

Furlough logline:

A man jailed for a murder he did not commit escapes in the desperate hope of finding the young son he has never met.

Chapter 1

Eddie Grassle leaned his bicycle against the One-Stop's facade and walked inside, grateful to be out of the late afternoon Florida heat. He felt even more grateful for simply being free to come and go as he pleased. As he perused the aisles, searching for the two items he'd come for, he relished the feeling of the blowing air conditioning—a luxury he'd gone without for the better part of the past five years. Prison walls had ways of changing a person's perspective. No longer did he have to lie on a metal bunk, staring at the peeling ceiling while listening to the collective groans of those imprisoned with him. No longer were watchful eyes upon him as he performed even the most basic of human functions. And finally gone was the near-constant slamming of doors, the clank of keys shutting him away for hours on end, like a specimen in a human zoo.

Three weeks of freedom was a nice start, but it hadn't been enough time to keep from sometimes pinching himself just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

Eddie found the items he'd come here for—a small bottle of chocolate milk and two packages of Jolly Ranchers—and placed them on the counter. Both were things Clarissa had said the boy liked most. She'd told him that just after Eddie landed in prison, during her final visit. He remembered her voice trembling with hurt and rage as she gripped the phone receiver, her

eyes tear-streaked and bloodshot through the inch-thick glass as she'd accused him, among other things, of not even knowing his own son's favorite snacks. And Eddie had silently sat on the other side of the glass, feeling like an asshole as he watched her fight back more tears. Then in a torrent, the tears *had* come, and with a shout of years-old frustration she'd slammed home her receiver and hurried away.

Then again, it was easy to walk away from someone who had never truly been there at all.

The clerk's voice broke Eddie's daydream.

"Excuse me?" he asked, blinking.

"Would you like a bag?" the Hispanic clerk repeated in his heavy accent. He stood quite a bit shorter than Eddie's six-foot-two frame, looking upward at him from behind the counter, offering an affable smile that suggested he'd become accustomed to customers like Eddie caught in the trappings of their own busy lives.

"Yes, please," Eddie said, returning the clerk's smile. He glanced at the electronic date displayed behind the counter—April 25, 2016—feeling amazed at how fast five years could fly by. He paid for his items and walked back out into the blazing late-April sun. Climbing onto his used ten-speed, he began pedaling toward his apartment, taking in the scenery around him. The sky seemed bluer than he remembered, the palm fronds lush as they waved lazily at the air. Springwood, one of many small cities in this part of southwestern Florida, seemed like it had aged twice as fast as he had in the time he'd been away. The vehicles cruising down the roads looked different. Sleeker. Not as blocky as he remembered them being. Even the clothes people wore had changed. Businessmen no longer wore squared-off dress shoes. Young mothers pushing exercise baby strollers down the sidewalks had exchanged sweatpants for new Dri-fit material that clung a little more closely to the body. He took it all in, breathing air that no longer

came stale and putrid from the combined smells of sixty grown men packed together in an area the size of the average family's home. Three weeks since his prison counselor had arranged an apartment for him with the thousand dollars Eddie had saved over the last five years. Located two miles ahead in the worst area of town, the complex lay claim to shady characters and more than a few cockroaches; but none of that mattered, because he could walk up the stairway with its chipping railing and rickety stairs knowing he would fall asleep poor and half-hungry, but at least free.

He came to a street sign that read Humboldt and for a reason he didn't quite understand, he turned suddenly onto it. Ten minutes later he stopped in front of a salmon-colored stucco home on the east end of town. Digging in his pocket, he uncrumpled a scrap of paper and double-checked the address before knocking on the door. *Just five minutes to break the ice*, he thought to himself. *It might make the boy nervous going to the park with a total stranger*. After detouring from his apartment, Eddie had felt confident on the way here. But now as he heard voices from inside, one of them an adult male, he considered hopping on his bike and riding away. He didn't recall Clarissa having any male family members living locally. The thought of the voice belonging to someone romantically connected to her caused old feelings of jealousy to creep into him. He could just come back tomorrow as expected, he reasoned. Besides, that might give him more time to get used to the idea that when the door opened, he'd see another man standing in the place Eddie had always felt he should be.

But he'd hesitated too long. The door swung open to reveal a man in his early thirties with a prematurely receding hairline and a slight gut. Several inches shorter than Eddie, the man gave him a once-over before glancing past him toward the bicycle in the driveway. Confusion showed in his eyes before sudden understanding dawned in them. "You must be Eddie."

Eddie extended his right hand. “Yes sir, I’m Liam’s dad.”

The man regarded Eddie’s offered hand but made no move to accept it. Just then, the door opened more fully, and a woman appeared. Clarissa. Her dark brown hair sat tied back in a simple ponytail, and she wore a pair of cut-off shorts and an old t-shirt that hugged her shapely body. Seeing Eddie, and with annoyance flashing in her eyes, she whispered something into the man’s ear. The man gave Eddie another once-over, this one more disapproving than the first, before disappearing into the house. Clarissa stepped out onto the stoop, leaving the door cracked. When she turned to face him, her eyes burned into him. Eddie felt like he’d definitely made a mistake in stopping by unannounced.

“You’re not supposed to be here until tomorrow,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Do you know how something like this looks?”

Eddie looked into Clarissa’s eyes for the first time in almost five years, unable to believe it had been that long. Tilting his head, he gave her that same sidelong grin he’d given her so many times before, when she’d ultimately folded her anger away over one of his many transgressions, and allowed him to lead her into the bedroom where not long after her fists had gripped the bedsheets. He’d always been able to soften her frustration and anger with that grin; but when she responded this time by folding her arms across her chest and setting her mouth firmly in a line, he stood up straight and cleared his throat.

He motioned toward the door. “Who was that?”

“That,” Clarissa said, “was my fiancé. His name is Roger. He lives here, not that it’s any of your business.” She brushed a strand of hair from her face, agitation causing her cheeks and ears to flush red.

Eddie shook his head. “Your fiancé?”

“Yes, Eddie,” she snapped. “Did you expect me to sit around and twiddle my thumbs waiting for you to get out?”

He huffed. “I didn’t mean it like that. I guess I’m just surprised. He doesn’t seem like your type.”

She laughed a humorless little laugh. “Not my type? I suppose you consider my type men who take the fall for their best friend and get sent to prison just weeks before their son is due to be born.”

Eddie dropped his eyes to the concrete stoop. “Look, I thought I’d stop by on my way home and say a quick hello. Just so tomorrow wouldn’t be awkward for him. But you’re right, I should have called first to see if it was okay. And it isn’t my business who you’re dating.” He sighed, realizing for the first time how it must have felt to be in her shoes all those years. “It’s just that I’ve never seen you with anyone else before.”

“Eddie ten, Clarissa one,” she said with a hint of satisfaction in her voice. “And yes, you should have called ahead first. You’re putting me in a difficult position here, Eddie, and I don’t appreciate it.”

He sighed. “I guess I’m just excited to see him. I’ve had five years to think about what an idiot I’ve been.” He dug into the convenience store bag and showed her the chocolate milk and candy. “I brought him his favorites.”

Clarissa huffed. “I’m shocked you remembered.”

Eddie placed the items back in the bag and took a step closer to her. On reflex she stepped backward, her backside pushing the door slightly open. Flustered, she closed it to just a crack again. When she turned to meet his eyes, her expression betrayed some long and painful memory that until now had lain dormant.

