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Imposition

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Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Brian Thomas Jeppesen

June 2012

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To my favorite girls, Mom and Estrella.

CHAPTER 1 - CUTTHROAT

"The new neighbors are crazies," Charles said.

"What?" Deborah asked from the table.

"The ones buying the other house. You know, neighbors."

Apparently, she'd missed the **SOLD** sign in the front yard next door; she'd been cooped up indoors for weeks, depriving herself of the fresh pre-snow air, something he could never understand. He'd slipped on his boots that morning and gone out to mow the lawn--winter would hit them earlier this year, here in the midst of October, and when buried beneath snow, the grass in his yard often smelled of rotting fruits--and while preempting this problem, he watched the realtor remove the lockbox. Charles still wore the boots, partly because it annoyed Deborah, partly because the kitchen linoleum was cold.

The U-Haul had squealed around the corner and thudded into the ditch in front of Twin Cedars across the street--it nearly jumped out of the ditch to the other side and took out one of the two cedars--and its right headlight popped like an eye from its socket. It clunked and rocked, roared and emitted smoke out the back, then went slack. Taking a turn like that out on these dirt roads never went over well for the driver.

Charles stopped scrubbing cheese off Jacob's plate and stared out the window above the sink. There'd been a buffalo not much different than that truck collapsed from dehydration at a dry stream

in Ft. Niobrara. For the first time in North Platte, the first time without a moose munching grass outside his foxhole or deer scratching bark off a tree ten feet away, Charles looked to where his camera would be. Upstairs, in his travel bag in the old darkroom. But he'd never shot anything other than animals. He'd never shot seriously in North Platte for that matter.

There were only three homes on this road--his, Twin Cedars across the street at the corner, and the one that'd gone unsold for eight months. How that happens, Charles didn't know, but nobody wanted a house out in the middle of nowhere. There was no school, no shopping malls, no hospital, nothing at all closer than 10 miles, and no one thought the city would develop anything further out there, an assumption Charles had experienced as truth for years. With Mrs. Lowrance shut up on the corner, it was lonely there.

Deborah lay her pen in her sudoku book, a boring habit of numbers and boxes, then walked to him. He held the curtain aside for her.

The engine revved, roared a guttural croak. Something clacked inside, and Charles thought of the buffalo again, the clack of its tongue hitting dirt. He'd always get right up on the beast. *Clack, clack, clack.*

"How big is it?" she asked.

"Why does it matter?" It didn't matter, not when the truck was bumper deep in a ditch. Deborah sometimes worried about the silliest things. The truck wasn't in their yard. Mrs. Lowrance would

be the one to find her ditch torn up after a tow truck removed the U-Haul. Still, those people were to be their neighbors. "No one's left it. It just pulled up and idled. Probably drunk, the way they were driving."

Movement flashed across the side-view mirror, a phantom shifting in the shadows of the passenger seat. Charles had been blessed with 20/10 vision, but that didn't help him here. He leaned closer to the window, the front of his shirt dipping into the sink, and tried to focus. The movement within was sharp, darting, like a humming bird, but without the beauty. One arm swung upward, and light glinted off something metal in it. It reminded Charles of the shower scene in "Psycho"--curtain pulled back, knife raised and *Eee Eee Eee!* He played the sound back in his head several times. In the U-Haul, something dark and heavy--surely it was coffee or Kool-Aid or maybe black paint--splattered the window. It splattered it like a hose let loose, streaked from the top-right to bottom-left. It completely obscured all movement within the cabin, except for one brief interruption. A hand smacked the window and slid downward. Whatever had wet the window accented every crevice of the hand and its splayed fingers.

"That's gross," Deborah said, returning to the table, back to numbers and boxes.

And it was gross because, though coffee or Kool-Aid would be gross enough, it looked a lot like blood. It couldn't be blood, not there in North Platte where the craziest thing that happened was that

diaper-wearing peeping tom, Jack Willis, spying on old ladies, but this had the look of blood. People in North Platte only died of old age. Of course, with his imagination, everything looked like blood.

Regardless, there was something happening inside the truck, and after the driver crashed it into the ditch, the passenger couldn't have been very happy about the accident.

Charles grabbed the plate and resumed scrubbing at it, continuing to watch the U-Haul. "I think Mr. and Mrs. U-Haul are duking it out, Deborah."

"Ignore them."

"They're moving in next door."

"I know, but there's nothing we can do about that."

"You didn't see them hit that ditch. When's that wretched sound going to stop?" he asked.

A smaller shadow entered the room and stopped just as it fell over the counter. "What's wretched mean, Dad?"

It was his boy's voice. He held back a sigh, wiped his hands on the seat of his jeans, then feigned the best smile he could. Jacob stood at the kitchen entrance in his soccer shirt, a piece of paper in one hand, his hair mussed and swept to the right. Deborah had stopped combing his hair three months before, insisting that the boy was old enough to do it himself. That was the day of the lake trip, the same day she'd told him about the affair. It had been a day of change for the family, only she'd forced it onto them. Now, Jacob's hair was never combed properly. Charles would have to teach him

that afternoon, or sometime in the coming week. For that matter, he should teach him to shave. At nine, testosterone was setting on Jacob faster than most boys. It'd still be another year before he grew anything on his chin, but the peach fuzz would come soon. It must have been the paternal passion in Charles that wanted this head start, for it was a dream of his to sit in the bathroom with Jacob and show him how to find the split in his hair line and comb the hair on top of his head away from it. Then, they'd stand before the mirror together and shave, Jacob with an electric, Charles with his straight razor. This was his privilege as a daddy.

"Hey, Monkey," Charles said, "Wretched's when something's sad."

"So, you think the truck sounds sad?"

A door slammed outside.

"Yeah. It sounds wretched to me, Jacob. What do you think?"

"Eh, I think it sounds hungry."

He looked again to the U-Haul and noticed something new there, in the clacking. A grinding, much like Charles imagined crunching bone to sound. The window was still stained--and wasn't that incriminating, since coffee and Kool-Aid would have dripped away. Maybe it was blood. The door there was still shut, like a jaw clamped down around its kill. "I think you're right," he said.

"Definitely hungry."

A man standing no more than five and a half feet tall stepped out from behind the U-Haul and walked into the road. Charles had

seen men like this--plump, wearing a shirt with a moon and clouds screen-print, khaki shorts with dozens of pockets--men who played dorky fathers in teenage sitcoms. The man flexed and stretched, thrusting his stomach forward and arching his back, then swung his arms at his sides. His stomach was darkened wet moisture, and some had splashed up on his face. He reached up and tried to wipe his clean, smearing the moisture to his upper lip.

"There's someone there, Deborah," Charles said.

She and Jacob joined him at the window. Jacob climbed onto the counter just to the side of the window, then craned his neck to look out. There were swells there Charles hadn't noticed before, to either side of his son's neck, where the muscles were beginning to form. He'd have the broadest shoulders on his team in a year or so. Charles' genes had done that to the boy. Score one for home team.

The man walked to their side of the road, then stuck his hand into his pocket as if to remove his keys. Instead, he flung a look back to the truck and to Twin Cedars. Lifting his visor, he snapped around and trained his eyes on Charles.

Clack, clack, clack.

Charles could feel those eyes ticking away at him, calculating him, and the thought of Jacob's muscles became background noise. Deborah, always the improviser, raised a hand and waved. Charles followed suit, putting on his most neighborly smile and waving his hand like Santa in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. When Jacob still believed, Charles claimed that Santa could see him through the

television with Magic TV Technology, and now, he found himself wondering if the man knew they could see him, or if he thought, like how real television works, they were just characters behind a pane of glass, waving for the benefit of whoever might be looking.

"He's probably nervous," Deborah said. "I would be, crashing that truck and realizing the neighbors were watching."

"Me too," Charles said.

Something wasn't right here. The man took them in, narrowing his eyes like the wolf on his shirt--and he really did seem like a wolf, just without the snarl--then waved back so stiffly about the joints that it seemed as if he'd never done such a thing. He stopped, then spread his mouth unnaturally wide.

There was something subdued in that grin, Charles recognized, a phoniness or looseness to his face that suggested it could plop to the ground at any moment. No matter what that stuff on the window was, this man had been fighting just before. And now, he was calm. Falsely calm, but calm nonetheless. It made Charles sick. He could shoot that in the wilderness. Wolves were renowned for being deceptive, and that's why he shot them from far away. Sticking on a telephoto lens, he could get right up on that seemingly gentle wolf, but if he approached one, its mask would fall away to reveal its savage, hungry nature. It would kill him. The man out there was a feral beast. Charles could smell it through the window.

Charles hoped the man would stay on that side of the glass, far enough away to keep that gentle illusion--something that Deborah

didn't seem to see as easily as Charles did--but the man had something else in mind. He pointed toward the front of Charles' house, then started that way. No, stay away, and Charles willed the man to hear his thoughts. But the man kept on.

The problem wasn't that they had new neighbors. They could use some company out on that road. And God willing, Jacob could use a friend. The problem was that U-Haul, sitting motionless in the ditch but breaking the silence with its constant clacking. And this man. He didn't trust this man not to do something drastic and muck up their lives. He couldn't even be bothered to turn off the engine. But really, the feeling that Charles got, like this man might be hiding a ring of dynamite beneath his shirt, was the worst part.

"Shit," Deborah said. "He's coming here. Here, Charles."

"I'll get the door," Jacob squealed before leaping from the counter.

"Jacob, no," Deborah said.

But he charged through the kitchen and disappeared around the corner.

"Dang it, Charles, you need to talk to your boy."

"He's not only my boy."

The ever-invasive doorbell rang out its cry, a single, loud chime. Deborah left the room without a word. He watched her leave, watched her ass, pressed too tight and flat in her jeans, leave the room, then returned to the window. He grabbed another plate from the sink and scrubbed at it with the sponge. Something was

definitely not right here. He felt it like a wintry draft coming through the closed window. The air itself felt heavy, damp and sick. It made him nauseous. That window made him nauseous, slicked in a film of blood. That's what it had to be, blood, since nothing else he could think of would have stayed on the window that way. It wasn't right. Fighting, blood, and now calm. This man, calm on all accounts. Not panicked. Not charging to their door and begging for help. Just walking and smiling. Calm.

Deborah was gone for only a second before she honked a vibrant note--not a scream, but Charles understood it for the same. He hurried toward the living room and ran into Deborah by the table. She was spooked, her eyes stony and jaw rigid, a look he'd never seen on her. He gripped her and tried to gather her together with his arms, but it was as if rigor mortis had taken her.

The man came around the corner, and something flashed in his right hand before he collided with them. Her eyes grew tight and beady as her mouth gaped open, and she crumpled to the linoleum floor under the man's weight, grasping at Charles shirt but unable to gather a handful. Charles took a step back so as not to go down with them. He'd seen that same flash in the U-Haul, just before the passenger had splattered the window.

The man, veins pulsing blue beneath pale skin, pulled himself up her legs as she tried to kick him off. These sorts of attacks happened between animals all the time in Yellowstone and Niobrara--in his head, footage of a wolf latched onto the hind haunches of a

baby elk played back as if he'd recorded it--but these things didn't happen between people.

He had to do something, so he turned to the table and grabbed for anything. Deborah's stupid Sudoku book. He couldn't do shit with a book. A chair would have been much less pathetic. Yet, he began to roll it up and felt resistance. Resistance, from a flimsy fucking book. No, not the book at all--it was Deborah's pen, so he snatched it from the book. By chance, a weapon.

He gripped the pen in his fist and threw the book aside. He had just enough time to stab the man in the shoulder, the pen breaking cloth and puncturing flesh, before realizing he'd never done anything of the sort. But he had to help. He clutched the man's shirt and yanked, freeing his wife. The man fell to his side, and Charles stepped back and looked at his hands--they'd only ever been good for shooting photos.

Deborah registered this, perhaps as a change of power, and she finally spoke--gasps, but words nonetheless. "Jacob, Charles. He cut Jacob."

The man pushed himself to his knees, the pen in his shoulder jerking about, then waved at Charles. "Hell-ooh," he said, then spread his lips to show his teeth, and Charles wanted to see them all removed.

No, this asshole did nothing of the sort, but Charles' limbs stopped responding. He imagined Jacob in the living room, holding the door open, waiting to see if anyone else would come.

"Monkey?" he called loudly.

There was no response. Deborah averted her eyes, then turned to kick at the man. But the man didn't matter just then. Charles ran from the kitchen and stopped just inside the living room. Jacob hugged the entryway floor. Hugged it, useless and immobile, his foot positioned to prop open the door, practically wedged beneath the door, and with his neck streaked and soccer shirt pasty with blood, face ashen and taut, his boy was a doorstop straight out of a murder mystery. Charles looked back to Deborah as she kicked the man in the face. This wasn't happening. He slumped back against the wall and closed his eyes. Even in his imagination, Jacob glared up at the ceiling through ghostly-white eyes. Charles tried to shake this thought, but his limbs wouldn't move. His arms leveled out, his palms toward the floor, and he felt his insides grow into one solid mass. He tried to move, but couldn't. Even his lungs had stopped, and there wasn't enough strength left to come up for breath. That was all there was for him. He pictured Deborah pacing the hallway on days when the house would get particularly silent, deciding how long to wait before packing three suitcases into the Rodeo and relocating.

Deborah kicked again, but this time, the man forced her leg flat against the ground and yanked. She slid away from the wall.

No, Deborah didn't know what she was talking about. He had to check Jacob for himself. He gripped his legs and forced his lungs to draw in breath. He was flooded with a new sense of what was happening. This man had wounded Jacob, and Charles had to react

quickly or lose his son. Pinpricks ran down his legs as they returned to him, and he started toward the kitchen.

The knife block was on the counter just three feet away from him. He reached for the counter to brace himself as he entered the kitchen.

"Charles," Deborah said. "Help."

The madman raised the knife and plunged it deep into her right calf. She wailed, then sucked in her breath, and Charles realized he wasn't the only one struggling to keep himself together. She smacked the man across the face, then jerked her leg from under the man. The knife dislodged from her calf and slid across the floor to settle with its blade under the dishwasher. With her unwounded leg, she kicked at the man again, but he wouldn't budge. Visor still tight around his head but slightly askew, pen still jerking around, he clamored for the weapon.

Charles went to her side and shoved the man off her. The man turned away from them, went to all fours, and skittered across the floor toward the dishwasher. A small handgun peeked out of the back of the man's pants.

