make that same mistake again.”

Annie’s admission caught me off guard. She didn’t know me anymore and I didn’t want her to be surprised or disappointed. “I’m not the same person you used to know, Annie. I work way too much. I’m uptight. I don’t socialize at all. I’m really not much fun.”

Annie laughed. “That’s in Chicago. Up here, you’re already turning back into the person you used to be.”

I wanted to argue with her, but I had to admit she had a point. Over the past day or two, I hadn't thought about work at all. Normally, if I was out of the office, I'd call back every few hours. But since I had been back in Mercer, I hadn't called at all.

"You think letting me go was a mistake?" I asked.

"Yeah, I do. Maybe the biggest mistake of my life. I've had a lot of years to think about it and I know that I don't want to let you go again."

It was starting to get dark. The sunset in the distance was a brilliant mixture of orange and blue. Dad loved these kinds of sunsets. He always said they were an omen of better times ahead.

"Well, you certainly have given us something to talk about," I said. "What do you say we go get dinner and talk about it some more?"

"Supper, Kevin. Supper."

"Oh, right. Let's get supper and talk about it some more."

"That sounds good. I'll race you to the car," she said, getting a head start on me.

"You still cheat," I said as we both ran toward the car, laughing.

#

I woke up early the next morning, wanting to fix breakfast for Dad before we headed home. My mind was reeling from my conversation with Annie the night before. We were back to being a couple, and I looked forward to getting to know her again.

I used some of the wood that Dad had piled up near the fire ring and started a small fire. I dug out the coffee that was stored in the cooler and made a pot. The combination of the wood

smoke, the coffee, and the fresh earthiness on the breeze made me feel alive and gave the day a feeling of possibility. It had been a long time since I had felt that way.

I thought that the smell of the coffee would wake Dad up, but after nearly a half hour, he still wasn't out of the tent. I was a little surprised. The early morning was his favorite time of the day.

I went back into the tent and saw him still sleeping. "Dad, are you going to get up?" I asked softly. He didn't respond.

"Hey, Dad," I said a little louder. "It's time to rise and shine." Again, no response.

I looked at him for a moment and thought the worst. Had he died in his sleep? I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. "Dad," I said again "it's time to get up." I put my hand on his shoulder. He didn't respond, but I realized his body was warm. I shook him gently. "Dad, it's time to get up."

He opened his eyes slowly. "Kevin," he said as if he was surprised to see me. "I was dreaming about your mom. I dreamt she was alive and we were all living back in our house." Dad reached up and rubbed his eyes. "We had a good life here."

"Yes we did, Dad. I just wish I would have realized it sooner."

Dad smiled. "Is that coffee I smell?"

#

We got back to Chicago late on Sunday afternoon. I dropped Dad off at his apartment with a promise that I wouldn't be such a stranger. He wasn't happy about being back in the city, but the trip had rejuvenated him. He stood up straighter, walked with a purpose, and smiled at the

people in his apartment building as he passed them in the hall. I was pleased with and surprised by his new attitude.

I called Annie that night and she told me she missed me. I missed her too. Before Dad and I left Mercer, we stopped by her house to say our goodbyes. Annie kissed me softly on the lips and made me promise to come back soon. I promised, and hated the feeling of leaving her.

The next few days at work were crazy. Because I had been gone, meetings got backed up and we had to squeeze them in without disrupting our normal schedule. I was forced to work late into the night to catch up, and my calls to Annie became shorter and shorter. I told Dad I would have dinner with him on the Friday after we returned from our trip, but then had to cancel our plans so I could get some work done. I thought I might be able to see him during the weekend, but I wound up working both Saturday and Sunday.

I was at the office the next Monday when Annie called. I was in the middle of a meeting and asked my secretary to tell her I would return her call that night. When I finally got around to calling her, she was already in bed.

“I’m really sorry, Annie. I meant to call earlier.”

“You warned me that all you do is work,” she said.

I wanted to respond, but couldn’t think of anything intelligent to say. All I ever did was work, and now it was getting in the way of my relationship with Annie.

“Am I going to see you soon?” she asked.

I had been trying to figure out when I could get back up to Mercer, but hadn’t yet found a good time. “I’m not sure. I know I can’t this weekend. One of our clients has a big filing coming up at the end of the month and we have to get everything done.”

“You don’t think you can get up here before the end of the month?” Annie asked.

“No, I don’t think so.” There was an uncomfortable silence. I badly wanted to see Annie, but I knew I couldn’t get away for at least a couple of weeks. “Is there any chance you can come to Chicago?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Things are slow at the store right now. Mom can probably handle things for a weekend.”

We made plans for Annie to visit two weekends later. The prospect of having her in Chicago excited me, and I looked forward to seeing her.

#

Annie had driven to Rhinelander—the closest airport to Mercer—and then flown into Chicago. I picked her up at Midway and helped her put her suitcase in the trunk of my car. I pulled out of the airport and swung out into traffic on Cicero Avenue, and then on to the Stevenson Expressway. Annie sat as close to me as the bucket seats would allow, and we held hands as I drove.

Traffic was slow and heavy, normal for a Friday afternoon. Annie talked about the store, and her mom, and the latest gossip from Mercer. I was only too happy to listen.

I had told Annie before she made plans to visit that I would have to get some work done on Friday afternoon, but that I would devote the rest of the weekend to her. I was glad she was so understanding. I had a ton of work to do and I was anxious to get back to my house to get it done.

As I worked, Annie sat on the couch in the living room and read a book she brought with her. When she tired of that, she came into my office and put her arms around my shoulders, kissing my neck.

“Do you mind if I listen to some music?” she asked.

“Go ahead. You know how to work the stereo?”

“I’ll figure it out. You just get your work done so you can wine and dine me.”

When she got bored listening to music, she poked her head into the office and said, “I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in a little bit,” I said, without looking up.

I was on the phone with Phil Bloom, one of the attorneys from my office, when I heard the front door open. “Are you still working?” Annie called from the living room. She came into the office and found me on the phone. “Sorry,” she mouthed, and put her hands up in apology.

When I got off the phone, I went into the living room, and found Annie asleep on the couch. The sun had gone down and the room was dark. I thought about waking her, but instead I let her sleep and went back into the office to do some more work.

I was excited to have Annie in my house, but I was also a little disconcerted. Having Annie with me and being able to share my life with her was exciting. I loved the thought of it. But I had been alone for a long time, and having her there put a pressure on me that I hadn’t felt in quite a while. I had to think about someone other than myself, and it was a strange and chaffing feeling.

When Annie woke up, she walked down the hall into my office. “You’re still working?” she asked, rubbing her eyes. “What time is it?”

“I didn’t want to wake you,” I said, looking at my watch. “It’s twenty after nine.”

“Is it too late to eat? I’m starved.”

I laughed. “This isn’t Mercer. They don’t roll up the streets when the sun goes down. You can eat whenever you’re hungry.”

“We don’t roll up the streets,” she said. “Are you going to feed me?”

We went to Chicago Pizza and Oven Grinder around the corner from my house. We each ordered a half-pound pizza pot pie and shared a chef’s salad. While we waited, I had a beer and Annie had a glass of wine.

“Do you come here often?” she asked.

“I haven’t been here in a while. I’m usually still at the office around dinner time. If I eat at all, I usually eat over there.”

“Why do you work so much?”

“It’s just what the job requires,” I said, not really giving much thought to my answer. The question made me think back to when Rebecca and I were still together and she would ask me why I was working so much. The thought made me uncomfortable and I wanted to change the subject. “How did you like your walk?”

“It was good. Your neighborhood is really nice. Nicer and cleaner than I expected.”

“Cleaner?”

“I guess when I think about the city, I think about everything being dirty. Even when I lived in Colorado, we lived in the suburbs of Denver, not right in the city. I’ve never lived in a big city and I’ve always kind of had a bias against them.”

“I guess I can understand that. I thought that way before I moved here. But really, it’s not that bad.”

“I suppose not, but I don’t think I could ever get used to it.”

I had this idea in the back of my head that maybe, given enough time, I could talk Annie into moving to Chicago. I wanted a future with her, and long term, we couldn’t have much of a relationship being six hours apart. Her comment threw cold water on my hopes to get her to move to Chicago.

After dinner, we went for a walk down North Clark Street. Despite the late hour, there were still a lot of people on the street, and the bars and restaurants were doing a brisk business.

“Isn’t this nice, having so many places to go this late at night?” I asked, trying to sell Annie on the virtues of the city.

“It’s nice to visit, but even if I lived here, I can’t imagine taking advantage of it very often. Do you go out here much?”

“Actually, no, I don’t. But it’s nice having it here if you want it.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like going out like this once in a while, but most of the time, I’d rather just go out behind the house and sit on the dock. I like to watch the stars.”

I instinctively looked up at the sky, but couldn’t see any stars because of the city lights. Annie saw me look up, but didn’t say anything. She just held my hand a little tighter and snuggled up closer to me.

We got back home around midnight. I poured us each a glass of wine and we sat on the couch, our feet up on the coffee table. As we talked, I felt myself starting to fall asleep. It had been a long day and I was tired. Annie sat up and put her wine glass on the table. She took mine

and sat it next to hers. She swung a leg over me and sat on my thighs facing me. “Don’t fall asleep on me yet,” she said, unbuttoning my shirt. “I have plans for you.”

#

When I awoke the next morning, I was lying on my back and Annie was lying next to me on her stomach, her arm stretching across the bed and her hand resting on my chest. The previous night had been a pleasant surprise. When Annie agreed to visit, I wasn’t even sure we would sleep in the same room. I had made up the bed in the guest room just in case.

Of course, this wasn’t the first time we had sex, but it had been many years since the last time, and back then we were young and unsure of ourselves. As adults, we knew what we wanted, and the previous night’s activities had been a much more satisfying experience.

I snuck out from under Annie’s hand without waking her and went into the office. We had made plans to visit the zoo, and I wanted to get some work done before we went. I had been working for about an hour when Annie wandered into the room.

“Good morning.” Annie was wearing one of my light blue dress shirts and her hair looked wild. The shirt hung down almost to her knees. When I turned, she sat down on my lap and gave me a kiss. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I thought you could use some sleep,” I said.

“We need to get going. I don’t want to miss the zoo.”

“It’s not going anywhere. Why don’t you get ready and I’ll finish up here.”

Annie gave me another kiss and then went upstairs to take a shower. Through the ceiling, I could hear her singing, and I imagined her naked under the spray of the showerhead. I thought

about joining her, but I really needed to get some work done before we left for the zoo. I was disappointed in my own priorities.

I was on the phone with Phil when Annie came into the office ready to go. She was wearing faded jeans, a pink sweatshirt, and a Cubs cap. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and it was sticking out through the hole in the back of the cap. I held up my index finger to indicate I would be just a minute. Annie sat down in an old overstuffed chair I kept in the office, but when I didn't get off the phone after several minutes, she got up and left the room.

When I finally got off the phone, I found Annie sitting on the couch in the living room looking at a framed photo.

"Is this Rebecca?" she asked, handing me the photo.

"Yeah, that's her. That was taken a couple of years before we split up. Where did you find it?"

"I was looking for the TV remote and found it in the drawer under the TV. Sorry, I shouldn't have been snooping."

"No, that's okay. I haven't seen this in years."

"Why did you guys split up?"

I put the photo back in the drawer and sat next to Annie on the couch. "It was my fault," I said. "I didn't put enough effort into the marriage and it eventually ended." I knew that my explanation was incomplete, but I didn't want to get into a long confession about my wrongdoing. Annie didn't need to know what a really poor husband I had been.

#

Our day at the zoo had been pleasant enough, but Annie wasn't being her usual fun-loving self. She was quiet and seemed to be lost in thought much of the time. I wasn't the best company either. Twice while we were at the zoo, I took calls from my office and talked both times for several minutes while Annie milled about by herself.

We went to Café Ba-Ba-Reeba's for dinner. I hadn't been there before, but I heard it was a fun, casual place that served Spanish tapas. The place was packed, and we were lucky to get a table. Annie started with the chicken and ham croquetas, and I had the goat cheese baked in tomato sauce. We ordered a pitcher of the classic red sangria.

I wanted to cheer Annie up, but I wasn't sure what to do. When I asked what was wrong, she insisted everything was okay. I knew better, but what could I say?

Next, Annie ordered the paella valenciana with roasted pork, txistorra sausage, and braised pork belly. It was a meat lover's dream come true. I got the skewered chicken and chorizo sausage.

As we ate, Annie came out of her shell a little bit. I think it might have been the sangria, which she seemed to enjoy. The fun, energetic vibe of the restaurant helped to pick up her spirits too. When we had finished our tapas, Annie moved closer to me and put her head on my shoulder.

"I've had fun being with you this weekend. I wish you could come back with me tomorrow."

"I wish you could stay with me instead of going back north."

"I think we've had this conversation before," she said.

I was trying to think of a reply that wouldn't ruin the mood when the server came by to take our dessert order. Annie ordered the chocolate truffle cake, and I got the gala apple empanada with vanilla ice cream.

"You were about to say?" Annie said.

Before I could answer, my phone rang. I could see from the caller ID that it was Phil, and I knew he wouldn't be calling so late on a Saturday night if it wasn't very important.

"I'm sorry, Annie. I have to take this." I got up from the table and went outside to take the call.

I wasn't gone more than ten or fifteen minutes, but when I got back, Annie's mood had changed. "Sorry about that," I said, sitting back down.

"Oh, I understand," she said, a noticeable slur to her words. Annie had a half-full tumbler of sangria in her hand, and the heavy glass pitcher sat empty on the table. "This is what your life is like now, isn't it? If you're not sleeping, you're working."

I hesitated to answer. I didn't want to lie, but I didn't want to upset her more. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"That's too bad, Kevin. You used to be a lot of fun."

#

Sunday morning, we were supposed to go to brunch, but Annie begged off, saying she was still full from dinner the previous night. I worked in the office while she got ready for her flight back to Wisconsin. We barely talked.

When we got in the car to head to the airport, Annie took my hand. She looked up at me as I maneuvered my way through the Chicago traffic. “I’m sorry for what I said last night, Kevin. I was out of line.”

“You don’t need to apologize. What you said was true. Probably eighty or ninety percent of my time is spent either sleeping or working.”

Annie shook her head. “It might be true, but it wasn’t my place to point it out, especially in such a nasty way.”

I brought Annie’s hand to my mouth and kissed it. “I’d love to tell you that things are going to change, but I don’t know if that’s true. No matter my intentions, there always seems to be more work to do.”

She nodded, and we rode to the airport in silence.

#

In early-November I was driving to a meeting with Phil. We were heading to downstate Illinois to meet with a client and we had a three hour drive each way. During the drive we talked about our personal lives, and Phil was unusually open.

“I think my kids hate me. They don’t ever have anything to say, except if they need money. I’ve become more of a bank to them than a father.”

Phil was on his third wife and second family. He had two grown kids from a previous marriage and three teenagers with his current wife. “I’m sure they don’t hate you,” I said.

“Don’t be so sure. They tolerate me because I put a roof over their heads, food on the table, and a cell phone in their ear. Even if they don’t hate me, I know they resent me.”

“Why would they resent you?”

Phil looked at me and smiled. “You’re kidding, right?”

I shook my head. “No. What do you mean?”