“I want to be a part of his life, Clarissa. I know you’ve moved on, and I can’t blame you for that, but a boy needs his father and— ”

She raised a hand to cut him off. “You had a choice, Eddie, and you chose your friend over Liam and me. Life is about doing things right the first time. I used to sit and fantasize about you being able to go back in time and choose us. But I realized, you would just do the exact same thing. That made me feel like a fool, Eddie. I refused to lose you *and* myself at the same time.”

Eddie shook his head. It was as if his life, like a pot of soup, had been left to slowly simmer during his five years away, leaving nothing but a charred and inedible lump. Five years—nearly one-fifth of his life up to this point—and all he had to show for it was a bag of sweets he couldn’t even give to his son when he wanted to. Looking at the sky, he spied a hawk circling high above. He watched as it glided in the airstream like some graceful avian sentinel. As it disappeared into the clouds, Eddie felt his own insignificance fall over him like a shroud. He knew then he’d never get her back.

“You’re one hundred percent right,” he finally said. “I fucked up. I wish like hell I could go back and make it right.”

Despite being almost a foot shorter and seventy pounds lighter than Eddie, Clarissa had always shown a fiery spark that had more than made up for it. It had been what attracted him to her the most, more so even than her good looks. And if he hadn’t already known that he’d blown any chance with her, what she said next only confirmed the fact.

“It really doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’ve moved on. I raised Liam the best way I knew how, and I finally met someone who was willing to be there. You’re a passionate person, but your passion is unfocused. Jules is a perfect example. You went to *prison* for him, for God’s sake. Even I knew those drugs weren’t yours.”

Eddie silently stared at the ground. He could sense what was coming next and didn't want to see the look in her eyes when she said it.

"I made a promise to myself I'd never bring him to see you in that place, and I kept it. Know that if you ever choose anyone else over him again, especially Jules, you'll lose him forever."

Hearing this caused him to meet her gaze. "Just give me one chance," he pleaded. "I won't let you down again."

She cemented her eyes onto him, consideration showing in her furrowed brow. After some time, she brushed away tears that burned fresh in her eyes and said, "I promised him he'd get to see you and I won't go back on that. But you need to know I talked to a lawyer, and he said you'll never get full visitation rights if I don't agree to it."

Outwardly, Eddie kept his expression even and nodded. But inwardly, he felt like doing backflips.

"Tomorrow, ten o'clock," she said. "I work at one and need to drop Liam off at the sitter's by noon. Don't be late."

"Okay, I won't," he promised, his heart racing. As he turned to leave, she called out to him.

"Eddie, wait. There's something I'd like to say to you. I waited five years to say it and it's important I finally get it out of my system."

He turned back to face her, the smile on his face faltering a bit.

"After Liam was born and I was still in the hospital, I started bleeding that first night," she said. "They checked me and said I'd have to have an emergency hysterectomy. I almost died. When I woke up the next day, I remember you called me from jail. It was a Sunday morning. I remember because there were church bells ringing somewhere close by. You asked how the baby was, but you didn't even think to ask about me. I hung up and told myself I'd never talk to you

again. That I'd never let you see Liam. He was my angel, and since I'd never be able to have any more children, I wasn't going to let you put a stain on the one I did have." She drilled her eyes into him. "Don't make me regret letting you see him, Eddie. Don't make me feel like I did in that hospital room. Most of all, don't ever let Liam down like that. If you aren't serious about this, please just turn around and don't look back."

Eddie felt something lurch inside of him, like a piece of him had just broken free and had floated away into a hidden recess of himself. He realized that Clarissa meant every word. Remembering what she'd said earlier about undoing the past, he imagined stepping into a time machine right then and going back to the night he and Jules had been stopped by the police, when the cop had found the bags of dope in the glovebox. How Eddie had immediately claimed them as his, despite the fact he hadn't known a thing about them. Eddie felt if he were able to undo that, he would see her smiling at him now, proud of her son's father, instead of looking so skeptical. But he knew that wasn't possible. No time machine existed. Even if it did, he'd probably find a way to fuck that up as well. The simple reality was he stood on the wrong side of the front door, and all the regret in the world would never change that. He wasn't just a stranger to his son—he realized he barely knew even himself.

"I won't let you down," he managed, his voice seemingly not his own. "I don't deserve it. Thank you for giving me a chance with him."

"Don't thank me, Eddie," she said with a sigh. "I'm not doing this for you. And you're right, you don't deserve it."

The sound of Roger's raised voice came from somewhere inside the house. Clarissa sniffled. "I have to go," she said. As she slipped through the door, a high-pitched giggle rose from a

nearby room, and then there was nothing but a closed door and Eddie standing there on the stoop, his hand extended toward it. Toward the only important thing he had left in his life.

Tomorrow.

Chapter 2

A silver Mercedes convertible pulled into a riverfront gated community and parked in the circular brick driveway of a sprawling Spanish-style home. Alan Ashford, wearing a suit and carrying a leather briefcase, stepped from the car and stood beneath the shade of a royal palm. Removing his sunglasses, he regarded the mansion before him and sighed. How in the world the man he had come here to see could afford such a lavish home was beyond him. Public servants received notoriously low salaries, even such a high-ranking attorney as his soon-to-be host. Prior to making the trip, Ashford had done his homework. He'd been unable to identify any other source of income or investments for the enigmatic homeowner—Mathias Hood, appointed State Attorney for Florida's 21st Circuit, rumored to be in contention for higher state or even federal office—other than his publicly listed salary of one hundred forty-two thousand dollars. Yet somehow, the man had managed to buy the sprawling riverfront property for three million dollars cash just the year before. Champagne taste on a beer budget.

The two-story home sported an expansive red tile roof that protected its four thousand square feet. Even though Ashford had never visited the house before, he knew from those who had that a large custom swimming pool in the shape of an eagle head sat in the backyard. The pool alone, built after Hood purchased it, had reportedly cost a cool two hundred thousand.

Ashford stood on the stoop for several moments, pondering how he would begin his speech. He'd been given orders to have no mercy, and that under any circumstances Ashford was to end the meeting having either willingly received Hood's resignation from office or forcing it. It

would be tricky, but Ashford held faith the job could be done. Once the governor wished to have a thing done, be it officially or not, he expected it to be executed without deviation.

Taking a deep breath, Ashford rang the bell. Mechanical chimes sounded through the house's interior. When no one answered, he rang it again. Finally, a looming shape approached from behind the beveled glass door. It opened to reveal a towering, well-built man in his late fifties. So, this was Hood. He had never seen him in person, and despite already knowing the stories of him being a physically imposing person, Hood proved even more so in the flesh. He stood bare-footed, his bathrobe hanging open to his navel to reveal a surprisingly chiseled chest and abdomen. A towel hung in one hand, and Hood used it to wipe beaded perspiration from his perfectly bald head. Standing before him, the man regarded Ashford with eyes so black and cold the latter felt an instant uneasiness pass over him, a feeling he wasn't at all accustomed to as the chief aide to the most powerful man in state government.

"Alan Ashford, Governor's office," Hood said. "You're early." He held out a hand. Ashford accepted it, surprised by the power behind it.

"Traffic from Tallahassee was lighter than I expected," Ashford explained. "Is this a good time?"

"Of course," Hood said, showing Ashford inside. "You'll have to excuse my lack of formality. I just got out of the pool—the doorbell sounds out back also. Swimming is such great exercise, I think. Care to join me? I've got some spare trunks you can borrow."

