

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

RID OF ME

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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By

GEORGE LANG
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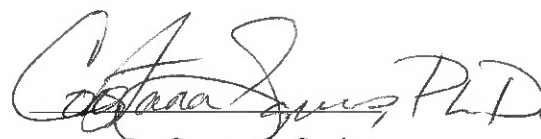
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Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

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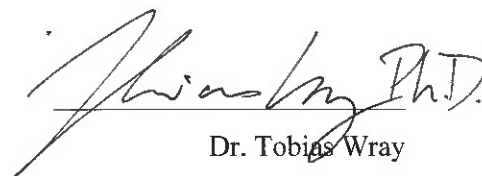
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Chapter 1

Ridley Royko did not want to hear his mother and father planning his future in their bathroom, but he had no choice. They spoke in a calculated stage whisper on this Saturday morning in mid-May, sounding conspiratorial for effect, and Ridley thought Mom and Dad could do with a little workshopping on their subtlety. Barb and Roger always spoke loudest about Ridley's lack of excellence at the tail-end of the semester, around the time Bainwood High School mailed out official correspondences and Ridley began lurking by the curb, waiting for the postal truck, anticipating the moment to dash to the street and intercept anything bearing letter grades or proof of truancy.

"He's eyeing the goddamn mailbox," Barb said. "It's started — like in January, the little asshole nearly pushed me down on his way to the street, mumbled something about the Columbia Record and Tape Club, and I just know I saw him shove something down the front of his pants. Shifty little grifter. If he would just try at anything, Ridley could be a child doctor."

"A pediatrician?" Roger said.

"No, like *Doogie Howser M.D.* He could be a young president, or one of those weirdos on *60 Minutes* who can tell you what the temperature was on this day in 1943."

"Those aren't weirdos, Barbara — those are autistic people. Look, Ridley's just lazy. Remember when we were buying the new upstairs toilets a while back, and he couldn't stop talking about those bidet things? He's so lazy, he can't even wipe his own ass," Roger said.

"You need to call Colonel McGinty today and see if they've got a bunk open at St. Julian's. I hear there's always kids washing out of the program. They get sick or break

an arm or something. Teach him some structure, discipline, respect for us — maybe — for a change?” she said. “They might get skinny boy to stand up straight for once — half the time, I think he’s trying to turn into a question mark.”

Ridley sat silently in front of the Sony console, the one his father bought not long after Ridley was born, watching a reporter do a live stand-up on the south oval of his school. A photo of Melissa McCayless from the 1992-93 yearbook flashed on screen. He listened intently to his parents while trying to make it look like he was catching up on the unfolding drama surrounding his classmate.

“Guess you’re shipping out, dumbass,” said Cam from his perch on the sofa, elbow-deep into a Cap’n Crunch box. “I get the big room, you get to clean toilets, soldier.”

“I wouldn’t start picking out your New Kids posters yet,” Ridley said, looking over his shoulder to give his 11-year-old brother a go-to-hell look.

“I’ll do whatever I want, ‘cause you’ll be walking around with a shaved head in green pants while I’m living it up like Macaulay Culkin: home a-fricking-lone,” Cam laughed, spraying a light aerosol mist of sugary corn onto his pink-bellied corpulence. Ridley pulled off his tube socks and chucked them at his little brother. One fell into the cereal box.

“Can you, for once, shut *that thing?*” Ridley said, gesturing baroquely toward Cam’s mouth. “Really cannot hear anything they’re saying over your bullshit.”

“You’re going to be living bullshit,” Cam said, flipping the tube sock out of the box. “Send me a postcard from scenic Kansas.”

To Ridley, Cam arrived in this world fresh from the womb to provide a nasty color commentary on his life. A second child of the first order, Cam experienced less of the rigid, micromanagerial parenting style Barb and Roger imposed on their first son. For the previous 15 years and change, Ridley felt that he must have been switched in the postnatal ward, a careless mistake in which one skinny baby with unruly hair was neighbors with a similarly ectomorphic *doppelganger*. He did not look like them — he was tall and thin, and these Roykos were stout folk of the prairie. Cam was in the family tradition, bombastic and unusually attuned to Ridley’s anxiety and vulnerability, lizard-brained like a *Jurassic Park* velociraptor.

“So,” Barb said from the bathroom. “Tuition is reasonable, includes room and board – what the hell is board, anyway? I always hear that, and I imagine somebody giving you a whack in the head with a two-by-four.”

“I think they’re referring to feeding them, but I’ve never really looked into it. I’ll ask the colonel when I call him. But does Ridley really need something this... extreme? I mean, Ridley? It’s not like he tortures animals or breaks into pharmacies.”

“Glad to see you have such high standards for our son,” she said. “If you’re so concerned about Ridley’s feelings, I’ll just let you do all the screaming when the grades get here, OK? Sound fair, Roger?”

“No, that’s completely your department. Specialty, really,” Roger said. “I’ll call as soon as I get to my desk.”

“If you don’t, then you’re next, Roger,” she said.

“What the hell does that even mean?”

Having received an earful, and tired of pretending to watch the story about his missing classmate, Ridley stood up and looked at his bare feet and bare torso, then bent down at the sofa, grabbed a tube sock and stared at Cam.

“If you say anything,” he whispered, “then I’ll come back and force-feed you this sock, you understand?”

“What are you babbling about, private?” Cam said, spraying a little more peanut-buttery spittle.

“This.”

Ridley whipped the sock at Cam’s face, sprinted for the front storm door and threw it open, dashing headlong for the mailbox. He took one last look into the dark, dusty receptacle for any envelopes marked Bainwood Public Schools and glanced back at the front door to see Cam in the doorway, flipping him off. Ridley shot a return finger at his little brother and started running – swift and steady in a way that surprised him, like he suddenly discovered a superpower. He passed Wilbur Purvis’ house as the retiree padded out for his daily issue of the *Tulsa World*, his ancient, toothless schnauzer yapping as Ridley’s breathing got louder.

“Damn kids and your track and field events!” Purvis yelled, laughing and shaking his newspaper over his head. “Hey Ridley, shouldn’t you have some shoes on for jogging?”

“This is how the Kenyans do it!” Ridley said, pausing to pet Sheldon before picking up the pace again. “You have a super-spectacular day, OK?”

“Will do,” Purvis said. “Remember, son -- steady breathing.”

Ridley bolted from the house spontaneously, in shorts and nothing else, out of sheer terror of life at barbed-wire-and-vultures patch of cracked earth in western Kansas, where crusty veterans who enjoyed the sadism of military culture could torture children with impunity, and those children could torture each other with similar impunity. Rail-thin but no track star, Ridley's athletic frailty became more apparent as he pumped out increasingly painful strides: on his way past four suburban yards down the hill toward Juniper, Ridley's burning lungs reminded him that he wasn't on the track team, and halfway up the next hill to the Willow Creek Estates entrance, his feet reminded him that his Reeboks were under his bed back home. And by the time he reached the brick-and-iron neighborhood sign and he spied Blanca Molina leaving with her mother in their Mercedes-Benz station wagon, his self-consciousness over his bony physique reminded him that he was only wearing a pair of cobalt-blue, corduroy Ocean Pacific shorts. They made only the briefest eye contact before Blanca turned to her mom, then pointed at Ridley and seemed to be laughing. He managed a weak wave to the brilliant and beautiful girl he worshiped every day while failing geometry class, but then the Benz wagon turned down Elmwood, its exhaust filling Ridley's burning lungs.

"Are you kidding me?" Ridley choked as he slowed to a halt on the rough blacktop. "So, no prom?"

Determined to give his lungs and bloody feet a break, Ridley crouched down behind the Willow Creek Estates sign at the corner of Juniper and Elmwood and leaned, heaving against the rough bricks. He tried not to think about how crazy he must look, like a Midwestern Mowgli, a feral boy lurking in the shadows of a wilting suburbia. He felt certain this wasn't the best way to meet Blanca's mother, looking like a disturbed,

species-confused child who crouches under the table to beg for scraps. He thought of Blanca as not so much out of his league as his solar system, and his current look, all visible ribs and dirty bare feet, didn't exactly confer upward social mobility, let alone hygiene.

With the burning feeling slowly ebbing away and his breath returning to normal, Ridley crept around the sign, watching for a car-free opportunity to sprint across the road into Cedar Meadows. Instead, the familiar diesel rumble of a 1993 Pontiac Bonneville — “hunter green” being Mom's signature color that year — soldiered up Juniper, forcing Ridley into the shadows behind a set of black, plastic garbage bins on the side of a house.

“Ridley! Ridley!” Barb yelled from the driver's side, the window rolled down.

“Goddamn it, Roger. He's either around here or he's left the neighborhood.”

“How did you possibly boil it down to those two potential outcomes?”

The Bonneville turned left and belched out a thick glob of blue-gray smoke as Ridley's parents searched.

“Colder ... colder ... ice cold,” Ridley said out loud, and as soon as the Roykos' brake lights disappeared over the hill, Ridley took a quick jog through the ornate, limestone-and-lantern entrance to Cedar Meadows. Trees were lush on that side of Elmwood, the homes statelier and less stamped out. He stopped for a moment to get his bearings and recall the most direct way to Max Wolf's house — a place where he could duck out with impunity because the parents were rarely around, even at night. Max had the run of things, and the only formidable problem presented itself when older brother Asher stumbled in at odd hours.

Ridley kept a steady if labored pace as he took a slight left curve off Juniper and barreled down Colony Place, attempting to look like a jogger even when nothing about his body, his gait or his clothing suggested anything to do with a regular fitness program. Just five blocks more of the burning lungs, the scraping soles, the self-consciousness and embarrassment, and he could collapse without causing a scene. And as his mind filled with dreams of air conditioning and putting his head under the kitchen faucet at the Wolf house, his bloody toe struck hard at a jagged crack in the sidewalk, and Ridley belly-flopped onto the concrete, his chin taking a stiff, ugly bounce as the air flew out of his lungs.

As he laid there, a set of soft footfalls encircled him.

“Hey boy?” said a little girl in a “Fraggle Rock” t-shirt. “Do you need a Band Aid? I’ve got some with Strawberry Shortcake on them.”

“Unnh,” Ridley said. “Wah... wah...”

“You mean water? I can get you some from my house. I’ll be right back.” Ridley could hear the girl running back toward her house, a squeaky cranking noise and a quick return, followed by a sudden blast of water to his face.

“Fuh – stop! Stop drowning me, little girl!” he yelled as garden hose water blasted into his face.

“I sorry,” she said, diverting the hose toward his shorts. “I’ll go turn it off now so you’ll feel better.”

As the girl returned to the spigot, Ridley gingerly pulled himself off the concrete and felt his pulpy knees sting as he separated them from the surface. He winced as he placed his weight on his right foot and then quickly moved to his left, alternating to avoid

lasting impact between his raw feet and the sidewalk. Blood trickled from his chin down to his soaked corduroy shorts as Ridley straightened up and turned toward the girl standing in the grass.

“Listen, OK?” he said. “I need you to do me two favors. Can you do that?”

“Sure, you can trust me. My teacher said I’m a good listener.”

“That’s nice. What’s your name?”

“Carly.”

“OK, Carly. Here’s the first one: I’m playing hide and seek from my parents. Can you pretend that you didn’t see me?”

“I think so,” she said. “Like, blink and you’ll disappear out of my mind?”

“Just like that. The next thing is really easy: this sidewalk is super-gross, right? Can you wash it off?”

“I can do that, too,” Carly said. “What’s your name?”

“Bob.”

“I hope you feel better, Bob.”

“Thanks, Carly. You have a nice day, OK?”

Ridley resumed his hobble down the sidewalk as Carly turned the hose on his blood, dispersing it into the grass. He tried to move as fast as he could, but the sound of a glass storm door opening triggered more adrenaline, and he made a sideways slip into the space between two houses to wait until he could reasonably assume that Carly’s mother pulled the girl away from washing away human blood and returned her to their house.

The Wolfs’ home loomed ahead at the end of the street, a 1970s river stone mansion set off by an enormous entryway, decorated like a disco dancer’s chest with a

beveled glass chandelier, all encircled by a driveway where Bud Wolf, a local radio executive, parked his BMW 740iL. Ridley settled on his left leg for doing most of the work and executed a difficult hop-and-drag move for the balance of his death march. Between his movements and the curtains of blood dripping down his torso from his wounded chin, he thought he could be perfect for the next George Romero film – *Dawn of the Dickheads*, as Cam would say — and based on their facial expressions, the occasional drivers passing on Colony Place seemed to agree.

“Um, son? Can I provide you some assistance?” said one older man with a snow-white mustache driving a crimson Cadillac Biarritz and gesticulating out the window. “You’re bleeding all over the damn sidewalk and alarming the populace.”

“No sir – just a skateboarding accident. I’m almost home anyway,” Ridley said, wiping some of the blood off his chin and onto his shorts.

“What the hell are you kids thinking with those things?” the man said. “Mankind was not designed to stand on wheels. You look like a ghoul, son -- a goddamn ghoul. And where’s your goddamned thing, your skateboard?”

“Thanks, I mean — oh man, it went down the storm drain back there when I wiped out.”

“Good. Get your momma to take you to the hospital,” the old man said as he shifted the Biarritz into drive. “I’d do it myself, but you’d bleed all over my damn upholstery. Godspeed, boy – get some stitches in you.”

The Beemer was nowhere to be seen, so there was a strong chance that Max was alone, holding court on the sectional with his weekly taping of *120 Minutes* blaring on the projection TV. Ridley lurched onto the front porch and rang the doorbell, leaving a

bloody smudge on the lighted button. Through the pebbled glass on the front door, he could see an impressionistic image of Max checking the peephole and turning the deadbolt.

“What the shit?” Max said, looking him up and down. “Did the chupacabra get you? Did it eat your clothes?”

“No, I just left half my face on the sidewalk. Can I come in or whatever? My parents are circling the neighborhood.”

“Looks like you tripped and fell on a giant cheese grater. Go around back and use the pool shower. Mom would totally lose it if she came home and saw your bloody footprints all over her new carpet.”

“Fine, but can you put Ben in the garage or something?” Ridley said, referring to Max’s chow chow. “I’m afraid that he’ll smell me and think I’m steak.”

“Tartar, for sure,” Max said. “What we’ll do is, I’ll get him inside, and I’ll bring you some Band Aids and clothes, OK? Or maybe just bring you some gauze so you can wrap yourself like Ramses the Second?”

“You’re hilarious, and weirdly familiar with major pharaohs. Meet you ‘round back.”

As Max closed the door, Ridley turned to make his way to the backyard and he heard, far in the distance, a diesel engine getting closer. Not certain if he could get to the side gate in time, Ridley climbed into the Wolfs’ front flower bed and pulled himself behind a large holly bush. As he crouched down, a small, bare branch scratched him across the cheek.

“Shit!” he winced, touching his face and then gazing upon the fresh blood rivulet on his palm. Meanwhile, he could hear the familiar Pontiac diesel pulling up the circular driveway, and he pressed himself deeper into the greenery as the car shifted into park and silenced after a final run-on of dieseling. He heard the doors creak as they opened and then rattled and clanged when they shut.

Ridley was at one with the bush, staring at his parents through a dense growth of spiny, green leaves while he sat among broken twigs, bugs and squirrel feces. He hoped Max ignored the knocks and his parents would move on, but he also knew how stubborn his mother could be when it came to a battle of wills. He clearly remembered the time when Cam was three and just starting his “hold my breath until you give me some ice cream” phase. Ridley watched his mother stand eye-to-eye with Cam, hold her own breath, outlast him and then continue for another 30 seconds just to prove her point. It forced Cam to rethink and revise his strategy of demands with his mother.

The bell chimed and Ridley heard Ben’s deep, booming bark, which became more insistent and forceful once Max opened the door. Ridley craned his neck to listen and jostled the bushes for a second, but no one on the porch appeared to notice him.

“I’m sorry – Ben, hush! Hush!” Max said. “Mr. and Mrs. Royko, what can I do for – Ben! Stop it! Get down, you freakazoid!”

“Yes Max, we were just wondering if Ridley had come by,” Barb said. “He took off this morning, and – my God, your doggie’s such an affectionate one, isn’t he? – and we were just – No! Get this goddamn beast off me!”

Ridley nearly laughed out loud as Max yanked at Ben’s collar, attempting to wrestle an aggressive dog he just barely outweighed off Barb Royko’s leg. After much

pulling and cajoling, Max fished a dried pig's ear out of his back pocket and threw it into the house, sending Ben on an immediate search for his treat.

"OK, sorry about that. No, haven't seen him around here," Max said, hands in both pockets of his Gap straight legs. "But hey, if he comes by, I'll point that crazy kid in the direction of home. Sound good? Great seeing the two of you -- don't be strangers!"

"No, here's a better idea," Roger said, wedging his foot in the door frame. "Why don't you call us, and we'll come get him? But don't let him hear you calling us -- got it?"

"Well, I don't know how I feel about that, Mr. Royko," Max said. "And I really don't know how I feel about you breaking into my house without my parents present."

"How does twenty bucks sound?"

"Perfect," Max said, ripping the bill from Roger's hand. "Expect a call, Mr. Royko,"

Barb stood and stared at the door for a few seconds, then turned to her husband.

"Roger?"

"Yes?"

"You just gave that boy twenty bucks."

"I sure did."

"Without stipulations -- None. At. All."

"Come on, he's a smart kid -- he knows he's supposed to call as soon as Ridley shows up. No way would he go back on his word."

"His word'? Just get in the car, Roger. Jesus Christ," she said, and they both trudged back to the Bonneville. Barb gunned the engine to ensure it would keep running and backed out into Colony. Ridley waited until he could no longer hear the violent

gurgle of the diesel, then gingerly peeked out from behind the bush to see Max staring back at him.

“Jeez, Ridley, what the hell did you do now? Whatever it was, it must have been completely batshit to send your parents on an impact sweep through my neighborhood.”

“You do realize it looks like you’re talking to a shrub right now?” Ridley said.

“Look, I’ve got enough problems with the way the police swing through here all the time, wanting to talk to Asher,” Max said. “I don’t need your mom and dad checking us out, too. But hey, look – twenty bucks!”

“You’re not turning me in, are you?”

“No, I’m turning this into a large pepperoni,” Max said, snapping the bill taut between his fingers. “While we wait thirty minutes or less, go take a shower or Ben will definitely eat you. Here’s one of Asher’s old T-shirts and some shorts. Try not to bleed on them, OK?”

Gross, Ridley thought, a Poison t-shirt from the *Look What the Cat Dragged In* tour. Definitely an Asher Wolf meat-rock artifact. Ridley carefully extricated himself from the bush and crept through the flower bed, his wounded hands and knees smarting against the rough, pine-bark mulch until he reached the side gate.

Once Ridley was in the Wolfs’ backyard, he felt an immediate wave of rare calm. Bud Wolf owned both an album-oriented rock and a Top 40 station in Tulsa, and the fruits of his earnings were on full display in his family’s backyard: heated pool, Jacuzzi, cabana, bathhouse and grilling station. There was always the chance that Asher could show up and turn everything into a suburban nightmare, but other than that real possibility, Ridley selected the perfect hideout.

Following a long shower to wash away his caked-on blood and grime, Ridley emerged from the bathhouse in the Poison shirt and jeans shorts to find Max on the chaise lounge, reading a *Rolling Stone*. The cover featured Nirvana wearing business suits.

“So,” Max said. “You still haven’t told me why your parents are knocking on doors. Is it the grades?”

Ridley sat down in a white Adirondack chair across from Max and propped his feet on a wooden ottoman. “It’s not just the grades. It’s the grade *cards*.”

“OK, now that’s a significant plot development,” Max said, putting down the magazine. “Do they have any evidence?”

“Well, it’s not so much evidence as it is shit-tons of suspicion, which – let’s be honest – they always suspect something. I think I hid the blank grade cards pretty well, but with the semester grades coming out next week, I’ve been trying to create a mock-up of the Bainwood computer printout on the Acer.”

“Any luck?”

“Kinda. I mean, I’ve copied it word-for-word, but my fonts don’t exactly match their fonts, and I don’t know for sure if Mom will refer back to past documents, but I would totally feel comfortable betting your allowance on it.”

“I bet you would,” Max said. “No offense to your mom and dad, but are you absolutely sure they’d know the difference if they saw a printout that wasn’t exactly like the real thing? I mean, I just scammed your dad out of twenty dollars without breaking a sweat. They just don’t seem that observant to me. Or bright.”

“Well, yeah, that’s Dad for you. Mom is a whole other animal – like something out of *Jack Hanna’s Animal Adventures*. All she has to do is post my and Cam’s grades

next to each other on the refrigerator. They detect any subtle difference in the printout, and then I'm thoroughly dead."

"How is the little asshole anyway? Still eating boogers and torturing neighborhood cats?"

"On his better days. They'll write true-crime books about him someday. Anyway, I was watching TV this morning – I swear, Melissa McCayless, non-stop -- and I heard my mom talking about how I had been watching for the mailman, and suddenly they're sending me to military school in Kansas. It took them absolutely no time to go from mailman to military school. That's how my mom's brain operates, Max. She holds the land speed record for jumping to conclusions."