“They resent me because I’m never home. I’m always working, and I can’t ever make it to their concerts or ball games. We make plans as a family and either I end up canceling or they go without me. It’s been that way all their lives. You know what it was like with you and Rebecca? Now add in a few kids and think of how bad it would be.”

I thought back to my time with Rebecca and remembered how my workaholic tendencies had ruined our marriage. I had let that happen, and I was thankful we didn’t have kids when we split. “What are you going to do about it?” I asked.

“Nothing. I mean, what can I do? I’m stuck on the wheel and it just keeps going around. I can’t jump off. Connie and the kids are too used to our lifestyle. You think they’re going to give up their comfortable lives so I can ‘find myself?’ Not a chance. The sad truth is, we make our choices and then we have to live with the consequences”

I shook my head. “There must be a better way.”

“There is. Don’t get on the wheel in the first place, and if you have the opportunity to get off, don’t miss your chance.”

I didn’t know if Phil was talking about my specific situation or just making general conversation, but his words hit home. I had the opportunity to get off the wheel. My house was paid off, I didn’t owe anything on my car, and I had enough money in retirement. Why did I keep working these ridiculous hours to make money that, although I liked, I really didn’t need? I was building a bank account, not a life.

With Annie, I had a reason to get off the wheel. There was no doubt that I could use a change. I was in a long term rut and I had been there so long that I didn't even think about getting out any more. Annie made me think about getting out.

#

I made arrangements to have dinner with my dad a few nights after my talk with Phil. I really needed to work late on the day of our dinner, but I left my office anyway to meet up with Dad. When I saw him, I could tell he had lost some of the glow he had when we first returned from Mercer.

"I'm glad you were able to get away tonight," Dad said. "Things slowed down at work?"

"Not really, but I've been neglecting you and I want to talk to you about something."

"I'm all ears."

"Did you know that Carl Lawson's old office up in Mercer is empty?" I asked.

"Yeah, I heard he moved to Arizona. I don't think Lillie was doing very well."

"Annie has this crazy idea about me opening a law practice up there. She thinks I should buy Carl's old office. What do you think?"

"I don't think it's crazy," he said. "Are you thinking about it?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I know it would be a lot of driving going between here and Mercer," he said. "Are you thinking about just being in the office up there a few days each month?"

"No, what I'm actually thinking about is quitting the law firm here and moving up to Mercer full time."

Dad looked confused and a little surprised. "Move to Mercer full time?" he asked.

I smiled and nodded my head. I could see the excitement growing on Dad's face. "And I was thinking we could move you out of the apartment and back up there where you belong."

Dad opened his mouth, then closed it before saying anything. His eyes began to tear up and he sat back in his chair. "That would make me very happy," he said. His voice was soft and full of emotion.

After dinner, I dropped Dad back at his apartment and hurried home. I was anxious to tell Annie the news.

At home, I didn't even bother to take off my coat before dialing Annie's number. I sat down and closed my eyes. Red, orange and yellow oak and maple leaves framed the falls, and the sound of water rushing over and between large rocks filled my mind. The air was saturated with an earthy sun-soaked freshness. The imagined scene relaxed and invigorated me as I waited for Annie to answer.

The phone rang once. I smiled and felt more contented than I had in years. It rang a second time.

"Hello," a familiar voice said.

It was good to be going home.

BACK ON THE ROAD

A novella

CHAPTER 1

When we got to Las Vegas, the first thing Bird wanted to do was visit the Chicken Ranch, a warehouse about an hour outside the city. He had been talking about it ever since we started our trip five days earlier in Illinois. Kyle was tired of hearing about hookers and warehouses. He was ready to kill Bird. As usual, I was stuck in the middle.

“What’s the big deal?” Bird asked. “It’s legal there.”

“I don’t care if it is legal. I’m not going to a whorehouse.” Kyle said. “Do you know what my parents would do to me if they found out? Joan would cut off my balls.” Joan was Kyle’s long-time girlfriend.

“Are you sure she hasn’t done that already?” Bird asked.

“Very funny,” Kyle said. “What do you think, Reno?”

I was once again put in the position of having to referee an argument between Kyle and Bird. They were both good guys, just very different. Kyle came from a well-to-do family that owned a bank in Chicago. He had a long-term girlfriend waiting for him at home and was a willing, albeit unenthusiastic participant in our road trip. I think he wanted to be able to say he had gone on a crazy post-graduation adventure, but didn’t actually want to do it. More than anyone else I knew, Kyle was ready to get on with life; a career, marriage, obligation, responsibility, the whole nine yards.

Bird was the product of a single mother and a lower-middle-class home. He had no money, no steady girlfriend, and no plans for the future. His only concern was making sure he was having a good time at all times.

I understood why Bird and Kyle didn't see the world the same way, but I hated their constant bickering. I just wanted everyone to get along.

I was somewhere between Kyle and Bird. My parents were financially comfortable, not as well off as Kyle's parents or as relatively poor as Bird's. I didn't have a steady girlfriend like Kyle, nor did I bounce from one one-night-stand to the next like Bird. I wasn't as conservative as Kyle, but I wasn't the wild man Bird was, either. And because my personality and worldview were somewhere between Kyle's and Bird's, I often had the swing vote in our arguments.

"If you're so hell bent on getting a hooker, why don't you just find one at the hotel?" I asked. "I'm sure there must be some hanging around."

"But it's not legal in Las Vegas," Bird said.

"Do you really care if it's legal or not?"

Bird tilted his head back and looked up at the car's convertible top, a serious look on his face. After a moment, he began to smile. "No, I guess I don't."

"So we're not going to the Chicken Ranch, right?" Kyle asked.

"Nope. You and I can gamble while Bird looks for a hooker."

Kyle nodded his head. "For God's sake, Bird, don't get caught,"

"Don't worry, Kyle. Your balls are safe."

Kyle had to laugh at that. "Thanks, that's very reassuring."

CHAPTER 2

Our road trip had started out as a lark. We had just graduated from Western Illinois University, the Class of '83. During the final semester of our senior year, the three of us took an American Lit class together and one of the books we read was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. One night we were sitting at a bar and after a few beers, I came up with the idea of recreating the journey Sal Paradise, the main character in the book, made across America.

In the book, Sal is an aspiring writer who befriends Dean, a wild and undisciplined guy who has a zest for life and a penchant for living in the moment, consequences be damned. The two set out on a quest from one coast to the other in search of experience and adventure. The author, Jack Kerouac, writes in a jazz-like style. We really connected with the book and even adopted some of Kerouac's odd beat language, calling everything mad, and crazy, and hincy. Our American Lit professor told us that *On the Road* is a thinly fictionalized version of Kerouac's real life.

"Let's do it," Bird said. "We can leave right after graduation and head to Denver just like Sal and the gang. Then we can go to San Francisco."

"You're not going to hitchhike, are you?" Kyle asked. He was slurring his words.

The familiar smell of generously salted popcorn wafted through the bar that had been like a second home to us during our college lives. We had hatched one crazy idea after another in here. Like those other schemes, this "Kerouac adventure" was just a silly idea, idle talk that was never meant to be taken seriously.

"I don't know," I said. "We're not really being serious about this, are we?"

“Why not?” Bird said. “It’ll be a blast. What else are we going to do this summer?”

Bird refilled my beer from the plastic pitcher, then poured what was left into his own mug. A cheer went up from the people in the bar as one team or the other scored in the baseball game that was on the big screen TV. We were too engrossed in our conversation to pay attention to the game.

“I’m supposed to get a job,” I said.

“You have the rest of your life to work. Take the summer off and see the country before you commit yourself to adulthood,” Bird said.

He had a point. I was apprehensive about getting a job and settling down into a career. I knew I’d have to do it someday, but I wasn’t ready yet. “It’s just a crazy idea,” I said. “I wasn’t being serious.”

“We should be serious about it. In less than a month we’re going to be out of college and I don’t want the fun to end. It can be like our last hurrah. A farewell to our youth,” Bird said.

I looked at him and then at Kyle. Maybe this was my way out of a life of obligation and responsibility, at least for the summer. “What do you think, Kyle?”

“We can take my car,” Kyle said. “I don’t want to hitchhike.” Kyle’s parents had bought him a new BMW M3 convertible as an early graduation gift.

I had expected Kyle to throw cold water on our plans. That was the role he usually played in our schemes. Instead, he had offered his vehicle and jumped on the bandwagon.

Bird slapped Kyle on the back. “All right, Kyle.” There was an excited edge to Bird’s voice. “What do you say, Reno?”

Even though it was originally my idea, I was now the only hold-out. The prospect of spending part of the summer on the road both thrilled and frightened me. I loved the idea in theory, but worried about what my parents might say. I was also concerned about being in a car for an extended period of time with Bird and Kyle. We were all friends, but the two of them often didn't see eye to eye. What if the trip ended up ruining our friendship?

I looked around the table. Bird was animated and wild-eyed, waiting for an answer. Kyle looked at me expectantly. "Do you really want to do this, Kyle?"

He nodded and I could see in his unfocused eyes that he was feeling the beer more than Bird or me. "Yeah, I mean, it will be great."

"All right," I said. "I guess we're going on a road trip."

Bird raised his hand above his head and I gave him a high five. "Lugubrious," he said.

CHAPTER 3

We were on the road for three days before we finally hit Denver, the first stop on our adventure having anything to do with Kerouac's book. Dean was from there, and during Sal's first trip west, he had hitchhiked to Denver to meet up with Dean and his other friends. Denver played a big role in the book and in Kerouac's life, so we spent a couple of days there.

On our first night in town we went down to Larimer Street, Denver's skid row, where Dean's wino father did his drinking in *On the Road*. The area was going through a change. Old buildings were being torn down and new ones were being built. Shiny new skyscrapers stood alongside boarded up two and three story buildings. You could see that the old buildings, despite being in disrepair, had once been show places, with arched windows, fancy facades, and other decorative touches. It didn't look like much now, but I could image how Larimer Street must have looked fifty or seventy-five years earlier.

Kyle pulled the car up to the curb in front of a place called Howie's Tap Room. There was a boarded up building next door and a man was sitting on the sidewalk in front of it drinking from a brown paper bag.

We went into Howie's and sat down at the bar, each ordering a Coors. We had a special affinity for the beer because the Coors Brewery didn't ship their product east of the Mississippi. During our college careers, we had made several trips across the river into Iowa to score the hard-to-get brew with the label that indicated it was a "banquet beer." We had no idea what that meant, but it seemed to add to the allure of drinking it.

We were sitting on round-topped bar stools with rotating seats covered in green faux leather. The seats were ripped and worn, and they squeaked when they were turned. Two other guys sat at the bar with us. There was a couple huddled together at a table in the corner, and four guys at another table across the barroom talking loud and laughing. The air was hazy in the dimly lit bar and it smelled of stale beer and tobacco smoke.

Bird swiveled around on his bar stool and looked at the barroom. “Just think, Jack Kerouac could have drank right here in this bar. Hell, he might have sat right on this bar stool.”

“He could have,” I said. “I think the stools might be that old.”

“Did you guys really like the book that much?” Kyle asked. “I thought it was kind of boring, and the language Kerouac used was weird. I mean words like ‘hincty’ and how Dean always says, ‘He knows time.’ Even that goofy word Bird is always using.”

“What word?” Bird asked.

“Lugubrious. I’m not sure what it means, but I’m pretty sure you use it wrong.”

“Lugubrious? That’s a great word,” Bird said.

“What does it mean?” I asked. “Do you know?”

Bird took a long pull from his beer then set the bottle on the bar. “No, but it’s a great word.”

“You guys ready for another one?” the bartender asked.

I told him we wanted another round of “The Banquet Beer” and he walked to the other end of the bar where the cooler was.

“You boys out slumming tonight?” came a gravelly voice from behind us. I turned on my bar stool and saw a man with shaggy brown hair and an unkempt beard. He was wearing a threadbare yellow t-shirt and dirty jeans with a hole in the right knee.

“We’re just having a beer,” I said, feeling like one of us should say something.

“Don’t they have bars out where you live?” the bearded man asked. “Maybe you should go back home to Mommy and Daddy. This ain’t no place for some weak-assed college boys.”

Bird stood up from his bar stool, but before he could do anything, the bartender said, “Leave them alone, Dale. I don’t want you causing any shit in here tonight.”

Dale was unsteady on his feet. He stared at the bartender for a moment and then walked toward the back of the bar where the bathrooms were. “Bunch of college pussies,” he muttered.

“What’s his problem?” Kyle asked the bartender, who had returned with our beers.

“He’s just drunk,” the bartender said.

Bird watched Dale walk toward the bathrooms and then he sat back down on his barstool.

“Let’s finish these beers and then head somewhere else.” I raised my beer in a toast and said, “Yo dee yo,” an inside joke that we always used as a prompt to drink. We each tilted our beers back.

When Dale returned from the bathroom he had a cigarette dangling from his lip. I expected him to say something, but he just walked by silently and rejoined his friends.

When we left Howie’s we walked past the boarded up building where the wino still sat on the sidewalk, to a place called The Ginn Mill. The barroom was long and narrow, with the bar on the right and tables against the brick wall on the left. The bar was rounded on the end nearest the front door, and the wood, which must have once been stained and lustrous, was worn and in need

of varnish. My eye was drawn up to the intricate copper ceiling. The place wasn't very fancy now, but I could tell that it had been at one time.

We sat down at the bar. Although the barstools had seats covered in faux leather just like Howie's, these barstools were affixed to the floor and could not be moved. They were not particularly comfortable.

There were more people at The Ginn Mill than there had been at the Howie's, and the atmosphere seemed to be a little lighter. There were two bartenders—a male and a female—and the female came down to our end of the bar.

We ordered a round of Coors, and when she brought them, Bird asked, “Do you know if Jack Kerouac ever came in here to drink?”

The bartender got a big smile on her face. “Is that why you guys are here? To find the ghost of the late, great Jack Kerouac?”

“We just wondered if he used to drink here,” Bird said, “but if his ghost is here, we'd like to see it.”

The bartender laughed. “Sorry boys, there's no ghost. But rumor has it he did drink here once or twice with his crazy friend Neal Cassady.”

“Cassady was the guy that Kerouac based Dean Moriarty on,” Kyle said.

“That's right. In other books Kerouac called him Cody Pomeray,” she said.

“How do you know so much?” Bird asked.

“Because I'm smart,” she said. “And because I'm getting a Masters in Lit at CU Denver.”

The bartender introduced herself as Carlene.

“CU Denver?” I asked.

“It’s the Denver campus of the University of Colorado. Where are you guys from?”

We told her and explained why we were visiting Larimer Street.

“I’ve never understood why *On the Road* is so damned popular,” she said. “It’s one of Kerouac’s worst books. Both *Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* are better. Have you read them?”

Although I was more of a reader than either Kyle or Bird, I had never read *Dharma Bums*, and had never even heard of *Big Sur*. We all admitted we hadn’t read either book.

“If you’re really interested in Kerouac, you should,” Carlene said. “He hung around this area, but I think he hung around Five Points even more.”

“Where’s that?” I asked.

It’s up Larimer Street about eight or ten blocks north of here. If you go up there, you should check out a place called the Crystal Grill Tavern. They’ve got a great cheeseburger. Greasy, but really good.”

We finished our beers and headed out to the car. We hadn’t eaten dinner and a greasy burger sounded good. We were just about to the car when our old buddy Dale came staggering out of Howie’s with another guy.