"Deborah, get up."

"I can't."

"You have to."

She looked up at him, made eye contact, then nodded. They both climbed to their feet. She winced as she stepped down on the wounded leg. He looked to the man, who now neared the butcher

knife. He moved, positioning himself between Deborah and the man. He gripped her waist and lifted her tall, supported some of her weight in his arms, and she slipped back into him and met his eyes. For a brief second, he thought she meant to kiss him--God, that was not the time for romance--but she stood and moved forward.

He pushed her ahead and looked down at her leg. The right one. The pants were torn and frayed where the knife had penetrated her flesh. It was bloody, something not unlike the deer carcass he'd seen a brown bear feasting on in Yellowstone. Everything reminded him of his outings today.

A clattering of metal brought him around. Deborah stumbled away from him. The madman on the floor now gripped the butcher knife by its handle. If they stuck around, they'd both die.

"Charles, come on." Now, it was Deborah coaching him.

He turned back to the man. He was stupid. He'd been stupid this entire time. The man was on the floor, practically immobilized, and Charles had been so frantic about escaping that he hadn't considered the obvious solution to this whole thing. Now, the man had his knife back, so Charles didn't feel as sure of himself as he should have felt before the man had recovered his weapon.

But, to hell with it.

Charles kicked the man in his gut, and the man buckled inward. He kicked the man in the gut again, then once in the hand that held the knife. That hand held the knife firm. Charles stabilized himself for another kick. If he missed, with just a slight turn of the wrist, the

knife would carve into his boot and sever most if not all of his toes. It'd leave Charles immobile and vulnerable, and he couldn't have that. If he missed--

He didn't miss. He connected with the butt of the knife, and it flew from the hand and skidded across the ground to the opposite side of the kitchen. The man had a brief look of dismay, but his smile, what Charles had begun to think of as his basic friendly-insanity smile, returned quickly. Charles turned, finding Deborah at the edge of the living room, and he grinned as if to say, look, Mommy, at what I did.

Deborah was saying something about a gun, but he'd disarmed the man. He turned back. The man clutched his stomach with one hand as if he'd been disemboweled, but in his other, he held the gun from the back of his pants. It was pointed at Charles, so he kicked the man in his face, and the nose broke open, blood gushing over his mouth. Charles had never done this before, and now, given the circumstances, it felt natural. Sensing his victory was close if not already there, Charles raised his foot and slammed it hard on the side of the man's head.

Charles kicked him once more, but the man didn't move.

"Charles, I can't stand it in here." Deborah said, curling her arms into her chest as if this proved her point.

Charles wheeled about and went to her, wrapped his arms around her, then looked down at the leg. She lay her chin against his chest and began to sob.

"It hurts," she said.

"Don't worry--we'll take care of it."

"I never imagined it would," she continued, shaking her head and looking to the side, "not this bad."

"Deborah," Charles said. But there was something far more important than any of this--Jacob. "We have to check on Monkey."

Jacob still lay in the entryway, and Charles collapsed, not of his own will, and crawled to his son and pulled his head into his lap. When the neck bent over his leg, blood bubbled out of the cut, out of his boy, and Charles moved his hands as if to scoop it back in, but nothing would hold it in.

"Get over here," he said. "Help me with him."

Deborah staggered to his side, grimacing as she stepped down on her right leg, and yanked his shirt. "Is he still alive, Charles?" She reached over him and grabbed her keys from the key hook beside the door. The jingle of them startled Charles.

"Yes, we have to help him."

"Hurry. The man. He's still here."

Charles placed his hands to Jacob's forehead--he was so cold--and willed him alive. It was stupid to stay there with a killer unconscious on their kitchen floor. He'd always been stupid, but if he could have a miracle, there was time for anything.

"Jacob," he said. "Wake up!" He stared intently into Jacob's face, studying his cheeks and eyebrows, his most emotive features, but there was nothing. "Jacob, hear me." There it was! At his last words,

that had to be a flicker behind his eyelids, his eyes fluttering about, trying to crack the lids open to find light.

"You have to like the way it bleeds."

Charles snapped around just as the man stumbled out of the kitchen. Bracing himself with one hand against the living room wall, he reached up with the other and tore the pen from his shoulder. Blood spurted from that shoulder--Charles must have hit something important there--and ran down his shirt. He tossed the pen into the kitchen, then smiled the same plastic smile.

"Charles."

"Okay," Charles said and got to one knee. He slid his arms under Jacob--don't you dare disturb him, Charles, he's too fragile--and lifted the boy toward his chest. As he did, Jacob's head fell back, opening the pumping wound, and he repositioned his left hand to cradle Jacob's head as he had done when the boy was just a baby. The boy was heavy at this age, but Charles would make it happen. "Go."

She slipped around him and out the front door. As Charles followed, he glanced around his shoulder and saw the man push off the wall and start toward them.

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CHAPTER 2 - STUART AND NINA

Stuart was thumping tunes on the steering wheel, Nina asleep next to him, wind slamming through his window and around the cabin, when he noticed the birds on the field were behaving strangely. They lifted out of the field and came toward the U-Haul and they swept the sky above them in wide, swooping loops. He'd never witnessed anything of the sort in Utah, but then, Nebraska had been nothing like Utah from the moment they entered it. To be exact, neither had Colorado, but the birds in Colorado, if there were any, never made an appearance. Nebraska was a different state; that much was obvious. That much was noted outright by the highway, by the way the fencing to either side switched from metal to wood the moment they crossed the border. This was a natural, naked and cold place, virtually untouched by man. So, it was possible that birds did exactly this in Nebraska. But that didn't make it normal.

They'd left the main freeway, or road by the look of it, back at Hershey. This was the route Sam had given them, printed from the internet. Directions and a map which lead to the new place on Homestead Rd. An old ranch house that'd been vacant long enough to bring the price down. They'd driven the whole way, almost nonstop. Just two stops. Once, for gas. Then, they pulled off the road to a portable toilet by a lake. One of those old blue things, and they'd just chanced to see it soon enough to pull off. Nina went to the bathroom there while he went over to check out the water. The

shore was littered with old tackle, a tackle box, a pole and a lawn chair, and while he'd gone fishing in Salt Lake, he'd never seen fishing gear just strewn about like that. But he didn't bother himself with that. He'd dipped his fingers in the water, then went back to the U-Haul with Nina.

But wasn't it strange, he felt something was missing in his recollection. Something at that lake. Something he'd seen or done, but he couldn't for the life of him target it.

Nebraska was a strange, dreamy place.

"Nina," he said. "Nina, wake up."

She stirred.

"Look at what the birds are doing."

She sat up straight and leaned to her window. "Whoa. What are they doing?"

"Battle formation," he said.

She laughed. "No, really. What are they doing?"

"Not sure. I've never seen it before. They came from the field a moment ago."

"Pull over."

He figured she'd want to, and he didn't mind in the least. They were a ways ahead of Samantha and Nina's sister, and he wanted to discover every bit of fun this trip had to offer.

There was no one behind them, so he let off the gas and pulled onto the shoulder. They left everything they had in the U-Haul, got out and stood off the road watching the birds circle above them.

"Look at them," Nina said.

"What a strange thing for birds to do. They're following us, I think."

Only, that's not quite what he thought. It was more like watching them. The formation was chaotic, just birds here and there, splotching the sky like hippie paint. Whenever he'd seen birds in person, they flew in a triangle. He'd only seen this--the diving and swooping and circling--only seen it once. Both times while Samantha was watching her nature documentaries. Flocks of birds flew like this when they were attacking another flock. And when preparing to swoop down on a carcass.

Which meant they were seen as another flock, or as something dead. Neither made sense, but then, Nebraska didn't make sense. So much flatness. He could hear Samantha now.

So much boring.

This, Samantha, was not boring in the least. They'd keep to the sky, but that didn't dull it.

"I don't get it," Nina said. "Why?"

"I don't know. They don't see many U-Hauls out here, I guess." He walked further off the road and turned back, but the birds moved further out as well. He staggered back a step, and his right foot stepped down hard on a rock. The birds swooped closer to him. They shouldn't have moved--it wasn't like the U-Haul had moved. He leaned left, and the birds flew a little left. He leaned right, and they flew a little right.

He turned his back to them and looked out at the weeds to the south. Eyes upon dirt, he imagined himself collapsing backwards into weeds and dirt, then placed his hands upon his ass and felt dirt on the back of his pants. It was a memory come back to him. He'd been at the edge of the tiny lake while Nina used the toilette. Then, he'd fallen into dirt and weeds. But there was certain connective tissue missing between the two images.

Nina went to the road and shielded her eyes. There was no sun out here, but light reflected off the snow. "Is that them?" she said.

At the end of the road, a headlight twinkled. Just one, but his eyes had always been better than Nina's.

"It's a motorcycle." He looked back at the birds, then something sparked behind his eyes.

Something bright. Not a headache. Bigger like a stone. Like cancer splitting his brain in two. The motorcycle was getting closer. That something other in his mind told him he'd be more comfortable sheltered. *You'll be killed standing out here in the open. The rider wants to kill you.* He wasn't sure why he thought that, but the worry was there.

"We have to get back in the U-Haul," Stuart said.

"Why?"

He couldn't tell her the truth--she'd think he'd gone insane. "I don't know if it's legal to park out here. If that's a cop, we might be ticketed."

"Good point."

Except it wasn't. They wouldn't be ticketed even if it was a cop--did they have cops or sheriffs out there?--but that wasn't his concern. They couldn't miss the motorcycle.

He ran around the front of the U-Haul and threw his door open just as the motorcycle blew past. A single-seater, but two riders. The driver had a child in front of him.

He climbed into the U-Haul, practically jumped into it, and slammed the door shut behind him. He turned the key in the ignition--he'd left it there when they'd gone out to look at the birds. Nina was already buckled in, so he buckled himself in, then pressed on the brake and threw the stick shift into drive.

"What's the hurry, honey?"

"I want to get to the new home!" He sucked in breath to calm himself, but it didn't work.

Nina turned the volume knob on the radio, then tuned it to the closest station. Country music was the best they were going to get out here. She gripped her door and the seatbelt, shifting in her seat.

The rider will circle back and kill you. Go after him.

He moved his right foot to the gas. He'd come off angry, but hadn't meant it that way. He wasn't sure why he was in a hurry; he just felt he had to hurry. He had to keep up with that motorcycle.

Something's wrong with the rider. He's gone mad. Mad enough to do something about it. To you. He doesn't belong on this road.

At this thought--he wasn't even sure it was his thought--He pushed the U-Haul to 85. The dash trembled beneath the windshield.

Any faster and he could damage the U-Haul. Any slower and that motorcycle could get away.

"Stuart, you're speeding."

"I need to catch that motorcycle."

"What?"

He'd already wondered at that, but it'd done him no good. That something in his head, though--it was bright and hot. He swiped sweat from his brow and wiped it off on the seat. He must have been running a fever, and his whole body trembled. The motorcycle was just in front of them, the drivers oblivious to the U-Haul. Stuart honked the horn, and the driver glanced over his shoulder, then hugged the shoulder of the road and gestured for Stuart to pass him.

It isn't natural. It isn't right that the rider should keep on the road.

But why wasn't it right?

He'll circle back and hurt you.

An image flashed through Stuart's mind--him dipping his fingers in the lake, then something moved beneath the water's surface. Something like a thick black slug. He'd recoiled from the water, but it latched onto his finger with a wisp of black smoke. It tried to pull him in, but he'd resisted and yanked his arm back. Whatever had gripped his hand, snapped out of the water and into his face. And at last, Stuart fell back into weeds. He'd been unconscious for a moment or two, and woken with no memory of the lost time.

He'll do it. And he'll hurt Nina.

No, he won't.

Yes, and Samantha. He knows about her, too.

What do you want?

Run him off the road before he can do what he desires.

Stuart turned to Nina. "Hold on tight!"

He floored the gas and aimed for the motorcycle.

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CHAPTER 3 - TWO BULLETS

Outside, the clacking of the U-Haul amplified in the open air, joined only by the squeaking of the SOLD sign swinging on its post next door, and Charles followed Deborah across the lawn to where the Rodeo crunched moist weeds to the ground. Deborah fumbled with the keys at the door--how predictable--but she got the door open, then stepped to the side and nursed her leg. Her feet were bare. If Charles hadn't been so eager to annoy her by wearing his boots indoors, he might have shared in that plight. Door open, Charles leaned into the backseat and lay Jacob there, positioning his head upward to close the wound. Jacob winced as his head moved. The pain was terrible to see, but it at least meant he was alive. They'd have to get him somewhere as quickly as possible.

"We need to get you guys to the hospital," Charles said.

"Can they do anything for him?" Deborah asked.

"What are you saying?"

"I saw that man cut him."

"That doesn't mean anything," Charles said. He wanted to offer some evidence to show that Jacob would make it, but nothing came to him.

She nodded.

The man hadn't emerged from the house yet.

One thing Charles knew is that Deborah's pessimism would prove justified if they didn't hurry. And her leg was bleeding all over,

that bare foot spotted with goosebumps. She wouldn't be able to drive with that leg, so he took the keys from her. But as he walked to the driver-side door, something fleshy dropped out of the U-Haul's passenger window. Long, slender flesh. In the initial flash of pale skin, he thought that it was of a worm, a large bugger, being thrown from the U-Haul to the frozen road as a practical joke. It was bright white against the grayness of the sky above the field to the south. But the thing coming from the car was not a worm, but an arm, slender the whole length, smacking the door and falling lazily to the side.

He hadn't even seen the window open. It was only down half way, but that was enough. The image of blood splashing against the window played back in his head.

Clack, clack.

Someone was still in it. Charles had told Deborah that the people inside were arguing, and with the man attacking them, perhaps they had been, violently even. The passenger was a woman, that much he knew, but he couldn't tell more. They had to save Jacob, but he couldn't just leave someone behind.

"Someone's still in the U-Haul," he said.

"But we have to get out of here."

The U-Haul's passenger door opened. The **SOLD** sign next door squeaked out its response, *Eee Eee Eee*--Charles thought of the blade raised high in the car just before the window was splattered in blood. He had to be quick, damn it!

He didn't hesitate; he just started out across the street.

With an inside view, the window was streaked dark red and wet.

"What should I do?" Deborah asked.

"Watch the door."