Max got up and started walking to the outdoor fridge near the grill. "Want anything? Coke? Sprite? Zima? Mom's got a couple of six-packs in there."

"You sure it's OK?"

"Of course – Mom won't notice unless you clean her out, so drink up," Max said as he twisted off the cap and handed Ridley the bottle. "But I've gotta ask."

"Ask what?"

"Well, you're pretty smart, and definitely smarter than anyone else in your family, so what's with all the shitty grades, if you don't mind me asking?"

Ridley thought for a few seconds and took another drink from the wine cooler.

"So, you pay pretty decent attention in class, right?"

"Always," Max said. "Eyes on the prize, scrupulous note taking."

"Right, well here's how it is in my brain," he said. "I mean, I do pretty well in math in, like, the first two six-week periods. I'm pulling As and Bs with no problem, but

I swear: by November, we hit some kind of equation or another that I just don't get, and then I just kind of drift – I want to pay attention, but then I'll look over at Blanca Molina and just kind of zone out, and then I'm permanently out of it, unable to advance.”

“Just because you're perving on Blanca? That girl, above all others, deserves better than your desk drool.”

“What I'm saying is, I get to that point and I lose what little confidence I have in any given math class. If I miss one key concept, I'm done for the rest of the year. I go down to a C at the end of the first semester, and then the second is a bloodbath.”

“So, maybe you just need to focus, like take No-Doz or Vivarin before class or drink more soda during lunch or something,” Max said. “And, let's not forget speed – find yourself a friendly biker gang and buy yourself some good, old-fashioned white cross. Just like Mom used to make.”

“You're a bad influence. I just think if I hyped myself with caffeine, my brain would just ping faster.”

Max seemed deep in thought, but then his head suddenly jerked around as a loud, rumbling engine got louder. “That's not the best thing I've heard today.”

“Don't worry,” Ridley said. “That's too powerful to be my parents' car.”

“Are you already drunk? That's Asher,” Max said, jumping out of the pool lounge. “We either hide you, or you get a lot bloodier in the next few minutes.”

Chapter 2

Ridley heard the engine stop, cutting off the muffled sound of Metallica's "Enter Sandman," then the hard, rattling slam of the Camaro door.

"Shit – does Asher still have it in for me? I mean, what did I even do?"

"Do you really think he even needs a reason? You're a skinny kid who listens to a band called Blur. Move your ass, will you?"

Ridley pulled open the back door just as he heard Asher jiggle the gate latch and quickly jumped into the Wolf's laundry room. Bud Wolf, the general manager and station owner of KRRCR-FM "The Rocker," the most popular rock station in the city and, most likely, the one playing Metallica in Asher's car; and his wife Desiree, the station's advertising director, rarely came home before seven o'clock. The house was typically the domain of teenage boys, with half-empty two-liter bottles of Mountain Dew on random tables, pizza boxes in the fridge and a steady stream of MTV in the living room – all day, all night, in stereo. Ridley pulled on a plastic nubbin on the end of a thin rope, and the attic door unfolded in front of the washer and dryer units.

"The pull string for the light is on the left," Max said. You're good now; he's out back now drinking a beer, but he's got to take a piss sometime. I'll check in on you later, OK?"

"Wait," Ridley said as he reached the top rung. "Can I get it back open from up here?"

"Never tried," Max said, grunting as he struggled to refold the ladder. "Enjoy!"

With that last bang of the attic door against its frame, Ridley was alone, with only the dull throb of MTV down in the living room to keep him company. The only natural

light in the attic emanated from the spinning roof turbines, which gave off a strobing effect over the Wolfs' boxes of family memories and forgotten detritus. In a corner, just under one of the turbines, he saw a pile of olive-green Coleman sleeping bags. He never knew the Wolfs to be avid outdoorsy types, but he welcomed the idea of not having to lie down on hard planks of plywood until Asher left the house for his nightly round of Camaro-enabled terrorism.

But there were far worse fates than being stuck in the Wolfs' attic, which Ridley soon identified as a repository for much of Bud's radio promotions memorabilia. An ancient and fading cardboard cutout of Peter Frampton, curls illuminated like an aurora from the *Frampton Comes Alive* album, showed Ridley the way to where most of the treasure trove resided, an otherwise anonymous pile of boxes labeled "KRCR." Most of the packing tape curled up at the ends, inviting him to rip it from the cardboard like a dry scab. Deciding that no one was likely to check the boxes until Bud wandered upstairs for menorahs in December, Ridley pulled the closest piece of tape, which took much of the cardboard with it, revealing the corrugation underneath.

Ridley opened the first box and found about one hundred compact discs, all notched and stickered to indicate promotional copies. A few boxes contained similarly notched vinyl albums. Other than that corporate vandalism committed to make them difficult to sell, they were pristine: Warren Zevon's *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School*, Gary Numan and Tubeway Army's *Replicas*, *L.A.M.F.* by Johnny Thunders & the Heartbreakers, which looked like someone had opened it, maybe thinking it was a mislabeled Tom Petty record.

"Holy shit," Ridley said under his breath. "This is where great music goes to die."

The Wolfs seemed to keep everything they ever owned, and on top of that, they possessed an unflinching taste in quickly fleeting fashions, technology and the stuff and ephemera of life, and never thought to stage a garage sale. As a radio station owner, Bud clearly loved electronics, and his attic looked like a ramshackle museum celebrating the last 25 years of technical evolution and one man's early adoption of the latest electronic gear from every era. As Ridley peered around the space, he could see all the phases: a Wollensak reel-to-reel, an Admiral belt-drive turntable that looked like Bud salvaged it from his radio station, and the key find: a Realistic TR-802 8-track recorder, just sitting uncovered next to a box of loose, hand-labeled red and blue cartridges.

"Holy shit, Max -- your dad still has one of these?" Ridley whispered to no one, including Max. "I thought everyone sold these beasts to pawn shops after people stopped listening to disco."

Ridley continued to crate dive, pulling out still shrink-wrapped copies of *Sound Affects*, *I'm The Man* and *Give 'Em Enough Rope* and setting them on the plywood for future relocation to his house. KRCC wouldn't play them, so something good should come from their imprisonment in a musty attic. He turned to another box, labeled "PSTRS" in hastily scrawled Magic Marker, ripped the seam and found about two dozen banded or taped posters. Inscrolling them like medieval proclamations, the third poster promoted a May 10, 1979 Police concert at Cain's Ballroom, followed by a December '79 Buzzcocks/Cramps double bill at the Boomer Theater, and a ripped-on-the-corners flier featuring The Tubes wearing corporate suits for *The Completion Backwards Principle* tour. He wondered why Max had not yet raided this gold mine. He re-rolled the posters and tossed them next to the purloined vinyl, then thought better of it: larceny

would seal his fate, pack his bags and drop him off at St. Julian's. Clearly, there was a deal to be cut with Max, who might not be that into the promo copy from SST of the Minutemen's *Double Nickels on the Dime*, but might see the upside in selling some choice cuts to his best buddy and then stashing the cash.

Ridley was ready to rip into a box marked "CARTS" when he heard the springs flex on the attic door. He ducked behind a large Allied Van Lines box and peered around, seeing only Max's messy black hair and aviator glasses peering over the lip of the door frame.

"Hey Rid, where are you?" Max said, half-whispering.

"Come over here, now. You've got to see this shit – it's glorious."

Max tripped slightly over a loose board but quickly steadied himself, flailing his arms like a baby bird on the edge of a nest.

"Asher is out of here – mumbled something about needing to take care of 'Mickey's big mouth' or something. Know anyone named Mickey besides the mouse? Does anyone go by Mickey anymore? – Hey! No way – put those back right now!" he yelled, pointing at the KRCR boxes.

"What? Nobody's going to miss this stuff, and it's so golden – The Jam? Joe Jackson? Graham Parker? Can't imagine your dad's much into *Squeezing Out Sparks* or *Beat Crazy*, can you?"

"Not the point. Thing is, Dad's office got the internet, and I've been selling these on a BBS for rock nerds. Just last night, I started talking to this guy up in New Hampshire who collects radio promos, and he's willing to pay for anything I've got from Elvis Costello," Max said, trying unsuccessfully to reseal the box of vinyl records.

“Has he asked you to send your underwear yet?”

“Asshole. Anyway, you’re screwing with my livelihood. I’m trying to save for a car, remember?”

“Get your dad to buy you a car, Max. Seriously, I’d have to mow a hundred lawns to be able to buy all of this stuff at Starship Records and Tapes at 11th and Delaware,” Rid said, evoking the ever-present local radio ad. “I’m your best friend, right?”

Max sat down on a crossbeam and propped his feet onto another, bridging a gap filled with pink, scratchy insulation. “OK, I don’t exactly know where you’re going to put them right now, but let’s do this. You can go through the box and pick out five records – no more than five, OK? But they can’t be Costello, unless it’s *Goodbye Cruel World*.”

“You’re the best, Max. OK, so I’ll take *Setting Sons*, *Pretenders II*, maybe *Regatta de Blanc*, the Bow Wow Wow album and...,” Ridley said, flipping through the cardboard jacket before pulling out a thick black box. “Holy shit, let’s round it out with *Sandinista!*”

“No – that counts for three. If you want that, put two back. By the way, have you heard *Sandinista!*? You’d be way better off with *London Calling*.”

“Sold,” Ridley said. “Wrap these for me, sir.”

“Sigh,” he said, sighing. “I’ll let you have them, but I think now’s a good time for you to make your escape. Let’s get you down from here and out in the world, lurking behind bushes on your way back home.”

Ridley’s eyes bugged out slightly at the suggestion, as if Max suggested eating a bowl of slugs.

“Not only ‘No,’ but ‘Hell no,’” he said, standing and dusting off the jeans shorts. “You make me leave, I’m so completely on a bus to Kansas. I wouldn’t do it to you, so don’t do it to me.”

Max looked around the attic, surveying the boxes of memorabilia, baby clothes, ancient electronics and early ‘70s conquistador statues and bullfighter tapestries. It was nasty, but it could work as long as Rid stayed in his sleeping bag and had somewhere to pee.

“OK, fine, but you have to be so damn quiet, like if you ran into Blanca and you couldn’t get a word out. Like if you were coming in late and trying not to wake up your mom.”

“You won’t hear a sound,” Rid said, raising two fingers in salute. “Promise.”

“You’re not a scout, and you’re doing it wrong. It’s three fingers – see?” Max said, demonstrating one of the few things he learned in three awkward years of Boy Scouts. “I’ll go get an empty Mountain Dew bottle for you.”

“What’s that about?”

“Pee-pee, my friend.” Max said. “Peepee.”

“Can you give me a full one, too? I might get thirsty up here.”

“Yeah, but don’t mix them up. It’s going to be dark up here. Be right back.”

Rid waited for an hour, then two, then three.

Chapter 3

Ridley and Max became a team in kindergarten, two little budding weirdos obsessed with Warner Bros. cartoons and imitating Mel Blanc's voice characterizations, a pastime that Ridley's mother ended when she told her son she did not relish years of speech therapy to correct all the stutters, lisps and articulation disorders he would get from watching *Looney Tunes*. Cartoons eventually turned into music, but it was the shared experience of their separate family dysfunctions that bonded them. Like families of childhood friends sometimes do, the Wolfs and the Roykos got their kids together for playdates, discovered their shared love of libations and started coming up with plans for backyard parties and, in due time, camping trips to places like the Illinois River and Robbers Cave State Park, where the cocktail hour arrived not long after breakfast.

Then, one year, that all stopped. Ridley noticed it when the Roykos planned a trip to Eureka Springs, Arkansas for Spring Break 1989 without the Wolfs. Ridley's mom told him they were a strong enough family to have family-only vacations, and then asked him why he thought they were not strong enough. Ridley gradually got tired of his questions being met with accusations.

Between wondering why Max had not come back to deliver his Mountain Dew and pee bottle combo, Ridley began to understand why attics had terrible image problems, why so many girls in his classes carried creepy supermarket novels about kids being forced to live in them and then, as they grew up, developed unsavory impulses toward one another. The plumbing in the Wolf house looped through the joists under the planking, and once Bud and Desireé were home from work, the squeal and rush of vibrating pipes sent pangs of anxiety through Ridley's stomach. He lay on top of the

sleeping bag, trying to ease into sleep, his bony body illuminated by the moonlight strobing through the turbines.

And when the house became quiet and the Wolfs stopped washing hands, running the dishwasher and flushing toilets, then the real horror of attic living set in for Ridley. Just on the cusp of drifting off, he heard the first sounds of tiny claws, scratching for traction on the plywood, whizzing past his ear.

“Oh, screw me!” Ridley yelled as he jumped away from the sleeping bag, knocking over the box labeled “CARTS” and dumping the noisy old plastic cartridges onto the planks. Whatever rodent startled Ridley with its midnight run was now in hiding as Ridley sat, stone silent, his knees pulled close to his chest.

A light in the hallway, visible around the edges of the attic door, was the first response to the outburst and unexpected clatter, followed by a booming Southern voice muffled by the insulation and drywall.

“Max, what the hell are you cussing about? Past eleven thirty, too damn late for this racket.”

Ridley heard his best friend respond sleepily to his father.

“Sorry Dad, I was having a nightmare. Too much Melissa news or something. I’m okay -- you can go back to bed.”

“Oh,” Bud said, scratching his salt-and-pepper hair. “Look, don’t let me hear that word again, alright? Must’ve been a bad one. Lights out, Max.”

“You got it, Dad. Good night.”

“Good night,” Bud said, shutting off the hallway light, then abruptly turning it back on. “That McCayless girl will turn up -- got to keep positive on these things. Police are doing what they can, OK?”

Bud nearly had the door closed when he turned back. “Speaking of missing kids, you didn’t hear Asher come in, did you?”

“Nothing yet.” To Ridley, this sounded like an unhappy ritual: a question Max knew was coming, an answer Bud heard too often.

Ridley saw the light go out, zipped the sleeping bag over his head, and made a few mental notes. Never get between Bud Wolf and his beauty rest. Do not scream in a house full of sleepers.

And, above all else, let the Wolf’s mice have their damn attic.

In time, exhaustion caught up with Ridley, putting an end to a long day of running and anxiety. He clocked out, mice be damned, and many hours later — or just a few, who knows? — when he heard the springs groan on the attic door, Ridley was barely aware of any time passing.

The next thing Ridley saw was Max staring down at him as he slumbered in the Coleman bedroll.

Ridley searched for the zipper handle. After a full night tucked inside the sleeping bag, his mouth felt packed with flannel and his bladder ready to rip a seam.

“You know, maybe if you didn’t put so much energy toward being a smartass, you wouldn’t have to spend so much time making fake report cards and dodging your psycho mother. This is your adventure, and so far, I’m not enjoying the ride, so what if we do things my way for a change instead of all your ‘let’s go jump into an attic’

bullshit,” Max said, fixing his eyes on his friend. “Now, a controlled, steady movement, right?”

“Okay, fine, but you first,” Ridley said. “I’ll follow the leader.”

Max gave Ridley a go-to-hell look and straddled the door frame in an uncomfortable-looking crouch stance as he gripped the joists on either side of the door and lowered his legs, like a gymnast on parallel bars. Ridley followed suit but, true to his unathletic form, stumbled into Max and sent him into a quick fall as the door opened and the two boys crashed into the first-floor hallway.

Subsequently, the ladder unfolded and hit Max in the back as he valiantly attempted to right himself. As the boys lay there, pathetically groaning with the dusty sleeping bag unrolled at their feet, a deep and unwelcome voice broke through while Aaliyah, singing “Back and Forth” on MTV, dominated a basketball court with her sheer charisma.

“Jesus, Maxine?” said the tall teenager with immaculately straightened, shoulder-length hair as he pulled Doritos out of an open bag. “See, among your many problems, you dumbasses don’t know how to make an entrance. Now, how about you and Ratley here tell me why you were up... there.”

“Shut up, Asher,” Max said, looking closely at his older brother’s pupils. “Rid’s borrowing a sleeping bag, and it’s not my fault that the attic is janky and disgusting.”

Asher studied Max, then shook his head, his dry laughter devoid of actual humor.

“Oh, bullshit. I’m serious -- either you tell me what you little shits were doing up there or I get Dad or Desiree to ask you.”

“So, you’re telling on us?” Max said. “That’s really not your style.”

“Maxie, you might want to stop showing off for your friend, or we’ll have a real show and tell. Like that? Now,” Asher said, looking at Ridley. “Why are you in my house, and don’t you say the words ‘sleeping’ or ‘bag.’”

“Alright, look – my mom and dad were about to take me out of Bainwood and ship me out to a military academy in the part of western Kansas where they don’t get TV yet. Shave my head and make me conform,” Ridley said, trying to play on Asher’s evident love of follicle growth. “What would you do if somebody was threatening to shave *your* head?”

Asher waited two beats, then grabbed Ridley by the arm.

“Get over here,” he growled and dragged Ridley back to his bedroom at the rear of the house, a dark sanctum of late teenage scumbaggery adorned with a new poster for Pantera’s *Far Beyond Driven*, a British flag, a seemingly endless scattering of cassettes, a Peavey amp, a Gibson electric and a poster of Christina Applegate, her hair teased out to the maximum height 1989 allowed and dressed like a member of Warrant. From the dust gathered on the roman shade on his window, it was clear to Ridley that Asher kept the shades drawn for weeks at a time. Ridley surmised he was in a lax-parenting zone.

“Look, just shut up, Royko. I knew you’re not going camping,” Asher said, closing the door. “Your freak-show mom started honking at me, waving me to the curb and then got out of her old lady car and gave me the third-degree over where your skinny ass might be, and then I come home and you and my brother fall on top of me. After last week, I don’t need any more bullshit landing on my head right now, and that includes you.”

Ridley tried to elicit some sympathy by bringing up their previous transaction.

“They always like to pretend that I have privacy, but if they find my supply of blank grade cards, way up on the top shelf, in a place my mother would have to strain to reach... if I inspire her to break out ladders and visit the far reaches of my closet, then I’m toast. I’m Powdered Toast Man.”

“Nerd,” Asher said, insulting Ridley while loosening his grip on him. “You’re on the most-wanted list, little man. So, we need to have a little talk.”

Ridley sensed a hollow place in Smaug’s armor. “I’m open to all ideas and opportunities.”

“So last week, a cop came around here about Melissa McCayless -- stop me if you’ve heard about this – and I swear I have no idea what happened to her. Seriously. But if you suddenly go missing, and we’ve known each other, like, *way* too long, they start thinking that I’m some nutjob who stores kids in his attic.”

“Yeah, Max told me about the cop, but they don’t think you did anything, right?”

“Hell if I know,” Asher said, plopping down on his bed. “You watch *NYPD Blue*? They want everyone to feel like they’re under suspicion, and I’m telling you, there’s way more police cars out today than yesterday, so watch your ass. Hey, go ahead and call my brother in, he probably needs to be in on it.”

Ridley walked back down the hall and saw Max, who had poured himself a bowl of dry Cap’n Crunch and was flopped down on the Herculon sectional watching Mariah Carey ride a rollercoaster. Max looked up from MTV as soon as he heard Ridley’s footsteps.

I think he’s going to let me stay, but I’ve got no idea why. He wants you back there,” Ridley said.

Max jumped off the sofa and Ridley. The pecking order was never in question at the Wolf house: Asher appeared to make whatever rules existed. Ridley, still a little raw from the fall, ambled toward Asher, who stood in the doorway and tapped his wrist where a watch would be.

“C’mon, Ratley – let’s figure things out,” Asher said, closing the door behind them. “You dorks ever hear *Reign in Blood*? Classic.”

Asher dropped the needle on the opening machine-gun riffology of the opening track, “Angel of Death,” and a searing blast of cartoon evil wafted from two speaker columns on either side of Asher’s crumb-strewn black bedspread. All of Ridley’s favorite musicians proved their ferocity with words first, chords second. But for now, Ridley needed to pretend to tolerate Slayer, just to stay on the right side of Asher Wolf.

Asher picked up his Gibson and clumsily played along on the unplugged guitar as the strings rattled against the frets. Max sat in the molded plastic chair next to Asher’s laundry-strewn desk, fidgeting.

Ridley felt the need to move things forward. “So, Asher, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking we could help each other out,” Asher said, reaching under his bed and pulling out a giant edition of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, which Ridley thought had to be a hopeful gift from a desperate older relative. Asher opened the book to reveal a hollow section secreting a wooden pipe and a Ziploc bag full of what looked like something out of a spice rack. “You want to try some, I’m totally cool with it.”

Asher shoved some dirty clothes against his bedroom door, then reached above his bed and cracked the sliding-glass window before he stuffed the bowl and fired up the pipe with an Iron Maiden Zippo. The 19-year-old took a deep drag off the rectangular

pipe. When Asher extended the pipe to Ridley, the younger boy was tempted but waved it off.

“Suit yourself, and you?” Asher said, pointing at Max. “Don’t even think about it. I don’t need Dad or Desiree getting on my shit for corrupting their precious boy.”