Ashford blinked, unsure of how to respond. But then Hood's expression softened, and he laughed good-naturedly, leading Ashford down the corridor to the study at the rear of the house. "We can talk here," he said, sitting behind a large desk and offering his guest a seat opposite it. "This is my favorite room in the house." A smile touched his eyes, brightening them briefly. As

Ashford settled into his seat, he looked out toward the oversized, eagle-shaped swimming pool, and to the sparkling river beyond. Moving his eyes around the room's interior, he observed a man's painted portrait hanging on the wall directly behind Hood's desk. He detected a strong resemblance between the man in the portrait and his host.

Hood noticed his guest's appraisal and was seemingly pleased by it. "My father," he said without turning to look behind him. "The greatest man I've ever known. He taught me many things, most of all conviction." Emphasizing this, Hood placed a plaintive hand over his heart. A whimsical expression washed over his face before it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Ashford's confidence had been high during his drive here. Now it wavered. Effectively firing a man in such a lofty position—one that held such esteem and political clout—would not be an easy thing to do. He would have sympathized with anyone else in his position. Yet the state attorney had to know this visit was not a social call. Hood appearing so relaxed and in such good spirits only increased Ashford's trepidation over the job he was about to perform.

"Care for a drink?" Hood asked, motioning to a bar against the near wall.

"No thank you," Ashford said, deciding to get straight to the point. "Mr. Hood, concerning the fact you failed to provide—"

"Special aide to Governor Braxton for the past two years," Hood said, the interruption flowing naturally, as if Ashford had requested it. He stood and fixed himself a glass of scotch served neat. "Harvard School of Law with dual master's in business and political science. Most people would assume someone in your position would aspire to national politics. My money says you wish to remain at the state level, no?"

Ashford waved his hand, passing on the question.

“I could only afford state law school myself,” Hood continued, retaking his seat. “I find the Ivy League a bit limiting—snobbery is almost a prerequisite for admission. But I won’t hold your choice of schools against you.”

Ashford shifted uneasily in his seat. He searched his mind for the next part of his speech—something he had rehearsed many times during the drive—but drew a blank. Why he had become suddenly nervous, he didn’t know.

“Where are my manners?” Hood said, smiling graciously. “I interrupted you. You were saying I have failed in something.”

Ashford cleared his throat. “Yes. Well—as you know, the deadline has passed for you to provide litigation data to the governor’s office. Yours is the only circuit in the state to fail in this mandate. You were even given a sixty-day extension, something not normally granted. The governor is frustrated, to say the least.”

Hood calmly sipped his drink. Warmth spread through his chest as his eyes moved past his guest to the river and its shimmering surface. After a moment of silence, he nodded to himself, as if finally deciding among a selection of courses to take. “I am a man of few trifles, Mr. Ashford. Life is short, and I believe we must take seriously those things that are pleasurable to us. Does that make sense?”

Ashford offered a polite smile but said nothing. He had heard of Hood’s proselytizing, his philosophical speeches on law and life in general. Several colleagues in the capitol had spoken of being held hostage by one or more of these sessions. Ashford had laughed at the stories. He did not laugh now.

“I know the reason you’ve been sent here,” Hood said, his smile disappearing. “Governor Braxton has instructed you to ask for my resignation from office. Perhaps *ask* is too soft a word.”

Ashford shifted in his seat. “Well, to be quite direct, Mr. Hood, yes. But not until the end of the legislative session several months from now. As you know, the outgoing state attorney is still on official suspension, which of course is how you came into the position. Since state law permits the governor to appoint a replacement either temporarily or permanently, the length of that replacement is entirely at his discretion. The governor values your time in office. It has been nearly two years, far longer than most attorneys will ever see at that position during their lifetimes. The governor is prepared to offer a generous severance of sorts, even though he has no obligation to do so.”

The sun turned the pool’s surface into a twinkling blanket of light. Hood kept his gaze fixed on it, his expression betraying no emotion. As he sipped his scotch, he allowed what his guest had said to settle in the air. After some time, he sighed and said, “Please show me what you have.”

Hood watched Ashford reach into his briefcase to first remove a file, then set it on the desk. He read its contents twice while his guest waited patiently, before placing the file back on the table. “This is very generous of the governor. And you are correct on two fronts. He does in fact have the authority to approve or, in my case, rescind my appointment. He also is under no obligation to offer a severance.” Without realizing he did so, he began to twist a large ring on his right ring finger.

Ashford took note of the ring’s center-mounted, cheap red stone and judged it to be of little value. Surprising, considering the opulence that surrounded every other aspect of the man’s persona.

What Hood said next caught Ashford off guard. “And what if I choose not to resign my position?”

“Then...then you will be immediately removed by the governor’s order,” Ashford responded. “Your office will be cleared out first thing Monday morning. Worse, you will never receive the support of the governor or any of his officers again. Call it the difference between a nasty divorce and an amicable one. The choice is yours.”

“The choice certainly does seem to be mine, doesn’t it?” Hood said. He held up an exploratory finger, the way a man might do when suddenly discovering a way out of an impossible trap. “But what if I had a *third* choice?” He continued turning the ring around his finger. “Do you want to know how I came into possession of this ring, Mr. Ashford? I believe you may appreciate the history behind it—if you will indulge me.”

Accepting his fate, Ashford bowed his head.

“When I was ten years old my life changed forever. My father had been returning home from work when he stopped at a drug store to buy my mother a set of sewing needles that she’d asked him to get the day before. Unbeknownst to him, the store was being robbed.”

Ashford glanced at the portrait. “And he was killed in the process.”

“Indeed,” Hood said matter-of-factly. “Thirty-four years of honest living and caring for his family in God’s name, and his life was extinguished in an instant. The robber was a junkie looking for quick cash. Thirty-four dollars is what he got. A dollar for every year of my father’s life. They caught the man several blocks away and he went on trial, which I attended. I’ll let you guess how it ended.”

Ashford understood where this was going. “He was acquitted.”

“Correct again. I take back what I said about you Harvard boys.” Hood clapped his hands. “‘Not guilty,’ said the jury. They were unwilling to send a man to prison on flimsy evidence. No gun was found. The many storm drains in the area were swollen with summer rains and could

have easily carried it away. The only witnesses had been the elderly clerk who died the following month from a heart attack and an old woman who'd forgotten her bifocals at home."

"Did the robber make a statement?" Ashford asked, irritated at himself for being sucked into the story.

"Even better—he confessed. But the police failed to read him his Miranda warning. This occurred in the early days of the law's passing, and the local police did not figure it to be an issue. How wrong they'd been. The jury never heard his confession since it had been thrown out. Ten minutes after the verdict was read, the man who gunned my father down walked right past me, a free man. As he did, he winked and tossed me this—" Hood held up his hand, showing Ashford the ring on his finger. "My mother didn't see the exchange. I pocketed the ring and later crept to the barn and hid it. That next summer, when my father's grave had grown over with grass and the worst of my mother's tears had dried, I removed it from its hiding place and slipped it onto my finger. It was much too large at the time, but boys grow into men." Hood's eyes moved from the ring to his guest. "Call it morbid fascination for my father's death. From that day forward, I knew where my life would lead."

Unsure why, Ashford felt his pulse quicken. Hood leaned forward in his chair, his black eyes flashing like daggers as they moved to the rhythm of the story.

"Before you leave, Mr. Ashford, I'd like to show you something that may add clarity to our situation." Hood reached into a desk drawer and removed a manila envelope. He placed it on the desk in front of Ashford and motioned for his guest to open it.