As he neared the U-Haul, a woman stepped out. Or stumbled out, and crashed immediately into the ditch, arms outstretched as if to grasp an invisible rope on the way down.

"Deborah," Charles said, "Help." When he turned back, she was limping across the road. He checked the front door, but the madman hadn't appeared. It didn't make sense. He should have been out by now. Something must have caught his attention inside.

Clack, clack. Crack!

Though the U-Haul was in terrible condition after trying to tear up one of the two trees in Mrs. Lowrances lawn, Twin Cedars was still in good repair; surprising, considering that she didn't accept visitors. She hadn't even come out for all the ruckus in her ditch. For all Charles knew, she was decaying up in her bed.

He had to get back to Jacob, but he couldn't leave this woman out here to be slaughtered by the man. As he came close, the woman righted herself awkwardly, almost tripping face first, then leaned forward to wipe her hand against the grass. He couldn't see what yet, but there was something wrong with the woman. When she stood, her face was like plastic, one facial layer pulled taut around another. And as she turned toward him, she clutched at a black patch on her stomach. Charles squinted, leaned in, and recognized it at once. He'd

photographed many animals, mostly in wildlife preservations, and he'd captured the occasional wolf munching on an otter's open chest cavity. This woman was the otter, with blood, wet blood, soaking her shirt. This woman was bleeding all over herself.

They had to get away from that road. They needed to be somewhere else when that man came out of their house. In the city, at the hospital, safe behind doctors and nurses and security and cops. He'd never seen a mess like this. Not on a human, anyway.

Damn it, he had to leave.

But even as he thought this, he was leaning toward the woman for a clearer view. The shirt was in shreds. Charles imagined the flesh in all its blown-up details. A soft, peach quilt flayed and splashed in red. Tender and taut over the thin rail of the lowest rib. He'd slashed her open. Charles felt something like fingers running up his spine and to the base of his neck. It settled there, a warmth at the bottom of his skull, and he swallowed deeply to no effect.

"Let's get her to the Rodeo," he said.

Deborah only nodded.

Charles approached the woman, eyeing the arm he intended to take over his shoulder. This near, the clacking of the U-Haul turned his stomach, and he felt his ribs pull tight around his lungs like skeletal fingers. The woman looked up at him and squeaked, almost screamed.

"No, don't do that," he told her. "I'm okay, see? I'm just helping."

"Ma, ma," the woman said. "Ma." She patted her chest with her hand flat and fingers splayed.

"Mother?" Deborah asked.

"No," Charles said. "I think she's saying 'I'm.' You're what?"

The woman turned and pointed at the U-Haul, then turned back and pointed at their house. "Ma sree."

"Sree?" Charles said. "Sree? Oh, sorry." This woman didn't have anything to apologize for. Even if she'd seen any of what went on, she'd been attacked as well. He shook his head, hoping she understood.

He turned to his house, but the madman hadn't appeared. Maybe he'd gone up to Charles' studio to ransack it, or he was looting everything he could find, or--and this was the only one of the three that actually seemed like a possibility, though only God knew why--he'd stopped in the kitchen for a bite. Either way, it was taking the man long enough, and Charles wasn't sure he wanted it that way.

But he didn't really have time to figure that out now, did he? His son was dying in the car--my God, he was dying--and he couldn't waste his time on someone else. But he went to her side anyway and took an arm around his shoulder. Deborah took the other, nursing one of her legs in the process.

Chunk.

Charles looked over his shoulder at the U-Haul. It had gone chunk. That was a new sound, something other than hungry or wretched. Something dead but still alive. That's what it was. Charles

didn't know why the sound mattered to him, but it did. Too bad it was still running.

He grimaced, then said, "Deborah, I have to turn it off."

"What?" Deborah said. She pushed down on her bad leg and cried out. "You're the one who keeps saying we have to leave."

"Do you want him figuring out how to get it moving and follow us?"

She started to protest, but then stopped. "You're right. Sorry."

He breathed out, nodded and released the woman's arm. The U-Haul wasn't more than ten feet away, and with the sprayed passenger door hanging wide open, it'd be a quick operation. The door to his house was still vacant, the killer nowhere in sight. He had to keep moving. He started toward the U-Haul.

When he reached the passenger door, he put a hand upon the frame and looked inside. On the far side of the cabin, the key sat in the ignition, a plastic tag vibrating with the strength of the engine.

Charles grabbed the door's handhold, but his hand slipped. He jerked it back. There was so much blood, and he looked down at his arms. He was covered in it, just one member of the bloodbath. He hadn't noticed before then, and perhaps that was because he'd been too busy with Jacob to notice, but now he shuddered at the blood on his arms. It's just paint, he told himself, then, Get real, Charles. It's blood. You're dealing with blood.

He'd done that before. He'd found a deer carcass on one outing and repositioned it to hide what he guessed was a rifle wound. He

was a photographer of natural wildlife, not a hunter. He'd gotten blood all over himself doing that, but he'd gotten a good photo out of it. This wasn't much different.

He placed his hand on the hard leather bench seat and lifted himself up. Inside, he slid across the seat and grabbed the key. In front of him, an ash tray hung out of the dashboard, broken where it connected, a metal piece bent to keep it from closing. With a twist, the key came free.

The U-Haul fell silent.

He slipped the key in his pocket, slid back across the seat, his pants now warm and wet as if he'd pissed himself, then lifted himself into the door frame with one hand on the handhold, the other on the frame.

The man was out of the house, stumbling across their lawn toward the Rodeo. At Charles' appearance, the man stopped and watched them. He no longer smiled, but his jaw relaxed just enough to show the white teeth behind those red lips.

"Deborah," Charles whispered. "Weren't you watching?"

Deborah turned back and saw the man, moved as if to run down the street, but held her ground. "You never told me to."

"Damn it, I did. And even if I hadn't, I don't know what I'm doing; why would I know what you're supposed to do?" He had no idea what he was doing. He could go up and kick the man more, but that didn't really seem like a great idea. He'd certainly end up dead, and Deborah wouldn't be able to take care of Jacob without him. "It

doesn't matter. We have to get to the Rodeo and protect Jacob. Hurry."

Deborah limped across the road with the woman's weight bearing down on her shoulders.

The man had no weapons that Charles could see. The knife had apparently been discarded inside the house. But it was still better that Charles not try his luck. "We have to keep our distance, but Jacob's in there," he said. "What do we do?"

"I don't know. I'm scared." As she said this, she stepped down hard on her leg, and her mouth opened into a wide 'O'. "That man cut our boy, Charles. And he'll kill us if we let him."

"Deborah, stop it!"

She paused, stunned and hurt, then continued and said, "What should I do?"

"Nothing. I'll do what I can about the guy."

"He'll kill you."

"No, I'll find a weapon."

Deborah looked to the man as he continued stumbling toward the Rodeo. "He's getting closer." She stumbled and tripped to the ground, and the woman toppled over her, pushing out all of Deborah's breath in one massive *uhn*.

Charles started toward them, then thought that perhaps it was better they stay there until he finishes dealing with the man. If he could just immobilize the man, he could get Deborah and the woman into the car and they could head into town. There, they could stop at

the hospital and get help. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was a start at one.

"Charles, help," Deborah said from under the woman.

The problem was immobilizing the bastard. Getting him on the ground long enough for Charles to do everything else. He had no weapons. The U-Haul was dead in the ditch, so he couldn't do anything with it. There wasn't even a decent sized rock on this road--it'd been swept a month before in preparation for the snow.

But then, perhaps something in the U-Haul would be useful. If it just weren't so dark. That was the scary thing about U-Hauls. No matter how bright it was outside, it seemed to Charles as if the sun could never touch the leather seats within--the fresh air, never feed them. And the back of the truck, surely filled with bed frames, a table, an entertainment center, was just as uninviting.

Shit, that was a mistake of a thought.

The metal door back there--its latch in place but unlocked as if to say here, Charles, have a little peek--it was inviting in the worst way. If this were a film, that's where he'd uncover the giant rat with rows upon rows of gnawing, gnashing teeth. He didn't trust places that remained all dark, all the time, and U-Hauls were just one of them.

The man began to move again, this time toward him, so Charles ran to the rear of the U-Haul. He didn't know what he'd do if those teathy rats were real, but he had to look. The man would reach him, and he'd have to defend himself. He'd come at him with knife or gun

or bat-shit crazy as his weapon. Charles would have to defend himself.

Charles prayed that nothing waited on the other side of the doors, then threw up the latch and flung them open.

From what Charles could see, it was mostly furniture within, one piece atop another all the way to the end, but towards the front, there was a stack of boxes, each labeled in frilly handwriting--MOM AND DAD'S ROOM, LINEN, S&P COLLECTION, SAM'S HOLE.

S&P, Charles thought, as in salt and pepper. He stopped reading and climbed into the truck. Nothing about the parents' room intrigued him, so he shoved the top box off the stack. As it hit the road, the corners cracked and spilled shirts and pants and dresses to the ground.

He'd leave the other boxes where they were for now. He turned and grabbed the leg of a table that had been turned upside down. He yanked on the leg, but it was too sturdy to break away from the rest of the table. He checked the others and reached the same conclusions.

The man was half way across the road now, and Charles had to act then or give up. So, he reached out for the first thing his hands could grab, one of the boxes--LINEN--and chucked it. It spilled towels several feet in front of the man. He grabbed another, almost threw it, but held his arms poised in the air, just ready to throw.

"Like our stuff?" the man asked, stopping near Deborah and the woman. "I like yours. Your boy was pleasant."

"Get away from her," Charles said, and he threw the box, but it fell short. Glass and tiny figurines shattered against the ground, a spray of brilliant flashing lights in the paleness of the day. "Don't do anything to her."

The man smiled. "Did I upset you? I didn't mean to. I'm sorry." He then reached behind his back and brought out his gun.

"No," Charles shouted.

"But I have to say," he said, holding the gun to his head, "we're gonna make great neighbors." He turned the gun away from himself, turned it on the woman, then shot her through the head.

The woman's head whipped forward as it took the bullet, and shot red matter into Deborah's face as the bullet hit the dirt to Deborah's side. The whole of the woman's body convulsed, and she slammed back against the ground. Here was a living person in front of Charles, a heart-thumping-and-brain-pulsing living person, right in front of him, and in less than a second, with his full attention, she was destroyed.

Charles reached for the other box, but hesitated before touching it, thinking that perhaps throwing boxes is what caused the woman's death, and that another could bring the same fate to his wife.

"Stop," the man said. "That's not funny anymore. *Chunk.*"

Charles froze. When the man said it, he sounded like the U-Haul. He didn't understand it, but that's how it was. Heavy and metallic.

The man aimed the gun at Charles, and Charles squatted as low as he could. "*Chuck*." But there was a look of confusion settling over the madman. He returned his attention to the woman, the gun still pointed at Charles, and all at once, a look of remorse settled over him. He lowered the gun and started away from the U-Haul.

Deborah tried to push the woman off of her, but Charles swatted the air to tell her to hold still.

The man had gone maybe twenty feet, staggering to either side, every step a threat to his ability to stay upright, when Charles felt safe enough to stand tall.

"*Chuck*," the man cried. "What are you? *Chuka*? Is that what you are?" He spun around and called, "Sir?"

Charles stammered what might have been words if he'd had his wits.

"I'm sorry for your inconvenience," the man said.

"Sorry for my--"

"Inconvenience." With that, the man raised the gun to his own head and fired, blowing cherry bits against the western whitewash.

Chuka, the engine barked, coming to life behind Charles.

"God," he said, jumping out of the U-Haul. He flipped about and stepped back away from the U-Haul. The entire thing rattled. The entire thing with its *chuka, chuka*.

Nearby, the woman had painted Deborah and the dirt a chalky rose, and the man, the son of a bitch who'd killed his son, was pumping his own pool. So much to take.

"Charles!"

He yelped, then cupped his hand over his mouth.

Deborah rolled the woman off of her. There was a second of recognition between them before she said, "Charles, it's me."

"It's okay," he said. "I just--the U-Haul."

"What's going on?"

Charles shook his head and turned away from her.

"The man's dead, Charles. We should do something."

The door to his house was ajar. Not propped open, but ajar, and he recalled leaving the kitchen to find his son laying on the floor there, propping it open. They couldn't spare the minutes it'd take to make that call. He had to get back to the Rodeo to check on Jacob. He looked toward the dead man a few yards up the road, expecting him to move again, then started across the street. Deborah followed at his heels, strangely mute of breath.

As he reached the Rodeo, Deborah continued past it and limped up the walkway that lead to the front door, and a strange feeling came over Charles. At the far edge of the lawn, near the corner of the house, stood a lone tree, a sycamore with a rough patch in the middle on the side facing the yard, a wound caused by repeated contact with his son's soccer ball. Several leaves dropped heavily to the earth, and a squirrel darted down it and out of sight. Everything was decaying or leaving.

It was Autumn, so it was no surprise that the leaves were falling. Charles hadn't paid attention, but now that he thought about

it, those leaves had been falling for about a week. That sycamore looked bare and ragged without its foliage. And the squirrel leaving the tree wasn't exactly unexpected behavior either. Not for this time of year.

Yet, he couldn't breathe. Sure, there was air moving in and out of his lungs, but that wasn't really breathing. Not in the way Charles would hollow himself out after snapping a beautiful shot. By the looks of it, Deborah didn't mean to leave yet, and Charles didn't think he'd breathe for a long time.

Chuka, chuka.

He turned away from his yard and peered back at the U-Haul.

The dying sycamore may have captured him momentarily, distracted him from the gore, but taking notice of it again, he had the sense that it wasn't nearly over.

Deborah stopped at the front door. "I'm calling 911. I'll be right back out."

That wasn't the way to do things. Their son was dying in the back seat, so the last thing Deborah needed was to go into the house. But that wasn't stopping her. "We need to get Jacob out of here. It'll take them forever to get an ambulance out here."

Deborah shook her head. "They'll know what to do."

Jacob, the monkey who now trembled in the backseat, would die soon, and at this rate, it'd be because of detours.

She nodded, but stepped inside anyway.

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CHAPTER 4 - DEAD IN THE ROAD

"Damn it all to hell. You feel that?" Aunt Lorrie slapped the steering wheel.

"What? What's wrong?" Sam asked. She checked her side view mirror, expecting to see the metal-mouthed grill of Uncle Kevin's pickup behind them, but it was just bare highway.