“I have a Great Books test tomorrow,” Max said. “It’s on *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and I probably don’t need to be smoking weed while trying to understand James Joyce, so —”

“Can you *possibly* shut your mouth?” Asher said, looking at his little brother like he smelled something unpleasant overpowering the weed. “Ridley, let’s talk business. Look for a weeny little dork, you do good work -- my ID almost never gets turned down, the dude at Fike’s Liquor always sells me my Mickey’s Big Mouth, and Thad Carroll said nice things about your work on his U.S. History grades. That guy’s a running back, so he’s good to have in your corner ‘cause he’s friends with, like, everybody.”

“Yeah, Asher, but that friend of everybody is going to get totally busted at the end of the semester when the computerized final grades come out, because he won’t be allowed to play without pulling a C-average,” Ridley said.

“You are way too conscientious about the money you take from Bainwood jocks. Football will find a way — it always does. Now, what I’m thinking is that we could do some business, and in the end -- if we do it right -- Thad will roll tide for Alabama and the beer money will flow,” Asher said, holding a lighter over his pipe, inhaling, holding, and exhaling. “Hey, will you two get all that shit out of the laundry room? Not getting blamed by Desiree for your mess.”

Ridley walked back to the hallway, folded up the attic ladder and dragged the

sleeping bag into the Wolfs' utility room with Max following after him. Ridley unzipped the bag, which was lined with a fleecy tartan design which in no way disguised the unrolled, obviously used, and dried-up condom at the foot of it.

"Oh shit -- I'm gonna puke!" Max said, his sickly countenance turning as plaid as the bedroll liner. Max ran into his brother's room, completely ignoring the standard house rules associated with Asher Wolf's personal space.

"That's really shitty, Asher -- you knew that was in there, didn't you?"

"Uh, don't know what you're talking about, Maximillian," Asher said, cashing out the pipe.

"Okay, Asher," Max said, so angry he was starting to hyperventilate. "Throw away your own sperm."

Asher, fully enveloped in the pot smoke, laughed so hard he snorted. "Hey, it's totally natural -- a lambskin. Fine, wuss," he said as he dumped the charred contents of his pipe, "I'll take care of my Luna Molina souvenir."

"Whoa, what?" Ridley said, abruptly reappearing from the laundry room upon hearing a familiar, revered last name. A faux-humble smile crept across Asher's face as he bent down and plucked the condom from the sleeping bag, holding it gingerly between his thumb and his index finger.

"Yeah, it was, like, two months ago or something. 'Scuse me -- I can't exactly throw this away in the kitchen garbage, can I? Start the machine and we'll talk."

Ridley picked up the bag with both hands and shoved it into the top-loading Whirlpool. "You might add an extra scoop," he said.

Max rolled his eyes at Ridley, scooped some Tide and started the machine. “Don’t think I’m going to do this all the time.”

Asher finally emerged from his room, leaving a wake of sprayed Lysol. “So, I think the first thing we do is get some rules in place, and the thing you absolutely, positively have to do is frigging get scarce by 4 p.m. every day, and really you should get up there sooner in case Dad or Desiree come home earlier than usual. I mean it, kid -- you are a pumpkin after 4 o’clock, got it?”

“Sure, whatever -- 4 o’clock it is.”

“No, don’t “whatever” me, Ratley,” Asher said, falling down on the couch. “And never come down before nine in the morning. Don’t be a dick, okay? You get busted, we all get busted.”

Asher Wolf seemed organized, more focused after smoking pot, as if it were putting to sleep his lizard brain. Max, normally given to similar verbosity without the intervention of mood-altering herbal remedies, was unusually defensive around Asher, because Asher was so offensive. Factor in the age gap and scarcity of common interests, and Max and Ridley rarely had to deal with Asher directly— he was so frequently out of the house or in his room, the older brother seemed like a myth, a bogeyman in a muscle car.

Asher did not seem to be winging it. The business? There was forethought in Asher Wolf’s presentation.

“How much did you charge Thad for doctoring his grades?”

Ridley committed some serious thought to the answer, because he gave breaks to real friends and charged penalties to others. Despite Asher’s assessment of him as a

friend to everybody, Thad Carroll was a loud, rich thug with no redeeming value other than his ability to move a ball down the field and maybe someday take over his father's State Farm agency. With all that working against the patron, the artist saw that he had only one reasonable course of action.

“One hundo.”

“Holy shit, is that the going rate?” Asher asked.

“The market will bear it, believe me.”

Asher looked like he was doing math in his head. “OK then, you hide in the attic and do grades while I drum up business. I'm your frontman, Royko.”

Just into his first full day as a runaway, Ridley felt the pressure of limited options and the probability that any exposure to open air would result in immediate apprehension by his mom and dad, who he imagined were circling the area in two separate cars, asking everyone they passed if they'd seen their half-dressed disappointment. He had no reason, under normal circumstances, to trust Asher Wolf.

“So why? Why do you want to be in a completely illegal business with your little brother's fugitive best friend?”

“And what do I get out of the deal?” Max interrupted after a long interregnum of Cap'n Crunch munching. “I'm an interested and knowledgeable party in all this. You've got to cut me in.”

Asher ignored his brother. “First up, I've got the contacts — every day at lunch, about 50 people I know pretty well stand around Taco Train off campus.”

“Behind the Reasor's?”

“That’s right, eating meat of unknown origin and bitching about this or that teacher. Most of them would pay good money to get their parents off their backs for six weeks or so, and that’s where you come in. As for you,” Asher said, pointing at Max. “You get squat – what’re you gonna do about it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Ash, how about... I’m tellin’.”

Even Asher knew when the big brother card was overplayed. “Fine, you’re in, but since Ridley is stuck in the attic and can’t steal blank cards anymore, that’s your job. Congratulations -- happy now?”

Max looked a little sick while Ridley sat pondering how this would work.

“So, you go out to Taco Train and pick up new customers, talk to kids in the hallways, whatever. How do we split things up?” Ridley asked.

Asher pointed to his own nose. “Fifty.”

Then pointed at each of the boys. “Twenty-five, twenty-five.”

“Man, you’re a criminal,” Ridley said, getting up to leave. “I’ll take my chances running down the street for a while.”

“OK -- fine, you each get thirty percent and I get forty, because I’m going out there and sticking my neck out.”

“Yeah, like I won’t be, stealing grade pads,” Max said. “I’ve been sucked into all of your criminality. I’ll lose out on being a National Merit Finalist and end up managing the rolling wiener heater at QuikTrip. ”

As Max slouched out of Asher’s room, Asher walked over to Ridley and stuck out his hand.

Nice doing business with you, Royko. Now get your bony ass up in the attic by four o'clock. Oh, and you might want to make yourself a sandwich and go take a piss. It's a long way to 9 a.m."

Chapter 4

“Bathroom’s all yours,” Max said, jumping down from the ladder and staggering backward. “Take a shower while you’re there. That chupacabra smell is starting to bake in.”

“Sure, but when I come out of there, you can explain why I didn’t get my pee bottle. Again,” Ridley said as he closed the bathroom door behind him.

“Plan ahead, pee boy – Asher told you it would be a long night. See you on the other side, fugitive boy.”

Rid stuck his hand outside the door, raised his middle finger, then pulled it back and raced to the toilet to unleash a high-pressure blast of pee. It hurt almost as bad as the still-stinging scrape on his chin. In the shower, as he washed off the attic stench, Rid contemplated his options. Home didn’t seem like a good choice, given that his mother and father were probably filling out the St. Julian’s application or reporting his disappearance to the police, or both. He could go lurk in the woods behind his house and become a Midwestern forest wraith, but he wasn’t schooled on which woodland creatures he could kill without a gun or a knife, or even what lived back there, and discerning poisonous mushrooms and berries from the delicious and healthy ones was not in his skillset, either. He could just stay in the attic, but if the police were on the lookout, it wouldn’t take long for them to draw a connection between him and Max. Even if he did make a temporary home in the rafters, what kind of life would that be? Even if he didn’t get violently ill or otherwise found by Max and Asher’s parents, Ridley saw himself creeping out of his hiding place at 18: pale, 78 pounds of mostly hair weight, no high school education. No one falls in love with Gollum.

“Max, you got any more shorts?” Ridley yelled as he wrapped a beach towel around his bony frame, his voice cracking from the terror of the daydream.

“Outside the door,” Max called from the living room. Ridley opened the bathroom and found a pair of Dickies shorts and another one of Asher’s old shirts, emblazoned with the band logo for Kix.

“Jesus Christ, Max. How many pop metal t-shirts does your brother own?”

“All of them,” Max said. “It’s just a shirt, one of an endless supply. Cereal’s in the kitchen if you want it.”

“Cereal?” Ridley said, his voice rising as he contemplated an entire shuttered adolescence with nothing better to eat than Max Wolf’s boxes of sugar-frosted cereal. The t-shirt featuring the cover of Kix’s *Blow My Fuse* draped Ridley like a dress as he pulled it over his head and started toward the mahogany front door.

“Screw it -- bad idea all around. Maybe my parents will be so relieved when I get home, they’ll forget all about St. Julian’s.”

“Hey, what the hell? Don’t know if you noticed, but I threw myself on a grenade for you the other night after your little Tourette’s outburst. What was that all about anyway?” Max said, pulling himself off the couch and switching off the television -- something that Ridley noticed seemed completely unnatural, almost alien, in the Wolf house.

“You’ve got rats -- big, monstrous rats that will chew your face off in your sleep,” Ridley said. “They’re up there making nests out of your dad’s *Penthouse* collection and they’re coming for you next. I’m out of here -- see you in class Monday if I’m not doing jumping jacks in Kansas.”

Max positioned himself between Ridley and the door, sticking his hand out to block his friend. “Just wait a second. Seriously, rats? And *Penthouses*?”

“Oh, and by the way, you still haven’t told me why you didn’t come back last night with the pee bottle. Did it just slip your mind? Catch a Liz Phair video and get distracted?”

“I didn’t come back up because somebody showed up at my front door last night. You didn’t hear the doorbell?”

“What, my parents again? Jeez, they don’t know when to stop.”

“No, a cop. Uniformed, big guy, mustache, comes with a doughnut — same guy, folksy as hell.”

“So, he was looking for me?”

“No – well, yes, but mainly for Asher.”

“No – well, yes’? What the hell does that mean?”

Max grabbed a handful of dry Frankenberry out of the box on the coffee table and started eating the cereal, piece by piece, like peanuts. “Well, it’s not the first time he’s been here. Last week, he came to talk to Asher.”

“What’d your brother do now – steal drugs from a nursing home?”

“I wish,” Max said. “No, they were investigating the whole Melissa McCayless thing. They think he has something to do with her disappearing, and now they’re wondering if he has something to do with you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Asher killed Melissa McCayless?”

“Hey -- can you keep it down a little? Desiree opened the windows before she left. Said Asher’s room makes the whole house smell like a head shop and the Lysol

doesn't fool anybody. But she won't do anything about it, because he scares the shit out of her."

Ridley was taken aback by the family dynamics, where parents could be fearful of their children, rather than the way he had it. "Why?"

"He's mean, pretty much nocturnal, disappears for days at a time -- I mean, pretty much as Bram Stoker wrote him."

Ridley stopped staring out the window and looked at Max. "You just described my last few days. Your job is not to make him relatable."

"Ridley, she started freaking out because, I'm guessing, something the cop said made her think her stepson is a murderer."

Things got silent, because Ridley could not think of something that you say in this kind of situation. They should make more specific greeting cards for living with violence, he thought. Just when the uncommon quiet of Max's living room became too much for Ridley, Barry Manilow's "Copacabana" changed the conversation as it rang throughout the entryway.

"Perfect," Ridley said, getting off the couch as the disco doorbell clanged, a vestige of the Wolfs' 1978 move-in date. "Mom's got the best timing ever. Let me know if you need a place to hide from your psycho brother -- we've got an attic, too."

Ridley pushed past Max and opened the front door, fully expecting to see Barbara Royko, wild-eyed and hungry for retribution.

"Oh... Hi?" said the dark-eyed 15-year-old girl standing on Max's porch. "I heard you guys yelling -- you might consider closing a window or two for privacy. Just a thought."

Ridley only expected to deal with an irrational, furious parent or two. He knew what to expect from that. But this was uncharted territory -- socially, this was Ridley crash landing on a distant planet. Hundreds of school bus rides, pretending not to look and fearing the possibility of accidental eye contact, could not prepare him for this.

Blanca Molina, editor of the *Bainwood Bee*, studied Ridley for a moment, smiling with her finger on her chin as if she were fascinated by a biological specimen. "You were on the news last night," she said, standing on the porch in gym shorts and a three-quarter length baseball jersey. "You probably don't watch the news, but trust me: lead story, old picture from the 8th grade yearbook -- *super* dorky -- interview with worried parents, official statement from a police officer with a mustache and wire-rimmed aviators. The hits just kept on coming."

"No, I-I-I watch the news all the time," Ridley stammered. "I try to stay on top of current events as much as possible -- I'm very well informed, I read the *World* every day like an old man. I was just really busy yesterday and ..."

"Everybody knows how busy you were, *Ridley Andrew Royko*," Blanca said. This was serious, Ridley thought, because they read his full name on the news. "Max, are you and your fugitive friend going to invite me in, or should I start thinking about how to spend the reward money?"

Max seemed shocked that she knew both of their names. It made her seem less perfect.

"Sure, Blanca -- my house is your house. I mean, you can stay here as long as you want, no pressure or anything." Max said with a slight voice crack, hastily pulling a pair

of his dirty socks off the couch and hiding them behind his shorts. “We’ve got some cereal if you want some.”

Ridley made a mental note that Max might not be ideal double-date material in any future where Blanca or anyone else as intimidatingly beautiful is involved.

Not acting intimidatingly beautiful at all, Blanca fell backward onto the leather sofa and gazed around the living room. “Luna said you boys had a nice house. Great TV, five-CD changer, Sega Genesis – looks like you’ve got all the stuff. How about some coffee? Do you know how to make a pot of coffee?”

Neither Max nor Ridley responded, nor did they seem to know how to navigate Blanca Molina’s confidence and sharp, caffeinated way of talking that felt like business.

“Fine. Just point me to the right cabinet. What is it with you boys anyway? None of you seem to know how to do anything for yourselves. When your mothers aren’t around, you live out of cereal boxes. By the looks of those socks behind your back, you probably can’t do laundry, either. Self-sufficiency -- it’s like learning to read: it sets you free.”

“Actually,” Ridley said, finally gaining some confidence, “I can do laundry. Max and I had to wash one of his sleeping bags so I could sleep in the attic last night. We’re not *that* bad.”

Blanca rolled her eyes at Ridley as she pulled a can of Folgers from the cabinet.

“Ew,” she said. “My sister told me about the famous Asher Wolf sleeping bag. Your brother’s gross, Max. Don’t be like him, okay? We’ll all hate you for it later, every last one of us. So, Ridley, tell me why you ran away and everyone’s looking for you. I’m your friend.”

On one level, Blanca's quick mind intimidated Ridley but before that morning, she was just a beautiful girl who Ridley obsessed over and seemed to know her way around a parallelogram. The Blanca Molina of his mind's eye was a goddess. This Blanca, the one filling a coffee filter all the way to the rim of the paper as she fixes us with fast-hitting facts, was real. And yet, grossed out by the possibilities of the Asher Zelensky sleeping bag but sufficiently relaxed to tell Blanca the exhausting story of his last day and a half, Ridley had the presence of mind to know he liked this version a lot more than the idealized vision he created in his ample, misused spare time.

"Wow," Blanca said as Ridley finished the saga. "Now, can I be totally honest with you? You won't get all hurt and start moping on me, promise?"

"I think you're going to be honest with me no matter what I say," Ridley said, leaning on the kitchen counter as Blanca poured a cup of coffee and started to drink it, no sugar or milk.

"You need to go home. Today. If I've learned anything from my sister, it's never to get in bed with Asher. He's a big, stupid asshole, right?"

"My words exactly."

Blanca looked him up and down. "Ridley, do you have anything you need to take with you?"

Ridley pointed to his chest, directly at the Kix album art. "I came here with less than this."

"That's pretty sad," she said. "I'm going to give you a set of specific directions, so listen better than you do in class. I live three houses down and one block over. That means you pass two houses, stop at the third, cut through Tracey Jamiesons' backyard --

her house is the one with the racist lawn jockey out front -- climb her back fence and you're at my house. Watch out for cop cars and news vans."

Ridley thought it best not to tell Blanca that he knew exactly which house was hers. Since she and Luna moved to Bainwood when Ridley was in seventh grade, Ridley had nursed fantasies about life in the Molina house, but with Blanca actually talking to him — a lot — he worried that saying anything, telling her about his long-standing crush, or even about the life at home that sent him running from the house barefoot and shirtless, might ruin things.

"Pass two houses, stop at lawn jockey, climb back fence -- got it. Max, you coming?"

Max shook his head. "I think I'm out. Don't know the plan, but it's probably better than hanging out here."

"You're so smart, Max," Blanca said. "And Ridley, I don't know if you slept through social studies or really watch the news or are just saying so to seem impressive, but if Max stays here, he gets to enjoy something that White House staffers during Watergate called 'plausible deniability.' Ridley, do you understand my references?"

Blanca was never this condescending in Ridley's fantasy life.

"I think it definitely means that Max will not know what is happening, so if he's asked about whatever it is you want to do, he won't have to lie, right?" Ridley asked, looking at her with a mixture of self-doubt and hope.

She smiled, then reached out and messed up his curly brown hair. "If we can bring your GPA up and keep it reasonably high, there might be hope for you yet, Ridley."

But Ridley, with years of crushing over Blanca and having his spirit crushed by his mother, could not trust when good things came to him.

“So, this is maybe the most you’ve ever said to me in my entire life,” Ridley said. “How is it that you just appear here, ready to help me when getting busted feels imminent?”

Blanca studied Ridley; her forefinger looped over chin as if in deep thought. “I know how to fix this, and you need help. It’s not going to be that difficult — you’ll see!”

“Wait,” Max said, grabbing Blanca’s hand, then dropping it quickly. “Blanca, is your sister, like, missing anything?”

“Taste in boys,” Blanca said. “And her Walkman -- she hasn’t been able to find it since Christmas.”

Max ran to the back room of the house, Asher’s room, disappearing inside the sanctum of delinquency for a few minutes. When he emerged, Max was carrying a bright pink Sony Walkman. Blanca immediately recognized the cassette player.

“Max, will you do me a favor? I know you don’t know me that well, but we seem to be getting along great, so I’m just going to go ahead and tell you that your brother is ... definitely a klepto, and possibly a psychopath. My dad bought this for Luna on a business trip to Tokyo -- no one has a pink Walkman with that FM band around here.”

“Yeah, not exactly Asher’s taste,” Max said, handing the Walkman to Blanca. “And look inside it -- PJ Harvey? Asher hates alternative rock. Doesn’t think anything that isn’t cranked up to 11.”

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“He should listen to Polly Jean Harvey — her music would burn your brother’s face off. He needs to respect women who rock,” Blanca said. “Thanks Max, I’ll give it to Luna when she gets home,” she said, opening the front door. “*Andele*, Ridley.”

“I’ll be there,” Ridley said as his acerbic dream girl left. For a second, Ridley looks as if his circuitry had shut down. “What the hell just happened to me?”

“I feel like Asher put acid in the Mountain Dew. I don’t see how that possibly took place in my house,” he said. “You better go, Ridley. She’ll kick your ass if you’re late.”

“What about you?” Ridley said. “What’s Asher going to do if he finds out you were looking through his shit? And beyond that, what’s he going to do when he finds out I’m gone?”

“I’ll suffer,” Max said. “Just get out of here and tell me what happens, because you’ve either got a girlfriend or you’ve just been adopted.”

Chapter 5

No hunter-green Pontiacs, no news vans, and no Mom as far as he could see. After he closed Max's front door, Ridley stuck his head inside the Kix shirt to see if he had actually followed through on the Speed Stick in the downstairs bathroom. He detected the overpowering chemical musk scent, so another quick sprint down the block would not make him completely repellant. He could not understand why Blanca would be curious about him or his situation -- this attention was entirely foreign. It made Ridley feel like a caveman waking up on a space shuttle, with all the day-to-day fight for survival suddenly miles below him and replaced by zero gravity and flashing lights.

Sidewalks were a bad idea, Ridley thought, so he hugged the bricks on the next two houses as he carefully edged his way up to the Jamiesons' house with the lawn jockey out front. Tracey Jamieson seemed like an OK girl, never had to walk alone in the halls or eat solo in the cafeteria, didn't seem unusually mean or bred full of hate or anything. It just played strangely, that jockey with the blackface holding the ring, even for a school district where students openly talked about the varsity away games that were just too far north of 51st street, and why that was a problem.

Ridley kept his head swiveling, staying on the lookout for the Bonneville, cops or reporters as he located the gate to the Jamiesons' backyard -- standard stockade fence, no sharp spikes or anything, no keyed lock, no growling from the other side. He tried the latch and the gate opened, and to Ridley's mind, this was either too awesome for words or too suspiciously easy.

The Jamiesons' side yard was full of the usuals: an air conditioner with a loud fan rattling around on top, a wood rack full of rotting logs, a slightly rusted 10-speed bike.