Ashford's imperious expression melted away as he opened the envelope and began to look through its contents. At first, he'd been confused as to the nature of the photographs inside the envelope. They'd captured a man and woman in fairly innocuous frames—holding hands at a

cozy restaurant, riding together in a gondola down a Venetian canal, embracing in a secluded park. As Ashford continued looking through the photos, sudden recognition dawned on him. His eyes widened as he flipped through the photos more rapidly, his mind racing. How could it be? He recognized the man in the photos as being none other than Governor Braxton himself. Worse, Ashford also recognized the red-headed beauty with him. As he should. The governor had paid Ashford a generous bonus over the past six months to keep the woman a secret, after all. He had gone to great lengths to ensure the governor's wife, the press, and anyone else who may have an interest in knowing about the risky affair remained completely in the dark. A politician engaged in a romantic relationship with a woman other than his wife was nothing new in the annals of politics. But complicating the issue was precisely *whom* the governor had chosen to have his affair with—the wife of his own lieutenant governor.

Aside from the photos, the envelope contained printed cell phone logs and text message screenshots. Ashford read through the first few pages, feeling increasingly nauseous. There existed no doubt in his mind these came from the governor's own private account. Using false identification and a disguise, Ashford had taken the extreme measure of activating the phone line himself, honoring the governor's wish to have him personally take care of the matter in hopes of eliminating as many connections as possible. All that planning had now been rendered useless. Because of a woman. Or more precisely, because of the governor's insistence on continuing his affair with this *particular* woman. As Ashford continued to read, his disbelief turned to panic. Not only was the governor now poised to suffer a scandal of epic proportions, but Ashford himself would certainly be dragged into it. His sights set on an eventual appointment to a coveted state cabinet position, he'd be ruined if the affair, and his involvement in it, came out. His two children thrived in private school, and his wife had become accustomed to a lifestyle the

Tallahassee political scene provided. Ashford himself enjoyed golfing with society elites and had recently smoked smuggled Cuban cigars with several state Supreme Court judges. All of it would evaporate if the newspapers and political talk shows had their way with him.

“What...what is this?” Ashford asked, his voice sounding weak.

“I think you know perfectly well what this is,” Hood responded, his voice that of a parent scolding a child. “This is a business meeting between two men who each have something the other wants. Tell me, Mr. Ashford, what is the price one would pay to keep every personal and political achievement they had ever worked for, or ever hoped to achieve?”

Ashford stared back, speechless.

“An extremely talented woman, from all accounts,” Hood continued, relishing in his guest’s anguish. “Former model and once runner-up in her state’s beauty pageant. Smart too, seeing as she is currently head of her husband’s Public Relations committee. Ironic, don’t you think?”

Had Hood not clearly been the bigger, stronger man, Ashford could have reached across the desk and strangled him.

“I’ve taken the liberty of gaining access to the cell phone application you installed,” Hood went on. “Or should I say, the application your *alter ego* installed. Unfortunately, you weren’t able to alter your fingerprints, either physical or digital. They connect you to the application, and the application connects you to the user of the account.”

Hood smiled a mischievous sort of smile, his perfectly white teeth like a row of alabaster tombstones in his grave of a mouth.

“How on earth did you get this information?” his guest managed.

“I’ve found that information is much easier to obtain by being the eagle in the sky rather than the rabbit on the ground.”

Despite a gust of warm air blowing in through the open French doors, Ashford shivered.

“What do you want?”

“Not too much that should trouble the governor. I need only to retain my position in this circuit as state attorney, for the duration of Braxton’s term and the next should he be re-elected in November. In the unlikely event he is defeated, I will require he give his expressed written endorsement of me to the incoming governor. As my father once said, ‘The winds of destiny blow strongest for those who set their own sails.’”

Ashford looked to the portrait that hung behind Hood and noted the subject’s resolute countenance. It seemed to him then that even from beyond the grave the elder Hood appeared to inhabit his own painted form. “I will pass along your proposal to the governor,” he said. “Given the circumstances, I am sure he will consider a compromise.”

A ladybug fluttered through the air and landed on a desk-mounted cigar humidor, complete with Hood’s vast collection of lighters and butane fuel canisters. Extending his hand, Hood allowed the tiny creature to crawl onto his finger. Bringing his finger up to eye level, he pressed his thumb firmly onto it. An audible popping sound could be heard in the near-silent room. When he lifted his thumb, he studied the insect’s smashed remains before pulling out a silk handkerchief and delicately wiping his fingers.

“I’m afraid a compromise will not do, Mr. Ashford. Governor Braxton will withdraw all plans for my replacement at once. There will be no deviation from my demands. I will require an answer in the next half hour.”

Ashford’s mouth hung open. He sat speechless, ruined, and utterly defeated.

“These are changing times,” Hood went on. “One must resort to methods not conceived of by our forefathers as they huddled in candlelit rooms, scribbling laws with sharpened goose

feathers. If Lady Justice becomes lost in the dark, Mr. Ashford, it is up to others to step forward and light her way.”

Five minutes later, after completing his phone call with the governor and assuring Hood his demands would be met, Ashford gathered the contents of the envelope and stashed them despairingly into his briefcase.

“Excellent,” Hood said. “Now I’ll continue my swim. Please be so kind as to show yourself out.”

Hood stood and untied his bathrobe. It fell to the flagstone floor, revealing his exquisitely chiseled body covered only in a red speedo swimsuit. Ashford stared, feeling himself blush as he averted his eyes toward the darkening river that lay beyond his tormentor’s towering form.

Hood walked out the doors and dove into the pool, his body gliding beneath the surface for half its length before resurfacing. He backstroked to the far end before switching to a breaststroke on the return lap. Ashford watched him for several minutes, unable to make his legs move. When he did manage to find his feet, he hurried down the corridor and out the front door as if chased by a ghost. As he sped away past the manicured lawns and expensive homes that stood behind them, he gripped the steering wheel much more tightly than he had when he’d arrived not thirty minutes before.

Chapter 3

Eddie climbed back onto his bicycle and pedaled away. He made it home ten minutes later. The one-bedroom apartment went for seven hundred a month, half of what he made at his job at a printing factory a mile from where he lived. He'd saved nearly every penny that he'd made at his prison job (at a rate of two dollars a day) in order to secure a roof over his head. Most newly released inmates weren't so lucky—if you counted a roach-infested rat trap lucky. And since thieves in this neighborhood were notorious for cutting bicycle locks, he did as he had since buying the bike and carried it up the single flight of stairs. Parking it just inside his front door, he flipped the deadbolt and collapsed onto the cheap recliner he'd recovered from the side of the road the week before. Intending on taking a short nap, he instead fell into a deep sleep.

He dreamed he was a kid again, playing a video game in his bedroom, when his mother entered. She'd been crying recently. Walking to the window, she pushed aside the curtains and stared out in silence. When Eddie asked her what the matter was, she told him she could never be happy again until he won the game he was playing. The character in the game had to search a maze for his father, who had left them just months before. Yet the harder Eddie searched, the further he got from finding him. He'd been in the middle of an especially difficult level when the ringing telephone startled him awake.

He rubbed his eyes and checked his digital watch—five past ten. Instantly, his heart froze inside his chest. Panicked, he jumped to his feet and ripped open the drapes. Streetlights glowed fluorescent orange and the moon hung in the night sky. Relief washed over him as he realized he hadn't slept into the next morning. He picked up the relic of a cordless phone and read the caller

ID: Restricted. Probably Jules again. Apparently, he hadn't gotten the clue. He'd called over twenty times in the almost three weeks Eddie had lived here. How he'd gotten his number, Eddie had no idea. And each time Eddie had let the call go to voicemail. On each message he had left, Jules had doled out one of his trademark offerings:

Hey retard, drop your dick and answer the phone. I wanna hang!

Really, Eddie, I'm starting to get the impression you're avoiding me. Don't make me stalk you. I'm an excellent stalker.