Her aunt pointed to the dashboard. "Gas."

Sam sighed, rolled her window down a crack and stuck her fingers through. The wind was wet and smelled of corn. They must have been growing the stuff not far from there, as Hershey, a village they'd passed about seven miles back, displayed billboards for an annual corn festival. Sam had pushed her aunt to stop at the gas station. Even if Uncle Kevin caught up to them, they'd be safe while at the station. But the one they'd seen exiting Hershey was unlit and "creepy"--her aunt's words, not hers--and besides, they only had ten miles or so. Empty or full, they'd make it. Her aunt's words again. Being right was tiring. Out here, the sun was a spiteful bastard with a turned back, and they'd see snow soon. "Don't scare me like that. Is there enough?"

The color had drained from her aunt's face.

"Great," Sam said. "And if we don't find a gas station?"

"I don't know. The car will stop, I guess."

"We have enough, huh?" Sam had said they didn't, but her aunt had insisted otherwise. Sam couldn't get stuck out there; there was

nothing, just a glazed field of drab brown stretching to a set of three peaks in the west, and a clump of tangled weeds in the east. They'd be obvious out on the road should anyone come driving by, and Sam didn't know how she'd manage walking all that distance on foot. Especially not with her nearly forty-year-old aunt, she was almost twice her age. She didn't even know who Jamie Cullum was. "We're not gonna get stranded, are we? It's Sunday."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I've heard about people who get stranded out here on Sundays. When Jason went to school here, his car broke down on the interstate, and everyone just kept driving by. The Huskers were playing."

She remembered him pulling out of a kiss and whispering, No one would miss the kick-off for a dweeb stuck on the shoulder, Baby.

"Samantha, that's enough."

"I'm serious. He was stuck out here for hours." A blush had set in beneath her aunt's black eye, and Sam winced as if seeing the battered orb for the first time. Damn, that must have hurt like hell. Probably still did. And if not, Uncle Kevin would make sure it did if he caught up to them. Why he followed them, she didn't know. It wasn't worth the bother. But that hadn't stopped him from following them all the way to Hershey. They'd lost him back there, but he was sure to resurface. She turned to look over her shoulder, but stopped. The cracked dash of the Volvo vibrated unnaturally. "Oh God, I feel it rumbling now. We're totally stranded."

"We're close to the city."

Sam looked out again, beyond the highway. In the tilled field to their left, a large metal thing she assumed watered the field teetered with the wind. To their right, the weeds broke once to the frosted crest of a hill not unlike the ones they'd driven through ten miles back. Not exactly a city, but one was tucked into a corner somewhere around here, just waiting to spring out at them. "There are no cities in Nebraska--that's what Jason said. Not like Salt Lake, at least."

It was only mid-day after all, and there wasn't another car in sight. They'd turned off I-80 early and headed north through that town with the corn festival toward highway 30, a back route into North Platte. Though it wasn't the first time she'd seen him back there, Sam had seen Uncle Kevin's truck on the road back in that town, a glimpse as it dragged across their path behind them. She'd seen his silhouette inside, felt his eyes screwing into Aunt Lorrie, but he'd turned off the road toward a horse stable. If Sam had been Uncle Kevin, she would have moved onto someone who would take the beatings quietly. But maybe he wasn't after Aunt Lorrie just to beat her.

"Someone'll help," her aunt said.

"Of course." Her aunt had missed it, but worrying her wouldn't do them any good.

The engine sputtered, silencing them, but chugged on. Sam pushed her hand against the dashboard as if to steady the engine, then laughed nervously.

Something glinted ahead of them, off the right side of the road. Sam leaned forward, pulling the seat belt until it locked in place.

"What is that?" her aunt asked.

The glint vanished, revealing a motorcycle, a red and chrome single-seater with a large trunk and saddlebags, crunched against brown earth just beyond rent fencing. One saddlebag had burst open, and a grease rag draped out and over the seat. Closer to the road, a sock monkey lay facedown in dirt.

They whipped past it too quickly to see much more, but as they moved on, Sam turned over her seat and looked past the luggage and grocery bags in the backseat and out over the road. Beyond the motorcycle, there was no sign of her uncle. He'd tracked them this far and would do so all the way to North Platte. Nothing could change that. Sam just had to be ready to do what was necessary. She felt her pocket and the knife within, imagined sticking her uncle with it, hoping she could.

But that motorcycle. It must have just gone down, or someone would have already cleaned it.

"Aunt Lorrie, I think that's an accident."

Her aunt checked the rear-view mirror, then looked at the dash again. "Nuh-uhn, we're not stopping. Out here, we don't know what might have happened." She kept checking the mirror as if she knew what had been worrying Sam.

"But if someone's out there," Sam said, "bleeding out in the weeds--"

"Then they'll bleed out. They'd do so with or without our help."

"We can't just--"

"Do nothing?" Her aunt was impassive again. The front of the car sputtered and she watched the dash. "Fine, let's stop and help whoever's out there. The cell isn't working, and the car won't start again, but that's alright. We'll just drag him five miles across the highway."

Oh, but Uncle Kevin would come at them long before five miles. He'd come at them, and they'd have to fight. But that was beside the point. That'd happen no matter what they did.

In the mirror, the crumpled motorcycle shimmered far behind them, ready to blink out like a star at dawn. Sam said, "Just pull over and let me try the cell. We should be close to town, right?"

"Which is it?" her aunt asked. "Near a town or stranded? You can't keep switching. Anyway, the cell won't work, not until North Platte comes in range. This isn't like Salt Lake City. We'll call someone when we get there."

The shimmer died, an opportunity missed. To do what? Save the day. Get to the side of the road and help a surviving rider to the car. Nonchalantly and without an ounce of regret, tossing her suitcases from the Volvo to free up space for a fellow Human. Oh, boy, Sam sure was a grand fellow. But she had to be realistic here. Her aunt was probably right. The Volvo wouldn't last much longer. Still, if someone were dying back there, and they could do something about it, they had an obligation to do so.

She sat back against her seat, adjusted the seat belt on her shoulder, then popped the glove compartment open. The phone sat there, no bars, but it had been in the compartment for some time. Didn't metal interfere with signals? She could try something at least. She grabbed the phone and held it close to her body. No signal. It probably just needed time to regain the signal. She could give it a moment.

"What are you doing?" her aunt asked.

"I'm gonna try to call someone. You don't want to stop, so I want to try this." She held the phone to the window, but there was still no signal.

"Who you gonna call?"

"The police. An ambulance. Whoever'll answer."

"Try your mom. Same provider, maybe better service?"

"You think she'll answer? She's probably at the house by now, and you know how Dad is. He'll have her carrying the heavy stuff. We'd have better luck getting the governor on the phone." Sam held the phone through the crack of the window. A bar lit up, then two. "Stop!"

Her aunt floored the break, and the Volvo thumped forward with the sudden change. The engine rumbled heavily. Her aunt turned her foot back to the gas pedal, but paused a brief moment before slamming down on it.

The engine sputtered once, then died.

"Fuck. What's your problem? Why you screaming?"

"I got a signal."

Her aunt steered the car onto the shoulder as the speedometer fell to zero. "You screamed, and now the car's dead."

"But, the motorcycle driver—"

Aunt Lorrie tilted her head back. "How do you even know there is a driver?" This callousness was new to her aunt, put there by Uncle Kevin. She was no longer the aunt who'd helped Sam, a then 10-year-old with a broken leg, across a sandbox.

"It's not my fault the car died," Sam said. "You went too hard on it. I saw that."

"I panicked."

"You panicked, and then you get after me?"

Sam turned to look over her seat. Vacant highway for miles.

The phone flickered, three bars, then two.

"I've got a signal."

Her aunt pushed on the brake, then turned the key in the ignition. Something stirred within the car, but went still when her aunt released the key.

"Aunt Lorrie, that's not gonna do anything. Let's just call."

Her aunt tried the car twice more. At last, her aunt removed the keys and rested her hands on top of the steering wheel.

"Fine," she said. "We'll do what we can."

Sam opened her door and the chill rushed in, gathering around the soles of her flip-flops. At least her jeans would spare her legs the freeze. She hurried to a patch of grass, and raised the cell back into

the air. As much as she hated the cold, she liked the feel of the wet grass against the sides of her feet. Something about it felt warmer than standing out on the road. Still just two bars. She punched 911.

Nothing.

Aunt Lorrie climbed out of the car as Sam listened for the tone. Her white blouse and long, yellow skirt didn't do much to offset the bruises.

A feeling of being naked hit Sam, and she moved closer to the Volvo. Just as Sam had predicted, they were stranded out here. Without reception on this end, the phone simply wouldn't work.

Neither would walking. She shifted her weight to her right foot to relieve some of the cold in her left. Dew beaded above her right eye. With that humidity, they wouldn't get far walking. Besides, Uncle Kevin would probably get bored of waiting for them to get back on the road and come after them. Truthfully, she didn't know why he hadn't already come after them. Heck, it made no sense for him to be there at all.

But what if, just by creepy proposition, Uncle Kevin was following them because--and this was a truly deranged idea--he loved her. There was no logical reason for him to be there. He could find someone else to beat. The only thing that could explain it for Sam was that he loved her. They--the *they* Jason talked about when he didn't really know who he meant--they said love conquers all, but if so, Uncle Kevin couldn't possibly love her aunt and still give her those black eyes.

They may as well have been in a barren wasteland. If the driver of the motorcycle hadn't died from the accident, he would from exhaustion. And even if they dragged him back, they couldn't start the car.

But her parents would be expecting them at the new place, so when it was obvious that Sam and her aunt weren't coming, they'd come for them. Sam just needed to focus on the task at hand. Investigating the motorcycle accident.

"Aunt Lorrie, can we please go check it out?"

"Fine. But remember what you said about Nebraskans. They won't help us if we get lost."

"It can't be more than a mile. Besides, it's not like we'll accidentally get on a different freeway while walking."

They walked back to the car to grab their purses and a few things. They both pulled coats from their suitcases and slid into them, and Aunt Lorrie pulled on a pair of tennis shoes. Her aunt had left nearly everything behind in Utah, but she'd remembered the tennis shoes. Sam's shoes were all in the U-Haul. When she climbed out of the car, her aunt held her head low, arms wrapped tight around her own purse. Her aunt had never been the obedient type where anyone was concerned until her husband came along. But now that her aunt obeyed her--no one ever obeyed Sam, since she wasn't usually the commanding type--Sam felt like she was exploiting her.

And maybe she was. The whole family did it, and Sam wasn't any better than the rest of them. No better than Uncle Kevin. She

didn't like treating Aunt Lorrie this way, but found herself falling into it every time they were together.

Sam reached back into the car and grabbed a liter bottle of water, stuffed it into her purse, and a bag of crackers and granola bars, then stepped out of the car.

They'd walked about fifty yards when her aunt sighed and said, "I'm sure you don't like moving out here, and I'm sorry it's happening like this. I just want you to know that I didn't ask your mom to come."

Across the wet field, a flock of birds took flight. They couldn't have driven more than a mile past the accident. But fifty feet seemed like too much with Uncle Kevin out there.

"She insisted, sisters stick together."

"And why are you telling me this now?"

"I just wanted you to know that I'm on your side."

The insinuation there being that Sam's side was back in Utah, and that her mom's side was to support Aunt Lorrie's move to North Platte, Nebraska. North Platte, so-named because of the river that ran through it. That's what Sam had read when she'd Googled it. But the town now touched the South Platte as well, so it was a misnomer. Regardless, the town had nothing to claim but its rivers and Buffalo Bill, so she couldn't imagine anyone living in such a boring place. They could call the place Boring, Nebraska, since that's what it had been since they left the signs for corn ice cream. All that aside, she'd print pages of information and begged her mom to move the family

with her Aunt. They needed to keep Aunt Lorrie safe. Be there in case Uncle Kevin showed up.

They'd walked about a quarter mile when they found a single handle bar about a foot in length, bent and crunched in the middle, torn on one end. Facedown beside it, was what looked to be a license plate.

Sam picked up the handlebar. "What do you make of this?"

"Ripped off, maybe?"

The bar was bent the wrong way, she thought, as if something had bent it forward. If the motorcycle had smashed against the ground, she imagined it would have bent it backwards.

The wreck had to be close.

"Check the weeds," she said.

Her aunt walked off the road and to the far edge of the shoulder.

"You see anything?" her aunt said after a moment.

"No. You?"

"Not a thing."

And the search continued this way for some time before Sam stopped and turned to her aunt. There was nothing here, but how was that possible? They found the handlebar, so there had to be a motorcycle nearby.

"Sam," her aunt said, "I don't like this. We should go back."

Sam wanted the same, but she couldn't be one of those evil Nebraskans that Jason talked about. Somewhere, the motorcycle's

driver lay against one rock, his bike smashed against another rock, his blood sprayed against everything.

"We have to keep going," she said. "It can't be much farther."

"How far before we decide to turn back? I'm not going until you tell me."

"You're playing that?"

Her aunt just nodded.

"Fine. We'll walk for another ten minutes." Sam looked at her watch. "If we don't see the motorcycle, we'll turn back."

Sam continued walking, and her aunt followed.

No more than five minutes later, a small, squat shape materialized through the mirage at the edge of the road, a formless clump moving across the road.

The road was otherwise empty. There had been no cars during the entire walk. No truck breaching the horizon no matter how often she expected it. She put her hand in her pocket and gripped the pocketknife. It was a pill, medicine to be applied in case of invasion, and she'd stick him with it if needed. But not if he just ran them down, knocked them off the road like the motorcycle.

Sam's throat tightened up. Maybe her aunt had been right from the get-go; they should have stayed with the car. Someone would have come to get them. Now, they were probably God-knows-how-far, and she wasn't so sure her legs could carry her back. She opened the water bottle and took a big drink.

"Aunt Lorrie, how far have we walked?"

"Seriously? You drag me all this way, and now you ask that?"

Sam pushed ahead. Her aunt always did that. Sam would ask one question or say one thing, and her aunt would read something completely different from it. The lady was going deaf by choice, and she wasn't even old. Sam wasn't thinking about going back or anything. Yeah, it seemed far, but she couldn't go back. Not when someone could die if she didn't help.

"We're probably only a mile from the car, if even," Aunt Lorrie said. "These things always seem farther than they are."