But as Ridley treaded lightly through all of it and peeked around the corner, he could see that the Jamiesons enjoyed the sweet life: a pool with a connected jacuzzi. Cedar Meadows had a neighborhood pool, and yet the Jamiesons still shelled out for year-round luxury.

Scanning for the most direct route, Ridley decided on a beeline along the right side of the pool, straight for the back fence -- two support beams and over. It was a skill enjoyed and appreciated by suburban kids in elementary school but mostly abandoned by the onset of adolescence, when hopping a fence started to look criminal instead of adventurous, a pursuit of freedom beyond your own backyard.

One last side look and Ridley took off, focused, barreling toward the back fence, zeroing in on the first beam and hoping to catch it just right so that one leg could push the other to the next beam, and he could vault the top without much damage and land in the Molinas' lawn. But his bare feet snagged a concrete garden border, and before he could even get close to the fence, Ridley fell face first into the begonias.

"Oh God, what now?" said an exasperated voice coming from the patio on the other side of the pool. "Son, just what the hell are you doing to my wife's flowers?"

Ridley turned over; his face flecked with scratchy redwood mulch. Squinting into the sun, he saw a heavysset man wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat and striped swimsuit.

"I wasn't..., " Ridley stammered. "I was just --"

"Just what? I need a story before I call this into my friends in law enforcement. You a pool hopper? You look like a pool hopper. Where's your shoes? Goddamn it, if you're not going to talk to me like a man, you leave me no choice."

Tom Jamieson turned around and started ambling around his pool, back to the patio and his cordless phone.

“No, no sir. Look, I was being stupid, right? I was going to see my friend, and, you know --”

Jamieson stopped, turned around and sized up Ridley, shaggy brown hair to dirty feet.

“Who’s your friend?” he said. He pointed at the fence. “You’re friends with someone in *that* house? That’s what you’re going with? *Those* girls? Do I look like a science fiction fan to you, son? Do you have a name, boy? Out with it, son!”

Ridley thought for a second. “I’m Edward Vedder.”

“Hmm,” Jamieson said. “Yeah, you look like an Edward, but I’m just thinking out loud here, Edward, if you’re such great friends with those teen-dreams over that fence, why in the holy hell don’t you just knock on their damn front door, Edward? You some kind of pre-vert? You look like a pre-vert, Edward.”

“Sir,” Ridley said, grasping for anything and clutching nothing. “I’m so sorry I cut through your backyard, and I must say your wife has excellent taste in gardening, but it was just a stupid mistake and I got lost and I promise not to do it ever again. Are we ... good?”

Jamieson squinted at Ridley. “Tell you what, Edward. We’re gonna take a walk, just a quick little walk, you and me, around the ol’ block. And this is the deal -- you listening to me, Edward? You’re going to march up to the front door of those Molina girls and ring that doorbell. If one of them answers and doesn’t scream when they see

your scraggly butt, then I just come back here and no harm, no foul. We clear the slate, and your trespassing butt is free to go as far as I'm concerned. You hear me, son?"

"I hear you, sir."

"Now, I'm not done, Edward. If none of them Molinas can vouch for you, then I'm going to have a chat with the local constabulary and tell them that a little pre-vert named Edward was pool hopping in my backyard and trying to rob my neighbors and violate their daughters and God knows what else. Now that's my deal and I've said my piece. Spit and shake on it?"

Ridley looked at Jamieson's big hands. "Sir, can we just shake?"

"You don't spit, it's no good, son. Deal ain't ratified. Rat-i-fied. Got to seal the deal, Edward. Commingle our spit in a solemn agreement!"

"God, fine," he said before spitting into his hand like Yosemite Sam or a Little Rascal. "Shake on it."

Jamieson just looked at Ridley's wet hand and shook his head. "Son, that's just gross. There's a hose over there. Wash off your damn hand and let's go, Edward."

Ridley cranked on the spigot and the cool water splashed over his hands, washing away his saliva. Throughout his years of underachievement at school, teachers and counselors often sent home notes detailing his concentration problems, but one observation Ridley saw once while snooping through the papers in his mother's bedside table actually made sense: he had problems with authority. Not like Asher Wolf, but if Ridley did not accept the rationale of certain homework assignments, he refused to complete them. In first grade, Ridley hid in a restroom during a fire drill. Ridley remembered with some degree of pride what his response was when the teacher pulled

him out of a stall and demanded to know why he was not joining his classmates on the playground.

“I did this last year.”

So, Ridley found the random orders and mandates coming from Blanca’s neighbor to be particularly onerous and potentially ominous.

“Come on, Edward, hurry yourself up with that,” Jamieson said, increasingly petulant and getting louder with each demand. “You some kind of clean freak, Edward? You look like you’re scrubbing into surgery, Dr. Edward Vedder.”

When he shut off the water, Jamieson grabbed Ridley’s arm. “Let’s travel, what say you? I just don’t know what will tickle me more, Edward -- getting to call my boys on the force or the completely unlikely chance that one of them Molinas will actually claim you. That would be something, wouldn’t it Edward? What the scientists or doctors like you would call one of those sadistical improbabilities, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Ridley said as he trudged through the side yard, around the bike, the firewood and the rattling AC. He wonders if it really is an improbability, that once he gets there, Blanca will point and laugh at him for actually coming over or, even worse, pretend to not recognize him.

“Well, all right now -- we are *out in the world*,” Jamieson said. “Hey -- hey Dr. Edward? I want you to feast your beady eyes on my pride and joy, right there in the front flower bed. I want you to meet my boy. I call him Kunta Kinte, or just Kunta if I’m all riled up. You get it, right Edward? Not too smart for you, Edward?”

Ridley stared at the painted plaster lawn ornament and wondered what kind of store sold those horrible things. “Sure -- no I get it, Mr. Jamieson. Alex Haley’s *Roots*, right? My aunt’s got that book.”

“Book? Whatever you say, Edward. Feel free to kiss him for good luck, ‘cause I’m reckoning you need a heapin’ helping of the stuff. Well, all right, Doctor, you just lead the way to your sweet Barbie Dream House, why don’t you? I’ll be right here behind you, so don’t do anything stupider than pool hopping into my property, like trying to run off or some shenanigans like that.”

With Tom Jamieson walking a few paces behind and wearing his wide-brimmed straw hat, striped swimsuit and some flip-flops, his big belly hanging over his drawstring waistband, Ridley wondered who was more likely to be picked up by the police. He just had to round the corner onto Oswego, pass two houses and learn his fate.

Once Ridley turned right, he could see Blanca’s house with its straight line of poplar trees along the side. After two years of school bus rides and furtive glances at Blanca, he could have found it blindfolded. He picked up the pace a little, hoping Jamieson might fall behind just enough that, if Blanca were paying attention, he could just dart through the Molinas’ front door.

No cars in the driveway, which could be good *or* bad, Ridley thought. The Benz was gone, which meant that Blanca might be, too.

“You know what, Dr. Edward? I think I’ll walk up to the door with you after all. Now, I’m not here to cramp your style or any such thing and I know what it’s like to be an awkward teenage doctor and all that, but I just want to make sure you’re not going to

harm that young thing. Because you're shifty, Edward," Jamieson said. "A hoodlum and a scofflaw, I'm thinking."

"Seriously, Mr. Jamieson," Ridley said, turning toward the man who seemed more and more like a greater threat than his mother, his principal, Mr. Jarvis or any neighborhood dog. "I'm not lying to you. I know Blanca -- she's a friend and she's helping me, and I'll totally honor our original plan if you'll just --"

"You shut your flapper, Edward, or I swear to Kunta Kinte I'll put you in a dungeon," Jamieson said, his nostrils widening and tightening, his eyes wide, fixed and unblinking. "Step up and ring that ringer, Dr. Pre-vert, but now *I'm* doing the talking. Keep quiet, or I'll burn you to a crisp, son."

The Speed Stick was no longer working. Soaked with nervous sweat, Ridley rang the bell.

It was a simple chime. No "Copacabana" for the Molinas. Ridley watched through the pebbled glass on the front door until a familiar shape, the cascade of dark brown hair, and the baseball shirt could be seen through the distortion.

"Oh, you made it -- didn't expect you out here, I --" Blanca said, pausing once she saw Ridley had company. "Well, Mr. Jamieson, what a nice surprise! Are you out for a stroll?"

"Well, yes, I," Jamieson said, suddenly aware of his bare torso. "So, you know this boy? This Edward character? Because he claims to be a doctor and washes his hands all the time, and he broke into my backyard, destroyed my wife's flowers like certain insects might and was fixing to hop over your fence and maybe violate your --"

“Um, yes, I know ‘Edward,’” she said, dragging the name out and giving Ridley a slight smile. “He’s a friend, but I think he got lost and I simply cannot thank you enough for showing him how to get to my house, Mr. Jamieson. You are *such* a gentleman.”

Blanca was a master of sweet condescension, Ridley thought. He could get used to being talked down to this way.

“Well, thank you for coming by -- that was so thoughtful,” Blanca said, clearly accelerating toward a goodbye. “You should go home now, Mr. Jamieson. Have a nice day, OK? *Bye.*”

Ridley only heard “But he’s some kind of pre --” before Blanca shut the door firmly and turned the knobs on two deadbolts.

“Seriously? ‘*Edward*’?” Blanca said, walking into the Molinas’ den to retrieve the cordless phone. “Edward R. Murrow or Edward Scissorhands’?”

“Eddie Vedder -- I told him my name was Edward Vedder, because I was pretty sure he didn’t have a copy of *Vs.*”

“Yes, but you really look more like a Stephen Malkmus,” she said, hitting a number on the speed dial. “Is he still out there?”

Malkmus, he thought. Not only does she know Pavement, but she also thought he looked like the undeniably coolest member of the band, the man who wrote, “Run from the pigs, the fuzz, the cops, the heat. Pass me your gloves, there’s crime and it’s never complete. Until you short it up or shoot it down, you’re never gonna feel free.” Also, the cute one, in Beatle parlance. He would take it.

Ridley peered through a vertical blind on the front window of Blanca’s den.

“He’s walking around in circles in your front yard.”

Blanca gave Ridley a silent “thumbs up.” “Yes, this is Blanca Molina and I live at 13427 South Oswego? Yes, well, there’s a neighbor of mine who I know is not supposed to leave his house, and he’s wandering around in my front yard.” She looked up and when Blanca saw that Ridley was staring, she shot him a compassionate smile, which could have been for either him or Jamieson. “Yes, that’s right. Thomas Jamieson. Yes. OK. OK thanks! Bye.”

She hung up the phone. “Tracey’s going to be in *trou-ble*,” Blanca said, singing the last word.

“What the hell, Blanca? Did you send me to that guy’s house for sport? Get a good laugh?”

“No, absolutely not, Ridley, but I figured he’d be fully medicated and you’d just slip through. Did you wake him up or something?”

Ridley looked down at his dirty, bare and now scraped-up feet. “I tripped into a flower bed, OK?”

“Ha!” Blanca said, walking over to Ridley and tousling his hair. “You’re quite the action figure, Ridley. Look, you might just go upstairs for a minute. Cops will be here soon, and you don’t want to be visible if Mr. Jamieson starts screaming about Dr. Edward Vedder again. By the way ... ‘Doctor?’”

“Seriously -- I have no idea.”

Ridley climbed the stairs and turned into the first bedroom on the left. The furniture was still little-girl vintage, but the walls were covered with posters: Elastica, Suede, the Gallaghers, PJ Harvey. He walked over to the window and saw a police car and an ambulance down below: an EMT was attempting to wrap a gray blanket around

Jamieson, who was extremely animated and pointing at the Molinas' house as two officers made calming gestures. Ridley saw the EMT plunge a syringe into Jamieson's upper arm, and the hulking man went limp almost instantly. It only took a minute to settle Jamieson into the back of the squad car.

Once he heard Blanca shut the door, Ridley left her bedroom and came down the stairs at a fast clip. "Gone?" he asked.

"Yep," Blanca said, falling into the living room couch and sinking into the cushions. "It's all over for now, but that Edward guy has made a real enemy. He should watch his ass."

Ridley walked over to the couch and sank in, but less casually and not too close to be suspect. "So, what is the deal with your neighbor who now thinks I'm Eddie Vedder?" he asked.

"Well, I'm guessing you watch a lot of TV, right? Lots of local commercials embedded in your brain?"

"You don't have to put it that way."

"Sorry," Blanca said. "All the boys I know are addicted to TV at some level or another. Anyway, remember when we were kids and we'd go home and reruns or MTV after school? Do you remember the SoundKing ads with Krazy King James?"

"Oh, totally," Ridley said. "Dressed all like a king with a robe and a staff that shot out lightning, screaming, 'I'm sending high prices to my ... *dungeon*.'"

"Yeah," Blanca said. "Krazy King James went crazy."

"With a 'K,'" Ridley said.

Blanca leaned forward on the sofa, her elbows resting on her bare knees. She turned to look at Ridley, who immediately and instinctively looked away.

“Stop that, Ridley. I learned in Newsroom class that a good interview is no different from a good conversation. It requires eye contact and attention, which helps your sources develop trust in you. Now, I can’t trust you if you won’t look me in the eye, Ridley. Right here,” she said, gently grabbing his chin and directing his gaze. “No more of that whole, ‘I’m not really looking at you’ thing from the school bus, right? Yeah, I noticed. But that’s behind us, agreed? Shake on it?”

Ridley looked at her hand. “Is this one of those spit-and-shake agreements?”

“OK, that’s weird.”

“You have no idea,” he said. “OK, shake.”

He held on until she let go and smiled uncomfortably.

“Ridley, we have work to do. It’s time to dig you out of your hole, but if I help you, you have to help me. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

“Yes -- I mean, sure. Of course,” Ridley said with an awkward smile. “But what?”

Blanca reached for the Walkman on her coffee table and handed it over. The cassette player was “Hello Kitty” pink, and Ridley noticed the numbers on the FM dial barely corresponded with any stations he knew: 76 to 90, and it had a separate row of what looked like TV channels.

“How do you listen to the radio with this thing? Stations are all out of whack.”

“Very carefully,” Blanca said. “You kind of have to tune by Braille, and if you want to listen to anything in town above KRCCR, you have to switch to the TV band. Totally different frequencies over there.”

“What did he get you?”

“A collection of *Mineki-nekos* -- did you see them? They’re up on my wall next to The Flaming Lips,” she said. “Five different colors and shapes of lucky cats. Going to get me into Georgetown if they actually work, but I’d trade all of them to Luna for that Walkman if they could’ve kept her from dating Asher Wolf.”

“He’s an asshole, huh?”

“You don’t even know, and I don’t want to say,” Blanca said, staring at the Walkman. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“Are you computer literate?”

Ridley smiled a relieved smile. “A little. My dad bought a TRS-80 Color Computer when I was little and I copied about five pages of BASIC from a magazine and got me a kick-ass version of Donkey Kong, but we got a PC last year.”

“So, you *can* follow directions,” Blanca said, standing up and extending her hand. “Come with me, good sir.”

Blanca continued to hold Ridley’s hand as she led him down a parquet wood hallway on the first floor, past their kitchen, and into an office with a beige, upright rectangular computer on the desk.

“Your dad has a Macintosh?” Ridley said, half-laughing. “Is anyone even buying those anymore? Apple’s on some kind of corporate deathwatch.”

“One of the best decisions my dad could make, though I’m not sure he knew what he was doing,” Blanca said. “But I think he only knows how to use Microsoft Word.”

“I don’t even know what you just said,” Ridley said, stroking the textured plastic of the Apple. “What can it do?”

“What your PC does, but much prettier and easier. See?” she said, pointing at the black-and-white screen. “OK, so here’s the \$128,000 question. Do you know how to use a modem?”

“Like, for dialing into BBS? The sound at the beginning of The Breeders’ ‘Cannonball?’”

“I’m learning a lot about you! Yes, like ‘Cannonball.’ I’m going to undo as much damage as I can for you, but first you have to promise you’ll help me with my Asher Wolf problem. Do you promise?”

“Absolutely. Your problem with Asher?”

Ridley picked a CD out of a Rolodex-style organizer and handed it to Blanca, who smiled and shoved it into the front slot on the Macintosh, which responded with a series of groans and clicks. Once the window opened on the monitor, Blanca clicked on an icon and, after about 10 seconds of intense thought, the Macintosh brought up a dialog box with a simple, black-and-white “connect” button. Blanca clicked the button and a tan box at the back of the desk with a bright red line of LEDs sprang to digital life, its diodes pulsating along with the petulant screech of machine language emanating from its internal speaker.

list of names and phone numbers. At the top of the list was an entry for “Bainwood_HS.”

“So, open that Word doc, and you’ll see a blue link with the words ‘Bainwood-underscore-HS, and...”

“Do I type ‘underscore’?”

“Oh, you sweet, simple boy,” she said.

At first, the cursor under Ridley’s command careened wildly over the screen as he adjusted to the teardrop Mac mouse, but he soon steadied it over “Bainwood_HS” and, after getting a nod from Blanca, clicked the top of the teardrop. The modem made a bubbling sound, and the screen went white except for a green “BHS” crest image that filled in from the top while loading. The full balance of the screen consisted of the words “LOGIN” and “PASSWORD” in Courier font.

Blanca pulled the keyboard toward her. “You’re not going to believe how easy this is.”

She entered “admin,” and then in the password field. Blanca rapidly typed “gobruins,” and a series of blank boxes appeared on the screen labeled “LAST NAME,” “FIRST NAME,” “MI,” “ADDRESS” and “SSN.”

“So here we are, Ridley. Just tell the computer a little about yourself, and then we’re off to see the wizard.”

Ridley studied the screen. “What does ‘SSN’ mean?”

Blanca arched her left eyebrow and smirked. “Seriously?”

“Look, I’m sorry I’m not as brilliant as you are. I get enough criticism, OK?”

“No, I’m sorry -- I’m being a jerk,” she said, touching his left hand, which had been moving the mouse aimlessly, taking the cursor on a wild tour of the screen. He stopped moving. “It’s just your Social Security Number, but you don’t need to know it. Just type in “Royko, Ridley A.” and it should know who you’re talking about.”

He hunted and pecked around the keyboard, occasionally missing a letter and correcting himself until he had filled in the blanks, and hit return. Then, scrolling from

top to bottom, the screen slowly filled with embarrassing data for “Spring 1994,” mostly grades in the low 70s and upper 60s with a respectable 86 in Language Arts I and a particularly desultory Geometry entry in the lower 60s.

“Jesus,” Ridley said. “This is like ‘WarGames.’”

“No, Ridley. ‘WarGames’ is like *this*,” Blanca said. “Now, what I’m going to tell you is way more important than knowing how to get into this thing. Put down the mouse for a second, so I know that you’re listening, OK?”

“OK, I’m listening,” he said, trying to pull himself away from the future of grade fabrication. “What’s up?”

“What’s ‘up’ is that it’s super-important to not get greedy. Never change your grade by more than 10 points and try to keep the last number the same, so that illustrious ‘61’ you’ve got in Maxwell’s Algebra class should become a ‘71.’ Also, don’t change anything you don’t absolutely need to change. What we’re doing right now is getting you out of trouble, not getting you into William and Mary.”

“Umm... folk group, right?”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Blanca said, rolling her eyes. “I’m just saying we’ve got to get your parents off your back for now. If you can do that, we’ll worry about the rest later.”

Ridley considered what “the rest” could possibly mean. This beautiful girl with the spring-loaded brain spoke his language when it came to appeasing his parents -- he understood short-term gains. It was the long game that seemed completely foreign, but then again, so did Blanca’s attention, which was far better than imaginary MTV girlfriends and the “dorks against the world” social stance shared by him and Max Wolf.

“All right,” he said. “I’m in. Just walk me through this, OK? I’ve never actually dealt with permanent records.”

“Yeah, see? You’ve been missing out,” Blanca said, pointing at the screen. “What I would do is keep that English grade just the way it is -- an 86 is almost a B-plus, so now fix that Algebra grade and make that a 71, which gives you a C. Is your mom cool with you getting a C in math?”

“I get an ugly look for a C. I get high decibel screaming for Ds and Fs.”

“I’d settle for an ugly look. I mean, it’s not like Vice Principal Arceneaux is going to notice that much change in one kid’s grades in this school. But just don’t tempt fate, Ridley. So, ready to move on?”

“Let’s do it.”

“All right, so ...” Blanca stopped and laughed, even pointed at the screen. “Seriously? A “D” in P.E.? What did you do, hide in the locker room?”

It had crossed Ridley’s mind more than once. “I forgot my gym gear for about two weeks. Straight.”

“Do you have a medical condition I should know about? My grandmother can’t remember anything, but she’s almost 80, Ridley.”

“Look, you know how Coach DiBona is -- he stands there and laughs at the skinny kids during dodgeball.”

Blanca leaned back in her father’s office chair. “I don’t know, Royko,” she said, which is how most kids referred to each other in gym class. “Would you rather be laughed at, or would you rather be *stared* at?”

Ridley didn’t say a word.

“Let’s finish up,” she said, refocusing. “It’s not like the guys who run this system are from Bell Labs or anything, but you don’t want to hang out too long. That physical science grade could come up from a 67 to a 77, and if we do that, then all you know are your ABCs, Ridley. Congratulations, you’re a completely average student. Now, go down to where it said ‘Save’ and type a ‘Y,’ and we can get out of here.”