So, is it the prison thing? Damn, man, that was way cool of you to do that. Epic how you never snitched on me. I don't even know if I could have done that for you. The fucking truth, bro. Now come see me so I can buy you a drink and tell you about all the girls who've been asking about you, you big handsome devil!

Jules. The only true friend Eddie had ever had in this world, despite the fact the guy had stupidly agreed to transport a large amount of prescription pills for his dealer. That fact had only been eclipsed by the fact he'd decided to run a stoplight *after* picking Eddie up.

The phone stopped ringing. Eddie set it down and prepared to listen to the voicemail when it rang again thirty seconds later. Same restricted number on the ID. This time, and for a reason even he wasn't sure of, Eddie answered.

"Hello?"

"There's my favorite person in the world. I thought you'd fallen off the edge of the earth!"

Eddie rolled his eyes. "Hey, Jules. Um—what's up?" With a sigh, he sat back down on the recliner.

"What's *up*? It's been like five fucking years since I've talked to you, and all you can say is 'what's up?' Let me come see you so we can catch up."

Eddie groaned. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jules. It’s a long story, but I’m sort of in a difficult position now that I got out.”

A short pause from the other end, then, “Let me guess, does the reason start with a ‘C’ and rhyme with Blarissa?”

“Look, Jules, I’d really love to have you over, but—”

“I’ll pick you up and we’ll hit the Nest then. Problem solved.”

Eddie winced, knowing Jules’s well-practiced habit of talking his way around obstacles had just boxed Eddie into a corner. He started by telling him that he couldn’t do that either, that there were a hundred different reasons why, but before he knew it he’d been talking on the phone for a half hour, even laughing several times. Jules was good for that. A natural gabber, and hilarious to boot. When Jules asked again if he could pick Eddie up so they could grab a couple beers, Eddie finally found the courage to tell him no.

“So, it *is* Clarissa,” Jules said, his voice casual and loose. “I get it. If I were in her shoes, I’d say the same thing.”

“Thanks for understanding, man,” Eddie said, expelling an audible sigh of relief.

“It really is too bad we can’t meet up one last time,” Jules said through a mouthful of food. “You know, to formally say goodbye after being friends for so long. But I get it, Clarissa has the final say.”

Eddie shook his head. “Clarissa doesn’t run my whole life. I can do what I want. It’s just that I have a huge day tomorrow and need to wake up early.”

“Next you’ll be telling me you need to stay in to watch *Wheel of Fortune* while your dentures are soaking. Your loss. If Clarissa changes her mind and lets you choose your friends, you know where I am.”

Before Jules could hang up, Eddie blurted out, “Hold on.” He paused. “I suppose it wouldn’t be that big a deal to meet up for a beer or two. For old time’s sake.”

“Now you’re talking. Want me to scoop you up?”

“Thanks, but I’ll catch a cab. Just got my first paycheck from my new job yesterday.”

“Gotcha,” Jules said good-naturedly. “Meet you there in twenty.”

Hanging up, Eddie looked dumbly at the phone, wondering how Jules had done it. A queer feeling came over him, a faint sense of dread that drew itself along the edge of his conscience like an icy finger. Staring at his apartment wall, he shook the feeling away. “He’s the best friend you’ve ever had,” he said to the wall, his face stoic. “You’re allowed to tell him goodbye in person.”

He showered and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. As he opened the door to leave and checked for his wallet, he spied the worn black and white photo he’d carried with him while in prison. An old snapshot of his father and grandfather, from when his dad had been a boy. Carrying the picture had become an unconscious habit of sorts, so much so that Eddie had already forgotten about it as he tucked it into his back pocket and bounded down the flight of stairs to wait for the cab. When it arrived, he slid into the back seat and enjoyed the drive through cozy Springwood streets he hadn’t seen in years. They passed the city water tower, onto which he and Jules had once climbed with bottles of beer stuffed into their pockets; the old drive-in theater; the familiar eateries and shops Eddie had visited more times than he could remember. He missed Springwood—too big to be called a town, too small for a city—and told himself he’d never leave willingly.

Five minutes later, the cab deposited him at the Rat’s Nest, a loveable dive to its many local patrons. Fronted by a flickering green neon sign, its exterior brick walls and blacked-out

windows stood evidence to countless graffiti artists who had used them as a canvas over the years. Inside fared little better. The wood paneled walls were bare in spots, most of the barstools didn't sit straight, and the felt on both pool tables was stained with beer and Lord knew what else. The restrooms had doors that wouldn't lock properly, forcing users to hold the door closed with one hand while they did their business with the other. Finishing off the dive tableau, a smudgy print hanging just inside the front door depicted a scantily clad woman bending over a race car, a lollipop hanging seductively from her mouth.

Eddie knew the place well. He'd seen more wild nights inside the bar than he could count, albeit drinking illegally. Even underaged he'd frequented the place, and because he'd kept quiet and never caused trouble he'd been served. The waitresses, two of whom he had dated, all knew him on sight. Most of the regulars treated him like their adopted family member, a big reason the Nest had felt like his second home over the years.

As he stepped into the smoke-filled space, his previous concerns over Jules melted away. Clarissa's words of warning were quickly replaced by a collection of sights and sounds he hadn't experienced since he'd gone to jail. Winking waitresses, clinking glasses, groups of bar patrons—some familiar, some not—and the mixed aroma of peanuts and beer hit him strongly. Music from the jukebox pumped a rhythmic classic rock beat. Feeling a familiar adrenaline surge through him, he scanned the crowd for that most familiar of faces.

Eddie caught sight of him at the furthest corner of the bar. Jules had his back turned, spun around on his stool as he chatted with a pair of women. Even from a distance he looked skinnier than Eddie had remembered. Other than that he looked pretty much the same, down to his sleeveless t-shirt and spiky haircut. Although it had been half a decade since he'd seen him in the flesh, Eddie felt like it had only been a few days.

Eddie plopped down on the stool next to Jules and waved for the waitress, a short-haired brunette he'd briefly dated. Rhonda. She'd been working the last night he'd been here, the day before the 'incident.' Walking toward their end of the bar, a faint look of recognition in her eyes, she asked him what he was drinking.

"The usual," Eddie said above the music, not acknowledging his friend beside him. Hearing Eddie's voice, Jules spun around on his stool but kept his gaze straight ahead. He calmly sipped his beer, the hint of a grin appearing at the corners of his mouth. Rhonda, for her part, smiled in full recognition now and began pouring a beer from the tap. She sat the foaming mug down in front of Eddie and rested her elbows on the bar, her breasts blossoming from her low-cut shirt.

"Long time no see, handsome. You just get out?"

"Yeah. The slammer wasn't for me, and I wasn't for the slammer," he said in his best Italian wise guy impersonation. "By the way, you seen a skinny, rat-lookin' fucker around here lately?"

Grinning and playing along, Rhonda shook her head.

"This guy, he's a real asshole, you know," Eddie continued. "But I feel sorry for the schmuck 'cause he has a little dick and he's kinda slow upstairs. I promised I'd drop by and have a beer with him since nobody else can stand him." Eddie gave Rhonda a wink.

Beside him, Jules still hadn't flinched. He continued to sip his beer and stare straight ahead, unmoved.

"I do believe a gentleman who fits that description came in a while ago," Rhonda said, her voice playful. "He's around here somewhere..." Her eyes made a dramatic sweep of the place until they fell squarely onto Jules. She looked at him expectantly, but he continued to sip his beer as if nothing were amiss. Lighting a cigarette, he took a luxurious drag and said in an aristocratic British accent, "What a coincidence, my dear, for I too seek a certain gentleman with whom I am

to imbibe. You know, whet the whistle, share a bevvy with an old chum sort of thing.” He gave Rhonda a wink. She rolled her eyes and giggled, clearly enjoying the charade.