“Hey look, the pussies are back,” he said.

Kyle was the closest to Dale and said, “We don’t want any—“

Before Kyle could get his hands out of his pockets, Dale hit him square in the face. Kyle’s knees buckled and he went down. Dale was leaning over Kyle waiting for him to get up when Bird let loose with a ferocious kick from behind right to Dale’s groin. Dale grabbed his crotch and teetered forward, falling in a heap. He moaned loudly and vomited onto the sidewalk.

“Hey,” Dale’s friend said to no one in particular. I pushed him away from Kyle, and he went tumbling over Dale.

I turned and saw Bird helping Kyle up off the ground. “Are you okay?” I asked Kyle.

“Yeah, let’s just get out of here,” Kyle said, then got into his car. Bird climbed in the back seat and I got into the front passenger seat. Dale and his buddy were still lying on the sidewalk when we pulled away from the curb and headed north up Larimer.

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The Crystal Grill was in a squat, rundown brick building with a backlit 7-Up sign over the door and a couple of “Schlitz” signs on the front wall. We walked in and immediately felt out of place. We were the only white people in the Crystal Grill. Kyle turned to walk back outside, but Bird marched past him and sat down at the bar. Kyle and I joined him.

“Three Coors and we’d like to see some menus,” Bird said.

The bartender nodded and walked away.

The bar was smoky and had the smell of beer and charred meat mixed with tobacco smoke. I thought I could smell marijuana as well. Marvin Gay was singing “Sexual Healing” on the juke box

“Maybe we should leave,” Kyle said. His right eye was beginning to swell from Dale’s punch.

“Why? I thought you wanted to eat,” Bird said

Kyle looked around the barroom. “I don’t think this is a place for whites.”

“You worry too much,” Bird said.

“I trust you boys are all of legal drinking age?” the bartender said.

“We are.”

The bartender set a beer in front of each of us and then reached under the bar and brought out three menus.

“Is it okay that we’re in here?” Kyle had his hand up to his mouth and spoke to the bartender in a hushed, conspiratorial tone. He then looked over his shoulder at the other people in the barroom.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?” the bartender asked, a perplexed look on his face.

“You know, because we’re white,” Kyle said, still keeping his voice low.

“Do tell,” the bartender said. “I hadn’t noticed. Let me ask you this: what color is your money?”

“Green,” I said.

“That’s the only color I’m worried about. As long as your money is green, you can come in here, and nobody going to bother you.”

Kyle let out a nervous laugh and nodded. “Okay. Good. Thanks.”

“What would you like to eat?” the bartender asked.

We each ordered a cheeseburger and fries.

“Three cheeseburgers and three orders of fries,” the bartender said, then walked back to the kitchen.

“Why would you ask a question like that?” Bird asked Kyle.

“What? I just wanted to make sure we were welcome.”

“Don’t you think it’s kind of insulting?”

“No,” Kyle said. “I think it’s better to know.”

“It is a little insulting,” I said. “Why would you assume that they don’t want us in here just because we’re white?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

The bartender rejoined us. “What happened to your eye?”

Kyle reached up and gently touched his swollen eye. “I got hit.”

“I hope the other guy looks worse.”

“He was still lying on the sidewalk last time we saw him,” Bird said.

“Is that right?” The bartender said. He walked away and then came back with a bag of frozen peas. “Put this on your eye. It’ll keep the swelling down.”

Kyle took the bag and placed it against his face. “Thanks.”

“You ready for another beer?”

“I am,” Bird said.

“How about you guys?” the bartender asked.

I said I was ready for another one and Kyle nodded, although his beer was only half gone.

The burgers came out and they were as good as Carlene promised they would be. The patties were thick and juicy, and each came with ketchup, mustard, tomato and a slice of raw onion. The fries were thin cut and were liberally salted.

When we finished eating, Kyle suggested we order another round of Coors. After the burger and a few beers, he was starting to feel comfortable. When “Midnight Train to Georgia” came on the juke box, he started to sing along. Bird and I joined in. We let Gladys Knight sing lead and we sang along with the Pips. As Gladys sang, we pivoted in unison on our bar stools, turning to the right and reaching out with our left arms, then pivoting to the left and reaching out

with our right arms. When Gladys sang the chorus, we each reached up in the air as if we were pulling a train whistle and sang, “who, who.”

When the song ended, a group of five or six people that were sitting in a booth behind us applauded. The bartender laughed and said, “I think you boys just earned yourself a free round.”

We had found a home in Kerouac’s old Five Points neighborhood.

CHAPTER 4

In *On The Road*, Sal and some of his pals leave Denver and head up into the mountains to Central City. While they are there, Sal attends the world famous Central City Opera House, where he sees *Fidelio*. The gang has a great time barhopping and throwing a party in an old miner's shack. But by the end of the night, everyone gets too drunk, fights break out, and the party breaks up. The next morning, when Sal and his friends head back to Denver, they feel defeated and depressed. We skipped the opera and the good times, and went straight to the depression.

Central City wasn't what we thought it would be. We expected a thriving old west mining town with bars and restaurants and a lot going on. Instead, what we found was a dusty, worn-out town with rundown, boarded up buildings, and signs posted all over concerning hazardous waste left behind from silver mining. The area had recently been designated an EPA Superfund site.

It didn't appear that the town was completely shut down. The opera house was still in operation, but we weren't interested in attending the opera. There were a few bars and restaurants, but it didn't look like anything much was going on. There were very few people in the street, and the town was quiet. We parked the car, and wandered around the downtown area.

"This sure doesn't seem like the place Kerouac described in the book," I said.

"Yeah, it looks like they've fallen on hard times since old Jack was here," Kyle said.

Bird looked around at the neglected buildings and the sad looking town. "Let's find a bar. I could use a drink."

Down the street from where we had parked was a bar called The Gold Coin Saloon. It was located in an uninviting, rundown brick building. We had to walk through swinging wooden doors like in a western movie to enter the bar, and when we got inside, a guy wearing a torn Denver Broncos jersey was walking backwards toward the doors.

“Come on, Sam. I can pay you next week,” the man said.

“I told you,” the bartender said, “don’t come back in here unless you have money.” The bartender was holding a baseball bat.

I had to move out of the way so the man backing out of the door didn’t run into me. He left, and we walked up to the bar and sat down on barstools with hard, wooden tops.

“What can I get for you?” The bartender was still holding the bat and looked pissed off.

“Three Coors,” I said.

“Why do you want to drink that skunk water when there’s decent beer to be had?”

“You don’t like Coors?” Bird asked.

“No I don’t. I’m a Budweiser man.”

We looked at each other, not sure how to respond.

“Hell, if you like it, then drink it,” he said. “I’m just trying to be friendly.”

We looked at each other again. Bird nodded. “Okay then, three Coors.”

The bartender shook his head, and after storing the baseball bat under the bar, went to get our beers out of the cooler. It was the middle of the afternoon and we were the only customers in the place. The barroom was rundown but had a historic quality I kind of liked. It looked like this place actually could have been around back in the Wild West days.

The bartender set a bottle of Coors in front of each of us and then walked away without saying a word.

“Geez, what crawled up his ass?” Kyle said.

“I don’t know. He seems genuinely unhappy. Probably the product of a broken home,” I said.

“You wouldn’t be too happy either if you had to live here,” Bird said.

When the bartender walked back toward us, we stopped talking and drank our beers. He poured a Budweiser from the tap into a tall clear glass and drank down about half of it. “Ah, that’s good beer,” he said to no one in particular. He then turned his attention to us. “What brings you to Central City?”

“We came up here hoping to see anything related to Jack Kerouac,” I said.

“Why would you want to come up into the mountains for that hack of a writer? You must have read *On the Road*.”

“Yeah, we did. Don’t you like Kerouac?”

“I think he sucked, although *Dharma Bums* wasn’t all bad. That sniveling little twit came up here for one night, got drunk, got into a fight, then went home and wrote about it like he was the king of the city. I don’t think he’s nothing but a poser and a wannabe. I hate all that beatnik shit.” The bartender had both of his hands on the bar and was leaning over it toward us.

“Other than that, Missus Lincoln, how did you like the play?” I said.

The bartender stared at me for a second, then got a smile on his face. He leaned back away from the bar and pointed at me. “That’s pretty funny. You boys just earned yourself a free drink.” He then explained that his name was “Smiling” Sam Ridley and customers who could

make him smile got a drink on the house. Few ever collected and he seemed impressed that we had gotten him to smile. “I reckon you won’t be able to do it again during your visit,” he said.

“What’s the deal with all of those dollar bills on the ceiling,” Kyle asked.

“Give me a dollar, and I’ll show you.”

Kyle handed Jack a dollar and Sam stuck a thumb tack through it. “See here, the tack has to go right through George Washington’s eye,” he said. He then fished a quarter out of his pocket, arranged the quarter against the head of the thumb tack, and threw it all underhand toward the ceiling. The tack stuck in the wood holding the dollar bill fast, and Sam caught the quarter as it fell.

“Now you’re invited to our ‘Bring Down the Ceiling Party’ next month. Everyone who contributes a dollar drinks for free until the money from the ceiling runs out.”

We finished our beers and Sam brought fresh ones. “Do you really hate Kerouac as much as you say?” Kyle asked.

“I think he’s a shitty writer and he’s the last person I’d come to the mountains for. There are so many other more important people who have visited town.”

“Like who?”

“Doc Holliday and Buffalo Bill Cody both drank right here in this bar. President Ulysses S. Grant came to town two different times. Hell, you want a writer, Mark Twain came to Central City, and he was a damn sight better than Kerouac.”

I tilted my bottle of Coors back, not sure how to respond to what Sam had said.

“Is that miner’s shack where Kerouac stayed still standing?” Bird asked.

Sam let out sigh. “You’re really not listening, are you? No, the shack is gone. Now enough talk about that goddamn Jack Kerouac. I feel like telling a joke. He walked over to the tap, poured himself another Budweiser, and came back to stand in front of us.

“An old man walks into a bar in Scotland, shuffles across the floor, and sits down at the bar. In a sad, defeated voice he orders a beer. The bartender draughts a mug for him and asks why he looks so down in the dumps.” Sam took a drink from his beer, and seemed to be getting into character.

“Ah, I tell you, man,” he said with a Scottish accent, “look out that window there. You see that fence. I built that fence with me own two hands. But do they call me McGregor the fence builder? No.” Sam took another drink of his beer.

“And that bridge across the burn? I built that bridge with the sweat of me brow, but do they call me McGregor the bridge builder. No they don’t.”

Sam rubbed the bar in front of him. “And the bar, I built it from the finest wild cherry wood available in all the land. But do they call me McGregor the bar builder? No they do not. But you fuck one lousy goat...”

We all started laughing. Sam didn’t even crack a smile. He just drank from his beer.

CHAPTER 5

Driving down the strip to our hotel in Las Vegas felt like what I imagined an acid flashback would feel like. Everything was lit up with bright, flashing neon lights, and the beeping horns and spastic brake lights of stop and go traffic added to the garish quality of the glittering, glaring city. I liked the idea of gambling a little bit, but I found Las Vegas breathtakingly gaudy. I looked forward to leaving almost as soon as we got into town.

On the casino floor, the bell and whistle sounds of slot machines mixed with the indistinguishable murmur of people talking and gasping and celebrating and laughing. Smoke rose from the gaming tables toward the brightly lit ceiling, and scantily clad waitresses in sequined outfits delivered colorful drinks to thirsty gamblers. It was an orgy for the senses.

Our money was limited, so we agreed that no one would risk more than one hundred dollars. Downstairs, Kyle made a beeline for the nickel slots, and Bird and I headed to the blackjack table. A year earlier, I had won almost two hundred dollars at a fraternity casino night, so I thought I knew what I was doing. Bird stood behind me at the table while I played. I encouraged him to sit down and join the game, but he said he just wanted to watch.

I started out hot, winning the first three hands. It felt good watching my stack of chips grow. I had some back and forth luck, but during the course of the next few hours, my stack got bigger and bigger. I got lost in the game and didn't notice that at some point, Bird had wandered off.

After almost three hours playing blackjack, my luck started to go south, so I took my chips and left the table. I found Kyle at the same slot machine where we had left him.

“I’m up eight dollars and thirty cents.” Kyle spoke with so much excitement you would have thought he was up thousands and thousands of dollars.

“That’s great.”

“How did you do?”

“I haven’t counted it yet,” I said, “but I did pretty good. Do you want to go get something to eat?”

Kyle was reluctant. His slot machine was paying out and he didn’t seem to want to walk away. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m hot right now.”

“You can always come back.”

Kyle looked at the slot machine and then back at me. He didn’t answer.

“They have an all-you-can-eat buffet for just five bucks.”

“I am kind of hungry,” he said. “I can pay for it out of my winnings and still have money left over.”

“Right,” I said, amused at Kyle’s excitement over his success. “I just need to cash in these chips then we can go eat.”

When we got up to the cashier, a woman with jet black hair asked how she could help us. Her hair was pulled back tight and she wore it in a long, thick pony-tail.

I put the chips down and slid them toward her. “I’d like to cash out, please.” I felt nervous. Vegas made me uneasy.

The cashier counted the chips quickly, reached into her drawer and counted out the cash as she laid it down in front of me. “One hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, five hundred, five fifty, five seventy, five hundred and seventy five dollars.”

“Holy crap!” Kyle said, remembering that I had started with one hundred bucks. “You won four hundred and seventy-five dollars?”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” I said, a little surprised myself. Kyle let out a “whoop” and patted me on the back. I looked at the cashier. She was used to doling out thousands and thousands of dollars to the high rollers. She was amused by Kyle’s excitement. “Congratulations,” she said. She had a big, toothy smile.

“Yeah, thanks.” I folded the money and put it into my pocket. “I guess I’m buying at the buffet,” I said to Kyle.

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We walked out of the restaurant after we finished eating and were assaulted by the bright lights and the cacophony of casino sounds. “God, did you know it’s already one-thirty in the morning? We should probably call it a night. We’re leaving for California in just a few hours,” Kyle said.

Just then a large man with close cropped hair approached us. He was wearing a brown sport coat with a darker brown turtle neck underneath. “Are you Steve Roberts?” he asked. I noticed that the sleeves of his sport coat were straining because of the size of his arms.

“Yeah, that’s me,” I said.

“Could you come with me, sir?” What Brown Sport Coat said was phrased as a question, but it sounded like there was only one right answer.

“Why? What’s going on?” I asked. Either I had inadvertently cheated at blackjack, or this guy was going to steal my money.

“Your friend Brad is in a little trouble,” Brown Sport Coat said. “He said you might be able to help him.”

It took me a second to remember that “Brad” was Bird’s real name. “Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

“It’s probably best if we just go up to your room to discuss this,” he said. Brown Sport Coat had been extremely polite, which for some odd reason made me trust him.

“Sure,” I said. As if I had a choice.

When we got up to the room, Bird was sitting on an unmade bed in his underwear. The blanket was on the floor and the sheets were rumped. A large man in a blue sport coat stood next to the bed and a woman in a slinky cocktail dress sat on the couch, smoking a cigarette.

“Hey, guys,” Bird said. He tried to stand up, but Blue Sport Coat pushed him back down on the bed.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Brown Sport Coat closed the door behind us and turned his attention to me. “Your friend here employed this young lady,” he said, gesturing to the only woman in the room, “for her services this evening, but when it was time to pay, he didn’t have enough money.”