Ridley typed in the letters, hit the ‘return’ key and the modem made an angry “dial tone” noise until Blanca flipped a switch and the red lights on the peripheral went dark.

“Blanca?”

“Yes, Ridley?”

“Why do you know how to do all this?”

Blanca shut off the power strip and the desktop on the Macintosh got sucked into a white pinhole at the center of the screen before disappearing completely. “You want some Fresca?”

“Fresca?”

“It’s what we’ve got. Mom’s on a perpetual diet.”

“Sure, I guess.”

Jumping out of the chair, Blanca grabbed Ridley’s hand and led him back down the parquet hall to the family room, then let go and left him standing by the couch while she rummaged around the refrigerator for the two-liter bottle of guilt-free citrus soda. Ridley wondered when he would stop flinching, even slightly, when she touched him, and if this was something special or just the way Blanca Molina conducted her casual and affectionate life. Growing up in a not-so-huggy family and being a male teenager, he was

always fearful of how physical contact might be interpreted, but this girl did not appear to be afflicted by such self-consciousness.

“It’s almost three,” she said, pointing to the brass clock on the mantle with the spinning mechanisms under a protective glass dome. “You should leave before it gets too late -- Mom and Dad usually get home around five.”

“What about your sister?”

Blanca put two iced glasses of Fresca on the coffee table. “If we’re lucky, she graces us with her presence in time for dinner, and she’s out the door before the dishes are cleared. I love her, but she’s a pain in the ass.”

“So, you didn’t answer my question,” Ridley said.

“Which one?”

“You know, how did you learn how to doctor grades?”

“Necessity is the mother of intervention,” Blanca said, laughing a little at her own dark joke. “Actually, now that I think about it, it’s the sister of intervention, because if it weren’t for me, Luna wouldn’t be going to TU in the fall. She wouldn’t be going anywhere.”

“What do you mean? She seems completely fine.”

Blanca gave Ridley a hard look. “Um, not ‘fine.’ Better, but not ‘fine’ yet. Look, I’ve done a lot for you today, and you’ve trusted me, right? Now I need to know if I can completely trust *you*. What are you made of Ridley? Am I going to hear a bunch of bullshit about Luna when I go back to school?”

Ridley made eye contact and worked to maintain it. Being with Blanca was requiring a crash-course social evolution for him. “Look. If you don’t trust me, then don’t

tell me. If you don't think it will help, don't say anything. But I promise," he said, suddenly and naturally grabbing Blanca's hand without fear, "This is completely between us."

She didn't pull away. "I'll know if it's you, Ridley."

"Dead serious," Ridley said. "Like, Nine Inch Nails serious."

"All right," she said. "You probably think I was being hard on Max back there for defending Asher, don't you? I wouldn't blame you, with you guys being best friends at all."

"Well, Asher is a dickhead, but..."

"Ridley, you have no idea. Seriously," Blanca said, getting up from the couch and taking the stance that almost always leads to worried pacing. "You know what happened to Luna? Asher Wolf happened."

"Did they have a bad breakup or something?"

"For real? No, the breakup was a miracle," she said.

"Asher just seems like a run-of-the-mill smoker-dealer-burnout guy, right? Taco Train at lunchtime, army jacket, lank hair and Iron Maiden t-shirts?"

"That's roughly it, yeah."

"Well, he and Luna started seeing each other last summer, right before school ended, and of course Mom and Dad hated him, right? That's what they're supposed to do. And she was completely into him, but -- and seriously, Ridley? -- she was a virgin."

"Really?"

"Hey, why are you so surprised?" Blanca said, knitting her brow. "Watch your social cues, please."

“I’m sorry,” Ridley said. “That’s not what I meant.”

Ridley listened as Blanca described mornings in the bathroom, water running constantly so their parents could not hear Luna describing the constant pressure coming from Asher Wolf. He wanted to have sex with her, and it was a steady drumbeat of testosterone-addled pleading. After days of this, Blanca said, Luna agreed to go to a Friday party with Asher at the Brandis Ranch, an old dude ranch in the far reaches of South Tulsa that became popular among Bainwood’s wealthiest students as a private location for binge drinking. Blanca woke up the next morning, and Luna was not in her bed. Her father Ray, an editor at the *Tulsa World*, was on the phone all day with contacts in the Tulsa Police Department, but everyone told the Molinas that she would have to be missing for 48 hours.”

“So, my dad and everyone else in this house were about to lose our minds when Luna showed up -- like, in the middle of the day on Sunday. She looked like shit, had dark circles under her eyes and her whole left side was dirty and her hair was all matted. And Dad kept, like, screaming at her, demanding that she tell him where she was and who did this to her and just kept going, and she just kept shaking her head.”

Ridley got up and walked to the kitchen to rip a paper towel off the roller, then walked back and handed it to Blanca.

“Thanks,” she said, wiping her nose and eyes. “Anyway, so Mom and Dad finally put her in the car to take her to St. Francis, to the emergency room, and I go with her, and she’s crying the whole time and she’s telling them she doesn’t know what happened and ‘Please believe me!’ and it’s just horrible, because she’s always been so together, right?”

“You must have been scared,” he said, feeling the impulse to put his arm around her but thinking better of it.

“It was awful, and my mom was starting to yell at my dad to stop yelling at Luna, and we’re all trapped together in this car going down 81st Street and no one is making sense.”

At the hospital, Luna was provided a “rape kit,” a series of tests given in the wake of a sexual assault, but Blanca said they never heard anything about it from the police after that.

“For weeks, Papá is calling the police and getting these completely uncaring receptionists telling him that they have ‘not received results and please check back later.’ And Luna was spending all her time in her room. No music, and at one point, my mother and father wrestled her into the shower because it had been a week. And my sister is smart, Ridley. National Merit finalist, but she stopped doing homework completely and would never hang out with anyone.”

Ridley almost raised his hand to ask a question. “So, that’s why you know how to break into the school’s computer system?”

“Yes,” she said, exhaling hard. “Luna had a bad semester. Really bad. She won’t really talk about it now, but I don’t think Plano went so well for her, either.”

“Like what?”

“Um, can we just stop?” she said, then picked the Walkman off the coffee table and looked at the label on the tape. “Let’s listen to PJ Harvey.”

Chapter 6

Blanca walked over to the stereo cabinet and hit the power button on the amplifier, which caused every component to light up and generate a slight hum from her father's tower speakers. Blanca hit a button and removed one of the tapes from the dual cassette deck and replaced it with Asher Wolf's cassette.

Ridley expected to hear "50 ft. Queenie" or Harvey's blister-raising cover of "Highway '61 Revisited," but the only music on the recording was the muffled, seemingly far-away sound of a radio, and the song was definitely not the work of a generational talent. No, it was older brother meat rock of the Sunset Strip variety, Ridley thought, as Blanca stared at the left speaker like she was focusing on the vibrations of the paper cones, divining detail from the muddle.

"Wait," Blanca said, then hit rewind and cranked the volume knob. "There's something -- listen, OK?"

She hit play, and the speakers started booming from the sound of friction against the microphone, as if the "record" button were accidentally pressed while someone sat on the Walkman. Ridley turned down the far-left bars on the stereo's equalizer to lower the bass, which allowed some sounds to emerge from the cacophony, like voices and bottles clinking and Asher being a sleaze. Girls' voices in the background, some giggling.

No, I'm just going to lie down here for a second, awright? Jush a second.

Blanca tensed and backed away from the stereo console, and Ridley watched as she sat on the couch and stared at the shag carpet, listening intently, occasionally making eye contact. Then a clear, metallic zipping sound — tortured, as if the teeth snagged

every few inches on something. The microphone noise continued and became rhythmic, like a prenatal ultrasound.

The next horrible seconds shocked Blanca and Ridley, who realized just how far the volume was raised.

Hey, what are you doing? Get off her, you asshole!

Blanca stood up. "Ridley, shut it off. Now."

"But, who do you think it --"

"Are you serious? Shut it off!"

Ridley opened the glass door on the stereo cabinet, hit the "stop" button and ejected the cassette. When he turned around, Blanca was staring at him, visibly shaking, tears wetting her cheeks.

"Who was that? I mean, it sounded like Luna, but it could have been Melissa, and I'm really, really freaked out," she said, pointing at the stereo.

Ridley went to Blanca and hugged her. Blanca rested her head on his shoulder, but her body felt tense and unyielding. "Should we take this to the cops?"

Blanca pulled away. "Maybe I'm not saying 'No,'" she said. "Maybe I'm saying, 'Let's wait until the last minute before we let a bunch of white male cops traumatize my Latina sister. My father reported for years before he became an editor, and still tells me stories of how people are treated north of downtown by the cops.'"

"If I'm being totally honest," Ridley said, "I've never been north of downtown."

"Most people from Bainwood don't, unless we're playing Booker T. Washington in an away game," she said. "But a little closer to home, last year Mamá was outside in our driveway, standing next to her car, and a cop stopped, got out of his car, walked up to

her and asked her if she was lost, as if Marisol Molina could not own a Mercedes and live in this neighborhood in South Tulsa.”

Ridley’s experience with police, up to the point that he became a runaway and they started looking for him, had been almost nonexistent. Other than the few times his father was pulled over for speeding and heckled mercilessly by his wife while Cam and Ridley watched and listened in the back, encounters with cops simply did not happen much for the Roykos.

“Take the tape, listen to it, tell me what’s on it. I just don’t have the stomach to listen, or the heart, because Luna went through something horrible, no matter whether that’s her on that recording or that’s Melissa yelling about what’s happening to Luna. Now, you know you have to go home, right?”

“Yeah,” Ridley said. “I’m scared shitless about it, but I know.”

“Are your parents violent?”

“They yell. A lot,” he said, looking down at the carpet. Yes, they could be. “It can go on for a while.”

“Look me in the eye, Ridley -- remember?” she said, this time raising his chin gently. “What do they do to you for running away? Just ... ballpark it for me.”

“Well, I’ve been gone for two days, plus I guess I’ve been on TV and in the newspaper, so that’s especially embarrassing. If I had to guess, I won’t step outside my room for a month except for bathroom breaks.”

Blanca smiled and playfully brushed Ridley’s bangs out of his eyes. “You want to know something?” she said.

“Of course.”

“Never been grounded. Not even once.”

“Wow,” Ridley said. “You’re so good.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right? Good at not getting caught. Just remember this: grades get mailed out next week and according to official Bainwood High School transcripts, you are incredibly average.”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling back at her. “I guess I really owe you for that.”

“You can pay me back by calling me and letting me know what you hear on that tape. Write it all down. Hold on,” Blanca said as she takes a quick jog to the kitchen and pulls a Post-It note off the refrigerator. She quickly jots a number. “You won’t lose this, right?”

She had to be kidding. “No, absolutely not.”

“All right. Look, I’m no expert at surviving punishments, but if I were you, I’d just go home now, don’t smart off, go to your room, serve your time, listen to the tape. Also, take your lumps, eat your vegetables and relax, because your grades are refreshingly and safely mediocre. Can you do that, Ridley?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I need something with a little more *oomph* to it.”

“I can do it,” he said. “Seriously.”

“OK. Keep that tape hidden, and do not, under any circumstances, record over it. Listen to it with some big-ass headphones of yours, and like you’re a reporter, I want you to take notes. When you can, sneak away from your parents and call me.”

“Trust me, I will,” Ridley said, looking at the front door. “But wouldn’t it be better if I just went back to Max and Asher’s house? I mean, I could stay in the attic, maybe hide this recorder in his room and --”

“Ridley?” Blanca said, fixing him with her stare.

“Yes?”

“If you do that, what are the chances that you’ll ever see me again?”

“Um,” he said, looking again at his bare feet. “Slim to basically none, I guess?”

“Up here, Ridley,” Blanca said as she grabbed his chin, raised his face to meet her eyes and leaned in to kiss him.

“It’s like *Seinfeld*, Ridley,” she said. “Be ‘Opposite George.’”

Chapter 7

Even after Blanca closed the front door behind him, Ridley's brain refused to respond to the outside world. It was a kiss from Blanca Molina, and it was better than anything he could fathom, and as he stumbled into the late-afternoon light on Oswego, Ridley stayed punch drunk on that kiss long enough to pass two houses, or just long enough for a black-and-white Crown Victoria to pull in behind him on the curb.

"Stop right there!" It was a booming voice amplified through a staticky PA, a gray loudspeaker mounted on the light bar. *"Hands on your head, kid."*

Ridley turned around and put his hands on the back of his head, like he was preparing to do sit-ups. The officer, a short man in his early 30s with a regulation police mustache, got out of his squad car and walked toward him with a folded-up Xerox in his left hand. He looked at Ridley's messy hair, his thin face, the Kix t-shirt and his dirty, bare feet, then squinted at the Xerox of a school photo with typed descriptions of a skinny missing teenager.

"Are you Ridley Andrew Royko?" the cop asked.

Ridley just stared at Sgt. Bobby Treadway, with his name above his pocket, not believing he was caught so conspicuously.

"Yeah, probably," he said.

Sgt. Treadway looked at Ridley's pupils. "You OK, kid? Been smoking the reefer?"

"What? No, not even," Ridley said. "Look, can I just go home? I mean, you can drive me or whatever, but I really just want to fall down and go to sleep."

“Mister Royko, do you know we’ve been looking for you for two days?” the officer said, glancing back at the Xerox. “What happened to you, um... you go by Ridley, right?”

Ridley paused for a beat, then looked directly at Treadway. “Yeah. Or Rid, sometimes.”

“OK, back seat,” Treadway said as he opened the rear passenger-side door. Ridley eased himself onto the cracked white-vinyl seat and examined the meshed metal bars between the front and rear compartments.

“Are you taking me home?”

Treadway closed the door firmly, walked around to the driver’s side and got in, affixing the Xerox to his clipboard and picking up his radio mike. “Six-Niner-Niner, got a 10-14 to Saint Francis, possible 10-85, subject’s name Ridley Andrew Royko, age 15, over?”

“Sir, why are you taking me to the hospital?”

The officer turned around and looked at Ridley through the mesh. “Kid, if you can tell me where you’ve been the past two days, then I can take you home. Otherwise, it’s all up to the ER docs. Buckle up, all right?”

Ridley thought about it. He could not think of a decent story to tell his parents about the past two days and did not want to get either Blanca or Max in any trouble with their parents, especially Blanca, but at the same time, Max was living in a house with a bad man.

“Nope,” he said. “I’m drawing a blank.”

“OK then,” Treadway said. “Settle back and enjoy the ride, Ridley. Crazy day on that street, no offense.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“In all your wanderings, you didn’t run into a middle-aged fat man wearing a swimsuit and a Panama Jack hat, did you? Guy raving to himself?”

“Don’t think so,” Ridley said, turning to the window. “Can’t remember much, if I’m being honest.”

Treadway looked in the rearview at Ridley. “Oh yeah, right,” he said, shaking his head. “Just a few more blocks.”

At the emergency room, Treadway checked Ridley in at the front desk while he sat in a plastic pastel chair in the reception area. “Parents are notified and en route. You guys take it from here?”

“Yeah, I think we’ve got him, Sergeant,” said the reception nurse. “Ridley Royko, you wanna come back?”

“Wait a second,” Treadway said, putting his hands in a “T” position for “time out.” He bent over to where Ridley was sitting and put his face close to him. Ridley smelled a Chili Cheese Burrito.

“Kid,” he said in a low, onion-tinged whisper. “You’ve got no head wound, you’re not slobbering and you don’t look like a glue sniffer or a gas huffer or whatnot. Now, I don’t know if you’ve noticed from the uniform, but I’m ... kind of a cop. I pretty much know a bullshit artist just from looking at them. Now, we can sit down over by that Coke machine down the hall and talk this out quietly, or you can keep up your soap-opera amnesia act and cost your mom and dad a couple thousand bucks in medical bills.”

Treadway stood up and put his arms on his hips.

“So, what say you, Ridley? Buy you a pop?”

“A what?” Ridley asked, feeling alarmed.

“A Coca-Cola, or something from the Coca-Cola family of products.”

Ridley was tired, and while it had only been an hour since he left the Molina house, he missed Blanca. He thought about how nice it would be to spend every afternoon with her, hacking into computer mainframes and having passionate, clumsy sex.

“Hey!” Treadway said, loudly snapping his fingers in Ridley’s face. “You still with me?”

“Uh, yes sir,” Ridley said, coming back to Earth. “I’ll have that soda.”

Sgt. Treadway fed quarters into the machine and hit the “Coca-Cola Classic” button, which sent a can tumbling down through a black swinging door. He handed the first can to Ridley and then repeated the process.

“All right, Ridley,” he said. “Pretend there’s no badge on my shirt and tell me why you’ve been bullshitting me.”

Ridley proceeded to tell a selectively truthful version of recent events. The threat of military school was in, as was running out the door, but Max and Asher Wolf were not part of this version of the story and Blanca Molina was out of the question. He told the officer he spent the past two days ducking into grocery stores and loitering near the magazine racks, walking from neighborhood to neighborhood and hiding in the narrow gaps between suburban houses, and the previous night he slept in a backyard, in a flower

bed. It might have been begonias. All in all, it was still bullshit, Ridley thought, but with just enough veracity to camouflage the smell.

“All that because of military school? Shit, Ridley,” Treadway said. “Hell, *I* went to military school.”

“Really?”

“Where do you think cops come from anyway?” he said, sipping from his green-and-white can. “You go to one of those places, you graduate and then you think, ‘What sounds better: boot camp or police academy? Hell, it’s all the same thing, kid.’”

Ridley turned and looked at Treadway. “No offense,” he said, “but I don’t want to go into the army and I don’t want to be a cop.”

“Really? Look, you’re a sneaky, devious little shit, aren’t you? You’d make detective in three years.”

Ridley tipped his can. “OK, so I’ve told you everything,” he said, lying. “What should I do, sir?”

Treadway sat for a minute and considered the question, rubbing the rough plastic of the waiting room chair. “I think we stick around for your parents to get here, and we both tell them exactly what you told me. What’s the worst thing they could do?”

“Send me to military school.”

“OK, if that’s still your all-time worst scenario, then what’s next?”

“How about being grounded for a month?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty bad,” Treadway said. “Full month or time off for good behavior?”

“That depends on what kind of month my mom’s having while I’m stuck in my room,” Ridley said, standing up to throw the can in the garbage. “After a few days, if she gets tired of me staying in there, reading and listening to records, she’ll start screaming that I do nothing to justify my existence, and so she’ll follow me around while I try to do some chores, complaining that she had to tell me to do them in order for them to get done. And then it’s four o’clock and the rum and coke gets broken out. Fun times ahead.”

While his parents enjoyed their first drinks and then got surly and argumentative with their seconds and thirds, Ridley usually stayed out of the fray, directly overhead in his room, and read about bands with names like Blur and Suede. He could pretend that he was living somewhere other than Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he never felt like he fit with his own family, let alone a place where it was not uncommon to hear advertisements for two competing cattle dewormers during morning newscasts.

“I’m not sure how to feel about what you just described,” the sergeant said, crushing his own can.

“I’m pretty sure how *I* feel about it.”

Treadway stood up, put his hands behind himself and cracked his back, which caused the handcuffs on his belt to clink like silverware. He walked down the row of chairs and back, then stopped.

“Look, Ridley,” he said. “I know this much: if a kid tells his story to Mom and Dad with a cop standing there, listening to the whole damn thing and whatnot, they usually take it a lot better than otherwise.”

“Why?”

“Because they think the job’s already done. If a police officer is already involved, how much worse can it get?”

“*Ridley Andrew Royko, please report to the ER check-in station,*” said the red-faced male nurse over the intercom. “*Ridley. Andrew. Royko.*”

“OK,” Ridley said, getting out of his pastel chair. “I guess I’m on.”

Down the hall, he could see Barb and Roger Royko at the front desk, talking animatedly to the nurse while his little brother Cam sat in a nearby plastic chair, palming Cheez-Its. As Ridley’s mother turned to see Ridley walking toward her with Sgt. Bobby Treadway, a dark-haired teenage girl and a drawn, nervous woman who looked like her mother walked through the swinging door from the emergency room, escorting a bulky man wearing a Panama Jack hat with his torso wrapped in a blanket. And as the man walked in front of Barb Royko, he looked up and locked eyes with Ridley.

“Doctor Edward Vedder! You look like you’ve got privileges in the Saint Francis Hospital. You some kind of ER doctor? You look like some kind of teenaged ER doctor!”

Chapter 8

All the Roykos faced forward, silent, like strapped-in crash test dummies. All except for Cam. The pudgy fifth grader stared at his older brother across the fold-down armrest in the back seat and rummaged around for the last broken crackers at the bottom of his Cheez-Its box. Ridley refused to make eye contact and concentrated instead on the strobing rhythm of overhead streetlights outside his window. He knew Cam was the only person in the car who could not stand the silence.

“Mom?” Cam said, wiping orange powder on his Levi’s. “Do I get the whole second floor to myself now?”