“Perhaps you’ve seen the poor fellow. He’s tall, well-built, and enjoys servicing strange men in darkened alleys. Not particularly intelligent either. Like any noble Englishman, I offered the poor chap a bit of charity by meeting him here. Have you by chance seen him?”

Rhonda looked between them both, stifling her laughter as best she could. For a moment both Eddie and Jules continued to ignore each other, until Jules suddenly jumped from his stool and embraced Eddie in an enthusiastic, bony bear hug. Eddie had just taken a drink, the contact causing beer to splash onto the bar top and across his lap. He slapped Jules’s back and Jules slapped his. Remembering the elaborate handshake they’d created during middle school, Eddie performed the ten-part routine flawlessly. This elicited an impressed laugh from Jules, who plopped his hands atop Eddie’s shoulders and gazed into his eyes as if his old friend had just rescued him from a deserted island.

“You guys are too much,” Rhonda said with a laugh. “Where’d you come up with those voices? They’re really good.”

The two sat on their stools and took long pulls from their beer.

“When you grow up poor like we did, you have to invent your own games,” Eddie explained. “One of ours was trying to see who could do the best impressions. We did lots of them, and I got good at it. But Jules is better, sad as it is for me to admit.”

Jules made a showy bow, complete with an exaggerated hand flourish. “It’s not easy being so awesome,” he said, his expression smug.

It wasn’t until now that Eddie noticed Jules’s heavy metal t-shirt hanging over his thin frame much more loosely than it would have five years ago. His trademark hole-filled black jeans,

usually tight, had a certain bagginess Eddie didn't remember seeing before, and even the boots on his feet appeared to be a size larger than needed. His normally tan skin seemed more fallow, and his eyes sunk into his face a bit deeper than they once had. Eddie *had* seen him this way before, in the year before Eddie had gone to prison, when he'd graduated from weed to pills, and ultimately to meth. Eddie began to say something about his old friend's appearance but decided against it. Surely Jules had learned his lesson. Besides, he wouldn't be hanging out with him again anyway, so he figured it wouldn't really matter.

Ignoring another patron hollering for a drink, Rhonda lowered her eyelids as she leaned even further across the bar toward Eddie. "I've missed seeing your face here. Maybe I can see it at my place after I get off work."

"I'd love to," Eddie said, "but I have plans in the morning and need to get to bed." He smiled meekly at her, feeling his cheeks and ears redden. It had been almost ten years since he'd felt himself blush. "I've missed seeing your face too," he said. "It's weird. Even after five years, this place seems the same. The people too. Except you—you're even prettier than I remember."

Rhonda pointed to Eddie as she addressed the collection of bar patrons. "Take note, gentlemen. *That's* what a woman likes to hear. Not that she has nice tits." She winked at Eddie then left to tend to the waiting patron down the bar.

Jules slapped a hand on the back of Eddie's neck. "Jesus, I really thought you'd broken up with me," he said, grinning. "And to think, all because of a woman you're not even fucking anymore. I'm glad you finally came to your senses, bro. I thought I was gonna have to start leaving boiling rabbits on your stove."

Eddie took a long pull from his beer and wiped foam from his lips. He stared down at the stained and scratched oak bar top, feeling that sense of faraway dread rise inside him again.

“Jules, you can’t say anything to Clarissa about meeting up with me. She’s serious about it. You’re a big reason she’s so upset.”

“Little old me?” Jules shot back, placing a hand over his heart. “Clarissa is hot-blooded. Cuban *and* Irish. Those kinds of chicks have it baked in their genes to get mad. But it does make for a good screw. Christ, I really did envy you. But she’s a control freak, man. A woman shouldn’t make a man choose between his friends and his kid. It isn’t right. This is America, the land of opportunity. We have drive-thru restaurants, computers in our phones, and websites where people meet up to piss on each other. Stand up to a woman or she’ll never respect you.”

Rhonda passed by and overheard the last part of what Jules had said. When she gave him a playful sneer, he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at her.

“Yeah, I guess,” Eddie said, only in half agreement. “Clarissa is letting me take Liam to the park tomorrow. It’s kind of a big deal.”

Jules almost fell off his stool. “Holy shit! What happened, the ice queen finally thawed out? I didn’t think she’d ever let you see the little bastard.”

“I told you, I had to promise to get my life in order. I told her I cut off all my old contacts. Shit, I even admitted that I haven’t had sex with anyone since her.”

“Regrettable. The sex part.”

“I’m serious, Jules. I have a job and a place of my own now. It takes most people like me twice as long to get that squared away, but my prison counselor was a big help. Maybe someday Clarissa will trust me to take Liam for a whole weekend. I signed up to work overtime so I can save for a car.”

“And in order to see Liam you told her you’d stop being friends with me,” Jules said, resignation in his voice. “That was part of the deal. You had to break things off with me for

good, not just for a while. Me, the only person you have left in the world who's ever been there for you. Jesus Christ, your own dad walked out on you when you were, what, twelve years old?"

"Ten."

"Whatever."

"I just want a normal life for a change."

"And you deserve that," Jules said, raising his glass in a toast. "I respect the shit out of you for what you did. They should make a movie. With my priors, I woulda done twenty years. I remember the cop raising his eyebrows like he was asking me if I was gonna let you do that. I felt so bad afterward I couldn't bear to look you in the eye. That's why I never came to see you. The worst thing is, I know I couldn't have done the same for you. You're a stronger person than me, bro. I've always thought that."

Eddie turned to Jules and suddenly wondered how life would be without him. The guy had been right about one thing—he *had* been there for Eddie. Despite the trouble they'd found, with no other living relatives for Eddie to count on and only random flakes posing as friends, through it all Jules had been rock steady at his side. He'd been like the old man in Rocky Balboa's corner, the one who listened to Rocky's shit but stood by him no matter what. Eddie eyed the large scar that started above Jules's right ear and angled harshly across his cheek. Seeing it always brought up feelings of guilt. To his credit, Jules had never thrown the cause of the scar in Eddie's face. Nonetheless, Eddie still felt tremendous shame over the years-ago fight he'd gotten into with a drifter, how he'd gotten the better of him until the guy had pulled a knife and started slashing. How Eddie had become pinned on his back with the knife only inches from his throat, when out of nowhere Jules had come running and tackled the guy. And finally, as Eddie had picked himself up off the ground, breathless, he'd seen Jules lying in a heap next to a garbage

dumpster, his face a bloody mess but the drifter running away down the street with his own knife stuck in his side. Jules. That goddamned Jules, sitting up and laughing like a madman, his face slashed open and bleeding like a faucet.

Eddie blinked the memory away and drained his beer. “You’ve been my only family, Jules, and I can’t thank you enough. Don’t think this is easy for me. But I stay awake at night wondering what my own son looks like. I just don’t want to wake up one day and realize I missed my last chance.”

Eddie removed the aged black and white photo from his pocket and placed it on the bar top. In it, a grinning man of about thirty knelt next to a boy who looked not much older than three. “My dad, the kid in the picture,” Eddie said, showing Jules. “It’s the only picture I have of him. My mom got rid of all the other ones after he left. About a year later, I was looking through an old shoebox in the attic and found this one tucked away in a notebook. She must have missed it. I hid it in my bedroom until the day she died. I think she would’ve torn it up right in front of me if she’d found it.”