“I thought she said a hundred dollars,” Bird said. He shrugged and extended his hands, a gesture that seemed to be saying, “I screwed up, but what can I do?”

“A hundred dollars? Do I look like a hundred-dollar hooker to you?” the woman asked. Her voice was loud and she seemed more insulted than angry. She was wearing a low-cut, shiny silver dress that accentuated her impressive cleavage. Her auburn hair was thick and curled. I

didn't have any experience with hookers, but she didn't look like a hundred-dollar hooker to me. She was poised and fit, and her movements were elegant and graceful.

"Let's all keep our voices down," Brown Sport Coat said. "People are trying to sleep."

"So, what does he owe you?" I asked the woman. The way her dress glittered in the light mesmerized me. I couldn't keep my eyes off of her.

"Your friend owes the young lady four hundred dollars," Brown Sport Coat said.

"What? Four hundred dollars?" Kyle said. "You paid four hundred dollars to get laid?"

Bird smiled and shrugged.

"Please, keep your voice down," Brown Sport Coat said to Kyle. He turned toward me. "If you could just pay the young lady, we could forget this ever happened."

The mention of paying the beautiful woman snapped me out of the trance I had been under since first laying eyes on Bird's "date" for the evening. "Four hundred dollars. That didn't last long," I said half under my breath. I reached into my pocket for the money, peeled off four one-hundred-dollar bills, and handed them to Brown Sport Coat. For some reason, I didn't want to hand them to the woman.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Brown Sport Coat said. "Have a good evening."

The woman stood up from the couch. I was staring again, and she noticed it. As she walked out of the room, she stopped in front of me, leaned in and gave me a soft, passionate kiss. I thought my knees were going to buckle.

"Thank you," she said.

"Hey, don't I get a good night kiss?" Bird asked.

The woman gave Bird a dirty look. Then she and her large friends left the room.

When the door closed, Kyle and I looked at Bird without saying a word. He was still sitting on the bed in his underwear.

“What? For four hundred dollars I don’t even get a good night kiss?” he said.

“Bird, can’t you keep your dick in your pants for even one night?” Kyle asked. “You’re going to end up getting us killed.”

“I got the kiss because it was my money.” I tried to sound angry. “I just won that four hundred dollars and I expect you to—” I burst out laughing. The situation was just too funny. I wanted to be mad at Bird, but I couldn’t. Bird started laughing too.

“Fine, you guys can laugh if you want,” Kyle said, “but I don’t think it’s funny. I’m going to bed. We’re leaving for California in just a few hours.”

The next morning, Kyle was still angry. I convinced Bird to apologize to him, although he didn’t see what he had done wrong.

“Hey Kyle,” Bird said. “I’m really sorry about last night. I know you’re pissed and I just want you to know that I feel bad about it and I won’t let it happen again.” He sounded sincere to me, but I knew him well enough to doubt that he was. He was simply doing what I had asked.

“Was it worth four hundred dollars?” Kyle snapped.

“Yeah, it was,” Bird said as if Kyle really expected an answer. I couldn’t help but laugh. Bird wasn’t joking. He really thought it had been worth four hundred dollars, especially since the money hadn’t come out of his pocket. Finally, Kyle couldn’t help himself and he laughed too.

CHAPTER 6

We left Las Vegas a little before noon and headed southwest down I-15 toward Rancho Cucamonga, near Los Angeles, where Kyle's friend Ed lived. Kyle had met Ed at a summer camp near Lake Geneva, Wisconsin when they were both in high school. They were life guards at the camp, and got to know each other well over three long, hot summers. They hadn't seen each other for about a year, but had kept in touch with letters and phone calls.

All I knew about Ed was that he had gone to Northwestern University, got good grades, and moved to California after graduation the previous year to become a financial analyst. We were going to be crashing at his place.

There wasn't much to look at as we crossed the desert from Nevada into California. We had the radio on and we were singing a Duran Duran song, "Hungry Like the Wolf," as loud as we could.

Kyle seemed to have forgiven Bird for his indiscretion the previous night. He was driving and singing along with the rest of us, bouncing around in his seat and keeping the beat on the steering wheel.

In Barstow, we stopped to get gas and I took over the driving. Kyle got in the back seat to sleep. Bird was sitting in the passenger seat with his shoes off and his feet up on the dash.

Near the Oak Hill Road exit on I-15 we saw a woman on the side of the road with her thumb out. She was wearing a red and white checked top and a pair of cut-off jean shorts. As we approached, we saw that she was short with blond hair that had kinky curls, and she carried a backpack.

“Pull over,” Bird said. “We’ve got to pick her up.” I expected Kyle to protest, but he was fast asleep. I slowed and pulled over to the side of the road about fifty yards in front of her.

“Kyle, wake up,” I said. I reached into the back seat and shook him awake.

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Bird said. “We’re just going to have another passenger.”

Kyle was confused until the back door opened and the blonde climbed in next to him.

“Hi,” she said. “Thanks for stopping to get me.” She had a voice that was hoarse and breathy and dreamy. I liked it.

“No problem,” Bird said. “We’re happy to help.”

We introduced ourselves and found out that our new friend was named Candy. She was going to Rancho Cucamonga where she was supposed to meet a friend.

“We’re going to Rancho Cucamonga, too,” I said. “We can take you all the way there.”

We drove for about 20 minutes. Bird was trying his best to make it with Candy, but she seemed to have an interest in Kyle. As they talked, Candy put her hand on Kyle’s leg and at one point, put her arms around his neck and leaned her head on his shoulder in a sort of hug.

Candy was a whole lot of cuteness wrapped up in a small package. She was just over five feet tall with tanned skin and bright white teeth that she flashed whenever she smiled. And she smiled a lot. I kept looking in the rearview mirror at her. Bird was turned around in his seat and Kyle was just as attentive as he could be.

Candy asked where we would be staying in Rancho. When Kyle told her about Ed, she seemed very interested. She said she didn’t live in town but knew a lot of people in the area. It never was clear where Candy lived, although it seemed that she didn’t know Ed.

We exited I-15 at Foothill Boulevard and drove west into town. After a few miles, Candy asked me to turn left onto Archibald Avenue. Almost as soon as we turned, she pointed to a parking lot and said, "Pull in there."

Bird was trying to find out what Candy would be doing later that evening, but Candy suddenly seemed uninterested. She grabbed the neck of her shirt and ripped it open so her white bra was showing. We all just stared without saying a word.

"Okay guys, here's the deal," she said. "See that woman up there by the door of that shop? That's my friend. If I'm not out of the car in one minute, she's going to call the cops and report an attempted rape. She knows what your car looks like and she has your license number."

"What the hell do you want?" I asked.

"I want you to give me all of your money. Hurry up and don't hold out. Give it all to me."

Kyle dug deep into his pocket and pulled out all of his money. Candy took it and put it into her backpack. "Now you two," she said to Bird and me. She was being all business. We hesitated, and she screamed at us, "Hurry up. I'm not playing around with you."

"Just give her the money," Kyle said.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out all of the cash I had. Bird did the same thing. I took his money and handed it all to Candy. She stuffed the money into her backpack and opened the car door.

"Thanks for the ride, guys," she said. "Now I want you to pull out of here and don't come back." She slammed the door and walked quickly toward her friend.

"Let's get the hell out of here before she calls the cops," Kyle said.

“She’s not going to call the cops,” Bird said. “She just robbed us. She doesn’t want the cops around.”

“Do you want to take that chance?” Kyle said. “Let’s get out of here.”

I pulled out of the parking lot going south on Archibald. “Turn right here and stop,” Bird said.

“Why?” Kyle asked in a panic.

“Just do it, Reno. Trust me.”

I turned right onto Hampshire Street and stopped. Bird quickly opened the door. “Go around the block, and then come back here to get me.”

“What are you doing?” Kyle shouted, but Bird had already closed the door and was running back toward the parking lot where we had left Candy.

We drove through a residential neighborhood. It seemed to take forever before I came to a street that turned to the right so I could go back and get Bird. I turned on Malachite Avenue and took it back to Foothill Boulevard. The afternoon traffic was busy and I had a hard time pulling out onto the street. Finally, I forced my way in. Car horns blared and tires squealed as I drove quickly through traffic back to Archibald. I took a right and floored the car down to Hampshire.

Bird was waiting at the corner.

“What did you do?” Kyle demanded.

“I wanted to see if I could catch a glimpse of Candy’s friend or the car they were driving,” Bird said. He was breathing hard from running.

“What did you see?” I asked.

“I got a good look at Candy’s friend. She’s tall, like almost six feet tall. She has long dark hair. Maybe black or dark brown.”

“Did they see you?” Kyle asked.

“No,” Bird said, “but I saw their car and I got their license plate number.” Bird smiled, looking proud of himself.

“So what?” Kyle asked. “What are you going to do with that information? You can’t call the cops.”

“Why not?” Bird asked. “They ripped us off. We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But the cops don’t know that,” Kyle said. “Who are they going to believe? Cute little Candy with the ripped shirt or the three horny guys from Illinois?”

“That’s not how—” Bird started to say.

“Forget it, Bird,” Kyle said. “We’re not going to call the cops. I’m not going to try to explain why we picked this woman up off the side of the road or how Candy’s top got ripped. No one is going to believe us. Let’s just go find Ed and forget about this.”

“Reno, shouldn’t we call the cops?” Bird asked.

I was in the middle again. “I don’t know, Bird,” I said. “I’d like to get back at her, but I think Kyle is right. We’d have a hard time convincing the cops that we’re the victims.”

Bird sat back in his seat and hit the door with his fist. “I can’t believe you guys.”

We drove to Ed’s office and Kyle ran inside. Bird and I stayed in the car.

“Why didn’t you want to call the cops?” Bird asked. “If we would have called right away, maybe they would have been able to catch her. Now she’s long gone.”

“I know,” I said. “I just don’t think the California cops are going to take too kindly to some out-of-state punks coming into their town causing trouble.”

“But we didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know, but I’m not sure we could convince them of that.”

I was quiet for a few minutes until Kyle came back out to the car. I could see from the look on his face that there was a problem.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as Kyle got into the car.

Kyle was shaking his head. “I don’t know. It’s weird. They said that Ed doesn’t work there. He used to, but he quit about four months ago.”

“He didn’t tell you?” I asked.

“No, that’s the weird thing. I talked to him just a week ago and he didn’t say a word.” Kyle was still shaking his head in disbelief. “I have his home address. Let’s see if we can find him.”

We went to a nearby gas station and got directions to Ed’s apartment. He lived on the second floor of an older two-story house. Kyle knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

“Can I help you?” an elderly man asked as he walked around the side of the house. We told him that we were looking for Ed. “Oh, you must be his friends from Illinois. Ed told me he was expecting you.” The man took an old, yellowed handkerchief out of his back pocket and blew his nose. He looked at the handkerchief and then put it back in his pocket. “Ed’s working right now. He won’t be home until after nine tonight.”

“Work?” Kyle asked. “Where does he work?”

“He’s working at a jewelry store over on Calle Bresca.” The old man gave us directions to the store and we were once again off in search of the elusive Ed.

Inside the jewelry store, we walked past two short glass cases, one to our left and one to our right. A young, olive-skinned woman with dark curly hair pulled back on her head stood behind a longer glass case directly in front of us. She smiled and asked if she could help us. When Kyle told her that we were looking for Ed, she went into a back room and came out with a security guard.

“Ed?” Kyle said.

“Kyle, you made it,” the security guard said with a smile. He was dressed in a full black uniform, black dress shoes, and a black cap with a gold star on it. On his uniform he wore a metal badge, and patches on his shoulders that indicated he worked for Ultimate Security Forces. His uniform was completed with a gun on his hip.

“I thought you were a financial analyst,” Kyle said.

“It’s a long story.” Ed shrugged. He shook Kyle’s hand, and Kyle introduced him to Bird and me.

“I don’t get off work until nine,” Ed said. “Do you think you guys can hang out until then? I can give you the key to my apartment if you want to stay there.”

We left the jewelry store and went back to Ed’s apartment. He was not a neat guy. Clothes were strewn over most of the furniture in the living room and dishes were piled up in the sink of his small kitchen. A bedroom immediately off the living room had an unmade bed and more clothes on the floor. The tiny bathroom was outdated with faded yellow tile on the walls and an old-style pedestal sink. The curtain around the bath tub was pulled back and there was a

visible ring around the tub. We were so tired that the mess didn't bother us. We fell asleep shortly after we got there.

When the phone rang, I woke with a start. Kyle answered it and asked if we wanted to meet Ed down at a local bar after he got off work.

"As long as he's buying," I said. "We don't have any money."

"I have sixty dollars," Bird said. He pulled three twenties out of his pocket."

"You held out on Candy?" I asked.

"Yeah. I wasn't going to give her all of my money."

We pulled into the parking lot at the bar right behind Ed. He got out of his car, and I was surprised to see that he was still in uniform. We'd almost reached the front door of the bar when Bird began jumping up and down and pointing at a car near the door to the bar. "That's it!" he said. "That's their car."

"What are you yelling about?" Kyle asked.

"That car right there," Bird pointed again. "That's Candy's car."

"Who's Candy?" Ed asked.

"It's a long story," Kyle said. "We probably shouldn't go in there."

"Are you kidding?" Bird said. "This is our chance to get our money back."

"No way. You're going to get us arrested," Kyle said.

"Arrested?" Ed said. "Will somebody please tell me what's going on?"

"We didn't do anything wrong. We're not going to get arrested. And Candy isn't going to want to involve the police. We're going to get our money back." Bird put his arm around Ed.

"And our policeman friend here is going to help us."

“What the hell is going on?” Ed asked yet again.

We told Ed what had happened earlier in the day, and Bird explained his plan, which involved us going in to confront Candy while Ed stood by the door in his uniform looking intimidating.

Kyle turned to me and asked, “Reno, we’re not actually going to do this, are we?”

“Yeah, I think we are,” I said.

Ed got a big smile on his face. “Cool.”

“Oh God, you guys are nuts,” Kyle said. “If we end up in jail, I’m going to kill you all.”

Bird and I walked into the bar while Kyle and Ed waited outside. It took a minute or two, but we spotted Candy and her tall friend sitting at a table near the dance floor with their backs to us. We went back outside and made sure that Kyle and Ed were ready. They were, so we went back inside to carry out Bird’s plan.

Kyle and Ed stood just inside the door, while Bird and I made our way toward Candy and her friend. As we walked, Bird danced and sang along to the song that was playing; “Come On Eileen” by Dexy’s Midnight Runners.

I punched Bird in the arm and pointed at the women, urging him to keep walking and to stop screwing around. He just shrugged innocently. Thankfully, Candy and her friend still faced the dance floor, so they hadn’t seen us approach.

“Hello, ladies,” Bird said. The women sat at a small, round table. We moved to either side of them, Bird between them on one side of the table and me between them on the other.

“Oh God,” Candy said.

“Who are these guys?” the tall girl asked Candy.

“These are two of the guys that paid us this afternoon not to call the cops,” Candy said. Her hoarse voice suddenly didn’t seem so sexy. The tall girl immediately reached for the purse that was sitting on the table, but I beat her to it.

“I’ll hold this for you,” I said.

“You know, ladies, what you did to us this afternoon was not very nice,” Bird said. “But we don’t want any trouble. We just want our money back.”