“Be quiet, Cameron -- I mean it!” his mother said, looking over her shoulder and shooting nasty looks at the smart-mouthed kid, then Ridley. “You can be grounded just as easily as your brother. Do you have anything else to say?”

“Nope. I’m just sitting here not being a runaway.”

Roger looked in the rear-view mirror, and pushed his gold aviator glasses up the bridge of his nose. “If I hear any more of that crap from the back seat, I’m pulling over.”

“I didn’t say a thing,” Ridley said.

“Shut up, Ridley. As soon as we get home, I want you upstairs, and you’re gonna take a goddamn shower and go straight to bed. Your mother and I will discuss the terms of your grounding tonight. You will not be part of the negotiations. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” Ridley glanced over at Cam, who was scratching his cheek with his middle finger and smiling, a glint of pure evil in his eyes. Ridley silently mouthed “screw you” at Cam.

“Mom! Ridley said a bad word!”

“Did I?” Ridley said. “I didn’t hear a thing.”

Roger suddenly pulled over into a convenience store parking lot, shifted the Bonneville into park and leaned over the back seat. “Ridley, Cameron? Silence.”

Ridley leaned his head on the window, completely exhausted but considering the merits of running away, all over again. Then he thought about Blanca, which made him feel better, but he remembered some of the last things she said to him: take your lumps, eat your vegetables. If he could avoid getting provoked by anyone in his family, Ridley thought he could just barely survive the next month, but he also knew how hard that would be given the nature of his family.

“What I want to know is,” Barbara said, her voice rising in agitation, “What is it that could cause you to run away and embarrass us this much?”

“Gosh, I don’t know Mom, does military school blow any bugles for you?”

“Well, I don’t know, Ridley? We can get you on the next bus and you can find out!”

“That’s it. Barbara,” Roger said. “Now I’m telling *you* to shut up.”

Ridley was thankful for his dad at the moment, for his impatience and his desire for silence as the Roykos sat in silence and darkness, the radio off. The Bonneville’s headlights illuminated their neighborhood’s entrance sign, a gray-brick wall with “Cedar Meadows” spelled out in black, Gothic metal lettering that always reminded Ridley of a Mötörhead album cover. But as the Roykos’ car got closer, Ridley could see that there were at least six neighborhood kids sitting on the wall, dangling their legs over the metal letters. One of the boys, a gangly preteen with braces that reflected glare of the

headlights, pointed excitedly at the Pontiac, and one by one, the boys pushed themselves off the wall and ran after the car as it turned into the subdivision.

“Oh, *great*,” Roger said under his breath but loud enough for everyone to hear.

“It’s the goddamn welcome wagon.”

Cam looked out the window at the boy with the braces and stuck his middle finger up his nose and silently cackled, mocking the running boys as the diesel smoke from the Bonneville made a few of them cough loudly.

“I’m not going to try to save you from those kids,” Ridley said.

“Whatever,” the little brother said. “Like you could.”

Once the Roykos turned down Juniper, the situation became all too clear. Three news vans were parked in front of the Royko home and down the street, along with a 1990 Mustang and a station wagon with fake wood panels, neither of which were familiar to Ridley. Light rigs were set up on the curb, and as the Roykos pulled toward their driveway, two female reporters and a male one rushed to the edge of their property and crowded around the family’s mailbox, each pulling a long microphone cord behind them. A man wearing Dockers and a bowling shirt followed closely behind with a spiral notebook while a bespectacled, long-haired photographer in his fifties took shots from the street.

“Honey,” Barbara said, suddenly polite in her panic. “I can’t be on TV -- I’m a mess because of this boy. Can you do something? Please?”

Roger just held up his hand, possibly to reassure his wife or to quiet her down.

“You look fine, Barb -- just get it together, all right?”

He then turned toward Ridley.

“Now, I want you to listen carefully to me, son. I want you to get out of this car and stand there, right by me and your mother while I talk to these reporters. Don’t you dare say a word to them,” he said. “You’re a minor -- remember that. They can’t make you talk.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna make him work in a coal mine?”

“Be quiet, Camcam -- I mean it,” Roger said, sighing heavily. “Ridley, do we understand each other?”

Ridley understood his father, but he was absolutely certain his father did not understand him. He nodded.

“OK,” Roger said. “I’m getting out of the car first. Follow me.”

With two news vans and a few reporters camped out front, it was hardly a media circus, but the word was out in Cedar Meadows, which meant that most of the kids in the neighborhood and a large number of their parents were standing in the street or, in the case of a few brave ones, tromping around in the Roykos’ front lawn. Roger straightened his blue-and-brown striped tie and got out of the Bonneville, followed by Barbara and Ridley. Cam stayed where he was but turned backward in the car, his face pressed against the rear windshield as he puffed out his cheeks and crossed his eyes at the reporters.

“Before you ask anything, I just want to say something,” Roger said as foam microphone covers crowded around his face and he put his arms around Barbara on his right and Ridley on his left. Sweat started to gather on his forehead and his words came out with decreasing confidence.

“My son, Ridley, he’s a good boy. He’s not a juvenile delinquent or hophead or dope fiend or anything like that. He just ran off over a private family matter. But he’s safe now, and that’s all that really matters, right?”

Ridley looked up at his father. If Blanca were here, she would tell him that reporters think a lot of things matter. The questions started piling and layering, one over the other.

“Ridley, you disappeared for two days when there are missing girls like Melissa McCayless out there. Why would you run away when police resources are stretched to their limits?”

Barbara stepped in front of her son.

“You’re Blake Maggerty, aren’t you? From Channel 8?”

“That’s right, Mrs. Royko. Now, do you and your husband --”

“I’m sorry, did you actually ask my 15-year-old son if he understands the impact of his behavior on public resources?”

“Well, ma’am, your son ran away for two days, and --”

“Mr. Maggerty, the only problem for him right now are the people outside his house,” Barbara said, and Ridley knew this was not true. “Camcam! Get out here this instant!”

Cam pushed the car door open and quickly slammed it shut as Roger turned toward the front door and rifled through his pockets for the keys. Barbara put her arm around Ridley, sternly and stiffly like a guard, and walked him up to the house. The newspaper reporter and his photographer walked briskly back to their cars while the TV reporters, still at the top of the driveway to avoid trespassing, prepared to do closing

“stand-ups” for their 10 p.m. newscasts. Several neighborhood kids stood behind them and made faces, hoping to be seen on the news, including Cam, who had stayed in the yard to flip off the camera. As Roger unlocked the door and sighed with relief, Barbara pushed Ridley into the house, then quickly turned and marched out to grab Cam’s arm and pull the boy inside as he strained against his mother’s tight grip.

“Hey! Are you getting this, Channel 8 guy?” Cam let out a big cackle. “I’m being abused!”

Once the family was inside, Roger closed the door, turned the deadbolt and walked slowly into the living room, pulling his tie off and dropping it on the floor as he fell into his Barcalounger. Ridley ran up the stairs and into the hallway bathroom, leaving Cam in the hallway with his mother, whom he just loudly accused of child abuse on local TV news.

Ridley heard the yelling from his mother and the beginnings of a crying fit from Cam, then the quick pounding of short legs up the stairs and a slammed bedroom door. He sat on the toilet and stared at his blackened feet. He wanted a shower, a bath, then another shower.

He heard muffled discussions downstairs and the distinctive clink of ice hitting glass. Then Ridley could hear the steady sound of footfalls, heavier ones, up the steps. And then a knock.

“Ridley,” said his father. “When you’re done, come down. And make it quick.”

He did not answer. Ridley felt like falling asleep on the toilet, or maybe just curling up on the floor tiles. Exhaustion was part of it, but Ridley was back at ground

zero two days after the explosion, and he was not prepared for the fallout. He wanted to avoid the next concussive wave of anger from his parents, but especially the concentrated heat from his mother. The more he could stretch out his bathroom break, the better.

“Ridley! Downstairs now!”

This was part of the problem, why he ran out of the house in the first place. Ridley’s mother was a slow-burn ruminator, a woman who started out mad, then let her anger churn until everything blasted out. He thought he knew when it was coming, but predicting the intensity was a next-level skill.

“Ridley! Now!”

“Coming.”

He washed his hands and left the bathroom, walking slowly down the hall. As he passed Cam’s room, the door was cracked and he could see his brother’s face peering out.

“After she kills you, I’m moving the Atari into your room,” he whispered.

Ridley flipped off Cam and started down the stairs.

“Mom!”

“Get back in your god-damn room, Cam – don’t even think about leaving until I say you can come out!” she said, haltingly at first, but then escalating and intensifying as if she were summoning a whirlwind.

Cam quickly closed his door, turned on his stereo and played the Spin Doctors.

When Ridley reached the stairs, he saw his dad, still in the Barcalounger but now with a rum and coke in his hand, and his mother was walking out of the kitchen stirring her glass. She walked to the base of the stairs, face on fire, raging.

“No,” she said. “I want you standing. Up there.”

Ridley stopped and said nothing as his mother scanned him, head to toe.

“Where’d you get that shirt?”

Ridley said nothing. He was so tired, he forgot to create a back-story for the shirt.

“I just found it, that’s all?”

“Are you serious?” Roger said. “No one just finds shirts -- definitely not on this side of town.”

“That’s awfully big, for you anyway,” Mom said.

“A lot of people still listen to Kix at school. Well, not a lot, and definitely not me.”

“So, you got it from someone at school? Well, duh!” Barbara said, taking a strong pull off her drink. “Look Ridley, I don’t give a shit where you got the shirt, but what I do give a shit about is you constantly lie to me all the time -- lying, lying, lying! I know that nice police officer found you way up on Oswego,” she said, glowering at Ridley. “But everything else is a total mystery. I mean, seriously -- where’s Columbo when you need him, right? My stupid son --”

“Barbara, don’t -- “

“Oh, thanks for speaking up, Roger -- right on time,” she said. Another sip.

“Who’s handling this, me or you?”

“Goddamn it, Barbara, go ahead -- take us *all* out, why don’t you?” Roger stood up and walked back to the kitchen.

Her eyes followed Roger as he walked to the kitchen, then refocused on Ridley.

“You ruined us tonight. All of us. Your father is going to be so embarrassed he’ll probably have to quit his job, and do you actually think I can show my face in front of the neighborhood? What are they going to say to me? What am I going to say to *them*?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” Ridley said, his eyes starting to water. I’m really sorry. I freaked out when I heard you talking about military school, and I just lost it and ran. I panicked.”

“How do you think we felt? Did you think about that for a second on your adventure?” she said. “You’re lucky — St. Julian’s is filled for the fall semester, so I guess you are spared the discipline and sense of honor a military school would provide.”

“Barbara, Jesus Christ, we just got the kid home!” Roger said.

“I’m not even close to done with him,” she said. “You’re in your room -- grounded. No TV and definitely no going outside.”

Ridley expected this. “Fine, mom,” he said. “But how long?”

Roger was now back, standing next to her and appeared to brace her shoulders as she rattled the ice cubes in her emptied drink. She reared back, as if she were going to forcibly expel a spirit from her chest.

“Until you stop being the Antichrist!”

Chapter 9

Ridley slept deeply that night, his mind filled with the incoherent dreams of the sleep-deprived, chaotic visions in which Blanca, Tom “Krazy King James” Jamieson, Sgt. Bobby Treadway, Asher Wolf, rotten little Cam, his toxic parents and the Antichrist all made cameo appearances, bum-rushing one another in his subconscious. He was out for over 13 hours and might have slept longer if his little brother had not started furiously kicking Ridley’s bedroom door.

“Hey dick!” Cam yelled as he repeatedly launched his size six Nikes into the door. “Mom said you can’t sleep all day. Get up! Get up! Get up!”

“Shut up you little choad,” Ridley said, pulling his pillow over his head and muffling his voice.

After he slipped his way down the stairs in sock feet, Ridley looked out the front storm door and saw a mail truck pulling up to the curb. A heavysset woman with a graying ponytail hanging over the back of her blue U.S. Mail uniform shirt shoved a rubber-banded pile of mail into the Roykos’ curbside box. Suddenly, Ridley’s grogginess evaporated and he achieved real focus.

Mail. Grade cards. Run. Now.

“No, *sir!*” Barbara said as Ridley grabbed the latch on the storm door. “Go eat a bowl of cereal and put your mowing shoes on. *I’ll* get the mail.”

It was too early for the grades to come out, but the impulse was there and Ridley could tell that his mother saw it in his body language, that clear desire to get to the mailbox and shove the Bainwood Public Schools envelope down the front of his shorts.

Blanca felt certain that they had changed the grades in time, but Ridley could not rest until he knew for sure, and somehow, he needed to reach the mail before his mom.

“You don’t think I can predict what you’re going to do? Not a single step towards that goddamn mailbox, Ridley, or I will cut you out of my life.”

Barbara unlatched the glass door and marched directly to the mailbox as the truck pulled away, glancing over her shoulder at the front door and appearing concerned that Ridley might still make a desperate sprint. She opened the box and immediately pulled the rubber band off the bundle and began sorting at the curb, shuffling through the mail like a beginning magician searching for the correctly guessed card. Then she paused and began ripping into one of the envelopes, and Ridley could see her mouthing the word “shit” as she unfolded the contents.

“I have to go into OG&E and pay this,” she said once she was back in the house. “I ask your father to do one thing. OK, now I’m asking you to do one thing. Watch Cam then you have to mow and weed-eat. No negotiations – you’re not in a union.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Cam, behave for your brother.”

“Sure, mommy,” he said with his head down, playing *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3* on his Game Boy.

“I’ll be back in 30 minutes,” she said, opening the door to the garage and pushing the button on the overhead opener. “Don’t even think about leaving or watching that MTV crap, understand?”

“Got it – no *Road Rules*,” Ridley said with a two-finger salute, then pulled back his index figure once his mother shut the door. “From the Antichrist’s hand to you, Mom.”

As soon as Ridley heard the Bonneville rattle to life, he began madly thumbing through the mail, poring over every bill and nothing from Bainwood Public Schools. When the garage door went back down and Barb’s car was on the street, Ridley practically ran to the staircase.

“No!” Cam said, looking up from the TV. “Mom said you have to watch me.”

“Not literally,” Ridley said. “I’ll be upstairs if you cut your mouth on a chip or something.”

“You’re a tiny little devil boy, Ridley.” He went back to his game just as his Wario took damage and shrank. “Ahh! Look what you made me do!”

Ridley went back to his room, grabbed his shorts from the day before and retrieved the Post-It note and the cassette. The number was written in purple ballpoint pen under Blanca’s name and punctuated with a happy face. He walked briskly to the spare bedroom they called the computer room and sat down in the ugly, orange-and-black office chair Ridley’s dad brought home after a company auction. He stared at the note for a few seconds and dialed.

Three rings, then someone picked up.

“Hello?” The voice sounded like Blanca, but a little closer to adulthood.

“Hi, uh ... could I please speak to Blanca Molina?”

“Is this a question? Are there other Blancas’?”

“Uh, well, no. You see, this is --”

“Hold on,” she said, and Ridley heard the familiar muffle of a hand partially covering the mouthpiece. “*Blanca! There’s another one on the phone!*”

The girl came back. “She’ll be right there. Who may I say is calling?”

“Ridley,” he said.

“Sorry, not ringing any bells. Who are you with?”

“Uh, what do you mean?”

Then Ridley heard another voice, unmistakably Blanca, yell from a distance.

“*Luna, will you stop messing with him?*”

Luna sighed. “Just a second...”

Ridley heard a loud bang as Luna dropped the phone, then a series of footsteps and, finally, the slight inhale that precedes a phone conversation.

“I’m so sorry. She doesn’t like it when boys call the house these days. Hi,” Blanca said in a voice that, in Ridley’s ear and his mind, sounded like a girlfriend. “How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know. It’s early. I just woke up about an hour ago, and my mom practically got in a slap fight with me over who was gonna get the mail. Then she ran out to pay a bill, I guess, and right now it’s just me and my dipshit brother.”

“I saw the news last night. Wow. Is your dad OK? He looked like he was having a stroke,” she said.

“I’m completely embarrassed,” Ridley said. “I mean, I didn’t see it -- it wasn’t really high on my family’s priority list to watch the replay, and besides, I can’t actually watch anything these days. It’s not like my social life was all beer bashes with the varsity squad and cheerleaders, but I didn’t really need that on all three TV stations.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry,” she said. “My computer skills don’t help with social grades. Hey, on the bright side, you had nothing to worry about with the grades or anything. I didn’t get mine either today. Besides, we took care of you. You’re fine, and your mom is going to be *so* shocked! She might even give you a reprieve or something.”

Based on available behavioral data, Ridley thought this nice but unrealistic. “You know that woman you saw on TV? That’s pretty much her, and you didn’t even see the worst last night. So, I’m not counting on it, and I’m sure my dad’s taking a beating at work.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Blanca said. “But look at it this way -- you can catch up on your reading, right? Do pushups in your cell?”

“Very funny.”

For a moment they were both quiet, but for once in Ridley’s life, it was a comfortable silence, not an awkward one.

“So,” he said, sensing it was his turn. “You’ll never guess who I saw at the hospital.”

“You were in the hospital? What happened? Are you OK?”

“No big deal -- long story. Anyway, what really made it bad for me was I ran into Krazy King James himself.”

“Oh shit,” Blanca said. “I guess he started babbling again, right?”

“Um, yeah. Called me Dr. Edward Vedder and all the hits. Mom saw a conspiracy and tore into me.”

“She sounds like a really sweet lady.”

“Yeah, it got a little biblical,” Ridley said.

“So -- uh, wait a second,” she said, and there was a brief silence. “OK, I guess she’s up in her room. Just wanted to make sure Luna wasn’t around.”

“What’s up?”

“Do you still have the tape?”

Ridley felt the TDK SA90 cassette through his jeans pocket. “It’s right here.”

“When are you going to listen to it?” she asked. “I’m sorry I put this on you, because this really doesn’t have to be your problem.”

“No, I get it,” he said. “She’s your sister, but don’t you think you’re the best person to listen to this? Or what about your dad?”

“That’s not a good idea,” Blanca said. “I know your parents aren’t the most touchy-feely people, but I’ve lived with my father for 15 years and I know that’s a total nonstarter.”

Ridley wondered sometimes if he was missing some empathy, because he had a hard time imagining what Ray Molina might be facing with no answers coming about or from Luna. From everything Blanca described, they all went through real hell after Luna disappeared, and had not fully exited it.

“OK, so whenever you hear something unusual, time code it,” she said. “That way, you can easily find it if there’s any actual evidence about anything or anyone.”

Ridley laughed. “Am I dating a spy or something?”

“I don’t know,” Blanca said. “Who are you dating?”

Ridley realized he had just made a presumption about their relationship, and he suddenly lost his freshly acquired power to have easy conversations with a girl. He stood with the phone in his hand, back to awkward silence.

“God, Ridley -- I’m just messing with you. Look, we are whatever we are,” she said. “We’re just getting to know each other. You are coming to my quinceanera, right? Dad always loves meeting all these skinny white guys. You’ll love him.”

“I can feel the love already,” Ridley said. This return to joking around put him a little more at ease, but then the familiar rumble of the garage door pulled him out of his reverie. “Shit -- Mom’s home. Gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow, I promise.”

“Thank you, Ridley,” she said, then made a kissing sound on the phone. “You’re my hero.” He stayed on long enough to hear the click, and then heard his mom open the door from the garage to the kitchen.

“Ridley Royko! Get out there and mow that lawn right now!”

KRCR was doing a “Wayback Wednesday” all evening, and so Ridley spent the night reading *Rolling Stone* and listening to a seemingly endless parade of decades-old classic rock hits -- Steely Dan, Queen’s “Seven Seas of Rhye,” and of course warhorses like “Sweet Home Alabama” and the dreaded Bad Company’s “Can’t Get Enough.” He could hear television dialogue but no downstairs conversation as *Primetime Live* blared from the console set, and just before 10 o’clock, he heard the show’s fake John Williams theme song and the sound of recliners springing back into their upright positions. Bedtime in the Royko household usually involved a fair amount of predictable noise, with the evening’s cocktail glasses rattling into position in the dishwasher and Cam complaining loudly that he needed to finish a Nintendo game, and the ritual was in full effect.

Ridley could hear his parents negotiating Cam into bed and saying their good nights, and then there was a knock.

“All right, Ridley -- lights out. Tomorrow, I want you to -- what the hell is that?” Roger asked, pointing to a *Rolling Stone* with Winona Ryder posing on the cover with spiky hair and nothing under her bib overalls. “I will not tolerate pornography in my house, son.”

“OK, it’s just a popular actress on the cover of a nationally known magazine, but I’ll work on that,” Ridley said.

“Don’t get smart with me. Just go to bed. I’ll take care of this,” Roger said, grabbing the *Rolling Stone* out of Ridley’s hand. “We’ll talk tomorrow about how you spend your time and money. Good night.”

“Good night.” Ridley shut off his light and crawled under his sheets, his eyes on the slim crack of light under his bedroom door. He watched and listened as his parents completed their ritual, turning deadbolt locks and shutting off the television. The lights finally went out at 10:20 and he heard the door to his parents’ room shut downstairs.