Jules motioned to Rhonda and pointed to their empty glasses. “This really sucks for me, but I get it. Remember that girl I was seeing right before you went away, the one with the nose piercing?”

“Which girl with the nose piercing?”

“Touché. Okay, the one with the blue hair and the tattoo of her ex-boyfriend’s face on her ass. Don’t tell me you forgot that story.”

“Her eyes rolled back in her head when you guys had sex and you’d make funny faces at her without her knowing. Yeah, I remember.”

Jules turned ninety degrees on his stool so that he faced Eddie directly. He placed one hand on Eddie's shoulder and gave it a good squeeze. All around them, the bar livened up even more than when Eddie had arrived. From the jukebox, Mick Jagger crooned about needing shelter, and patrons hollered and laughed as the combined drunkenness of the place seemed to double in the space of just a few minutes. "Well, the day she broke it off with me, she told me she'd only dated me because she was trying to get over her ex-boyfriend. She actually told me that. Said she thought of him every time we screwed, even bought me clothes the dude used to like wearing."

Eddie turned to look into his friend's eyes. "Damn, bro, that's shitty."

"It's okay, I'm used to people using me then throwing me away."

"But do you see what you're doing?" Eddie said, becoming annoyed now. "I'm talking about my kid, and all you can talk about is some chick you used to screw."

Jules hung his head and smiled sardonically. "Jesus, bro, I'm pouring my heart out here and all you can do is ram your Dear John speech down my throat. I get it. You and I are through being friends. I can accept that. I kind of resent you for it, but I'm a grown man and I don't need to be preached to."

Eddie nodded. "I'm sorry. You're right. That's the second time I've been an asshole today."

"Thanks for saying that," Jules said, appreciative. "That part about you being an asshole. Because you can be, you know. The whole world doesn't revolve around Edward Grassle. You're not the fucking sun."

"I said I was sorry."

"Apology accepted." He pulled out an empty pack of cigarettes and groaned. "Anybody got a smoke?" he asked several nearby patrons. When none of them said they did, he rolled his eyes. "I was born in the wrong generation. Fifty years ago, everyone smoked. You go for a check-up and

the doctor is sitting there with a Marlboro in his mouth. I can only imagine.” He looked dreamily toward the ceiling and sighed. “Anyway—my story. So this chick breaks up with me and is telling me about how she’d used me to get over her ex, blah blah blah. Like a dummy, I offered to walk her to her car, and do you know what she says to me?”

“She offered to fuck you one last time?”

“Yes!” Jules exclaimed. “Told me we were still through but wanted me to fuck her really good one last time.”

Eddie pushed away the gnawing feeling that had begun to grow inside him. He wasn’t sure if the beer or the entire mood of the conversation was to blame for the creeping uneasiness. But just the act of talking with Jules distracted him from all that, as it always had. For all his faults, the guy had a disarming nature he achieved through basic conversation. Despite everything he’d gone through, including missing five years of his life because of the guy, Eddie already knew he’d miss talking with Jules the most, that good conversationalists didn’t grow on trees. “Did you do it?”

A look of self-righteousness spread across Jules’s face. He seemed to have been waiting for the question. “Of course not! I told her to look in the mirror while she fucked herself with a dildo, then she’d sort of be fucking her ex-boyfriend. She just stared at me with her mouth open. I laughed as she drove away.” Jules beamed proudly, appearing like someone remembering their first kiss or some other pleasant, long-ago memory.

“What’s it supposed to mean?” Eddie asked.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Jules responded with a shake of his head.

Eddie shrugged. He suddenly felt very tired. He wished he were home on his recliner, drinking the last beer in his refrigerator and falling asleep to ESPN. He couldn't get home fast enough.

"I told you that story because that was the only time in my life where I felt good about myself," Jules said. "You and me, we're not that different. Your dad skipped town and your mom croaked a few years later. My mom put me up for adoption and never cared two shits about ever finding me. My dad could've been a hundred different schmucks. Then I meet you and I see we're not that different at all. Except for my much larger dick, of course."

Eddie gave his friend a light-hearted punch to the shoulder. They both laughed.

"We did so much together," Jules continued, his voice dreamy. "I know we got in some trouble over the years and that some of it was my fault." Eddie gave him an incredulous look. "Okay, maybe most of it was. But I'm really not a bad guy. I wish Clarissa could see that."

There it all was in a nutshell. For the first time in his life, Eddie understood just how much doing the right thing could feel good and bad at the same time. Signaling for the tab, he watched Rhonda saunter over and set the bill in front of him. Before he could pick it up, Jules placed his hand over it.

"Nuh-uh, buddy. This is on me. Besides, you've got your son to worry about now. And from what I've been told, the little fuckers are expensive these days."

"Thanks," Eddie said, feeling something stick in his throat. "For everything. I'm glad you understand. Once I get back on Clarissa's good side and there's a little water under the bridge, maybe things will change."

“Say no more, old chap,” Jules proclaimed, snapping back into his British accent. “As we Englishmen say, a man must know when to grasp the nettle. A fair crack of the whip, I do say, is all we ask in life. One last toast, old boy?”

They clinked glasses. Jules performed the salutation. “To love and to lose, ‘tis better than to never have loved at all.”

After each of them drained their beers, Jules dug into his front jeans pocket. He produced several bills, as well as a small, cylindrical object that he quickly concealed in his fist. Eddie eyed him and started to ask what the object was when he changed his mind. *Stop it already*, he thought. *He’s a grown man, so treat him like one*. As soon as Jules paid the tab, he stuffed the object back into his pocket. Telling Eddie he needed to use the bathroom, he returned five minutes later with a noticeable bounce in his step.

“Let’s beat it,” he said, leading Eddie out into the parking lot. Eddie lingered behind, having detected something different in Jules’s eyes, something off. The usual liveliness in them had been replaced by a strange urgency, as if something alien now inhabited them, something bad. But he pushed the thought away, remembering the glazed looks in his fellow inmates’ eyes. Loneliness mixed with depression and the knowledge of a wasted life. Deciding to let Jules be, that it wasn’t worth hassling the guy any more than he had, Eddie waved goodbye to Rhonda and pushed his way out the tinted double doors. He climbed into the passenger seat of Jules’s ragged out Mustang, content to enjoy the last few minutes he felt he’d ever have with his old friend. As they cruised along familiar-looking streets, he took in the sights and sounds of his old stomping grounds. A host of memories flooded back to him as they drove in silence, the radio providing a melodic backdrop to the Mustang’s grumbling engine. Shops and eateries that he and Jules had visited since high school. An old neighborhood where an ex-girlfriend of his had once lived. All

of it brought him a sense of peace and belonging, something he'd gone without for the past five years. Soon they pulled into a parking lot, and it wasn't until Jules said something about popping inside for a pack of smokes that Eddie realized they were at the same convenience store he'd been at earlier in the day.

Eddie ruminated on friends coming and going from a person's life, sometimes like a leaf on a glass-smooth lake, gently floating away from shore. Other times, their exit felt akin to a submerged seashell violently uprooted by a wave and pulled away by the current. Eddie wasn't sure which of these applied to his own relationship with Jules. Although it was over, a bittersweet feeling swept through him as he realized the death of one relationship made possible another. Enveloped in his reverie, he noticed Jules reach behind the passenger seat and fumble through an old duffle bag, but he thought nothing of it.

"Look at the moon," Jules offered, keeping his hand inside the duffle. "It always looks so much bigger when it's full."