When Bird mentioned the money, Candy looked down at the backpack sitting on the floor next to her chair. Bird saw where Candy was looking and grabbed the backpack.

“You may not want any trouble, but you’re going to have plenty if we start screaming,” the tall girl said.

“If you scream,” Bird said, “that nice police officer over there by the door with our friend Kyle will be happy to come sort this out. You remember Kyle, don’t you Candy? Should I call him and his new friend over?”

Both girls were silent.

“Now Candy, should I take your whole backpack or would you like to tell me where the money is?” Bird asked.

“It’s in the front pocket in an envelope,” Candy said.

“Candy!” the tall girl said.

“What do you want me to do? Do you want that cop over here?” Candy asked. The tall girl slumped in her chair, but said nothing.

Bird unzipped the front pocket of the backpack and removed the envelope. He handed the backpack to Candy. "It's a shame we couldn't have met under different circumstances," Bird said in a soft, sincere voice.

Candy rolled her eyes.

"Not now, Bird," I said. "Let's go."

Bird wasn't listening. "Candy, I feel like we should kiss. What do you think? Just one goodbye kiss?"

"Leave," Candy said, turning her back to Bird.

Bird acted like Candy's words had hurt him. He put his hands on his chest as if his heart was breaking. "All right, then," he said. He turned to the tall girl who was still sitting slumped in her chair. "It was nice meeting you."

The tall girl raised her right hand and gave him the finger.

"So much anger." Bird shook his head as we walked away.

Kyle and Ed were still standing at the door. "Did you get it?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah, let's go." I was anxious to get out of the bar.

When we got outside Ed asked, "What now?"

"We should get out of here before they call the cops."

"Kyle, they're not going to call the cops," Bird said.

"Even so, it's probably not a good idea to hang around here," I said. I knew Bird was probably right, but I didn't see the sense in taking any chances.

"I'm starved," Ed said. "I know a great Mexican place on the other side of town, and you can pick up the check to pay for my invaluable services."

Bird slapped Ed on the back and laughed.

We got into our cars and headed out of the parking lot. As we drove away from the bar, Bird asked, “Hey guys, how much did Candy steal from us?”

“I think we figured out it was about three hundred and fifty bucks,” I answered.

“Wow, it looks like Candy and her friend have been busy,” Bird said. “There’s over three thousand dollars in this envelope.”

There was a brief moment of silence and then Kyle blurted out, “Oh my God, we just robbed those women. We are going to jail.”

“We didn’t rob them,” Bird said. “We just collected interest on the money we loaned them earlier today.”

I laughed. “That’s one way to think about it.”

“What are we going to do now?” Kyle asked.

Nobody answered for several moments.

“Three thousand bucks,” Bird whispered. “We can do just about anything we want.”

I was about to say something when Bird asked, “Do you think there are any hookers in Rancho Cucamonga?”

CHAPTER 7

After staying with Ed for a couple of days, we headed to San Francisco. We were supposed to be staying with a friend of Bird's from high school, a guy named Brian, but on our way north along the coast, Bird admitted that he had never called Brian to make the arrangements.

"Where are we supposed to stay?" Kyle asked.

"I can call him now," Bird said. "I'm sure he won't mind if we crash at his place."

"Do you have his number?" I asked.

"No, but I'm sure I can get it."

"How are you going to get it?" Kyle asked.

"If it's not in the phone book I can call some people who have it."

The Go-Go's were on the radio singing "We Got the Beat," but none of us were singing along. The uncertainty of not having a place to stay had suddenly cast a pall over our trip.

"If worst comes to worst, we can always get a hotel room. We still have plenty of Candy's money," Bird said.

"I told you I'm not going to use any of that money," Kyle said. After we had gotten the money from Candy, Kyle made it clear that all he wanted was the money back that she had stolen from him, but didn't want to have anything to do with the rest.

"Why are you so uptight about this," Bird asked.

"Because it's stolen money and I don't want any part of it."

"You're such a fucking cub scout," Bird said.

Kyle looked at Bird in the rearview mirror and shook his head. I sympathized with Kyle, but I really didn't understand his refusal to share in the money. Candy had stolen from us and it was just dumb luck that we had ended up with so much cash. We hadn't set out to rob her. Even so, the money was causing a rift between us, and I didn't like it.

At Ed's suggestion we had driven up the coast on State Route 1. It would take longer, he told us, but the scenery was gorgeous. He was right. The central coast was beautiful, with beaches and rocky coastline to the west, and rugged mountain ranges to the east.

"Pull over here and I'll try to find Brian's number," Bird said.

We were in San Luis Obispo near the state university. Kyle parked, and we went in search of a phone we could use. Bird stopped a good looking woman and asked her if she knew where we could find a pay phone.

"There's one right over there in the student union," she said.

"Which one's the student union?" I asked.

"That's where I'm going. You can follow me."

"To the ends of the earth," Bird said.

She smiled. "This way." She walked and we fell in right next to her. "Where are you from?" she asked.

Her name was Megan and we told her we were from Illinois and explained that we needed to contact Bird's friend Brian so we'd have a place to stay in San Francisco.

"I live across the Bay in Hayward. In fact I'm heading home tomorrow for the summer. Where does your friend live?"

"I'm not sure," Bird said. "I just know he lives in or near San Francisco."

“You don’t know where he lives and you don’t know his telephone number. Are you sure you really know this guy?” Kyle asked.

“I know him,” Bird said.

Megan laughed. She had a surfer girl look with thick blond hair swept back and slightly curled, a thin, fit body, and a big smile that showed off her white teeth.

Inside the student union, Megan showed us to the pay phone. We thanked her for helping us and she walked away. Bird picked up the receiver on the phone and began to dial, but then hung up and said to us, “I’ll be right back.” He went running off in the direction Megan had gone.

“God, why can’t he keep his hormones in check?” Kyle said.

“Can you blame him?” I asked. “She was gorgeous.”

A couple minutes later Bird came running back, out of breath.

“Did you catch her?” I asked.

Bird smiled and held up his hand. On it was scrawled a telephone number.

“You got her phone number. Now can you get Brian’s?” Kyle asked.

“Why do you have to be such a buzz kill? Bird said.

“I get this way when I don’t have a place to stay.”

I could tell that Bird wanted to respond, but he knew as well as we did that we were in this predicament because of him. He turned toward the telephone and started dialing.

The first thing we found out was that Brian’s telephone number was not listed in the phone book. Bird called his mom and got a phone number for his friend Kate. Kate didn’t know Brian’s number but thought that Andy might know it. Andy wasn’t home, but his brother said he

worked with Brian's sister, Sara, and although he didn't have her number, his friend Heather had it. Heather gave Bird Sara's phone number, and although she wasn't home, her boyfriend said Bird could call her at work. Bird called the number Sara's boyfriend gave him, asked for Sara, and then was put on hold. When Sara finally picked up, she gave Brian's number to Bird. Bird dialed Brian's number, but there was no answer. He had to leave a message. The whole ordeal took almost two hours.

We got back into the car and headed north again, hoping that Brian would get home before we made it to San Francisco. We continued on State Route 1 heading up the coast and stopped in Carmel to try Brian again. Bird left another message. We tried yet again when we got to Santa Cruz and this time we hit the jackpot. Brian was home.

According to Bird, Brian was happy to hear from him and he invited us to stay at his apartment. He lived close to downtown San Francisco and was a musician. Bird wasn't sure what instrument Brian played or what type of music he performed. In fact, there was a lot Bird didn't know about Brian. I was beginning to wonder how well Bird really knew him.

We followed the directions Brian had given Bird, and we ended up in front of a Vietnamese restaurant in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. Brian had an apartment above the restaurant.

"There's something I want to tell you guys before you meet Brian," Bird said, as we were getting out of the car. "Brian is gay."

"You didn't think to tell us that before?" Kyle said.

"Is it really that big of a deal?" I asked. "We're just crashing at his place, not screwing him."

“He might be willing to have hot gay sex with you, Kyle, if you ask nice,” Bird said.

“No, I’m good, but what if he comes on to me?” Kyle asked.

“Why would he come on to you? You’re not gay, are you?”

“No, of course not. But for some reason, gay guys like me.”

Bird and I laughed. “What do you mean gay guys like you?” I asked.

“There’s a gay guy at my dad’s bank and he’s always looking at me when I’m there.”

“That’s your proof? Some guy you think is gay looks at you?”

“He is gay. He brought his boyfriend or partner or whatever they call them to the bank Christmas party.”

“And you think he’s attracted to you because he looks at you?”

“Yes.”

“If Brian was going to come on to one of us, why would he choose you over Reno or me? What makes you think you’re a gay guy’s fantasy?”

“I don’t know. They just seem to like me.”

“Bird, over here,” a voice called from a doorway next to the restaurant.

We were standing behind Kyle’s car getting our luggage out of the trunk. Bird waved back at Brian.

“When I introduce you to Brian, try not to be so irresistible, Kyle. Give the poor guy a fighting chance.”

“Very funny,” Kyle said. He shut the trunk lid and walked behind Bird and me as we approached Brian’s door.

Brian's apartment was small. It was a studio that consisted of a large room that served as the kitchen, living room, and bedroom, and a separate, very small bathroom. It was neat and clean, but it was only about half the size of Ed's apartment in Rancho Cucamonga.

"Bird, I still can't believe you called. I was so surprised. I wish you would have called sooner. I could have made sure I had more food in the place."

"We kind of thought he'd call sooner, too." Kyle said.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Bird has always been crazy and impulsive like this. It's good to see you haven't changed."

"It would be nice if he would change a little," Kyle said.

Bird gave Kyle a hard look. "You have a roof over your head. Why can't you stop bitching?"

"After all the shit you've pulled this trip and you're worried about a little complaining?"

"Ladies, let's not fight," Brian said. "This apartment is too small for hard feelings. Let's all get along."

"Good idea," I said. "I'm exhausted, but I could go for a drink. Do you have any beer?"

"No beer, but I have some wine." Brian went into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of wine off of a rack on the counter that held five or six bottles. He held up one of the bottles. "A little red to celebrate your visit."

We gathered around the kitchen counter and Brian poured each of us a glass. We took our glasses into the living room and sat down. "To San Francisco," I said.

Everyone raised their glasses in a toast.

"Yo dee yo," Bird said and we all drank.

“Did Bird ever tell you about the time we slept together?” Brian asked. I almost spit out my wine.

“He never mentioned it,” Kyle said. “Why don’t you tell us?”

I looked at Bird, expecting him to protest, but he sat quietly with a silly grin on his face.

“It was our senior year in high school,” Brian began. “He and I were in bed together and there were about two or three hundred people watching.”

“What?” Kyle blurted out.

“Just tell them the story,” Bird said. He was calm, sitting back on the couch sipping his wine.

Brian laughed. “Okay, I’ll stop teasing. Bird and I played Oscar and Felix in *The Odd Couple*. You could probably guess that he was Oscar and I was Felix. In one of the scenes, we were in bed together. That became the joke during our senior year; that Bird and I had slept together.”

“I’m slightly disappointed,” I said.

“So was I,” Brian said. We all laughed. “But it was during that play that I decided what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I wanted to be on stage, acting and playing music. I’ve been lucky enough to do that for the past few years.”

“Bird told us that you’re a musician, but I didn’t know you acted too. Are you in any plays now?” I asked.

“Not right now. I play keyboards in a band and I pick up a little work as a studio musician. That pays the bills. I have an audition next week for a production of *Waiting for Godot*.”

“It’s great that you figured out what you want to do with your life,” I said. “I wish I could.”

“What do you mean?” Bird asked. “I thought you wanted to be a writer.”

“I’d love to be a writer, but almost nobody can make a living just from writing. They all have other jobs. Once I figure out how I’m going to make money, then I can worry about writing.”

“At least you have a choice,” Kyle said. “I’ve known for years that I’d end up being a banker because of my dad. He became a banker because of his father and now I’m going to do the same.”

“Don’t you want to be a banker?” Brian asked.

“I’m not sure. The bank has provided a good living for my family, so it might not be bad. It would just be nice to have a choice.”

“Go try something else for a while,” Bird said. “You can do whatever you want.”

Kyle let out a snort and took another sip of his wine.

“What about you, Bird? What do you want to do?” Brian asked.

“I just want to have fun. I’ll figure out some way to make money, but I’m not interested in it unless it makes me happy.”

“That’s a nice sentiment, but I don’t think that’s how it works,” Kyle said. “Nobody’s going to pay you to be happy. They pay you to work.”

“So why can’t you do work that makes you happy,” Bird asked, challenging Kyle.

“Everyone wants to be happy in their work, but there are damn few jobs out there that are fun and enjoyable. A handful of people get those jobs and everyone else works for a living. Not everyone can be happy in their work. That’s just how it is.”

“You might be right,” I said. “When I look at my parents, they like their jobs as realtors okay, but I don’t think they’re really happy. They have a lot of responsibility and they have to do a lot of shit they’d rather not do. It’s the same thing with their friends. Some of them even make a lot of money, but none of them are really happy.”

“That’s what I mean,” Kyle said. “Having a job is about making money and paying the bills. If you want to be happy, go golfing on the weekend or take up some other hobby. Jobs don’t make you happy.”

“I’m happy with my job,” Brian said. “It’s exactly what I want to do.”

“No offense,” Kyle said, “but look at the lifestyle your job provides.” Kyle looked around the room. “This apartment might be good enough for now, but how are you going to feel in five or ten years when your friends have moved on and they’re making more money and buying bigger houses and driving nicer, more expensive cars. You’ll be left behind and then your job won’t seem so great.”

“But why do you have to buy bigger houses and nicer cars? Just because your friends do? That’s a sucky reason,” Bird said. “Instead, why can’t you scale back what you want and be happy with what you have?”

“Because it doesn’t happen. I mean, it sounds good in theory, but for most people, they see their friends doing better in life and suddenly the small apartment and the low paying job that used to make them happy no longer does. There’s a reason people get an education, start a

career, get married, buy a house, have kids, and on and on. It's because it's a script that works. Trying to live a different kind of life is a romantic notion, but long-term, it doesn't work."

"Reno, do you agree with this shit?" Bird asked.

"I like the idea of living a different kind of life where your work and your home life both make you happy, but I've never seen anyone do it. I wish it was possible, but there must be a reason people don't do it," I said.

"That's just depressing," Bird said. "What about the way that Kerouac and his buddies lived? They seemed happy."

"Happy? They were drug addicts and alcoholics and lived in squalor most of their lives. Kerouac drank himself to death. Neal Cassady passed out from doing drugs down in Mexico and died from exposure. They had fun in short bursts, but overall, they were poor and miserable."

"That's depressing," I said.

"I practically want to kill myself. There's no use going on." Bird put his hands around his neck and acted like he was choking himself.

"You know what they say," Brian said. "Life's a bitch and then you die."

"Very uplifting. Thanks for the positive words. Is there any more wine?" Bird asked.

"For a guy who never drinks wine, you're doing a pretty good job." I said.

Brian retreated to the kitchen and fetched another bottle. "Why the interest in Kerouac?" he asked.

We told him about the class we had where we read *On the Road* and how our trip was a kind of re-creation of Sal Paradise's journey in the novel.

“You know, Kerouac spent a lot of time around San Francisco,” Brian said. “Some of those guys Kerouac hung out with were gay or they openly experimented with homosexuality.”