"What things?" But that shape on the horizon was familiar to her. An animal, probably. "That might be the accident," she said, "But if not, I think we should turn back."

"As I said--now you say that?"

"I don't want to. I'm just saying, we don't know what's out here. This place is a hellhole. I don't like it. You don't like it. You made that clear from the beginning. You didn't want to help whoever was on that motorcycle."

At the end of the road, the shape fully formed, revealing what looked like a Doberman with a bulldog's bulk dragging something long and bloody into the road. Sam stepped back and gripped her aunt's hand tightly.

The Doberman was tilted forward, its hind legs erect, back hunched, forelegs bent, putting its face right into the indistinguishable bloody mess on the road.

"Okay," Aunt Lorrie said. "We need to get the fuck out of here."

"Look," Sam said. "We can't go. We're here."

Off the road, the weeds broke away to reveal the motorcycle crunched beyond the fence. And now that they were closer and on foot, she saw what looked to be a body in leather clothes peeking out of the grasses nearby. The motorcycle was brilliant, a nice shiny, polished red. But it would never run again. Guaranteed.

"I know you don't want to help, but it doesn't matter what you want." She gripped her aunt around the wrist. "We're not going back. There's someone there."

She didn't wait for a response. She quickened her pace and pulled her aunt along. It had worked so well and she realized she'd sounded an awful lot like her uncle. But they had to help the motorcycle driver. Simple as that. It was selfless.

They were thirty feet away, possibly closer, when the Doberman looked up. Blood painted the thing's dark maw and lighter, muscled neck like red paste within the shallow carpet of fur. It wouldn't attack yet; it'd merely protect what it had found--found attached to a person and gnawed off, to be precise.

"Don't run," Sam said, for she'd been bitten by a dog before. "We run, it will chase."

"It'd kill us."

The knife wouldn't do much good now, not until the thing was upon her, but she could avoid that. She had to.

The bloody thing beneath it was part of a limb, fleshy and hairy, and a trail of blood and cloth traced its wake. Straight across

the roads, sticky and reflective, then diagonally into the weeds. That's where she'd find the driver--judging by the hairy limb, a man--missing limb and losing life.

She had to get to those weeds. She started that way slowly, but stopped when the Doberman's gaze followed her. Its lips curled upward, bunching at the roof of his muzzle, baring white teeth. Just being here, she was a menace to its meal. Circling it, she was a threat.

But then her aunt moved in the opposite direction, drawing the Doberman's attention, and the dog growled, now split between the two of them. It was ready to strike from the look of it, but just didn't know who to strike first.

Stupid, Sam cursed herself. It would get her aunt, and that was Sam's fault. Her aunt was supposed to be safe with her. That's why she'd brought the knife. And now she led them to this.

Sam spotted a rock a few feet away and stepped back, but rather than turn towards her, the Doberman turned toward Aunt Lorrie. Stupid, she repeated, then stepped swiftly over to the rock and scooped it up. This had to strike true, and she screamed and chucked the rock at the dog.

It struck the dog at the left ear and bounced off.

The Doberman growled and advanced toward Sam, and it seemed she'd earned its attention. It barked twice, and the muscles in its legs tensed, possibly to snap into action, but then a larger rock hit it in the ribs. Aunt Lorrie shook her arm out, then rested her hand

on her knee. Without pause, the Doberman turned and charged Aunt Lorrie.

Sam watched the attack in horror. The Doberman kicked its hind legs out, throwing itself towards Aunt Lorrie's face, but Aunt Lorrie threw her arms together in front of her--a behavior, Sam guiltily thought, had been ingrained into her through eight years of marriage. The Doberman was all open muzzle and teeth, and it knocked Aunt Lorrie backwards as it clamped down on her left arm.

The larger rock lay on the other side of the carcass. Maybe Aunt Lorrie hadn't thrown it hard enough.

This was all her doing, her fault; it was all because of her. And now, she had to do something right.

Sam turned away from it to focus on her weapon, but as she charged forward, something else caught her attention. Amidst the bloody mess that the Doberman had been feeding on, the white skin was barely visible, and Sam realized then that this carcass could very well be her aunt. A human limb, the only remains of the woman who'd survived Uncle Kevin.

They'd come all this way at her insistence. Aunt Lorrie had complained and foretold that this was a bad idea, but Sam had been too fucking bullheaded to listen. She had to save the man bleeding out on the rocks. She didn't have a choice. Reality check--she could've turned back any damn second of the trip, or could've listened to her aunt in the first place and just waited until they got back to the city. But she was too...

Too young, too stubborn, too something.

She snapped forward, swept up the rock, turned and threw it with everything she had. There had been times, competing on the softball team back home, when things got so intense that time slowed for her and she was able to perceive every detail. She could see the rock spinning toward the battle. The Doberman with its mouth agape, going in for another bite. Aunt Lorrie behind a screen of blood. Her arms were streaked in it. Her face showed anger more than pain or terror, and Sam thought there might be hope for Aunt Lorrie yet. The rock hit with a resounding impact, and the Doberman squealed and leapt aside. It looked back at Sam, then bolted away.

Sam ran to her aunt's side. The blood streaked her face, down her neck, and her once-white blouse, especially at her stomach.

"Aunt Lorrie, I'm so sorry."

"It looks worse than it is," she said, grimacing and holding her right arm up.

"But, there's blood all over."

"Sam, I'm alright. It bit me, but I've had worse."

She wasn't howling or wailing as Sam would have expected, so Sam checked her over. Her arm was punctured on one side of the forearm, the other side was unharmed and she was fine everywhere else, but there was so much blood, that the one set of punctures must have been bad. But then, perhaps not all of the blood was her aunt's. The dog had been chewing on a limb. "Aunt Lorrie, we need to at least wrap it. There's a towel in the car."

"No, we need to wrap it now. Use my shirt, I guess. Get your nail clippers. We can cut it enough to tear a strip off."

Sam retrieved her purse from where she'd dropped it and dug out her nail clippers. With them in hand, she huddled over Aunt Lorrie and gestured for the arm.

Something sounded nearby, a barely audible tick like that of the beat-up grandfather clock they'd left in Utah, and Sam searched the other edge of the road. That was too close though, it seemed, for the way the sound had reverberated across the terrain. The doberman would return. There was no doubt. It was still hungry, and as far as it was concerned, they had taken its food.

She looked at the leg. She'd decided that's what it was. A human leg. She'd never seen an arm with thick curls of hair like the one on that skin. Chances were, out in the weeds on her side of the field, the motorcycle driver's torso lay oozing what little blood it had left.

"I'm spooked," Sam said.

Sam clipped and tore the blouse along the right side, then wrapped it once around the wrist. Aunt Lorrie winced, but Sam turned back to the field and did her best to ignore her aunt's pain.

Out there, hidden amongst the grasses of the field, something had ticked. Sam had led them out here, brought them right into the doberman's den, and if the dog was headed back, there wasn't time.

Another tick, this one louder and hollower, and she spotted it at once. About twenty yards out, crows perched upon the rims of

wide plastic baskets. Most dipped their beaks into square bins housing grapes, but one was smacking its beak against the side.

Clack, clack, clack!

"You're hurting me."

"Shh. That bird is head-butting the bin."

Aunt Lorrie looked that way, then said, "It's more like it's cleaning its beak."

That didn't feel quite right. "If it's doing anything to its beak, it looks more like sharpening."

"Stop it," Aunt Lorrie said. "You're scaring me."

"We're both scared. Have you not seen the fucking leg?"

"Leg?"

"That thing the dog was eating. The blood on its muzzle. That's leg blood. I saw some hair."

"Animals have hair."

"But not human skin." She stood and hurried to the side of the road. "You're fine, but all this blood's gonna make me hurl."

She looked down the road. They should've hired movers. If they had, her parents would be here with them, and things would have been so much easier. Her mom was stronger than any of them. She'd have known what to do with the Doberman. She'd certainly have known what to do with Aunt Lorrie's arm.

"Do you think he'll come?" she asked.

"Why do you have to make me think of him?" Aunt Lorrie asked.

"Because I'm thinking all of this was a bad idea."

Aunt Lorrie huffed, then walked toward the other side of the road in the direction the dog had gone. Sam stepped forward, but stopped when her aunt stopped.

"That dog could come back."

"I'll kill it for you, Aunt Lorrie."

Aunt Lorrie was silent. Sam covered her nose and walked toward the leg. This time, she saw the shoe, or the leather sole that remained. There was so much red, the thickness of bone punctuating through it.

Her mother should be there with them. They had the money for movers, but her father had insisted they do it themselves. Stupid when you think about it, since he was the last one who should insist on something like that. He just made her mother do everything. But if he'd kept quiet, they could have hired movers and her mom would be with them to help them figure this out. She cleaned emergency rooms at the local hospital--not so local anymore. She mopped up blood every day, so this would be cake. But instead, Sam was stuck there with her aunt, and she had to have strength.

Before this vacation, before Aunt Lorrie showed up with a knuckled incision above her temple, life had always seemed tame. Dogs were dogs, cats were cats, and the bells chimed in the Tabernacle. That had changed, Sam realized. Even out here in the open, it seemed as if gnarled limbs would pop right out of the earth to trip her or grab at her ankles. More red than she'd ever imagined

seeing. Whatever her mother had that allowed her to clean this stuff up, Sam needed some of it.

It was a bitch of a road in a bitch of a place, and that chill, well, that was a cold bitch too. Sam walked off the edge of the road and removed a flip-flop to release some pebbles that had taken cover under the center of her foot. She had a blister forming on her middle toe.

"Damn it," she said.

She stared ahead, searching for something she couldn't place, feeling as if they'd forgotten something. The car, the motorcycle's handle bar. No. The driver!

She turned and hurried toward the motorcycle.

"Sam, don't go in there."

She continued in, reaching the wreckage in seconds. It was a mess, metal parts fractured and spread across what was probably still weed-stricken land just prior to the accident. Now, it seemed the whole area had been driven to death. The motorcycle itself lay there, gripping the rock like a hand, but the greasy rag she'd seen draping over the seat was now a shirt.

She searched her surroundings, spotting the body almost at once slumped against a patch beyond some green stalks. She approached slowly, cautiously, not sure what she expected to happen. When she reached the stalks, she swiped at them, swiped at some white puffs that clung to them, and pushed them away from the man.

The body of a man clad in leather lay there, one leg missing as the remaining stub pumped blood the color of shit into the dirt. His arms were turned to the side, gripping a bundle of red cloth beneath it. She didn't hesitate, which she knew was stupid even while she did it, but she didn't; she leaned forward and flipped up a visor on the man's helmet. His face was a baseball within, stiff and white, the mouth tight as if it were a stitch holding his face together.

She stepped back into someone and screamed.

"It's just me," her aunt said, but that didn't help.

Sam turned away from the body and strapped her arms around her aunt. "He's dead," she said.

"My god."

Something in her aunt's voice indicated that she was referencing something other than the horror Sam had just seen, but nothing could be more horrific than that.

"My god," her aunt said, peeling herself free of Samantha's arms and moving toward the body. "There's another."

Sam turned around. Her aunt grabbed a hand from within the folded leather and pulled it aside. She poked the red cloth, then stepped aside so Sam could see it. Near the man's chest, brown hair bunched beneath the red cloth, and she realized suddenly that it wasn't red cloth at all, but rather a child's motorcycle jacket. There was a kid there with its face buried in the man's chest. She almost screamed, but Aunt Lorrie held a finger to her lips.

"Kid?" she said. "Kid, are you okay?"

There was no response, but Sam got the picture. Her aunt thought the kid was alive. That wasn't possible. The motorcycle was destroyed. For that matter, the man was destroyed. She didn't imagine the man could have protected the kid.

"Kid?"

"Kid," Sam mimicked. "Are you okay?"

No response, but the kid's head shifted beneath the sheets. Sam moved forward, pushing her aunt aside and bending low.

She was so close to the man, the carcass, the severed limb, the blood. So close to the pumping that she could hear it.

Shloop, shloop, shloop.

A flake flittered past her eyes and settled in the pasty dirt. The snow she'd predicted was finally coming.

Her hands shook, and she swung an arm to the ground behind her to keep herself on her finger. She had to do this. They'd come all the way here for this, so she had to.

"Excuse me," she said.

Jason had once told her a funny thing. He'd been depressed, had threatened to off himself, and she tried to help him cope. His response, curious and leading as it was, caught her off-guard. If you want to cheer someone up, make them think you need their help.

"Excuse me," she repeated. "We're lost. We need to find a gas station."

She went silent, shushed her aunt when she tried to speak.

After a moment, the boy said, "In town."

Sam smiled at her aunt, but lost it immediately. They weren't in a land of smiles. She grabbed some dirt in her hand and sifted it between her fingers. "We don't know where that is."

He looked up at her, a 10-year-old by Sam's estimate, then pointed in the direction of their car. "It's that way."

"I don't think we can find it."

"Why not?"

Sam nodded toward her aunt. "Look at how old she is. She can't remember anything for more than a minute."

The kid grimaced, but Sam understood this for an attempted smile.

"Besides," she said, "I've never been there."

A flake hit Sam on the bridge of her nose, and it looked more like ash than the snow that blew off the Rockies.

The boy looked at Aunt Lorrie, then back at Sam. "How come?"

"I'm from Utah. I just--"

"They killed Hank," the boy said. "They hit us and killed Hank. How could they do that?"

"I know," Sam said, feeling as if she'd already known this, "but can you help us." After all, the motorcycle handle was bent the wrong way, as if someone had hit it from behind. It wasn't a natural accident, which meant it was a hit and run. "If you help us, we'll help you. Show us the way to the gas station."

The boy looked into the man's helmet, and, when the man didn't move or flinch, started crying heavily.

Sam cursed herself for opening it, then reached forward and snapped the visor shut, but there wasn't really a point to it now that the boy had seen.

"What's your name?" Aunt Lorrie asked.

"Hen," the boy cried. "Hank calls me Hen."

"Is that short for Henry?"

"I'm a little version of him. That's what he always says."

Sam reached a hand out. "Hen, will you please help us?"

"I have to stay with him."

"It's not safe," Aunt Lorrie said.

"No, I have to."

Sam wagged her hand at him, tempting him with it. "There's a big dog out here. It'll come back for you."

Hen slid his hand into Hank's gloved hand and gripped tightly.

Aunt Lorrie snatched out for his other hand and began to pull on him, saying, "Don't you understand? We have to go!"