Ridley sat up in bed and carefully put one foot on the floor, making sure he did not make any noise. He walked like he was in a high wire act, carefully placing his feet so that he avoided any creaking beams under the carpet. When he finally got to his canvas slingback chair, Ridley sank into it quietly, pulled out some old Nova headphones and jacked into the stereo before powering it back up. The tuner glowed softly as Ridley flipped the switch on the cassette deck and, as quietly as possible, pulled the “PJ HARVEY” cassette from its hiding place under the beanbag.

Just so Cam would not hear from across the hall, he pushed the cassette loader shut as slowly as he could, trying to minimize the click as it engaged. Taking a deep breath, Ridley pressed play.

As the leader tape gave way to the recording, Ridley heard laughter -- girls' laughter -- and the tinny opening keyboard line of Aerosmith's "Dream On." Then he heard a male voice cutting through the music. It seemed to Ridley like there were at least two girls on the recording, maybe three, but he only heard one guy.

"Hey girls," said the voice, booming over the laughter and the classic rock. "Who wants a Mickey's Big Mouth?"

Chapter 10

He reclined in the sling-back canvas chair, sort of an Eames if a tent company made it, the room illuminated only by the soft light of the amplifier and the slightly strobing VU meters on the cassette deck. Ridley periodically hit the stop button, rewinding, checking the counter, writing down notes and pushing play again. Taking notes did not come naturally to Ridley, a fact that his undoctored grade cards bore out, and so it was as nearly 2 a.m. when he finally reached the end of the 45-minute side of the cassette, the leader tape ran out and the play button popped back up with a loud click. He took off his bulky headphones and worried for a moment that the click woke up Cam or, even worse, his light-sleeping mother had heard it from downstairs, but those mild fears could not compare to how he just felt while listening to the ominous, muffled sounds on the tape.

Ridley looked over the notes in his Trapper Keeper. His penmanship suffered in the relative darkness of his room, but he could just make out the uneven chicken scratches set off by tape counter numbers:

012 -- sound of Aerosmith's "Dream On" (classy) and girls laughing.

056 -- Hey girls, who wants a Mickey's Big Mouth? (Asher?)

059 -- Lots of noise, girls yelling yeah, etc.

063 -- Alright, so four Mickeys coming right up ladies. Be back in a sec. Don't start without me, door opens and slams.

091 -- Girl (farther away) said Luna, you got any smokes? Sound like a car trunk opening.

106 -- Lots of girls talking, sounds of lighter flicking.

131 -- *Trunk closes.*

149 -- *Door opens. Girl said, What took you so long? Got someone in the trunk? Asher (maybe) said not tonight, Sound of clinking bottles, passing around (I guess). Gong goes off at the end of "Dream On," radio starts playing "More Than a Feeling" by Boston. Must be nonstop shitty music block on KMOD.*

301 -- *girls laughing, someone (can't tell) calls other girl "drunk bitch." Voices starting to slur.*

487 -- *Hey Melissa! You falling asleep? (McCayless?)*

624 -- *Can't understand, everyone sounds drunk. Haven't heard Asher in a while.*

822 -- *No talking, quiet except for the funky guitar crash starting the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Give It Away." Then a metallic sound (zipper?)*

874 -- *Asher yells. Keeps yelling, says bitch a lot... 1,2,3,4,5,6 times.*

922 -- *Lot of noise, bumping around.*

936 -- *Still going on.*

911 -- *Girl yells, maybe Luna. Hey, what are you doing? Get off her you asshole! Muffled noises, like her mouth is suddenly covered. Door opens, loud screaming, door closes. Keys rattle, then radio cuts off. Beeping, large truck sound, radio back on. "Feels Like the First Time." Tires peeling out.*

Ridley closed his binder and looked at his digital clock, focusing and defocusing. He was bleary, crashing hard, and yet he could not tell one girl from the other, but everything about what was happening in that fuzzy audio sounded like a serious crime. Blanca would have to listen to that last part again, if only for a few seconds. Keeping his hand on the cassette door as he slowly pushed eject to dampen the noise, Ridley eased the

tape out, shoved it and the binder under his mattress, and fell face down into his Stimpfy pillow,

* * *

The next sound he heard was a gasp followed by a disbelieving cackle, the kind of noise Ridley's mother usually made during the patches of bleak sarcasm that precede full-blown fury. It was coming from the bottom of the stairs, but this time there were no screams.

"Ridley, come down here, please," she yelled. "Wake up now, or -- Cam, will you go up there and get your brother out of bed?"

"No -- Mom, I'm coming, OK?" he said, sitting up and wiping drool from the corner of his mouth. "I'm up!"

Then he heard the stomping, those hard footfalls that came whenever she wanted him to know she was coming up the stairs and he had not moved fast enough for her taste and level of patience. The door swung open while Ridley was still hopping on one leg, trying to get his shorts on.

"Seriously, Mom?" he said as he finally negotiated them up to his waist and zipped up. And then he saw what was in her hand, clutched to her robe. It was watermarked white computer paper with perforated tracks along both sides. She turned it around and held it out, and he could see the dot-matrix printing. School subjects and letter grades. Barbara Royko was not smiling, but to Ridley she looked confused rather than angry.

“This must be some kind of clerical error,” she said, shaking her head. “But it said it right here: ‘Royko, Ridley Andrew.’ The date of birth is correct, the social security number is right as far as I know, but ... the grades?”

Ridley took the paper and stared at the grades. The English grade he thought was going to hold steady at a B+ was a solid A. His lowest grades were Bs in physical science, algebra and gym. Everything else was an A. These were not the minor upgrades Blanca originally engineered: according to this official document from Bainwood Public Schools, Ridley earned a 3.5 GPA for his final six weeks of the semester. He tried to remain stoic, but slowly a smile crept across his face.

“Holy crap,” he said. “Thank you, Blanca.”

“Who’s Blanca?” Barbara said. “Sounds a little, um... exotic.”

Ridley blushed, realizing he had said Blanca’s name out loud. “She’s my tutor.”

“You said ‘tooter,’” Cam said loudly from his room.

“Cameron, be quiet,” she said. “When have you been seeing this Blanca?”

“Oh, you know. Lately,” Ridley said. “She’s kind of a genius. She showed me exactly how to get good grades.”

Barbara took back the sheet of paper and studied it again. “Do we get to meet this Blanca ... What's her last name?”

“Molina.”

“Is that Spanish?”

“Seriously, Mom?” he said, rolling his eyes. “They come from a place called Toluca, near Mexico City.”

“OK, we’ll talk about meeting this Blanca,” Barbara said. “I just want to thank this girl for saving my son.”

“Can I call her?”

“I think that would be the polite thing to do.”

Ridley wondered how his mother, with her soft-to-medium racism, was suddenly an authority on manners. “OK, thanks,” he said, then added, “And thanks for believing in me.”

Barbara furrowed her brow. “Sure,” she said, then left the room and walked back down the hall. Believing in the Antichrist.

He waited until he heard her reach the first floor down, then Ridley quietly moved toward the computer room. He didn’t need the Post-It note anymore. He picked up the phone and began dialing the number, but before he could get past the prefix, the doorbell rang. Ridley cradled the receiver, waited and listened as his mother opened the door.

“Yes?” Ridley heard his mother say with obvious disapproval. “What do you want?”

Ridley’s feelings of relief evaporated.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Royko,” said Asher Wolf, being more deferential than Ridley could ever recall hearing from the terrible teen. “I was wondering if Ridley still had my Kix t-shirt. Is he here?”

“Oh -- *your* Kix t-shirt,” she said. “How appropriate. Ridley? I think you need to come down right now. *Ridley!*”

“No-no-no-no-no, Mrs. Royko, it’s seriously no big deal,” Asher said, patting the air down with his hands. “We’re cool, OK? He just borrowed it, being all skinny and

half-naked and out-of-it and whatever, and I just thought he needed it more than I did, right? It's completely cool, Mrs. Royko."

Ridley ran down the stairs, Kix shirt in hand, and landed on the tile. "Um, hey Asher," he said, gingerly offering the folded shirt like a sacrifice. "It's right here -- thanks for, you know, everything."

Outside, Ridley could see Asher Wolf's Mustang parked on the curb. Asher took the shirt, looked down at it and wrinkled his nose in what looked like disgust or revulsion.

"Clean?" he asked.

Barbara inserted herself back into the discussion. "Yes, it's clean, Asher. Now, is there anything else we can do before you leave?"

"Ridley, you didn't borrow anything else, did you?" Asher stared sharply at Ridley, red-eyed but focused. "Anything you can think of -- 'cause, I'm here, right? Got all the time in the world. Anything you want to share with the class, Ridley?"

"All right -- you have your shirt," Barbara said, crossing her arms. "Goodbye, Asher. Tell your father I said hello."

Asher balled up the Kix shirt and passed it from hand to hand as he backed away, sneering. "See you later. Ridley."

Barbara pushed her son firmly back toward the banister as she quickly closed the door and turned the deadbolt. Ridley watched nervously as she got on tiptoes and looked through the peephole. His mother stayed there, rigid, watching.

"Mom, I --"

“*Quiet,*” she hissed. Ridley heard the Camaro fire up, its glass pack exhaust rumbling as Asher pulled away from the curb. It faded out and then disappeared entirely after a screeching turn at the corner.

She finally landed back on the balls of her feet and looked around at Ridley, her eyebrows raised so extremely that it sent ripples of horizontal lines up her forehead.

“Ridley Andrew Royko the Second, just what the hell did you do?”

“Mom, seriously, there’s --”

“Do not B.S. me, son,” Barbara said, jabbing her index finger at him. “What does that little criminal want? Tell me -- *now!*”

“Mom, please!” Ridley yelled, balling up his fists and stomping. “I don’t know and I can’t tell you, OK? *OK?*”

“Which is it, Ridley?” she said, matching his volume. “You don’t know or you can’t tell me? Does this have anything to do with that girl? That Blanca?”

Ridley stood in the middle of the living room, red-faced. His mother stared at him, examining him from his tousled bed head to his bare feet. It felt forensic to Ridley, like he was being taken apart systematically by his mother.

“Well, that’s just great,” she said through her teeth. “Thank you, Ridley. Congratulations, son -- *bra-vo*. First, you run away. Then, you force me and the Tulsa Police to look for you all over the damn city before you make me and your father look like idiots on the TV news, and now, for your encore, you’re gonna get us all killed by the high school psychopath? *Ridley, goddamn it, I raised you better than that!*”

Ridley’s mother turned the deadbolt lock on the front door.

“No one leaves this house -- both of you upstairs,” she said, walking briskly to the dining room to close the drapes on the front window. “You have no idea about that boy.”

“Come on,” Ridley said, pulling his brother by the hand. “You heard her.”

Cam pulled his meaty arm away and brushed past Ridley. “This is all your fault, dumbass,” he said. “She’s only like this when you’re around to piss her off.”

As his mother moved from room to room, pulling the little white plastic pulleys at the edge of each window to draw the curtains, Ridley followed Cam upstairs, walked into the computer room and shut the door. He stared at the touch tone buttons of the yellow princess phone as he heard the familiar clink of cocktail ice hitting the bottom of a glass downstairs, and then Ridley quietly picked up the phone and began dialing.

Ridley let it continue long past the customary six rings, staying on for nearly a minute, then pushed the button on the plastic receiver and, sensing an absolute danger, immediately dialed again. Just one number.

“Operator, what city?”

“Tulsa.”

A pause, then a different voice. “Go ahead.”

“Tulsa Police Department.”

This time, a recording. “Please hold while I connect your call.”

After a click, Ridley heard the dial tone and then an immediate pickup. “Tulsa Police, is this an emergency?”

“No -- I mean, I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“How may I direct your call?” asked the woman behind the switchboard.

Ridley cleared his throat but could not get it out at first.

“I’m sorry, sir. How may I direct your call?” she repeated.

Ridley took a deep breath.

“I need to speak to Sgt. Bobby Treadway,” he said. “Tell him it’s Ridley Royko.”

Chapter 11

Ridley felt his worlds colliding as Sgt. Bobby Treadway sat in his living room, and the room felt like it would collapse on itself from the uncomfortable silences. He needed to get his friend, the officer, away from his mother and father.

“Ma’am, coffee would be the utmost,” said Treadway, taking a seat on the Herculon sofa. “Just a little half-and-half with that, if you have it, of course.”

His mother grimaced and stomped to the kitchen to rummage through the Frigidaire. This was his chance.

“Officer Treadway, is there any way we can talk by ourselves?” Ridley said, whispering. “I mean, without Mom around to do color commentary?”

Treadway shaded his mouth with his bulky hand, like a theatrical whisper. “Based on our prior conversation, your mother is of the freak show persuasion?”

“Yes sir, that’s fair,” Ridley said, almost laughing.

“All right then. Let me see what I can negotiate.”

Barbara Royko returned from the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a carton of half-and-half. “Well, look what I found!” she said. “Perfect?”

“Mrs. Royko, can I have a moment of your time?” he said, cocking his head sideways toward Ridley. “Private-like?”

Barbara shot Ridley a laser look. “Ridley, mow the lawn – *now!*”

“No, no, no, ma’am, I just need a quick sidebar.”

Ridley watched as his mother broke eye contact with him and turned abruptly toward the kitchen, as Sgt. Treadway closely followed, cradling his coffee. Ridley stared

at Nancy Reagan's rictus smile on the cover of Reader's Digest and tried to make out a few words from the next room.

When Treadway returned with Ridley's mother, he was smiling. "Ridley, let's go talk on the porch, if that's all the same for you."

"Mom, can I have a Coke?"

"Drink some water, Ridley. I'll be upstairs in your room."

Both Ridley and Sgt. Bobby Treadway watched as she walked up the stairs, and then listened as Barbara's heavy footfalls landed on the floorboards. Finally, a door closed.

"Is your mother always this generous of spirit, Ridley?"

"This is one of her good days," Ridley said.

As he walked outside, Ridley looked beyond the patio and saw a crime scene in his own backyard. His cherished poster of Jennifer Connelly from *The Rocketeer* had been rolled out on the grass with rocks placed at its corners. In the center, three lawn darts jutted out from odd angles just above her navel.

Ridley ran out to the vandalized poster. "I'm going to kill that little shit!"

"Just so I'm clear," Treadway said, ambling up as Ridley crouched down and began wadding up what was left of Jennifer Connelly, "Who's the 'little shit' in this scenario?"

"My little brother, Cam. Total junior psycho."

Treadway took a knee and pulled a lawn dart out of the ground, thoughtfully examining the dirt gathered on the tip. "That actually sounds like an apt diagnosis,

Ridley. This Cam of whom you speak hasn't graduated to torturing neighborhood pets, has he?"

"He's 11, but I don't think so."

"Doesn't matter. Keep an eye peeled in case Fluffy next door goes missing. I hate to be the bearer of bad stuff, but that's just the psycho playbook, son. In any normal case, I'd ask if you have troubles at home, but I think we've blazed that trail and whatnot. So, let us move on and discuss my good friend, Asher Wolf."

"So, you know Asher?"

"Everyone on the force knows Asher, from Chief Paxton all the way down to the meter maids. Boy was a cat killer in kindergarten and, well let's just say he's long since graduated beyond mangling posters of teen dreams, Ridley."

Ridley stood up, palming the crumpled remains and looking down at his shoes. "I know."

Treadway grimaced as he stood up, wiped his forehead, squinted into the bright light of the backyard and then looked Ridley in the eyes. "Now, how exactly is it that you know that, Ridley?"

"That's why I asked if you'd come by – it definitely wasn't to meet the family," Ridley said. "I need to get something from upstairs. Can you just wait here?"

"Let me suggest an alternate strategy. Why don't I go up there with you? When properly and judiciously applied, 'copness' is a superpower."

When Ridley and Officer Treadway reached the top of the stairs, the ransacking was in full progress. Barbara Royko was halfway under the bed, with only the south end

of her floral muumuu showing. Disheveled piles of *Rolling Stone* and *Q* magazines and abundant tube socks and tighty-whiteys were growing at the foot of the bed.

“Now, that’s just unseemly,” Treadway whispered to Ridley. “Your mother should have more self-respect than this.”

“That Walkman on my dresser – damn it, I thought I had that hidden better.”

“The pink one?” Treadway said, pointing at the Walkman. “With a cat wearing a bow on its head?”

“Don’t judge,” Ridley said. “It’s a lender.”

Treadway adjusted his shirt and asserted his official demeanor, then entered the bedroom.

“Mrs. Royko,” he said, knocking on the open door. “I need that pink portable stereo cassette player with the cute kitten, please?”

“And just whose tape recorder is that, Ridley?” she said.

“It’s Blanca Molina’s, OK?”

“Is that the Spanish tutor?”

“Her family’s from Toluca, Mexico, but sure, Mom.”

“Mrs. Royko, the Walkman please?” Treadway said, increasingly frustrated. “Or do I need to cite you for obstruction of justice, ma’am?”

“Fine,” she said, grabbing the Walkman and handing it over. “Ridley, we’ll be talking about this pornography later.”

“Mrs. Royko, a boy needs a safe outlet for his primal urges, and that hardly rises to any official standard of pornographic material. So –”

“With all due respect, I don’t care what you think it rises to, Officer Treadway. Do you have everything you need?”

Treadway glanced at Ridley and then scanned the boy’s trashed room. “I suppose not, ma’am. I won’t interrupt you in your parental duties any further. Thank you and have a nice day, ma’am.”

Ridley led the way downstairs. “I’m sorry you had to see all of that, officer.”

“Call me Bobby, son,” Treadway said. “All I can tell you is this: you’ve got two more years until you see graduation. Hang in as best you can, and then you can plot your escape. I strongly suggest that strategy for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I said, ‘Bobby,’” Treadway said. “Now, what’s on that tape recorder?”

“OK, so when you picked me up on Wednesday, I was leaving this girl Blanca Molina’s house, and—”

“Right, where Tulsa PD apprehended Krazy King James after his little field trip,” Treadway said.

Ridley sorted through all the details of those frenetic 24 hours. “Exactly. Well, that Walkman actually belongs to Blanca’s sister, Luna, but we didn’t find it in her room or anything. Fact is, Officer — um, Bobby? I found it in Asher Wolf’s bedroom.”

Treadway almost did a spit take with his coffee. “What the hell were you doing in there? You’ve got some kind of death wish?”

“He was gone at the time – me and his kid brother, my best friend Max, saw him just long enough for him to blackmail me into some kind of homework slavery thing for

him and his burnout friends, but then the phone rang and he just left, right?” Ridley said. “Anyway, so Blanca came by and recognized the Walkman, and— “

“Wait just a sec,” Treadway interrupted. “That Blanca girl just came by the Wolf house for no reason?”

“She said she heard me and Max fighting,” Ridley said. “Which was definitely true, because their windows were open and Max understandably does not want to think of his brother as the manifestation of pure evil and I was trying to explain to him all the ways in which he’s, like, exactly that.”

“I see,” the officer said. “And you’ve listened to this? What am I in for, Ridley?”

“I took notes,” Ridley said, handing over his legal pad.

As he listened, Sgt. Bobby Treadway kept his hands on the headphones, visibly pushing them into his ears to amplify and accentuate the sounds of Asher Wolf offering the girls spiked bottles of Mickey’s Big Mouth and the atrocities committed against Melissa McCayless, Luna Molina and whoever else was in the car that night. Eyes closed, he said nothing, resting his elbows on his knees. His face bore the pain of a man forced to witness a violent crime without being able to intervene. All Ridley could do was sit there for 45 minutes, until the “play” button popped up and the police officer removed the pink headphones. He sat silently on the wooden porch swing for about a minute that lasted an hour.

“Ridley,” he said, measuring every word. “Did you listen to all of this?”

“Um ... yes. All of it.”

“I wish you hadn’t – no kid your age should have to experience something like that. What about Blanca?”

“She couldn’t,” Ridley said. “She asked me to listen for her and take notes. I did – they’re upstairs on a legal pad. I think I hid it ... oh shit.”

““Oh shit’ *what?*”

Ridley sighed and rolled his eyes. “In a *Rolling Stone* magazine.”

“Sheesh,” Treadway said. “Think your mother’s found your private detective work yet?”

“Well, actually it might not happen, since I hid them in an issue with Bill Clinton on the cover – she hates her some Bill.”

“Unless she hates the president so much, she picks it up and shakes it, out comes your legal pad” Treadway said, tapping his temple for emphasis. “Not to get you all paranoid.”

Ridley craned his neck to look out his front window and check the cars.

“Not paranoid. I’m going with ‘alert.’”

“In all seriousness, I need to hang onto this,” he said, pulling a rubber glove from his right front uniform pocket and pulling it down onto his right hand. “You wouldn’t happen to have a sandwich bag, maybe a Ziploc? I just need the tape, not this god-awful Walkman – hell, they even got the numbers wrong on the FM dial. Who built this piece of crap?”

“It’s Japanese,” Ridley said. “Blanca’s dad brought it home from a trip to Tokyo, and their FM band hovers below ours. If you want to listen to our FM, you switch it to the TV band.”

“Huh. Learn something new every day, and a few things you can’t unlearn,”

Treadway said, pulling the cassette out of the player and dangling it in his gloved hand.