“How do you know that?” Kyle asked.

“It’s just common knowledge around here. Kerouac talked a little bit about gays in the book—he mostly called us queers—and because of it, there was talk of banning the book. A lot of those beats would sleep with anyone and everyone.”

“Where did he hang out around here?” I asked.

“In the book, he talked a lot about Mill City,” Kyle said.

“I don’t know of anywhere around here called Mill City. There’s a bookstore on Columbus Avenue that always has Kerouac stuff in their windows. You could probably find out more from them.”

We took Brian’s suggestion and went to City Lights Bookstore the next day. When we told the woman at the front desk that we wanted to find out about Jack Kerouac’s exploits in San Francisco, she introduced us to a tall, skinny guy named Martin Hale. Martin looked to be in his thirties, with long stringy hair and a shaggy beard. He talked like he was perpetually high.

“Yeah man, Kerouac used to come to the bookstore with Neal Cassady and Allen Ginsburg. They were friends with the owner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Have you read Kerouac’s books?”

“We read *On the Road*,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s cool. You should read *Dharma Bums*. That’s his best one.”

“So we’ve heard. Do you know much about where Kerouac lived and hung out while he was in San Francisco?” I asked.

“Are you guys, like, on a vision quest or something? That’s cool. Kerouac lived with Neal Cassady in a little house on Russell Street over in Nob Hill. I’m not sure of the address. They used to hang out and drink at Vesuvio Café.”

“Where’s that,” Kyle asked.

Martin motioned for us to follow him and he walked to the front corner of the store, pointing at a side window. Across a small alleyway sat Vesuvio Café. “You won’t even have to move your car, man.”

“Cool,” Bird said. “We heard that there’s no place in San Francisco called Mill City, like in the book. Do you have any idea where Kerouac was talking about?”

“Yeah, he was talking about up in Marin County, just over the Golden Gate. He combined the name Marin City and Mill Valley to come up with Mill City. You know the part in the book where Sal is staying with Remi Boncœur and Remi gets him a job as a night watchman? That’s in Mill Valley.”

We thanked Martin and made plans to meet up with him later that day at Vesuvio to talk more about Kerouac. When we left, we followed Martin’s directions to Russell Street, but we had no idea which house had once belonged to Neal Cassady. The houses were small, clapboard sided structures that were built close together, one right next to the other. A couple had been fixed up with fresh paint, but most were weather-worn and tired looking. We stopped a couple of people on the street to ask if they knew where Neal Cassady had once lived or where Jack Kerouac stayed, but they didn’t know what we were talking about. We gave up and headed to Mill Valley.

We were disappointed that we weren't getting the Jack Kerouac experience we had expected when we started our trip. Actually, I'm not sure what we expected. Whatever it was, our expectations weren't being met.

We crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and drove another twenty minutes north to Mill Valley. We didn't know what we were looking for and I could tell that Kyle was getting annoyed. He wasn't real excited about our trip to begin with. Now that we were wandering around aimlessly, he was not a happy camper.

"Do we even know what we're looking for?" Kyle asked.

"Can't you just enjoy looking around? It's not like we have other plans," Bird said.

Kyle looked straight ahead as he drove. "If we're not going to actually do something, I'd just as soon go home. Smiling Sam was right. Kerouac sucked and this trip to follow in his footsteps is starting to suck too."

I had gotten the feeling earlier that Kyle didn't want to continue our trip once he saw his friend Ed. Seeing Ed had been an excuse to put up with Bird through Denver and Las Vegas. Now the excuse was gone.

"Maybe we could check in at the library to see if they know anything about Kerouac there." I said. "It beats just driving around."

We found the library and we all went in to see what we could learn. It wasn't much. The librarian, an older woman with gray hair and a purple flower print dress, said that Kerouac used to live with a poet by the name of Gary Snyder."

"Do you know where they lived," Bird asked.

“They lived in a cabin at 370 Montford,” she said, without having to look up the information.

“We should go there,” I said.

“I can give you directions,” the gray haired librarian said, “but I’m afraid the cabin isn’t there anymore. It was torn down several years ago.”

“Oh, great,” Kyle said. “Another dead end.”

“They did build another house on the land where the cabin used to be, but it’s not the same place Kerouac stayed, I’m afraid. If you want to know more about Kerouac’s time at the cabin, you should read *The Dharma Bums*. He writes about his experiences here in Mill Valley in that book. It’s one of my favorites. I think it’s better than *On the Road*.”

We thanked the librarian for her time and headed back out to the car.

“So what are we going to do now?” Kyle asked.

“Let’s go by where the cabin used to be,” Bird said.

“Why? It isn’t even there anymore.”

“We don’t have anything else to do,” I said. “We might as well drive by before we head back to San Francisco.”

We followed the directions the librarian had given us and ended up on a narrow road in a rundown area of town. On one side of the road, the land sloped down into a valley. On the other—the side where Kerouac’s cabin had once stood—the land went up a hill. The area was heavily treed and where the cabin had been, there was now a small house. In the front yard were several long logs waiting to be chopped up into firewood.

“We drove all the way to California to see this? I could have driven around Chicago and seen slums,” Kyle said.

“First of all, this isn’t a slum,” Bird said. “Not everyone can live in a mansion. And second, this is all part of the adventure. It’s part of the experience.”

“Driving past houses where Kerouac never lived is an adventure? This sucks.”

“Why do you always—“

“Maybe we should just head back and get something to eat. I’m hungry,” I said. I looked back at Bird and gave him a look I hoped conveyed my desire for us not to fight. He must have gotten the message.

“Yeah, I’m hungry too. Let’s go eat.”

The trip back was quiet. Kyle turned on the radio and we heard Blondie sing “Call Me.” After that, “Billie Jean” by Michael Jackson came on. The three of us were quiet.

We stopped at a fast food restaurant and after we had eaten, Kyle said he needed to call Joan. He went to use the pay phone, and Bird and I stayed at the table.

“What the hell is his deal?” Bird asked. “All he does is bitch.”

“I don’t know. I guess he’s just frustrated we aren’t seeing more Kerouac stuff.”

“What did he think, that we were going to see Kerouac and hang out with him?”

“I think he’s getting pressure from Joan to come home. I know he feels like he let his dad down by taking this trip instead of working at the bank.”

“I just wish he’d try to enjoy the ride rather than ruining it for us.”

After lunch, we headed to Vesuvio Café for drinks. Martin said he would be stopping by after work.

We got a table and each ordered a Coors. The bar was full of what my dad would call “characters.” There was a guy at the bar wearing a tank top and a tie-dyed cowboy hat. Next to him was a guy with dreadlocks wearing a long overcoat and sunglasses. A guy dressed like the captain on “The Love Boat” walked into the bar, looked around, and then walked out. Nobody paid attention to any of these people. The weirdness was apparently expected.

There was still tension between Bird and Kyle. Each drank his beer and didn’t talk. I wanted to talk, but couldn’t think of anything to say. So we all sat quietly drinking and looking around the bar.

“Did you guys just come from a funeral?” the waitress asked.

“No, why would you ask that?” Kyle said.

“You’re all so quiet and stone faced. I figured something must be wrong.”

“No, nothing’s wrong. What’s your name?” Bird asked.

“Brandy, but you can call me Brandy.”

We laughed.

“What do I get if I order Brandy?” Bird asked.

“More than you can handle,” she said.

“In that case, I’ll have a double.”

Brandy laughed. “Good come back,” she said. “Are you guys ready for another round?”

“We’d be foolish not to,” Bird said.

When Brandy walked to the bar to get our drinks, Kyle said, “She’s good looking.”

“Yes she is, man,” Martin said, as he walked up to the table. “Looks like you got a head start on me.”

Brandy brought our drinks and gave Martin a hug once she had set the bottles on our table. “What do you want, Sweetie?” she asked Martin.

“I think I’ll start with a bourbon. I’ve got some catching up to do.” Brandy walked away and Martin sat down at our table. “Did you find Neal Cassady’s house?”

“We drove down Russell Street, but nobody seemed to know which house was his,” Bird said. “The street’s only a block long. We must have seen it. We just didn’t know which one it was.”

Kyle let out a sarcastic laugh and took a pull from his beer.

“Oh man, I’ve never even gone over there, even though it’s just a few minutes away. I should go sometime and figure it out,” Martin said.

Brandy brought Martin’s drink, gave him a wink and then walked away.

“We went over to Mill Valley too, but we didn’t see anything there either,” Kyle said. “It was a real red letter day.”

Bird sat back in his chair and glared at Kyle, who didn’t seem to notice.

“We saw where Kerouac’s cabin used to be,” I said, “but it was torn down a long time ago. There’s another house there now.”

Martin raised his glass and drank down about two-thirds of the bourbon. When he stopped drinking, he let out a sigh. “Man, that first drink of the day is so good.”

“After that drink, I think you might have caught up to us already,” Bird said.

Martin snorted out a laugh and then leaned in toward the table like he was going to tell us a secret. He motioned for us to lean in too. “Do you guys smoke?” he asked, raising the pinched thumb and pointer fingers of his right hand to his lips.

“No,” Kyle said at exactly the same time as Bird said, “Yes,”

Martin looked back and forth between Kyle and Bird and then shook his head in confusion.

“We have, but not much,” I said, trying to explain. “We mostly just drink.”

“I got you, man. I’m going to go out in the alley to toke up. If you’re interested in joining me, come on.”

Martin stood up from the table and then Bird stood. I stood up next, which left Kyle the only one sitting.

“What the hell,” Kyle said and he stood up too.

“All right then, it’s unanimous.”

“You’re not leaving already, are you?” Brandy asked.

“Save our seats, darlin’. We’ll be right back,” Martin said.

We walked outside into the alley that ran between the café and the bookstore. “Welcome to Adler Alley,” Martin said. He took a baggie out of his pocket and took a joint out of the baggie. “This isn’t your normal pot, man. This is strong stuff, so be warned.”

“But it’s just pot, right?” Kyle asked.

“It is, but it’s not your granddaddy’s weak Illinois weed. This is some A-number-one, primo shit.”

Martin lit the joint and handed it to Bird. He took a long drag and held it in as he passed the joint to me. I put the joint to my lips and inhaled. I tried to hold it in, but started coughing. I took another hit and passed the joint to Kyle. He looked around at us, but just held the joint in his hand.

“Take a hit, man,” Martin said. “Don’t let it burn down.”

Kyle raised the joint to his mouth and took a quick drag. He seemed surprised that he hadn’t coughed. So he took a bigger drag and held it in.

“That’s it,” Martin said as he took the joint back from Kyle.

We passed it around, and with each rotation, Kyle became bolder and took ever bigger, deeper hits.

“Is the first joint of the day as good as the first drink?” I asked Martin.

“It is,” he said, “but this isn’t the first joint of the day.”

We polished off two joints before we went back into the bar. On the way in, Martin put his arm around Kyle and said, “I’m proud of you, man. You’re like the illegitimate son I never had.” Kyle smiled dumbly.

The marijuana had hit me hard. Martin was right, it was strong stuff. I felt peaceful and everything around me seemed to be swirling. Bird was smiling and just looking around the bar. He hadn’t spoken in several minutes.

Kyle looked to be the highest of all of us. His eyes were slits and he had a dreamy look on his face. He kept saying, “That was some good shit.”

“Look who’s back,” Brandy said. “Did you save any for me?”

“There’s always some for you,” Martin said.

We sat back at the table where our drinks were waiting for us.

“Brandy, did you know that we have three young Kerouac scholars in our midst tonight?” Martin said, pointing at us. “They’re beatniks in training.”

“Is that right?”

“I think they each need a Jack Kerouac to quench their thirst for knowledge,” Martin said. The second half of the sentence he spoke with an exaggerated, elitist accent. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t keep his normal hippy burnout voice from coming through.

“One for you too,” Brandy asked.

“Why not?” Martin said, and Brandy walked back toward the bar.

“What’s a Jack Kerouac?” I asked.

“It’s the house specialty,” he said.

“A Jerk Kerouac,” Kyle said and laughed at his verbal stumble. We all laughed at Kyle laughing at himself.

Brandy brought four drinks and sat one down in front of each of us. “A Jack Kerouac for each and every one of you,” she said.

“Jerk Kerouac,” Kyle said and started laughing again.

“What’s in this?” I asked.

“Taste it first and tell me if you like it,” Brandy said.

I tilted the glass back and took a drink. “It’s good,” I said.

“It has rum and tequila mixed with orange juice, cranberry juice, and lime juice.”

“It’s delicious,” Kyle said, although he hadn’t tried any of his drink.

“These will go on my tab,” Martin said. “It’s my gift to the youth of America.”

“Yeah,” Bird said, slapping Martin on the back. “He’s a real gone cat. He knows time.”

“Yeah man, now you’re talking like a beatnik. These Jack Kerouacs really work.”

“Jerk Kerouac,” Kyle said again.

“Lugubrious.”

CHAPTER 8

When we got back to Brian's apartment he was gone. There was a note on the table that read,

"If you make it home alive, come to Aunt Charlie's (133 Turk Street)."

We had no idea what Aunt Charlie's was or where Turk Street was, but we were game for just about anything. Thankfully, Brian had included directions.

Aunt Charlie's was just a few blocks from Brian's apartment. We probably could have walked. We probably should have walked considering how drunk and high we were, but we didn't. We found a parking spot down the street and made our way to the bar.

The building was nothing special. The front was green and needed paint. There was a neon sign in the front window and another one over the door that read "Aunt Charlie's Lounge." When we walked in, our senses were assaulted. A bright pink neon sign above the bar cut through the din of smoke. The smell of burning tobacco and an odd combination of perfume and body odor permeated the air. Unless I was seeing double or triple, there were multiple women walking around the bar looking a lot like Marilyn Monroe. It felt like we had walked into the middle of a carnival.

"Bird," I heard a voice call and saw Brian sitting with two other guys at a table near the door. We made our way to his table."

"Where have you all been," Brian asked.

"We were at a place called Vesuvio Café," Bird said.

"Over in North Beach. That's a—"

“Best place in the world,” Kyle said as he introduced himself to Brian’s friends. “Hi, I’m Kyle.”

Bird and I followed suit. Brian’s friends were Hector, a balding Hispanic man in an expensive suit, and Michael, a black guy with an impressive build and a velour pull over top.

“Looks like somebody had a good time at Vesuvio,” Brian said, nodding his head toward Kyle. Kyle was oblivious to Brian’s gesture.

“It’s a fun place,” Bird said.

“It’s the beatnik headquarters of Frisco,” Hector said.

“That’s why we were there,” I said. “We’re following the Kerouac trail.”

“Jack Kerouac was a misogynist and a queen,” Hector said with his thick Spanish-by-way-of-New-York accent.

“What do you mean?” Bird asked. “Kerouac was married and had kids.”

“That’s true, but that doesn’t prevent a man from being gay. Just ask Michael.”

“It’s true,” Michael said. “I was married for almost five years, just trying to pass as straight.”

“You’re gay?” Kyle asked.

“I am,” Michael said. “And Hector’s my partner, so don’t get any ideas.”

Everyone laughed except Kyle, who took a step away from Hector. “But you’re so big.”

“What’s that mean?” Michael asked. “You think only little guys can be gay?”

“No, but...So you’re all gay?” Kyle asked, pointing at Brian, Hector and Michael.

“Honey, with the exception of you Kerouac freaks, everyone in this place is gay,” Hector said.