The boy's mouth opened into a big gaping *O*, and he wailed as he fought to keep his grip on his--was it his brother?--but Aunt Lorrie yanked him free and carried him toward the road.

They could have given him a moment. Sam had fought the dog off once, and she could do so again. Tearing the boy away from his brother would make losing him any easier. Sam couldn't imagine that kind of loss, so who was she to drag this kid along with them.

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CHAPTER 5 - WASTING TIME

When Deborah left, insisting she enter the house to call 911, Charles stepped off the porch. She must have known Jacob was dying, so it didn't make sense that she could spare any time to call for help. The northernmost part of North Platte was just east of them, the hospital towards its center. They needed to get their son there, and while calling 911 would get an ambulance moving in their direction, that'd only waste time. He could leave then and there, not wait for her, but she'd been stabbed in the leg. He didn't know how bad her wound was, but she needed help as well. Nothing in the house could give her that help. Calling for help, it'd be at least twenty minutes before anyone made it out there. Charles could make that distance more quickly. And he would, if Deborah were just out here. She was wasting time.

A flake alighted on his nose, cold and wet, and he pulled his arms tighter about him. It was so difficult to think out there. He'd been washing dishes just moments before, and then all of this happened. He'd gotten a bad feeling about the man and the U-Haul the moment he saw them, but Deborah--what was it she'd said? Just ignore them. She'd brushed him off as nothing more than a bad neighbor. Like she brushed off many things. This situation, rare as it might be, is exactly why you don't brush off a bad neighbor or a bad feeling.

"Deborah," he said. "Come on. We have to leave."

A cold, western wind blew into his face. He thought that perhaps the further he was from the front door, the better he'd breathe, so he walked out to the grass. He moved a few steps away from the wall of the porch, then turned and looked back.

Something wasn't right here, as if he'd crossed some barrier that the man had created. He stumbled backwards, as if stung by a scorpion, then fell to his ass. He heard someone laugh, felt Jacob's presence and looked to the car. Deborah had squeezed Jacob out in November, and that made him a scorio. Perhaps it was Jacob stinging him, knowing what he was doing. Knowing Charles had betrayed him by turning his back on the Rodeo to wait for his mother while death swept over him and yanked him out into endless sleep. And if it were Jacob stinging him, that meant he wasn't alive in the Rodeo. Somewhere, he was out there, skittering along in frozen dirt and dew, trying to get back to his body, but never pushing past that western wind. And Charles was there on his ass, never to stand. On his ass, doing nothing about it. But something else caught him like a wave, sliding into place over him, then pulling dirt and grass from beneath him. It was lifting him, he was sure of it. It would grab him up and pull him away from his house and he'd never get back, so he leapt to his feet and ran to the rodeo. Once there, he looked into the Rodeo, and there was Jacob, quivering, shaking his little legs. He turned back to the Rodeo and saw the broken rocker. Jacob was still alive. All at once, he sank to the ground in tears.

"God," he yelled, "get the fuck out here."

"It's ringing," she shouted from within.

Right then, pressing his face up with his palms, he saw Mrs. Lowrance out on Twin Cedars' lawn, and she gawked at him and said, "There's so much blood. I've never seen anything like this. Why'd they do this?"

He wiped tears from his face, then shook his head. From what Charles had heard, this woman hadn't attended her own husband's funeral. She didn't seem like the type to care, yet she was out there now. Maybe because things calmed down a bit.

She began to walk over, her arms straight down her sides, but stopped at the edge of her yard, staring at the dead woman in the street. "Ew! I can't. I have to go back inside. I saw your wife head inside, then you fell down, and I figured I might be able to do something, but I can't do this. I'm sorry."

He nodded.

"If you want to talk sometime, you could probably come over." She turned back.

He was going to let her go, but maybe he needed her. If Deborah didn't come out in the next second or two, he'd take Jacob into town himself, but he wasn't sure he had the composure to handle it alone. He couldn't rely on Deborah, so it was up to Mrs. Lowrance. "Wait! I need your help."

She stopped, but didn't turn to face him.

"I need you. My son is hurt, and I need to get him to the hospital."

She didn't speak. She just stood there, silent as can be, hopefully considering what he was asking of her. But when it came down to it, he didn't know what he was asking of her. That she help, but that didn't say much. She'd already shown him she wouldn't help. Maybe help him up. No, he didn't need some old woman to help him do that; he could do that on his own.

He turned and pushed himself up enough to peek into the backseat where he'd placed Jacob. There was so much blood, but his son twitched around the shoulders and knees. It was small this time, but he had to have twitched.

"There's so much of it," the woman said. "I called 911, but they were busy."

They were busy? But if so, then he couldn't get ahold of them. And if he couldn't do that, his son would be lost. He pictured himself in shiny shorts and a sweaty blue tank top etched with a large white '7' on the front. Nearby, amidst swollen corpses, Deborah would stand, equally bloated, her hair brittle and falling out in clumps, waving her arms like a high school cheerleader, shouting, "Rah rah sis boom bah!" Beside her, Gary would be gripping his son's exposed clavicles like handle bars on a bike, and he'd yank, forcing the boy to raise his right hand and give him a bony thumbs up. And as he approached the yellow crime scene tape at the end of the road, Mrs. Lowrance would cross the path, all grins and giggles, removing the tape to terminate the race. Gary would lean over and clack his teeth against his wife's in mockery of the way the living kiss.

Nonsense. They couldn't be busy. Charles wiped his face again, then composed himself and stood from the ground. "What do you mean?"

She flipped around and averted her eyes from the bodies. "I called and got a recording. Their lines are busy. Either they don't have enough operators, or the weather's really worrying people. Or they have a bunch of this."

A bunch of this. That was a ridiculous, if not terrifying, thought.

"I can't do this," she said again. "I've never seen a dead person other than Richard and my parents. Now, I was on the pot, but came out because I heard the shots, and there are two bodies in the road. My Richard, bless him, went in the night, and there isn't much blood when you do that."

He patted the window and said, "But, my son. Come with me. Get in the car, and we'll take him together. I'd just need you to make sure he's safe while we drive. Make sure he doesn't fall off the seat and keep his head up."

"You're son's in there?"

He nodded.

"I'm sorry. You seem like a nice man, but I can't drive in a car with a body."

"But he's not dead. Not yet."

She turned without a word and headed back up the path to her front door.

He needed this woman's help, but she wouldn't budge. In the end, she would never leave her house. Not until they wheeled her out on a stretcher.

"Deborah, damn it. I'm leaving!" He turned back to the car and considered taking off on his own when movement within the house caught his eye. Deborah was in the hall, heading his way with her cellphone to her ear.

She emerged from the house a moment later, wearing her tennis shoes now, and Charles threw open the Rodeo's driver-side door and climbed in, then reached across and unlocked her door. She came down the walkway and started across the lawn in his direction--and thank God they'd finally get out of there--but then she stopped. She looked about the yard, the road, from the woman's body to the killer's body, the wrecked U-Haul, then back at Charles.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked, but he was behind glass; she wouldn't hear him. He gestured to the passenger door. In his rearview mirror, he caught movement. The man was twitching a few yards up the road, one foot thumping the earth, flopping to either side. A quiver had set into its entire system. Not bone. This seemed to be muscle movement. He'd heard that signals sometimes lasted well beyond a body died. That's what was happening with the man. But it was still disturbing. He imagined the man snapping his head around to stare at him, bare-teethed and ravenous. The man would get up and go at them again, and keep at them until they no longer had the energy to climb in the back of a U-Haul or dodge through a

house. He'd catch them and eat them. That's what would happen in a film. It wouldn't twitch because of left-behind signals, but because of some contagion. But that wasn't really scary. Those things didn't happen outside of films and books. What was really scary, what he wished he could ignore, was that these sorts of things--men so psychological flipped that they pick your house at random, invade it, and try to kill you--these sorts of things simply happened. Not frequently, but they happened. And it'd happened to them. He rolled down the window and said, "Deborah, you need to get in the car."

The snow was beginning to pick up a little. Flakes hitting the ground left a thin film, halos around pebbles. A chill had set upon them and the whole valley, and the temperature would continue to decrease throughout the day. It'd easily be down in the twenties by afternoon, teens by night.

Deborah nodded and started around the Rodeo to sit in the backseat with Jacob.

He looked back at Jacob. The boy twitched, but it couldn't be the same kind of twitching the dead man did. This twitching was of pain. As severe as it was, it wouldn't kill him. They'd be the family on the news that barely survived, and fellow Nebraskans would watch and wonder at how lucky they'd been. There had to be enough time and life in his boy to get him to the hospital.

He started the Rodeo, and as he sped toward the corner, his son twitched just in the bottom of the rearview mirror.

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CHAPTER 6 - SAM, MEET CHUKA

As they left, Hen looked back over Aunt Lorrie's shoulder at Hank, still wide-mouthed and wailing, but Sam knew this was best. Aunt Lorrie had acted impulsively, perhaps, but the pinscher would return and eat the boy if they didn't get him away from the carcass and the wreckage of that motorcycle.

They'd reach the car quickly now, Sam knew, but that didn't comfort her. Her feet hurt, and even another ten yards was too far. Her aunt, on the other hand, still walked strongly. Sam hadn't known her aunt had any strength, let alone the kind needed to keep walking after being part of something so tragic.

But then, Sam thought, perhaps tragedies were something you got used to after a while. She turned to look over her shoulder and down the freeway. Uncle Kevin had tracked them to Hershey, so he'd surely seen them take highway 30. And that would lead him right to them. And if he came down the highway right then, they'd be stuck in the open and helpless.

After a while, Aunt Lorrie set Hen on the ground, and the boy followed along, though he seemed uncomfortable.

Sam fell behind them and watched the boy from behind. A steady slush was hitting the ground now, but it disintegrated on impact.

It was all worth it. That boy would have died out there if they hadn't gone back. Even if Uncle Kevin did come up on them, herd

them off the road, get out and attack them, it seemed to Sam that she would still have been right in making her aunt go back with her. As long as they made it through with their lives, the boy was evidence to that.

She moved back up with them just as they came across the bent handle bar. Hen ran to it and picked it up.

"This was ours," he said.

Sam found it a strange way to express something like that, but she understood the boy. He retained anything he could.

But the license plate wasn't the boy's. It came from a normal vehicle, not a motorcycle. And now that Sam thought of it, the vehicle missing that license plate was likely the one that had hit the motorcycle. She went to it and lifted it, tilting it to spill some moisture to the ground, then flipped it around.

It was a Utah plate. As in her Utah. The one she'd travelled from. There were no vehicles up ahead, and she turned back to verify that the highway behind them was empty. The plate didn't come from the Volvo. Malfunctioning as it was, it had both plates.

"This can't be," she said.

"What's wrong?" Aunt Lorrie asked.

Coincidence would suggest that someone else from Utah had come this way, gotten off I-80 in Hershey and, instead of heading south toward that lake they'd seen, headed north through town and turned east on I-30. But Sam didn't believe in coincidence.

"Aunt Lorrie," she said. "I think this is from the U-Haul."

"What?" Aunt Lorrie asked. She grabbed the plate from Sam, then dropped it as if she'd seen a tarantula on one side.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

Aunt Lorrie wiped her hands on her clothes, then said, "No, of course you aren't. Your dad's a careful driver."

Sam knew what her aunt was thinking though. The older woman knew it, too.

Sam pushed past her aunt and lead on. Her aunt followed her, holding hands with Hen, and Sam swore she could feel her aunt thinking ill of her parents.

She couldn't handle it. If she discovered that her worries were valid, that her father had turned to her mother in the midst of an argument and smashed into the motorcycle, she simply wouldn't be able to handle it. It'd mean her parents had killed someone. More specifically, her father had. And to make it worse, he'd driven off after doing so. Her father was a total dweeb and she didn't like him much, sure, but he wasn't a bad man when she was honest with herself. He provided for them, mostly. He was weird, but sometimes he was funny, even if she'd never admit such a thing out loud. One thing he wasn't was a killer. Him and murder were two ideas that had never been connected in her mind, and she didn't want to start connecting them now.

But the fact of the matter was that she held the U-Haul's license plate in her hand, and that connected her father to the accident and the dead man she'd found. And ultimately, it connected him to Hen,

who was probably out of a father or uncle or whatever that man was to him.

She wanted to have faith, but the evidence was insurmountable.

When the Volvo came in view, she remembered what they'd forgotten.

"Aunt Lorrie," she said.

"What now?"

Sam sighed. "'What now?' You hear how rude that sounds?"

Aunt Lorrie looked away. "Sorry. What is it?"

"I don't think Mom and Dad will come for us." They were silent for a moment, then Sam went to the boy. "Hen, how far is the gas station?"

"I don't know. A ways that way. We should be close."

Sam studied the road ahead, but saw nothing.

"But," the boy started.

"What?" Aunt Lorrie asked.

"There will be some houses first. Maybe they could help."

Sam still couldn't see anything, but they had to keep going.

"What's the street called?"

"It's a road," the boy said. "And I don't know what it's called."

"Do you think that's where the new house is?" Aunt Lorrie asked.

Sam shrugged. It was possible, but it didn't really matter much. They'd either reach a gas station or her parents, and as long as one of

those happened before Uncle Kevin came, they'd be safe. They just had to keep going. That was apparently the theme of their entire trip. First Uncle Kevin calls them, says he's coming for them. Then the accident, and the car running out of gas. And they just had to keep going. Sam wanted a nap more now than ever before.

She pushed past her aunt and led the way toward the Volvo. She paused just long enough to assure Hen that the Volvo was their piece of junk, before continuing past it.

According to the map she'd printed from online, their new home was ten miles out of North Platte, so it made sense that they'd reach it before a gas station. There, she could rule out her parents involvement in the accident and go in the U-Haul to get gas for the Volvo.

They walked a ways further, hugging the weeds to the right for their warmth. Sam hugged herself tighter and felt the chill dissipate for a moment, but she let the chill back in when the first house came into view, and she spotted the U-Haul around it, sunk into a trench just off the road. She looked to her aunt, then quickened her pace.

The U-Haul was on, its engine chugging, and though they couldn't see much from this distance--they were probably a baseball field away--the driver-side door hung open. No one seemed to be in it. Beyond the U-Haul, on the other side of the road, they could see just the corner of another house.

Where were her parents if not in the car? Probably, they'd called for help and stopped at a neighbors house.