Eddie craned his head to look up at the moon, half-shrouded in clouds. As he did, from the corner of his eye he noticed Jules quickly bring his hand from behind the seat. When Eddie turned back to look at him, Jules was smoothing his t-shirt over his waistband. And despite the cool evening, he'd begun to sweat profusely since they'd left the bar, Eddie thought. Even at night, this part of southwest Florida could feel like a veritable swamp, but tonight prevailing winds from the Gulf forty miles away had brought with them the final vestiges of the northern winter. He actually felt a bit chilly, but he reasoned this away as well, knowing he'd just spent five years languishing in housing units that had regularly reached ninety degrees due to most of Florida's prisons not having air conditioning. But tomorrow was forecast to be a great day, with highs in the seventies. Perfect weather for a father to take his son to the park, he thought.

A smile touched his lips.

“Be back in a jiffy,” Jules said, jumping out of the car. The front of his shirt read ‘*One Sexy Mofo,*’ and as he got to the store’s front door, he adjusted the hem of the shirt once more before slipping inside.

His mind on tomorrow, Eddie turned the radio volume up. A favorite Zeppelin song of his, “Ten Years Gone,” blared from the car’s speakers. His smile grew, despite an old memory that resurfaced in his mind just then. One of a ten-year-old boy, having just thrown a baseball against the side of an old shed.

Shading his eyes from the blazing summer sun, he leaned in from the makeshift pitcher’s mound and shook off a sign offered by his imaginary catcher. The boy’s target—a square box etched in chalk on the side of the storage shed, located twenty yards from the house. With an imaginary right-handed batter standing at the plate, the boy’s last pitch had been about four inches outside.

Coming to a set position, he glanced over his left shoulder to check the imaginary runner on first base. The boy had walked him on five pitches. Winding up, he hurled a fastball. The ball slammed just inside the upper portion of the chalked box—a strike. A puff of white dust floated into the air as the ball rolled halfway back toward the mound. The batter, a real bruiser who had hit a double his last at-bat, connected with the pitch in the boy’s mind, sending the ball into the right-center field gap. The boy raced into the outfield (a half-acre-wide lawn which extended from one side of the unattached garage into an open field beyond) and screamed at the imaginary centerfielder to throw him the ball. ‘Cut off, cut off!’ he hollered, holding out his mitt as he waited for the relay throw.

'Cut off! Cut off!' he screamed again, and unlike last inning when the centerfielder had made a throwing error, this time he hit the boy with a perfect throw. With the game tied, the baserunner rounded third. Spinning, the boy unleashed a fake-throw home. Without breaking stride, he sprinted to home plate where he became the catcher. He imagined the runner sliding feet-first, kicking up a cloud of dirt as the throw came in on one bounce. Swiping his mitt in a looping, downward arc, the boy placed the tag. The likewise imaginary umpire stood off to the side to get a good look at the play, and for a moment he made no call. The boy turned to show the ump the ball in his glove. Nodding, the ump made a downward punching motion, signaling the runner out. The boy raised both arms in triumph, his imaginary teammates mobbing him in celebration. The crowd—thirty thousand strong in his mind—went wild.

The celebration over, the boy looked back toward the house. He'd been waiting for over an hour for his father to come out and pitch to him, but the screen door had remained closed, nothing but the sound of the television coming from the living room. His father had promised to play for several days now, and each time he'd either been too tired or his back ached from a long day of work.

Just as the boy turned to head back to the mound, the screen door screeched open and banged shut. Heavy footfalls coming down the front steps—his father, he knew the footsteps anywhere. The boy felt excitement surge through him, figuring his father had finally decided to join him. A baseball bat would be propped over one shoulder and he'd be wearing that sideways grin of his. 'Sorry there, Eddie,' he would say, handing him the bat. 'Had to let the old back loosen up a bit first. I'll pitch. Try not to hit it too far, huh?' And then he'd ruffle Eddie's hair like he always did, before taking his place on the mound.

Instead, Eddie turned and saw something strange. Instead of walking toward the field where Eddie stood, his father walked toward his truck parked on the gravel driveway. Instead of holding a baseball bat over his shoulder, he held a suitcase in one hand and a duffel bag in the other. He tossed them both onto the truck bed and stood there for a moment, as if deciding something. Eddie frowned. Today was Sunday, and Eddie had heard of no plans for the family to make a trip. Even if his parents had decided to travel on such late notice, surely his mother would have already called him inside to pack his things and wash up. As Eddie stood watching his father climb into the driver's seat and start the engine, the sound of the screen door opening again caused him to look back toward the house. Another curious sight. His mother stood in the doorway looking toward the driveway, one hand covering her mouth. Was she crying? From this distance, Eddie couldn't tell. Either way, his gut told him none of it was good.

As his father put the truck in gear he turned and made eye contact with Eddie. He raised one hand in a sort of half-wave. It seemed to Eddie as if he were saying hello and goodbye at the same time. And then, almost as if those waving fingers themselves had thought, they folded into his palm one at a time, and then his father looked away. Eddie's gut fell further. Unlike the many times before when his parents had fought and his father had stormed out of the house, not returning until the wee hours of the night, this time seemed different. Eddie opened his mouth to yell out, to protest—you were supposed to pitch to me, can't you just pitch one inning to me and then you can leave and I won't even say a word, I promise—but no sound escaped him. His mind spun with a thousand different thoughts and emotions. Yes, his parents had been fighting much more often lately. And yes, several times Eddie had glimpsed fresh bruises on his mother's face, her shushing him when he'd asked what had happened to her. And each time Eddie would lay

awake in bed, listening to the sounds he'd become accustomed to—the settling house, the crickets in the darkened fields, his mother's soft weeping coming from her room down the hall.

Now, after his father's truck disappeared down the long gravel driveway, Eddie sat down cross-legged on the pitcher's mound. He did not move. He did not speak. After two hours of watching for his father's truck to return, he heard the screen door open and close. His mother came and sat down next to him in the dirt. Her arm slid around his waist and she hugged him close to her body and they stayed that way, silent except for his mother humming an old nursery rhyme she'd used to help Eddie sleep when he'd been a baby. She didn't speak for some time, but when she did her words came like a whip across his very being. 'Your father will never come back. Maybe when you get older, I'll tell you more. Now it's just you and me, and you're just going to have to be a man quicker than I imagined.'

The air smelled of ragweed and orange blossoms. Late afternoon gave way to dusk, and mother and son sat that way until the sky faded into deep blues and violets in the west.

At one point, Eddie said he felt funny inside, like something was missing from where it should have been. His mother said she felt the same way, but that it wouldn't last forever. She would have been worried if he didn't feel that way, she said. Then she kissed the top of his head and went inside, where she made him his favorite homemade blueberry pie for dinner. Told him it would be the only time she'd allow such a thing. With his mother silently watching, Eddie ate the entire pie himself, washing it down with a half-gallon of milk. When he finished, he helped wash the day's dishes then played in his room until his mother came to tuck him into bed. She stayed longer than usual, smoothing out his rumpled hair. When she left, Eddie lay awake for hours. He listened to those same night sounds, watched the way the moonlight made shadows dance across his ceiling. He wondered many things. Why had his father decided to leave, and where had he

gone? He wondered if he would ever want to play baseball again, and if it would ever feel the same to him if he did. But most of all, he wondered what his life would be like when he woke the next morning, if the sun itself would look somehow different as it streamed through his bedroom curtains.

When sleep finally came to him, he dreamed of a giant train in the sky that went on as far as the eye could see.

Eddie blinked the memory away, returning to the present scene as he sat alone in the Mustang's passenger seat. The song continued its rhythmic beat and melody. It had always made him think about life, about missed opportunities, about how a person could gain perspective after missed time.

Most of all, it reminded him of how a person could *change*.