“This is a gay bar?” Kyle asked. “We’re in a gay bar?”

“Yes.” Brian laughed. “Is that a problem?”

“No, I’ve just never been in a gay bar before. I’m not sure how to act.”

“Maybe you should order a drink,” Bird said.

“Waitress,” Brian called to a short blond with pig tails two tables over. She turned and everyone saw that she was a man with a thick black mustache.

“What can I get for you, honey?” he asked in a low voice.

Kyle couldn’t speak. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“Do you have Coors?” I asked.

The waitress indicated that they did and I ordered a round.

Kyle was still staring at the thick mustachioed waitress when he walked away.

“I can get you his number if you’re interested,” Hector said.

“No, that’s okay.”

The waitress with the mustache brought our beers and gave Kyle a smile. “If you need anything else, just let me know,” he said. Kyle nodded.

“I think he likes you,” Michael said.

Everyone laughed except Kyle. He looked uncomfortable.

“Before you guys got here, we were talking over a problem,” Brian said. “Michael is supposed to sing at a big open mic night here tomorrow night, but his background singers can’t make it.”

“More like they abandoned me,” Michael said.

“El pendejos,” Hector said, and put his hand on Michael’s arm.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to have to cancel unless I can find more backup singers.”

“You sing, Brian. Why don’t you back him up?” Bird asked.

“I would, but our band is the house band here at Aunt Charlie’s and we’re not allowed to compete in the open mic.”

“Plus, we’d still need two more. We need three backup singers,” Michael said. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“We could do it,” Kyle said. “There are three of us.”

“You’re drunk,” Bird said. “Don’t listen to him. He’s drunk.”

“And high,” Kyle said.

“If I remember right, you used to be a pretty good singer, Bird. You should do this,” Brian said.

“Oh please, would you be willing to help?” Michael asked. He was smiling and suddenly looked hopeful.

“Reno, what do you think?” Bird asked.

“You’re the one who’s always talking about making your life an adventure. Here’s your chance to practice what you preach,” I said.

Bird took a long pull from his bottle of Coors. “Damn me and my adventure seeking ways. You’re right. I am always talking about that. I suppose this will be a great memory someday. We’re in.”

Michael quickly stood up and hugged Bird. “Thank you so much. You saved the act.”

CHAPTER 9

The next afternoon we were in the basement of a community center getting ready to practice for our big night.

“Guys, I really don’t want to do this,” Kyle said.

“Too bad. You said we’d do it, so now we have to,” Bird said.

“I was drunk and high. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

“It’ll be fine,” I added. “What are we supposed to be singing?”

“I don’t know,” Bird said. “Hopefully Michael will be here soon.”

Just then Brian, Michael, and Hector came walking in. Michael had a boom box, and Brian and Hector were carrying suit bags.

“Sorry we’re late,” Brian said. “We had to pick up your tuxedos for this evening.”

“Our tuxedos?” I asked.

Brian laid the suit bags on a table and took one out. The tuxedo jacket was powder blue and it had matching pants with a dark blue strip down the side of the leg.

“We’re wearing that?” Kyle asked.

“Not just that,” Brian said. He opened another suit bag and pulled out a pink shirt with ruffles down the front. “You’re going to wear this with a dark blue bow tie. You’ll look fantastic.”

“I don’t want to wear that,” Kyle said.

“But you promised,” Michael said.

“Listen to me, hijo de puta,” Hector said, “we rented these tuxedos and shirts because you said you would help Michael. You can’t back out now.” Hector took an angry step toward Kyle.

“Don’t worry, we’re going to do this, aren’t we Kyle?” Bird said, putting his hand on Kyle’s shoulder.

Kyle looked at Bird and then at Hector, who was still standing in front of him looking angry. “Yeah, we’ll do it.”

“Good,” said Michael. “Now we have to practice.”

Hector turned away from Kyle without speaking.

“What are we singing, anyway?” I asked.

“Midnight Train to Georgia,” Michael said. “You’re the Pips.”

“Hey, we know that song,” Bird said.

“And Hector’s going to show you the dance moves.”

Hector had moved across the room and was facing us. “Come over here and I’ll show you where to stand.”

We went over by Hector and he arranged us the way he wanted us to stand: Kyle and me on the sides and Bird in the middle. He then showed us three different moves which he called “the train,” “the swing,” and “the whistle.”

“These are the only moves you need to know,” Hector said. “Everything is based on these three moves.”

We practiced the dance moves over and over again to a recording of Gladys Knight and the Pips that Hector played on the boom box. Michael and Brian stood across the room and interjected a thought now and then, but it was clear that Hector was in charge.

Just when I thought we were doing pretty well, Hector would yell, “Que chingados es eso,” and we’d start again from the beginning. We listened to the song over and over until our moves were second nature. Finally, he said, “I think you’ve got it.”

“Can we quit now?” Kyle asked. “My feet hurt.”

Brian stood with his hand on his chin. “I think that’s as good as they’re going to get.”

“I hope it’s good enough,” Hector said.

Michael put his arm around Hector’s waist. “We have to get going before the dry cleaner closes.”

Hector told us we should be at Aunt Charlie’s by 8:30 and then he, Michael and Brian left.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Kyle said. “It’s one thing to do it here, but it’s another to be in front of a crowd.”

“You’re not getting stage fright, are you?” Bird asked.

“I don’t like being up in front of people. I thought I was going to get sick just giving a two minute presentation in speech class.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “We all will.”

We were walking to the car when Kyle suddenly stopped. “Guys, I’m serious. I don’t think I can get up in front of a bunch of people and dance.”

“You have to. You said you would,” I said. “Michael’s counting on you.”

“But I can’t. I’m too nervous.”

“I think I know what to do about that,” Bird said. “Let’s go to Vesuvio.”

CHAPTER 10

Martin was sitting by himself at the same table we had shared with him a day earlier. “Hey man, it’s the Kerouacians. I’ve got a head start on you this time,” he said holding up his drink.

“Welcome back,” Brandy said, walking up to our table. “What are we drinking tonight?”

“How about a round of Coors?” Bird said.

Brandy nodded and went to get our drinks.

“Did you make any big Jack Kerouac discoveries today?” Martin asked.

“Not today,” Bird said. “We were busy practicing for our big singing debut tonight.”

“Singing debut? What are you talking about, man?”

We told Martin about the open mic contest at Aunt Charlie’s and about our role as Pips backing up Michael’s Gladys Knight.

“Aunt Charlie’s is a gay bar, man. I didn’t know you guys were gay.”

“We’re not gay,” Kyle said, too loudly.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Brandy said. She set our beers on the table.

“We’re just helping out a gay friend. Actually a friend of a friend,” I said.

“Who’s gay, the friend or the friend of your friend,” Brandy asked.

“They both are,” I said.

“Both are gay or both are friends,” she asked.

“Yes,” Bird said.

“Stop, man. You’re hurting my head,” Martin said.

“What are you guys even talking about?” Brandy asked.

We explained the whole thing again for Brandy’s benefit.

“That is really cool that you guys are helping out a friend like that,” she said.

“He’s really more a friend of a friend,” Bird said.

“Don’t start again, man,” Martin said. “Brandy, we should go see them tonight.”

“I don’t get off until eight.”

“The contest doesn’t start until nine,” Bird said. “Can you come after you get off work?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Brandy said. She was looking at Bird and smiling, pausing for a beat too long before she turned to Martin and asked, “Do you want to drive us?”

“Yeah, cool.”

Brandy nodded to Martin, smiled again at Bird, and then walked away.

“I think she likes you, man,” Martin said to Bird.

“Can you blame her?” Bird asked. We all laughed. “Martin, we have a favor to ask.”

“Oh, oh,” Martin said. “What do you need?”

“It’s nothing bad. We just want to buy a couple of joints off you for tonight. It will help us relax.”

“Mostly, it will help me relax. I’m scared to death,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, man. I can do that. How much do you want?”

“Just a couple,” Bird said.

“Better make it three,” Kyle said.

“Look at you, man. Yesterday you didn’t even know how to smoke and today you’re a head,” Martin said.

Everybody laughed except Kyle. “I’m not a head. I’m just nervous.”

“Those things aren’t mutually exclusive, man.”

#

We had gotten what we went to Vesuvio for and we were back at Brian’s to get ready to go to Aunt Charlie’s. Bird and I were sitting in the tiny living room at Brian’s waiting for Kyle to get done in the shower. Queen’s “Fat Bottomed Girls” was playing on the stereo.

“Do you think Kyle is going to be okay?”

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” Bird said. “If he ever wants to enjoy life, he’s going to have to loosen up.”

“I feel sorry for him. I know I didn’t expect to come on this road trip and end up being a backup singer at a gay club. He’s probably kind of in shock”

Bird laughed. “I didn’t expect it either, but it will be a fun experience. Not many people get to do this.”

“I don’t think many people want to do this.”

“That’s probably true, but most people are assholes who are afraid of trying something new and different. That’s why most people never do anything with their lives.”

“You think we have to be backup singers at a gay club to do something with our lives?”

Bird tilted back the beer he was drinking and finished it. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. What we’re doing isn’t what’s important. It’s our willingness to do it.”

I took Bird’s empty and went into the kitchen to get us fresh beers. “You mean because we’re willing to be backup singers in a gay bar, we’re going to have successful lives?”

“Something like that,” he said taking the fresh beer I had gotten him. “It’s not a guarantee, but I think it sets you up to be more successful in life if you’re willing to take chances and try new things.”

I was actually a little surprised that Bird had thought about this kind of thing before. I thought I was the only one among us who really pondered life. “It’s scary, but I think I understand what you’re saying. When did you become such a philosopher?” I asked.

He smiled. “I’m not just a pretty face.”

When Kyle was done in the shower I took my turn. Maybe Bird was right. I never wanted to be like Kyle, afraid of trying new things and taking risks. I wanted to live a more adventurous life, full of new experiences. I had no idea how I could do it, but I wanted to avoid the scripted life of cubicles, expense accounts, and two weeks of vacation. If being a background singer at a gay bar could help me get there, I was all in.

When I got out of the shower, I put on the pink ruffled shirt and the light blue tuxedo. I looked ridiculous, but I kind of liked it. Kyle was complaining because his pants were too short.

“Look, the bottoms of my pants don’t even touch my shoes.”

“They don’t look bad,” I said. It was a lie. His pants were too short and looked bad.

“Maybe this will help,” Bird said, lighting one of the joints Martin had sold us. Bird handed it to Kyle. He took a deep drag and held it in like a pro.

“I think you are becoming a head,” I said to Kyle.

Kyle shook his head and after a moment blew the marijuana smoke out of his lungs. “No I’m not,” he said. “I’m just nervous.”

“We need to get going,” Bird said. “We’re supposed to meet Gladys Knight and her entourage in fifteen minutes.”

“Let’s finish this first,’ Kyle said, snagging the joint from my hand and taking a hit.

“No, you’re definitely not turning into a head,” I said.

CHAPTER 11

At Aunt Charlie's, Kyle had trouble parking the car. He tried to back into a spot, but it took him four tries to get it right.

"I think I'm high," he said. "Maybe we should smoke another joint now." We did.

When we went inside the bar, Brian and Hector were waiting for us. As usual, Hector was not happy.

"Where have you been? You were supposed to be here almost twenty minutes ago."

"We had trouble parking," Bird said.

"We really did," Kyle added.

"Where's Michael," I asked.

"He's in the bathroom getting ready," Brian said.

Just then Michael walked up to the table in a flowing dress a shade of pink darker than our shirts. He wore a wig of thick, dark hair that fell to his shoulders and had on a wide gold necklace. His eye shadow matched our shirts and his lipstick was a bright red.

"How do I look?" Michael asked.

"You look beautiful, mi amore" Hector said.

"You're gorgeous," Brian said.

"Is that Michael?" Kyle asked

I saw Martin and Brandy came into Aunt Charlie's, and waved them over to our table.

"You guys look great," Brandy said. She looked different than she had at Vesuvio's, a little older and more dressed up. Her straight hair had been curled and she wore a short skirt that

was both sexy and formal. From the smitten look on his face, it was obvious that Bird also noticed the difference.

“You look great, too,” he said and gave Brandy a hug. “Let me get you and Martin a drink.”

“I won’t argue with that, man,” Martin said.

Bird took Martin’s drink order and then he and Brandy went up to the bar.

“How’s Kyle doing?” Martin asked me. Kyle was standing on the other side of the table, still staring at Michael.

“He’s kind of high, but I think he’s going to be okay.”

“You know, I feel bad about charging you for those joints earlier today, so I got you a present,” Martin said, pulling a book out of the bag he was carrying. “It’s a biography of Jack Kerouac.”

Martin handed me a book entitled *Memory Babe* by Gerald Nicosia. “Thanks, Martin. That was nice of you,” I said.

“I’ve read it and I really dug it,” he said.

Bird and Brandy came back to the table and Bird handed a drink to Martin. “Here’s to a great night,” Bird said and raised his beer in toast. Everyone at the table toasted and took a drink.

“Yo dee yo,” Kyle said.

We stood around talking for another ten minutes when the lights dimmed and a man dressed like Marilyn Monroe stepped to the microphone.

“Hello everyone and welcome to Aunt Charlie’s annual open mic competition,” she said in a breathy voice. When she had welcomed everyone, she introduced the first act, a guy dressed

like Cher who sang “The Way of Love.” He looked just like Cher, with long, dark hair, full lips, and dangly silver earrings. He sounded great.

The second act was another Marilyn Monroe impersonator singing Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” There was a disconnect between the way the singer was dressed and the song. You could feel that the audience wasn’t getting it.

“That’s Tim Boylan,” Michael said. “He always dresses like Marilyn and he never wins.”

“It’s time for you to go backstage,” Hector said and led Michael through the crowd like he was escorting a bride down the aisle. We followed. Brandy gave Bird a kiss on the cheek and wished him good luck.

The third act was another guy dressed like Cher, but this time she was with a Sonny look-a-like and they sang “I Got You Babe.” We watched them from back stage, and although they were good, they weren’t as good as the first Cher.

When Sonny and Cher had finished, the MC introduced us as Gladys Knight and the Pips, and before I knew it we were on stage. The lights came up, the music started, Michael began singing, and we were doing “the train” that Hector had taught us.

I was surprised at how easy the moves were coming to me. In just one afternoon my body had gotten used to matching the dance moves to the music. I was feeling loose and comfortable, enjoying my time on stage.

Earlier that afternoon, we had not heard Michael sing. We danced to the music on the boom box, not Michael’s voice. I was amazed how much he sounded like Gladys Knight. Granted, he looked a little like a linebacker in a dress and a wig, but he sounded like Gladys.

As the song went on I looked to my left and noticed that Bird and Kyle were having just as much fun as me. Kyle in particular was loose-jointed, feeling the music and moving with confidence. He was enjoying himself, pumping his arms to the beat. And every time we'd sing the "who, who" part in the chorus and act like we were pulling a train whistle, he'd get a big, goofy grin on his face and look directly at the audience.

When the song ended we each stood up straight and took a bow in unison, just as we had rehearsed with Hector earlier in the day. The audience applauded loudly and we left the stage. Michael was ecstatic. He hugged each of us and thanked us for helping him.

"I was so nervous," he said, "but I could feel you behind me, and when the music started, I knew we were going to be okay."