Sam remembered her phone and pulled it out of her pocket. There was a dial tone. She dialed 911, then stopped to listen for an operator.

But then she looked at her aunt. Just because she couldn't see her parents, didn't mean they weren't in the U-Haul. Or worse, thrown from it. The door on this side hung open, and it wasn't like her parents to leave a car door open. She imagined the U-Haul veering around the corner, beyond her father's control, skidding across gravel and dirt and leaping into that ditch. One scenario suggested her father's face had smacked the steering wheel so hard it broke his nose, and her mother had helped him from the U-Haul in a hurry. The other scenario, the one she regretted considering, had them both thrown from the U-Haul and across the ground like a rock across a lake. She said, "I'm gonna run ahead," and broke into a run. Behind her, her aunt protested, but she didn't care. She had to reach the U-Haul and her parents.

As she neared the U-Haul, someone stepped out from around it, covered from crown to foot in--surely this wasn't what she thought it was--blood and bits of flesh. Like Hen's older brother back on the highway. But this man--was it her uncle?--was stumbling toward her, so she dropped her phone, stumbled back in kind and reached into her pocket for her knife.

Then, there came a cry from behind her, and Sam turned to look and saw Aunt Lorrie darting into the road toward her. But there was something else. Back down the highway, dirt rose in a line away

from them, kicked up by an approaching pickup truck, filling the highway as far back as Sam could see.

It was her uncle's truck.

She turned back. The man coming at her was a little heavy, perhaps white--though it was even hard to be sure about that given all the carnage--and he wore a shirt with a picture of some kind. God, don't let it be a wolf. Regardless, the pickup truck was just now coming down the road, so this man wasn't her uncle. But he came at her just the same, so she didn't release her grip on her knife. She yanked it from her pocket and flipped the blade out.

Behind blood, the man's eyes flashed down to the blade, and he beamed bright red teeth at her. And now, that smile, those eyes, the way they crinkled at the edges, and the sharp bridge of his nose, she knew this man, didn't she? But she couldn't. It couldn't be her dad.

The man tilted his head upward, formed his hand like a gun, and pointed to a large hole beneath his jaw and to the side of his Adam's apple. He brought his face back down and smiled again.

"Sam," Aunt Lorrie called, but there was nothing more.

"Sam," her father said, but the words felt forced.

"Dad?"

"Sam. You're the one he loves most."

"What's happening, Dad?"

"Dad shot himself after he shot Mom. They're both dead. And the lady and the boy, and the man on the motorcycle. All dead."

"What are you saying?"

He slipped out his tongue and licked his lower lip, then dabbed at his teeth. "I cut a boy's throat," he said, spitting blood off his lip and onto her cheek. "Never thought I'd get to do that."

"Dad, what are you saying?"

He lunged at her, and she swept her arms up in defense. The blade slid into his abdomen, and she instinctively ripped it out. He didn't bleed. There didn't appear to be any blood left for him to bleed out.

"I'm sorry," she said, as if in trouble. "I didn't mean to stab you."

His hands went for her neck, but only patted her chest with two handprints before she screamed and pushed him to the ground.

A shrill squawk sounded above her, and a crow swept overhead, circled them once, then landed in the road a few yards away, skipping twice before finding its footing. Sam shooed it, but it remained.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "I don't know what's happening. What's wrong with you?"

She ducked around the U-Haul, leaping over the ditch and crossing in front of it. Up at the house, an old woman lay on the doorstep with a frying pan in one hand, her face screwed up in anguish. She was covered in blood around her stomach, and her forehead had been smashed--probably with that same pan. But Sam couldn't linger; she had to find her mom.

And she found her. There on the other side, her mother lay in the road, a corona of blood spreading out from her head on the dirt. Sam yelped and darted forward.

"Nina," Aunt Lorrie cried, spotting the body at the same time, and she came to Sam's side. "What's happening?"

"This isn't real," Sam said, and she smacked herself. "Gah! Wake up. Wake the fuck up!"

Aunt Lorrie grabbed Sam's mother and pulled her into her lap. Sam grabbed her mother's shoulder and tried to retrieve her, but her aunt's grip was too strong.

They were struggling for control of Sam's mother when her dad came around the U-Haul and stood out in the street.

"You gotta love the way they bleed," he said. "That's what I told the guy in that house." He swung about to point at the house on the other side of the road, bent at the knees and almost toppled over, but before he could complete the gesture or the fall, her uncle's green pickup truck veered around the corner and smashed into him, and he more or less exploded. Sam and her aunt screamed in unison as the truck screeched forward with the sound of the breaks. A red smear traced its path for several yards before the truck stopped, mangled remains of her father wedged beneath both front tires and the bumper.

Sam sucked in a breath when the pickup's driver-side door snapped open. She sat there with her aunt, sobbing loudly, as her uncle stepped out of the truck and came at them. He studied

everything around them for a moment, a strange confusion, then sudden realization on his face as he surveyed the scene.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked, pointing at Sam's father. "Lorrie, what was that? The man was gonna kill you. Why? Did he go insane? Or did you do something to piss him off?"

"Shut up," Sam said. "Just shut up."

He fell silent and looked around. Sam followed his gaze as it passed between both houses near them. There was blood in both doorways, the woman in front of the closest one.

"Oh God," she said. "It wasn't just them."

"No, it wasn't," Uncle Kevin said. "I saw you looking at that accident back there and came at once. Why would your dad do all this?"

"He couldn't have," she said.

"No," Aunt Lorrie said. "He couldn't have."

Uncle Kevin reached for Sam's mother's head and lifted it to examine the wound. "Your dad's got a gun?"

Sam nodded.

"Well, he shot her. And with that much blood on him, it looks like he shot the others, too. What'd make him do all that?"

Sam recalled her dad lifting his head to expose a hole beneath his jaw. It didn't make sense. He was still up and moving. Besides, he'd never do that.

"Lorrie," Uncle Kevin said. "We have to get out of here."

"You hit him," Sam said. "You ran him over."

"I had to. He would have killed you."

"But you hit him."

Someone cried nearby, and Sam startled, then climbed to her feet and walked away from her aunt and uncle. Hen stood between two trees in the yard nearby, tears streaking his cheeks, his entire body quaking, and upon seeing this, Sam ran to him and took his head to her chest.

"Don't look. Don't dare look," she told him, then turned back to her uncle.

Uncle Kevin stood there, looking at Aunt Lorrie with an exaggerated frown.

"Will you take us into town?" Sam asked.

"That's what I've been saying, but she won't listen. She never does. We've got to go get help."

He was right. They had to get help, but they might be able to get it sooner. She hurried back to her phone and stuck it to her ear. There was a busy signal. She tried 911 again but got the same steady *beep, beep, beep*.

"Since when does 911 get busy?" she asked.

"We've got to go," Uncle Kevin repeated.

Sam nodded in response.

Aunt Lorrie looked at her, her eyes wide. "We can't go with him," she said, and then, "Are you crazy?"

"He has a truck," Sam said, and she went for it. "There's no other way into town."

Hen followed her, and they climbed into the back row of the cabin.

"Lorrie, don't you see this crazy shit," Uncle Kevin said. "Get the fuck up!"

Aunt Lorrie set her sister's head back to the ground and nodded. "We're coming back though."

Sam waited for them to get inside, then hugged Hen as tightly as she could.

#

CHAPTER 7 - INTO NORTH PLATTE

"Jacob. Hang in there, Monkey!"

Deborah jumped at Charles' voice. Jacob had been twitching in her lap, but that stopped seconds after they started down the road. The boy's face glossed over like billowing white drapes slapping naked against a window, and it seemed he actually was dying.

"He was doing fine a second ago," Charles said, pointing to the rearview mirror. He switched to a higher gear and pressed down harder, looking ahead on Rodeo Rd, thinking he didn't want his son to die in a Rodeo on Rodeo Rd. There were a few buildings coming up, mostly warehouses and auto-shops, and he scrutinized each one, just in the off-chance that one had previously called an ambulance and no longer needed it. Ridiculous, but it was Jacob, so ridiculous would do. He studied the rearview mirror.

Come on, Jacob, move.

Not a flicker of movement on the backseat.

"He's alive, right?" Deborah asked.

"What?" Charles asked. She couldn't start worrying now. She needed to keep it together, because it wasn't like he was all that composed. "Of course, he is."

They passed the first warehouse, but there was no life there, as usual. Up ahead, the road curved, and it was after that that they'd catch their first sign of life. It was after that that he could reasonably hope to pass an ambulance or police car.

Flakes of snow began to accumulate on the windshield, not enough to obscure his vision, and with the rearview mirror turned downward, there was no risk of the sun blinding him. Still, a passing vehicle with high beams could blind him, so he clicked the windshield wipers on.

He swerved with the bend of the road. There were two cars at the Quikstop up at the next bend, but the road was otherwise empty.

"What street should I take?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Damn it, Deborah." She was working against him again. Not right then. He didn't need that right then. He had to think! He knew the street.

The problem with this city, a problem that really only presented itself when he needed to get somewhere quickly, was that the Union Pacific ran right through it, separating his third of town from the two-thirds that had a hospital. There was the viaduct in the center of town, North Jeffers, but that was so far out of the way.

There was a cross-street, but he couldn't bring it to mind.

"Take North Dodge," Deborah said.

"What? Why?"

"Take it to 9th," she said. "Look, if you want to get to the hospital, get over to 9th, and you'll see the other viaduct."

Of course, the one on Buffalo Bill. Dodge would be just after the bend.

He drove past the Quikstop, then swerved with the other curve.

The town was so dead this time every year, but this year was particularly bad. People in town had been sluggish, not wanting to leave their homes, and with such a cold picking up, it'd continue that way throughout the winter.

As they approached North Dodge, Charles slowed and readied for the turn. Jacob lay motionless in the back seat, and the Rodeo began to smell of his blood. The thickness of it was something Charles had never experienced. And that brought a thought.

Jacob's twitching really hadn't been all that different from the dead killer's. Charles saw animals twitch well after they'd been disemboweled, but that didn't mean he understood life well enough to distinguish between different kinds of twitching.

"Deborah," he said, his voice nearly lost to him.

"What?"

"What were your plans for the day?" In the corner of his vision, he saw her mouth drop open. "To keep me calm. What were your plans?"

He turned onto West 9th.

"Honestly?" she asked.

"Honestly."

"Sudoku and more sudoku. I had nothing planned beyond that."

There had to have been more than that, but perhaps it was difficult for her to think of it at the moment.

"My plans," he said, "were to get a new sled."

"We already have one."

"No, it broke last year. Remember when Jacob scraped across that rock?"

She nodded and looked out of the window.

"So, I thought I'd hit up Wal-Mart. Snow coming, they're probably stocking them now."

"What are you doing? You think this makes me feel better?"

Charles couldn't speak. This couldn't happen. Didn't happen. Not to people like him. Deborah's eyes were trained on him, reproachful.

"He's okay," Charles said. "He has to be."

When the looming viaduct came into view, and eventually met them, Charles kept his foot pressed on the gas, the muscle in his leg stinging with the effort he exerted as he spun the steering wheel to the right, his cheeks and forehead palish red in the rearview mirror, and he willed the Rodeo to move faster, pressing harder on a pedal that already touched the floor. As he veered around the corner, the left side of the rodeo banged against the barricade on the far edge of the viaduct, ripping the air apart, but he kept it steady and regained his lane.

"Charles, you have to hurry."

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He blew out air to cool his face.

He sped up the viaduct, meeting two sedans that swerved in their own lanes, and he looked back at them as he crested the hill. A horn honked south of them, so he turned back, giving him a view

across the valley. Lit white and grey against a hazy backdrop, the top floor of the hospital breeched the tree line nearly twenty five diagonal blocks away. His stomach rumbled as they began their descent. Not from hunger, but from the gravity playing on him as he took the viaduct at this speed.

On the road ahead, there was only one other vehicle, a small truck, headed toward the viaduct, and it swerved into their lane for just a moment before cutting back across two lanes, hitting a curb and barreling through a wooden fence. It was impossible, simply impossible that so much could be going wrong in one day. He'd normally stop and try to help whoever was in that car, and make sure no one living at that house had been hit, but this wasn't the time for generosity. He'd tried that with the woman in the U-Haul, and it got her shot through the head.

"Oh shit! What the hell is going on?" Deborah asked.

"Hell on Earth--I don't know." He didn't care to make up an answer. He looked in the rearview mirror. "Almost there, Monkey. Hang in there."

The viaduct ended and the street leveled out, and Charles watched for traffic coming down 4th St up ahead.

But he caught another car in his peripheral, coming not from 4th, but from the dirt road separated from this one by a fence to his right--the one that passed beneath the viaduct a block or two back. Metal fencing cracked like glass, then a loud *Thwack* roared and the Rodeo jolted forward and fishtailed. Charles spun the wheel to the

right--perhaps to correct for this, but he didn't know--and the car veered to the right and slammed parallel against the sidewalk. The front right tire burst, and the front of the car collapsed to the street.

Charles slammed on the break instinctively, and the Rodeo squealed to a rest on a sidewalk curb.

"Fuck!" he screamed. "Not this!"

He tried the ignition, but the car didn't start. Behind them was a red sedan, a four-door lump on the road, its front left corner crunched inward, the headlight smashed. A teenaged girl sat erect in the driver seat, smiling and bouncing, antsy in her excitement.

But excitement was not what she should have felt. She should have been terrified. Like how the man at his house should have been disturbed or angry or worked up or frightening or something after cutting his wife in the U-Haul. It didn't make sense. In a normal situation, he would call 911 and his insurance, and this girl wouldn't drive for a long time.

He tried the ignition again, then looked at Jacob who was still and pale in Deborah's lap. This wasn't luck. That was the wrong word. Fortune was wrong, too. There was no word for it, but this girl would get away with this. He reached back and grabbed Jacob's closest hand, which had been touching the floor, squeezed it and gave it a little shake. He spread his fingers in Jacob's palms, hoping the sensation would be enough to bring him awake, but there wasn't the slightest flinch of movement. He wasn't finished though. He brought the hand to Jacob's chest, set it there, then pressed his fingers

against Jacob's neck, just above the cut, and even with that sharp, heavy cold, he flexed his fingers to push them closer to the jugular. There had to be something. Deep there, a slight pulse came to him, though he couldn't be sure now if it was Jacob's pulse or his own. His fingers had to adjust to the slight sensations. Jacob was slipping out of reach. If he wasn't gone, he wouldn't stick around for much longer. He removed his fingers and turned back to the street.