While we were backstage, I heard the song "Gloria" playing, and I peeked out to see a guy dressed exactly like Laura Branigan from the music video for the song. He had long dark hair, black spandex pants, and a black top with silver beads and a lightning bolt belt that glittered in the stage lights.

The singer moved just like Branigan moved in her music video, complete with hair flips and shoulder shimmies. The problem was that the singer's voice was too low. He couldn't hit many of the notes that Branigan had hit in the song.

"We're heading back out to the table," Bird said, tugging on my arm.

We walked back out into the barroom and several people congratulated us as we walked through the crowd. Bird was walking in front of me and I saw a guy reach out and squeeze his butt. Bird turned around, gave the guy a smile, and playfully slapped his hand. When we got back to the table, Brandy greeted him with a hug that brought her feet up off the ground.

Everyone was smiling and happy, but there was almost no talking because Laura Branigan was still on stage singing. When she finished and the audience applauded, Hector leaned over to us and said, “You were all fantastic.” For some reason, pleasing Hector felt especially sweet.

“I didn’t know you had it in you, man,” Martin said and shook my hand.

The MC announced the final contestant of the night. “Singing ‘Bette Davis Eyes’ please welcome, Kim Carnes.”

The lights came up and the spitting image of Kim Carnes was on stage. It looked so much like Kim Carnes that I thought it might actually be her, until Brian leaned over toward me and said, “That’s Rob Worrell. He’s really good.”

Worrell wore a black pant suit with a white shirt, just like Carnes wore in the video, and he was wearing black sunglasses which he would occasionally slide down his nose seductively as he sang. His voice was gravelly, just like Carnes’.

When he finished, we ordered another round of drinks and waited for the judges to decide who had won the contest. I didn’t care if we won or not. I was just happy for the experience. Even so, I knew how much a win would mean for Michael, so I was holding out hope that we had won.

When I looked around, I noticed that Kyle was missing. “Where’s Kyle?”

“He went outside with Martin,” Brian said and put his fingers up to his mouth like he was taking a hit from a joint. “He certainly has become fond of pot.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said.

Brandy and Bird were standing very close together, talking and drinking. I was happy for Bird. He seemed to like Brandy—at least as much as he liked any woman—and it wasn’t lost on

me that Bird had picked up a woman in a gay bar. That's the kind of luck he had with woman. Throw him in a men's prison and he'd come out dating a female guard.

The music softened and the lights flickered. The judges had made their decision. Kyle and Martin returned to the table just as Marilyn Monroe took the stage.

"Let's thank all of the contestants for their performances this evening." The audience applauded and whistled. "Here are your top three contestants. In third place is..." she trailed off until the room had become quiet, "Rob Worrell as Kim Carnes." Everyone applauded and the male version of Kim Carnes went up on stage and stood behind Marilyn Monroe.

"In second place, and I have to say, she looked gorgeous tonight, Michael Hudson as Gladys Knight."

Michael jumped up out of his chair and hugged Hector. When they disengaged, I could see that Hector was crying. Michael went up on stage and stood next to Kim Carnes.

"And the winner of the 1983 Aunt Charlie's Open Mic Competition is..." Marilyn again waited until the room was quiet. "Roger Conrad as Cher."

The first Cher—the one who sang "The Way of Love"—went running up on stage and hugged both Michael and Kim Carnes. The audience stood and cheered. I looked across the table and saw Hector was crying and cheering loudly.

"Why are Michael and Hector so happy?" I asked Brian. Second place was nice, but I thought they might be disappointed that Michael hadn't won.

"It's the first time he's ever finished in the top three," Brian said. "This is a really big deal for him."

On stage, Michael leaned forward and said something to Marilyn. Marilyn nodded her head and said into the microphone, “Gladys would like her Pips on stage with her.”

Bird, Kyle and I went up on stage to the audience’s applause. Kim Carnes and Cher hugged the three of us.

When the festivities on stage ended we went back to our table and continued celebrating. Michael and Hector were ecstatic. Michael had hugs for everyone at the table, even Martin, who seemed confused by the attention. Hector was especially happy.

“Thank you for your help, amigo. I had my doubts about you guys, but you pulled it off,” he said, seemingly on the verge of tears. He turned, took Michael’s arm, and they made their way to the dance floor.

When “Open Arms” by Journey started playing, Bird and Brandy went out to dance. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he held her close.

Brian had moved to an adjacent table where he was talking to two guys I didn’t know, and Martin and Kyle had stepped outside again to get high. They invited me, but I begged off. Truthfully, I really didn’t like smoking pot all that much.

The question came into my mind, “What now?” I wasn’t thinking just about the evening and what we were going to do next. I was thinking about my life. I thought about the conversation I had with Bird earlier that afternoon, and I worried that I wouldn’t be able to live the type of life that appealed to me. I knew I couldn’t keep running around the country having fun forever. School was over and it was time to move on. Unlike Kyle, I had never been in a hurry to get out of school and get on with life. He looked forward to working at his family’s bank. The thought of going to work in an office made me feel trapped and claustrophobic. I

wanted to avoid the typical nine-to-five lifestyle, but I feared it was my fate. Hell, wasn't it everyone's fate?

I watched Bird, and I couldn't help but wonder what he was going to do. I was always a little afraid I might become like him, crazy and irresponsible. He had no plans for the future and wasn't particularly concerned about it. Instead of being afraid, maybe I should have tried to be more like him, not so much irresponsible, but easy going and carefree. What the hell, it wasn't too late to start now.

My mind was still full of thoughts about the future when I woke up the next morning on the couch at Brian's apartment. Kyle was asleep in the recliner, still in his tuxedo. I had stripped down to my underwear before going to bed. My tuxedo lay crumpled on the floor.

"Do you want some breakfast?" Brian asked. He was standing in the kitchen with the refrigerator door open. "I'm making eggs."

"Sounds great. Thanks."

Kyle moaned in his chair and pulled the blanket over his head.

"Where's Bird?" I asked.

"He went home with Brandy. Don't you remember?"

I thought back on the previous night. I remembered that Bird left with Brandy at the same time Kyle, Brian and I left in Kyle's car. "Oh yeah, right."

Brian had just finished making scrambled eggs when Bird came into the apartment. He was still in his tuxedo and his hair was sticking up at odd angles.

"Good morning, fellow campers."

"Aren't you all chipper this morning," Brian said.

“In fact, I am. How’s everyone here?”

“Brian and I have survived,” I said. “The jury’s still out on Kyle.”

Kyle moaned again from beneath the blanket.

“If you want some eggs, I left everything out on the counter,” Brian said, pointing toward the kitchen.

“No time, Bird said. “I need to get cleaned up. I have a date this afternoon.”

“You and Brandy are really going hot and heavy, huh?” I said.

“It’s not with Brandy,” Bird said. “It’s with Megan.”

“Who?”

“Megan. You know, the blonde from San Luis Obispo. She’s back home in Hayward for the summer and she’s coming over to get me. She wants to show me around town.”

“How did you get hooked up with her?” I asked.

“I called her yesterday when we were getting ready to be Pips.”

“She’s coming all the way over from Hayward?” Brian asked. “That’s on the other side of the Bay.”

“Yeah, she suggested it. I wasn’t going to turn her down.”

“I hope you’re worth the effort,” Brian said.

“I’ll do my best.”

CHAPTER 12

Bird went off with Megan, and Brian took off to return the tuxedos to the rental place and then meet up with friends for dinner. Kyle and I sat around the apartment all day watching TV. We were both hung over and didn't feel like doing much of anything. By dinner time we were bored watching MTV videos, so we ventured downstairs to the Vietnamese restaurant.

"I think I'm going to head home," Kyle said.

We had just ordered our food. I got garlic shrimp and Kyle ordered ginger chicken, a dish the waiter recommended.

"You want to eat up in the apartment?" I asked.

"No, I mean home. Back to Chicago."

"Really? When?"

Kyle took a drink of his water and looked down at the table, drawing invisible patterns with his finger. "I told Joan I'd leave by the weekend. She's been on me about being away so long."

"Kyle, you can't come running every time she feels lonely. You deserve to have some time for yourself."

Kyle looked up from the table and let out a sad little laugh. "I know I deserve time for myself, but I don't really want it. I want to be back home. And as far as running to her when she feels lonely, that's what couples do for each other."

I wanted to protest, but I wasn't sure what to say. I knew from the beginning that Kyle wasn't crazy about taking off on a road trip. He was ready to start his post-college life and

become an adult, not extend his adolescence. Even so, for my own selfish reasons, I didn't want him to leave. I wanted to avoid adulthood for as long as I could, and I needed accomplices like Kyle and Bird to go along with me. Kyle leaving would put me that much closer to what I was trying to avoid.

"Kyle, you don't have to—"

"There's more to it, Reno." Kyle said. "I snorted cocaine last night and I really liked it." He paused for a moment, touching the condensation on his glass. "I don't want to like it. I don't want to do drugs. That's not who I am. I feel like I need to get away from here or bad things will happen."

I was surprised to hear that Kyle had done coke. Smoking a little pot was one thing, but I knew Kyle well enough to know that he was opposed to hard drugs. Even so, I felt like he was overreacting. So he snorted some coke. What was the big deal? If he didn't want to do it anymore, he didn't have to.

"If you don't want to do coke again, don't do it. You don't have to leave to avoid it."

"I don't want to blame Bird for this," Kyle said, "but I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for him. Bad things happen around him. Crazy things. If I wasn't around Bird, I wouldn't have gotten punched in Denver and I wouldn't have done coke last night. He didn't force me into anything, but stuff like this happens all around him."

"Was Bird snorting coke?"

"No, he wasn't even there. That's not what I mean. It's just, bad shit happens in his wake."

"Don't you think that's kind of unfair?" I asked.

“No, I don’t. And I’m afraid if you stay around him, you’re going to end up regretting it too.”

It was obvious that Kyle had made up his mind and there was no sense in arguing with him. If he wanted to go, I couldn’t stop him.

Later that night, Bird took Kyle’s announcement in stride. He neither seemed surprised nor angry. “It’s been fun,” he said when Kyle told him.

“You know that money we got from Candy? I think you guys should use it to buy a car,” Kyle said.

“Some of that money is yours,” I said.

“You know how I feel about that. I don’t want any of it. You guys keep it.”

The next morning Kyle packed his things into his car and drove away from Brian’s apartment. He was heading home, and I couldn’t help but wonder what was next for Bird and me.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked Bird. We were sitting in Brian’s living room waiting for him to get out of the shower.

“The first thing we need to do is get some wheels,” he said. “Brian said we could use his car tomorrow to visit dealerships.”

“That’s fine, but I meant what are we going to do on our Jack Kerouac road trip? I thought we might head down to Mexico like Sal and Dean did in the book.”

“Don’t you want to stay around here for a while? I’m really digging San Francisco. This is a great area.”

“Yeah, San Francisco is okay, but I didn’t think we were going to stay in one spot long term. Aren’t we supposed to be having some kind of adventure?”

Bird was playing with a Rubik’s cube, turning the faces, but not having any luck getting them to line up. “I have to be honest, Reno. I really like it here. I’m not sure I want to leave.”

“You don’t think Brian is going to let us live here indefinitely, do you?”

“No, that’s why I thought we could get an apartment together.”

“Bird, we don’t have money for an apartment. Not if we’re also going to buy a car.”

“We could get jobs. Brandy said she can get me in as a bartender at Vesuvio.”

“I don’t want a job,” I said. “And I don’t want to settle down in San Francisco. We were just supposed to be stopping here for a few days, not move here permanently.” I could feel the anger building inside of me. It was rare for me to get mad at Bird, but he wanted to change everything and expected me to go along with it.

“I know, but I really like it here. I don’t want to leave.”

Brian got out of the shower and came into the living room.

“Now that Kyle’s gone, what are you guys going to do?” he asked.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I said and left the room.

I was pissed. This wasn’t part of the plan. We had gone in on this trip together and now Kyle was gone and Bird wanted to live in California permanently. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know what to do about it. If Bird was determined to stay in San Francisco, I couldn’t make him leave, but that didn’t mean I had to stay. Of course, if I didn’t stay, what was I going to do? I wasn’t ready to go back to Illinois and find a job.

I made the water as hot as I could stand it and stood under the spray from the shower. Brian's small bathroom was steamy and the mirror was fogged up. Our road trip was supposed to last for most of the summer. Instead, it had fallen apart in less than two weeks. I was no longer stuck trying to figure out Bird's and Kyle's arguments. Instead, I had to figure out my own dilemma.

That night, Bird went to Brandy's, Brian went out with friends, and I stayed at the apartment by myself reading *Memory Babe*, the book Martin had given us as a gift. I wanted to know more about Kerouac because I thought if I knew more about his life, I could figure out where to go next on my Jack Kerouac journey. I might be going alone, but I wasn't ready for it to end.

What I found out was that Kerouac was kind of a jerk. He treated a lot of people like crap and was extremely selfish. I also found out that he lived in Manhattan when he wrote *On The Road*, but had moved to Florida to live with his mother by the time the book was published. He also wrote *The Dharma Bums* at his mother's Florida home.

The next day when Bird came back from Brandy's, I told him I planned on leaving for Florida as soon as I could find a car. I expected him to be angry, but he wasn't. He told me he wanted me to stay, but if I didn't want to, he understood.

We went looking for cars and found two we could afford at a used car dealership just south of San Francisco in Colma. I got an eight year old Pontiac Grand Prix and Bird bought a nice, impractical 1968 Cadillac Coupe de Ville convertible. He said it had "style." The dealer agreed to change the oil in both cars since we were buying two at one time.

We only had a few hundred dollars left over after buying the cars, so I called my parents who agreed to wire me some more money. Brian agreed to let Bird stay with him for a couple more weeks until Bird could put the money together for an apartment of his own. Brandy had offered to let him stay with her, but he declined her offer, claiming he didn't want to put that kind of pressure on their relationship. In truth, Bird wanted to continue seeing Megan and didn't know how he could see her while living with Brandy.

That night, Bird drove his Caddy across the Bay to see Megan. I stayed home and poured over maps, figuring out the best way to get to Florida. At first, I tried to figure out the fastest, most direct route, but then I changed my mind. I had all summer to kill. There was no reason to see how fast I could get to Florida. Instead, I planned out a route that took me down the coast through San Diego, then east to Sedona and the Grand Canyon. From there I'd head to Texas to visit Dallas, the Alamo, and Houston. I had heard Padre Island was a lot of fun, so I planned on swinging past there, too. Then on to New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast into Florida, eventually making it to Orlando and Jack Kerouac's mother's house.

I felt a tremendous amount of freedom planning out my route, knowing that all of the decisions were mine, and along the way, I wouldn't have to mediate any arguments. The summer would eventually end, and I would have to move on with my life, but until then, I was going to see the country and be adventurous.

I sat on Brian's couch with the map open to the full United States and just stared. There were so many roads out there, so many things to see, so many possibilities. I had a car, a little bit of money, and a whole lot of time. What had happened before didn't matter and neither did what would happen at the end of the summer. My whole life was happening right now.

I thought of a line I had read in *On the Road*, pulled the book out of my backpack, and after a few minutes, found what I was looking for. “The road must eventually lead to the whole world.” I read the line again and wanted to shout out like a mad Dean Moriarty, “Yes! Yes! That’s right!” I took out a pen and underlined the passage. It was going to feel good being back on the road.

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