"Charles," Deborah said. "Is he dead?"

"Don't, Deborah. Just don't."

The car came on, and when Charles pushed on the gas, the car screeched loudly against the curb, or on the curb from the feel of it, and skidded along. He turned the steering wheel, hoping it would get off the sidewalk, but the car continued along the edge, and he could feel the resistance as a tightness in the steering. He tried to force it, but getting nothing, he jerked it as hard as he could. The Rodeo slid to the left, then slammed down on the street. The screeching continued.

"Charles, stop."

"Stop it."

They continued to screech along. When the left tire popped with the force of a shotgun and the Rodeo slammed forward, his wife's voice reached him.

"Don't yell at me. Is he dead?" she asked. "Charles, how is he?" She was shaking now, her cheeks quivering, her hands tapping at the grip on the door.

"No," he said, then looked south. He couldn't see the hospital while below the tree line. Jacob wasn't moving. There was just too much happening for him to think properly. "He's got a pulse."

Deborah took Jacob's wrist in her hand, then said, "Charles, that girl. There's something wrong."

Charles turned again to look back at the teenaged girl, pressing down on the break and focusing his eyes through the slush. She raised one hand--please don't wave--and looked at it as if she'd never seen such a thing, pink and green striped fingernails turned toward Charles, before shoving the pointer deep into her mouth. She must be gagging herself, making herself throw up.

Charles pushed on the gas, but it seemed they'd get to the hospital faster walking, so he stepped back on the brake, put the Rodeo in park, and turned the key. He rested his head against the steering wheel for just a moment before sitting tall.

"I'll carry Jacob," Charles said.

Deborah just nodded. Her expression was all mud and stone, but he understood. He'd be the same way if Jacob weren't so close.

No, it wasn't her fault. He couldn't start blaming her for this situation.

He climbed out of the car--some country musician played through the window of a mobile house on the right--and glanced back at the teenager. He was going to point at her, as if to say, "Look, bitch, you're lucky I'm busy," but the girl still had her finger in her mouth. Only now, she appeared to be chewing on it--God, she

couldn't actually be chewing on her finger--and he was going to discount it altogether until she ripped her hand away minus that pointer.

Somewhere south of them, sirens blared.

It's okay, he could figure this out later.

No, he couldn't. A hundred years from now, he'd still be trying. That girl had just bitten off her fucking finger. In what world did that happen? Not Charles' world. But he wasn't in his world now. That much was clear. He didn't know when it'd happened, but he'd stepped through some hole into some Hellish place, where people cut children's throats, crashed cars on purpose and ate their own fingers.

He threw the back door open, then pulled Jacob from Deborah's lap, movements abrupt and haphazard. At the edge of the seat, he pulled Jacob upright and gripped him around his bottom, rooting himself through the street's gravel, bent his legs, and lifted his son into his arms.

"Let's go," he said.

"Yes," Deborah said. "Charles, what's going on here?"

He turned away from her, being careful not to disturb Jacob. The boy was heavier than usual, like when he'd fall asleep in his arms. It seemed he'd put on fifteen pounds in his restfulness. Charles would carry him, though, no matter how heavy he got, no matter how far he had to go.

The red sedan was empty.

Further out, the rail yard was a white, inky mass, shimmering and impenetrable. Above him, dying pink light called to him. He felt his lungs tightening, and moisture hummed heavily in his ears.

"Where'd she go?" he asked.

"I don't know. What's going on?"

"How would I know? Stop asking me that."

He lifted Jacob into his chest and pushed himself along, forgetting all about breathing. The hospital was about thirty blocks when on foot, twenty south and ten across, he told himself. It seemed like a lot now, but North Platte wasn't all that large. He walked more than that during his regular photography outings.

But Jacob was so heavy. A swell of weakness came through which jolted his knees toward the ground, but he stood and cursed and spat before continuing on. Only, this time it would be tougher going. He renewed his efforts, pushing along the street, willing Jacob to hang in there.

It didn't matter. With Deborah wasting time to call 911 at the house, the unhelpful Mrs. Lowrance, and now this accident--it seemed a rift had formed between him and the hospital, a silent recognition of a horrible truth. Charles' muscles hurt, seized up, but he kept on.

He had to fight it, to do something right then to keep going.

Charles persisted, lunging forward, pulling Jacob closer, willing Jacob to open his eyes. Willing anything, a nose, a finger, to wiggle. But the cold, pasty unlife had already invaded his son. The way the

weight resisted his movements, the way it dug into his muscles, pinching and dragging them downwards in strands, the way the pressure built behind his eyes and his lungs threatened to collapse, he knew he didn't have long before he would collapse. He couldn't do anything else.

"Deborah, he's too heavy. Take him from me."

Deborah came to his side and slid her arms underneath. He wouldn't leave Jacob dead and packed in snow, glaring back at him through ghostly-white eyes. But his limbs wouldn't move, his arms stretched to the street, his palms dripping, and Charles felt his insides grow together into one solid mass.

They were lost, indeed. Without Jacob, they were lost.

"He's fine," Deborah said to him.

"I know he is." Charles stopped, as if the pause in this sentence could make everything acceptable, but then he said, "You don't have to tell me he is."

"They'll help him."

Deborah moved along, sluggish, but not borne down. The weight wasn't too much for her. Charles followed, wondering how she was able to carry Jacob when he had become so incredibly weak. She'd always cared more about herself than anyone else, yet now she was the one carrying their boy.

"Chuka."

Charles startled and snapped around to find the teenaged girl near Deborah.

That had come from the teenager, and she waved her bloody hand in the air toward Deborah with no indication that she was aware she was missing a finger. She dropped the hand back to her side and just stood there, her eyes trained on Deborah--Deborah, who held Jacob in her arms, who'd taken Jacob from him and freed him of this responsibility.

"That's what that man said," Deborah said, backing up slowly as if avoiding a dog. Charles had time to think how fucking impossible that was. Deborah's tone suggested she thought the same. Something in the questioning inflection.

"Are you sure?" Charles asked, but there was no mistaking the sound.

Something across the street beyond the broken fence barked, not a dog's bark but something with a man's baritone and a cowboy's twang. Charles turned, half-expecting a dog with a human's head or vice versa--he'd seen so many absurd things that day, so why would that be any different--but instead, a man with a felt cowboy hat and a large buckle stumbled into the newly-made opening in the wooden fence. He was a tall man, maybe buffalo-tall, though Charles wouldn't have a chance to do a comparison. The man stepped forward, then stumbled down to his knees at the gutter as if to vomit. A woman stepped from the yard behind the man and climbed onto his back, slamming her fists into the back of his head, and he howled and tried to crawl away. The woman wrapped both arms around his neck and held on tight, and as Charles continued to watch, the woman reached

upward and gouged the man's eyes out. The man shrieked, and Deborah, who'd been watching the teenaged girl, let out a sound like *EEP!* This was her startled sound.

Chalka! the girl cried nearby. It had to have been Chalka he'd heard this time, the sound had evolved. The man who'd cut Jacob had said Chuka and Chunk and other variations, and now this girl with Chalka; a sound he guessed was common to--Common to what? The man was in a U-Haul from Utah, so he couldn't possibly have had something in common with this girl here. Besides, it hadn't started with the man. The U-Haul had made sounds very similar to this, and it'd seemed as if the man was performing some inarticulate expression of that sound, but that didn't explain this girl.

"We've gotta leave," Deborah said. "We've gotta go to the hospital. Even if--" She nodded to Jacob. "Even if he doesn't make it, we'll be safe there."

Charles turned on her just in time to see the man find his bearings and flip his attacker over. On top of her, he stretched out, feeling blindly for something to grab. As soon as he managed to grab the folds at the front of her t-shirt, he punched her in the left breast, but the woman's single darting knee between his legs was enough to throw him forward into the gutter. The man's hat fell into the sewer, and without it--the man was balding twenty years early--he resembled a maniacal clown Jacob watched on TV--was his name Side-Show Bob? Charles could hear the clink of his buckle as he struggled to stand, see the smear of blood and gutter-grime spreading out from

his sockets, as he used the curb to help him stand. He staggered and steadied himself in the road. With a hand on her breast, the woman climbed to her feet and looked up at Charles, and she had the same genuine smile the teenager wore. A nurturing, best-friend, I'm-here-to-cheer-everyone-up smile--the kind Charles wished Deborah would give him sometime. Side-Show waved at the woman, even at that distance, then staggered and stumbled back a step, right into the path of a green station wagon. As it slammed into him, his body crumpled against its large hood and splattered the windshield with hair and guts. The wagon sped away and up the viaduct.

Move, he thought, but his legs wouldn't carry him anywhere right then. This must be what they called shock, but thinking that didn't make it any more acceptable for him to just stand there and do nothing. Deborah stood there with Jacob in her arms and blood running out of her pant leg and off her shoe. He'd forgotten about her injury. And to think he was the one complaining about Jacob's weight.

Sirens blared again south of them, and maybe seven blocks away, two ambulances and a fire engine sped past.

Now the young girl moved at them, as if she'd been waiting for another set of sirens and a bit of gore, and she almost grabbed Deborah by the right cuff, but Deborah slapped the hand away and ducked around to the other side of the dovetailed Rodeo. The young girl took a moment to take in what Deborah had done, eyes wide, then followed after her, tugging at her shirt with her left hand.

Don't just stand there, dumbass, Charles told himself.

He snapped into action, moving to Deborah's side, grabbing Jacob from her arms. Back the way they'd come, in the farthest side of his peripheral, the wagon swerved on the viaduct and smashed through the protective barrier and flew out over the train yard, causing an explosion of concrete and wire fencing. Before it could hit, Charles hurried around the Rodeo and toward where he'd seen the ambulances, Deborah close behind. They ran as quickly as they could, then ducked as something Southeast of them exploded.

Charles had just enough time to think, that didn't come from the rail yard, before the crunching of the wagon met the explosion. They stood, hunched over, and continued forward. Charles glanced over his shoulder. On the other side of the street, the woman started out into the street and toward them, all smiles and glee. The teenager was also in pursuit; though, tearing her shirt up and over her head, she moved much more slowly. Up ahead and to the left, smoke billowed upward in a pillar and spread outward.

Hang in there, Jacob, Charles thought, I'll get you there.

A mistake of a thought, when it came down to it. His boy's head draped over his arm, the cut held open by gravity, and there wasn't a bit of a pulse left. No pumping of blood as there should be. Jacob wouldn't make it.

Charles wished he had worn his watch in the house, but he guessed it had been close to a half hour. A half hour of his boy bleeding out.

"Deborah, I'm scared," he said.

She came closer to him and kissed him hard--not a passionate kiss, but a sharp, forceful one--and she said, "Be a man."

He glanced back. The two following them had met in the middle of the street and were now locked together, the woman with her hands around the teenager's throat, and she squeezed, straining her muscles to clamp down tighter. The young girl tried to wedge her hands between the woman's arms, but the woman shook her to either side, flopping her head back and forth, slammed her head against the street, then continued to strangle her. And she reveled in this, cocking her face toward them and smiling.

Does this please you? Charles imagined her saying. Does it make you happy?

The woman smiling at Charles, sitting on and strangling the teenager and smiling at Charles, was mad. That's the best Charles could come up with. It's the one thing everyone they'd seen that day had in common. She was mad, the girl under her was mad, the man who cut Jacob was mad, and anyone who'd drive their car over the edge of the viaduct was sure as hell mad.

Deborah cried out, "Where the fuck is the hospital?"

At the sound of her voice, the woman stood and snapped her head around, but they were far enough away now that it would have been impossible for her to catch them. The blood that dripped from Deborah's shoe left a dark and obvious trail behind them, but if they reached safety, that wouldn't matter.

Charles adjusted his arms under Jacob, who seemed much heavier now that Charles' was busy with other things. He pulled Jacob close and kissed his arm.

"Who are they?" Deborah asked.

He didn't have any answers to that. He hadn't met them before, but that didn't really matter. These people couldn't possibly have been like that before that day. Something this insane in the middle of his town would have been obvious.

"Charles?"

"I don't know, Deborah. I just don't."

To the south, another explosion sounded, followed by screams, and Deborah flinched and hunched lower at the sound. Another pillar of smoke rose to the sky, joining the first as they blanketed the sky in dark fluffs. The country music increased in volume, as if someone meant to drown out this insanity.

Charles followed Deborah across 4th St, and down the street on the other side, the woman following them behind. They covered half of the next block, and were just passing an alley when two guys came out at them. One had a grey sweatshirt, the other a parka. Mr. Parka went right for Charles, but Charles side-stepped. A flurry of heavy cloth and wool shot up like a cape as the man went down to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Charles asked.

The other went for Deborah, and she wasn't so lucky. She took his full force and collapsed under him. Charles didn't have use of his

hands, but he had feet. He went to Deborah's side and kicked the attacker in the gut.

But then Mr. Parka shot up and grasped at Jacob, and all at once, the boy was out of Charles' hands and tumbling to the ground. And Charles watched, horrified. When Jacob hit the ground, Mr. Parka crawled over him. Charles kicked at the man, but he didn't budge.

"Stop that!" Charles roared, and he kicked the man more.

And on that kick, his foot caught the parka and threw it aside, revealing two veiny hands gripped tight around Jacob's neck, the thumbs pressing deeply into the wounds. The man grinned like a child caught being smart.

Charles tackled the man, tearing him off Jacob, rolling twice on the ground, and when he came up, he was on top of the man, hands gripped tighter around his neck, and someone else was hitting Charles from behind, but his focus was on the man who'd hurt his boy. He squeezed as tightly as he could, and when that didn't satisfy him, he forced his hand a little tighter. The man's face grew red and hot, and eventually, he stopped moving.

Charles turned then, catching the arm of the one who'd been hitting him. The other man. The other attacker. Everyone in this town was attacking him, God knew why. So he took that man to the ground and did the same as he'd done to the first.

"Please, God, no!" Deborah cried.

She was beside Jacob, trying to hold his neck shut, but the neck had been torn open wider. She lifted his upper body against

her, and there was a limpness to their son that Charles had only seen in dead animals.

"They killed him," he said. "He's dead."

He screamed and fell to Deborah's side.

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