“Seriously, son: if you need to talk about the stuff you heard on this, you let me know.”

“So, what happens now?” Ridley said.

“Well, a few things I can share with you, but mostly I’ve got to draw the line on official police business. I’ll pass it along to our forensic audio nerd downtown — based on what you just told me about Japanese FM radio, I’d swear you’re cousins. He’ll see if he can amplify some of the sounds that got ...muffled in the recording,” Treadway said.

“Don’t worry – I’ll keep you posted on the progress.”

“OK,” Ridley said, getting up and opening the back door. “I’ll get you that Ziploc.”

As they walked through the kitchen and Ridley stopped to sort through the pantry, Sgt. Treadway looked in the living room and saw Cam playing a game involving characters made of spheres and a conspicuously designed-to-annoy soundtrack on the Sega Genesis. Treadway reflexively put his hand to his ear and walked toward the TV, placing himself between the boy and his game.

“Hey – I can’t see!” Cam said, oblivious to Sgt. Treadway’s uniform.

“You must be Cam,” Treadway said.

“Yeah,” he said, mashing the controller.

“Try ‘Yes, officer.’”

“Fine. Yes, officer,” he said, furrowing his brow. “Now, can I go back to *Ballz*?”

“Absolutely, and no judgment on that. Now son, I’ve got a question for you. Does your big brother torture your teddy bears with those lawn darts out there?”

Treadway asked, casually feeling around for the power button on the television.

“Uh, no? Teddy bears are for babies,” Cam said, dragging out the last word in the same way that kindergarteners describe their toddler siblings. “Besides, I don’t pay any attention to that doink – hey, why’d you turn that off?”

“Son,” Treadway said, squatting down to near eye level with Cam. “I saw what you did to that poster out there. Now, I’ll let the Jennifer Connelly massacre pass for the time being, but if I hear about any of those weird music guys or that skinny English girl who doesn’t smile meeting a similar fate, I’m bringing you in for desecration of art, do you hear me?”

“Fine.”

“I said, ‘Do you hear me?’”

Cam pulled himself off the carpet. “Yes sir!”

“Good answer,” Treadway said. “I’ll boil it down to this, Cammy. You’re on my radar, kid.”

Chapter 12

The next day, when Blanca called for him to come over, Ridley wore shoes and a shirt and took his bike, even stuffed a few crumpled dollars in his shorts from Structure. As far as his mother knew, Blanca was his tutor, and she didn't need to be anything else to them, Ridley thought. Still, despite the surprise 3.5 GPA on Ridley's final report card, an act of hacking mastery by Blanca Molina herself, Ridley still felt his mother's suspicion and distrust every time he left the house.

"Just what is this Blanca teaching you on a day like this? I want to meet this girl, Ridley," she said, standing in the driveway in her muumuu.

"I'll see if she can come over some time," Ridley said with a lie and a flourish. "You'll like her, I know."

"Well, all right, but don't you go near the Wolfs. I mean it, Ridley — You'll be back to no TV and no stereo if I find out you did."

That's where it is always going, isn't it? Ridley thought.

"What time will you be home? I'm making the Hamburger Helper beef stroganoff you love."

"Gosh, Mom, that sounds really great," he said as he straddled his bike and kicked off on the driveway. "Later!"

"Wait!" Barbara yelled after him. "What's her number? Are they in the book?"

"Yes," he yelled back. Ridley had no intention of being back for beef stroganoff.

As he downshifted for the steep hill on Juniper, Ridley realized he lied to his mother simply because he did not know the truth. He wanted to be at Blanca's house and he needed to tell her about the contents of the tape, but Blanca never said why she wanted

him to come over, and Ridley didn't think it was that important to ask. He just wanted to see her. If she wanted to read the business page of the newspaper to him, he would happily submit to it.

Once he crossed 91st Street and Willow Creek Estates became The Lakes at Cedar Meadows, Ridley could see the left turn onto Oswego. As he prepared to perform the hand signal, he looked over his shoulder just in time to see the front grill of a Camaro slam into his rear wheel. This sent his front wheel into a 90-degree juxtaposition that launched Ridley over the handlebars, where he landed with his face skinned against a personalized OU Sooner curb address that illustrated where the owners stood on state issues.

Barely able to move his neck, Ridley looked up in time to see the Camaro shift into reverse and start barreling backward. He rolled as close to the curb as he could get, but then a pair of meaty hands pulled him onto the sidewalk.

“Hey! You!” said the owner of the hands. “Don't go running over teenage doctors sleeping in the street! They are the future! Don't you know this is Doctor Edward Vedder? You look like a man who doesn't recognize Doctor Edward Vedder! He's a teenage whiz kid sturgeon! He's –”

Asher Wolf shut off the engine and jumped out of his car with the door hanging open, took four long steps toward Tom “Krazy King James” Jamieson and lobbed a tire iron at the bridge of his nose, sending the Hawaiian shirt-clad wobbler into an immediate, cold fall. Then, Asher came for Ridley.

“You have something of mine,” Asher said. “Where is it?”

The alcohol on his breath stung Ridley's skinned-up face as Asher grabbed and twisted the elastic on Ridley's t-shirt. "You give it back, Ridley, and we're even – you're free and clear."

"What do you want?" Ridley said, tasting blood as he spat out the words. "I don't have whatever it is – it's gone. It's—"

"Well, which is it? Help me understand, and maybe, just maybe, I'll help you not die."

At that moment, a teenage girl opened the glass storm door of her front door and saw her father splayed on her front lawn and a 19-year-old shaking a 15-year-old on the side of the street.

"What happened? Daddy are you all right?" said Tracey Jamieson, a thin girl with black, straight hair, as she ran to her father's side. "What happened, Asher?"

"I'll tell you what happened," Asher said, breathing heavily. "Your crazy father ran into the street and this kid hit him on his bike. Aren't you supposed to keep him in the house?"

"It's hard – as soon as I go to the bathroom, he's out the door," she said, cradling her father's head as his Panama hat sat upturned in the grass. "I should call an ambulance."

"No, I'll take care of it – I'm on my way to the house," Asher said as he jumped back into his car. "You just stay with them, and I'll call 911." Then he drove away fast enough to leave black skid marks.

"Daddy?" she said, patting Krazy King James' beefy face to revive him. "You're going to be OK. Can you tell me why you ran into the street?"

“Race fans ... hot rodders,” he mumbled. “All the kings are coming ... for Doctor Edward Vedder.”

“Daddy, where did you hear about Eddie Vedder?”

“Um,” Ridley said, raising a hand covered in blood and gutter scum. “I’m pretty sure he’s talking about me.”

“Yeah,” Tracey said with a disbelieving look. “You’re not Edward Vedder. You’re that Ridley kid who never knew the answers in geometry class.”

“You got me,” he said, standing up. “Yep, that’s all you have to know about me. Sum total of my existence. Sorry about your dad and being so messed up, Tracey. He seems like a nice guy and I always liked his commercials.”

“Wait, where are you going? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Ridley’s face felt like a raw sirloin rubbed with coarse pepper, and every time he inadvertently touched his face, as he often did out of habit, the stinging bordered on unbearable, but the last thing he wanted to do with his time, on his way to Blanca’s, was go back to the hospital.

“Mmh, I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m just going to walk my bike down to my friend’s house around the corner. You’ve been so kind, Tracey.”

As his teenage sarcasm rolled forth, Ridley’s knees looked like cauliflower heads dipped in ketchup, and his side throbbed as he picked his bike out of the gutter. When he tried to roll it, the bent rear rim scraped the frame. Ridley winced as he picked up the heavy bike, placed the top of the frame on his right shoulder and started limping down Oswego toward Blanca’s house.

“Are you sure?” Tracey said.

“Don’t worry. I suck at geometry, but I’m not totally stupid.”

Ridley moved slowly, shuffling his feet as he focused on the third house down, 13427 Oswego.

“Maybe I’m just not supposed to cross 91st Street,” he thought as a stabbing pain shot through his side. “It’s like Blanca’s got a force field of bozos and murderers around her.”

As he approached Blanca’s house, she ran into the driveway.

“Oh my God,” Blanca yelled, running up to Ridley to help lower the bicycle off his shoulder. “Are you OK? What attacked you – a street?”

“Gah,” he groaned as the weight lifted from him. “I’ll give you three guesses after you get me inside. Oh, and you should hide my bike, like, somewhere – the garage or around the side or something.”

“All right let’s put this thing in the garage,” she said, scrutinizing the bike. “By the way, and I don’t know if this helps with your pain right now, but I’m kind of a genius at truing a bike wheel.”

“Truing?” he asked, cocking his head like a dog. “That sounds made up.”

“No, not at all,” Blanca said. “It’s like spin-balancing a tire on your car. My dad taught me how to do it.”

“Huh. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re hopeless. Can’t make coffee, can’t true a bike wheel,” she said, entering a code for the garage door. “I think you should just sit there on the bench while I grab some Bactine. I think I can fix up both of you.”

After Blanca went inside, Ridley got up and hobbled over to the garage door opener and hit the button, fearing that Asher might be trawling the neighborhood for him. She returned with Bactine, a washcloth and a small plastic tub filled with water.

“OK, sit still and try not to be a baby,” she said. “We need to get some of this asphalt out of your knees and face.”

“Blanca, I think I should get a pass on ‘being a baby’ right now,” he said with “finger quotes.”

“I’m sorry – just trying to get your mind off, um, everything, I guess,” Blanca said. “So, tell me what happened.”

“It’s pretty simple, really,” Ridley said. “I had just gotten into your neighborhood when Asher Wolf came up behind me in his death car and rammed me off the road. Then our good friend Tom Jamieson tried to help me, like he does, and Asher beat him in the face with a lug wrench. It was a great start to a golden day.”

“So, he knows?”

“Uh, yeah, he knows. He showed up at my house the day before yesterday, after I got my grades – thank you again, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” Blanca said, miming a curtsy.

“Seriously, he rings my doorbell and starts asking to see me, and my mom gets all up in his face, like she knew something about him. It was bad. So, I called this cop I know ...”

“You’re friends with a cop? Who is it, Stacey Koon?”

“Not at all – super cool guy by cop standards.”

Blanca paused and then gave Ridley a smirk of disapproval. “By *your* cop standards. My expectations after Luna and just from my relatively short Latina lifetime? Super-low.”

“I get it — I mean, no, I don’t probably really get it,” he said, with care. “But I want to. I really, really do.”

“OK,” she said. “I really, really appreciate that. It’s better than I get from most boys — and way, way better than Luna has ever gotten.”

“So,” Ridley said, fighting for a way to get into the tape discussion and opting for a near non sequitur. “Officer Treadway ran some interference for me with Mom and, next thing you know, I played him the tape.”

“You what?”

“Swear to God, I played him the tape.”

“Ridley,” Blanca said, washing off his right knee. “You haven’t even told *me* what’s on the tape.”

He paused, wishing there could be 18.5 minutes missing from that tape and knowing that if he voiced this sentiment, Blanca might laugh at first. But then, as he recalled the horror of her sister’s experience.

“Look, I’m not sure because it’s muffled and noisy and there’s some really bad classic rock blaring in the background, but basically Asher offers these girls some Mickey’s Big Mouth that I think he laced with rohypnol, and then you hear a bunch of slurring voices and things that sound like creepy, unsexy sex. And I heard two names on the tape: ‘Melissa’ and ‘Luna,’ and so I think we have the soundtrack to the night Melissa McCayless went missing and your sister escaped.”

Ridley could see some tears forming in Blanca's eyes, and feeling some self-confidence, hugged her tightly around the shoulders.

“Blanca, the cop? His name is Sgt. Bobby Treadway. Seriously, I really lucked out when I met this guy. He took the tape and he's going to have it looked at by their forensics people – clean it up, analyze the sound of the engine in the background, all of that.”

Blanca pulled away. “Can we get him? I mean, really get him sent to some super-maximum underground prison on Saturn? I need that for Luna, and after what he did to you today, I think I need it for you, too.”

For the first time in what often felt like a long 15 years, Ridley Royko knew that someone wanted something for him, rather than from him.

Chapter 13

Blanca returned her attention to Ridley's skinned-up cheek. "We've got to fix your face," she said, her dark eyes surveying the damage. "You won't be cute anymore we don't get this cleaned and bandaged, Rid. We can't have that, can we?"

Ridley shook his head, like a cartoon wolf trying to shake off the stars and the birds orbiting its head. "I'm sorry – what did you just say?"

"Wow, you must have banged up your eardrum, too," she said. "I just said I don't want that cute face all scarred up by Asher Wolf and his stupid death mobile. It would be just another crime for him, but the world might not recover."

He took a quick inventory of his social life, and he realized that no girl his age had ever openly complimented him like that. Ridley felt as though never-used sections of his brain were suddenly lighting up and sending signals. Confidence that never stood a chance of being nurtured in the Royko house started bubbling up to nearly normal teenage levels. He felt high, and like the old Roxy Music song said, "Love is the Drug." Ridley just stared into her deep brown eyes, maybe drooled a little.

"Um, Ridley, Are you OK?" Blanca said, laughing and poking him in the ribs. "Are you OK? Do you need me to call an ambulance, or a hearse—"

Ridley pulled her toward him, pressing his lips into hers and closing his eyes. The last time this happened, she initiated, but this one felt like a good kind of eternity, the way tiny shifts in the tectonic plates generate earthquakes that seem to last hours.

Then he pulled away and stood back, holding Blanca's hands between them and smiling – this time, with more warmth and less shock. To his considerable relief, she was smiling, too.

“That was amazing,” Blanca said, wiping the corner of her mouth. “Don’t ever forget how to do that.”

“I won’t — I promise,” he said, losing a little of his cool. “Nothing can shake this.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, go and clean up your face. Use the Bactine, the Neosporin, whatever it takes, and I’ll keep working on your bike. Use the downstairs bathroom, all right? Luna would kill me if she knew you were upstairs.”

“Right. I’m on it,” Ridley said, backing his way out of the garage and through their utility room door.

As he made his way to the bathroom, Bactine in tow, Ridley could think of nothing but the kiss. Blanca was no girlfriend in Canada, no church camp crush that could never quite be reached after the last day, when all the minivans swept everyone back to life, back to reality. Blanca was real and true, he thought as the clear liquid hit his face and he winced from the sting. He felt different about Blanca and, consequently, he felt different about himself. He smeared the Neosporin on his face and pulled a gauze bandage out of the white box under the sink. “Badass,” he said to himself as he taped the gauze to his cheek. Ridley looked like an old photo from a Time-Life book, he thought, a bandaged soldier in a foxhole, just learning of the ceasefire and wondering if the guy who shot him heard about it, either.

He could feel himself unclenching after 14 years of being on guard. In all that time, Ridley tried to lie low and avoid the alphas, even when they slept downstairs, but they always succeeded in finding him and administering their takedowns. With Blanca, he thought, no one could take him down.

But as he opened the door to leave the bathroom, the clench came back as Ridley was thrown back against the wall, the base of his skull smashing into a towel rod.

“You should have stayed in here, Ratley.”

Hot blasts of pain pulsed down Ridley’s spine as Asher Wolf slinked into the bathroom, grinning maniacally at his prey.

“Man, I got a newsflash for you,” Asher said, opening his mouth wide before ripping the gauze off Ridley’s cheek with his teeth. “Your pretty face is going to Hell!”

Asher grabbed Ridley’s shoulders and bashed him into the rough, textured wall. “You’ve got something that isn’t yours, you shitty, shitty little asshole,” he said. “Now, where the hell is it?”

Bloodied and beaten, Ridley slowly raised his head, and then just as slowly raised his eyes to the intruder.

“Right here.”

With that, Ridley brought the top of his forehead crashing into Asher’s left eye socket, immediately opening a spout of blood and causing the intruder to yell booming, pained as he cupped his hands over his eye. Ridley pushed past him and ran toward the garage.

“Quick,” he said, throwing open the door. “Grab something heavy.”

Blanca was standing in the middle of the garage breathing heavily, her hands grasping a cast iron camping skillet. “Beat you to it – where is he?”

“Slumped in the bathroom, I think, but we don’t have much time. Hide beside the door. Does your dad have a hammer?”

“On the pegboard.”

Ridley grabbed a large Stanley off its hooks, revealing a black outline of the tool on the brown background. He then ran to the other side of the door, and they waited, listening to the sounds of Asher banging down the hallway.

“Goddamn you, you little shitbag,” Asher mumbled as if he were gargling with his own teeth. “You give me that tape, and we call it even — AHH!”

Perfectly in tandem, Ridley lowered the hammer into the back of Asher’s head as Blanca swung the skillet like a castrating pendulum, directly at his inseam. Asher fell forward and landed on the concrete, silent.

Blanca and Ridley clung to each other, then carefully separated and circled the still body of their attacker. It took a long minute for either of them to say a word.

“How did he get in?” Ridley asked, his hair dripping with sweat.

“Not this way,” she said. “He must have stolen one of Luna’s keys. What do we do now? I mean, is he even breathing?”

Ridley bent down to look closer. He could see Asher’s back rising and falling.

“He’s just out, but ... hammers,” Ridley said. “I think our best bet is to call Treadway.”

“The cop?”

“Sure—he’s heard the tape; he knows the story. Is there a phone in here?”

“We just beat a man — maybe to death,” Blanca said. “How much do you like this cop again? And how much does he like you? This could matter in court, Rid.”

Ridley pulled up his t-shirt to wipe sweat from his forelocks. “I don’t know who to trust. Phone?”

Blanca wiped some blood and sweat from Ridley's forehead. "On the wall, right by the workbench."

She pointed to an ancient red rotary phone with a tangled cord. Ridley took a few steps and grabbed the receiver of the old rotary, trying to pull the exact number from his post-attack, blurry memory. He squinted as if it could improve his recall, and then started circling the dial with his index finger, watching the clear plastic disc spin smoothly back into place each time.

He heard three rings, then an answer.

"Bobby Treadway."

"Sergeant Treadway, this is Ridley Royko. You need to come to Blanca Molina's house right now. I mean, if you can."

"Roger that, Ridley. See you in five."

Ridley hung up the phone and looked first at Blanca, then at Asher, who was still out cold on the cracked, polished cement.

Blanca bit thoughtfully on the middle bone of her index finger. "I think while we wait for your cop friend to get here, we should tie this asshole down. You know, just in case he wakes up and goes crazy on us?"

"I'm right there with you. Your dad have anything that would do the trick?"

"Sure – ski ropes in the corner, and I think my dad's got some jumper cables," Blanca said. "You know, those jumper cables could deliver a painful shock. Do you know how to jump a car?"

Ridley let out a weary, slightly wary laugh. "You have some interesting ideas."

"OK, fine. I guess we just tie his hands, tie his feet, then tie them all together."

As Ridley handed one end of the blue, polyester ski rope to Blanca, his head pounded from the earlier impact. Head butts are painful to all parties involved, he thought, and before that was the slam into the bathroom wall, so the possibility of concussion was there. He fumbled with the ropes, wrapping them around Asher's wrists and before tying them in a simple, blunt knot.

"All right, then," Blanca said, a bead of sweat forming on her forehead. "Not artful, but it looks like it will hold. So, let's tie our ends together and be done with this freak show."

Ridley couldn't help having romantic feelings as they looped their rope ends together, even in the act of tying up a dangerous criminal, Blanca Molina inspired his mind to drift wayward. He leaned in, but she quickly backed away.

"Ridley?" she said with a concerned look. "I'm sorry but standing over a hog-tied killer doesn't exactly do it for me."

"Sorry. I've just never beaten anyone up in my entire life, let alone someone way out of my weight class," he said. "This is just surreal."

"You're right, Rid. This is off-the-charts lunacy," Blanca said, caressing his unbloodied cheek. "But let's keep it together long enough for your cop friend to get here."

Asher groaned and they both stood up, jarred by his sudden vocalization.

"I just hope he gets here before this psychopath wakes up completely," Ridley said. "What about your parents? When do they get home?"

Blanca wrinkled her forehead and squinted. "Not for a couple of hours. I wonder if we have any tranquilizers."

“What, just lying around?” Ridley said. “We need to just wait. How would you get one into him anyway?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Serve him a nice, cold Mickey’s Big Mouth?”

At that moment, Ridley heard a car horn out front. He peered out from the cobwebbed garage door windows and saw a Tulsa PD squad car at the curb.

“That’s him,” Ridley said. “I’ll go let him in through the front.”

“OK,” she said. “You sure it’s him?”

“If it’s not, things just got way more complicated.”

Ridley walked into the house, rubbing his shoulders, which made him feel like an old man with arthritis. As he reached the pebbled glass door, he could see a familiar distorted outline.

“Officer Treadway, -- man, I’m glad you could get here,” Ridley said.

“I said ‘Bobby,’ son,” Treadway said as he entered the foyer. “For the love of God, kid, what the dickens is up with your face? You get in a fight with a floor sander or something?”

“No, it was a Camaro. Ran me off the road this morning,” Ridley said. “I mean, with Asher Wolf driving, of course.”

“And so, do you have any idea where he could have gotten off to? Treadway asked.

Ridley was running out of sheepish looks.

“It’s not so much where he went after trying to run over me and then coming into Blanca and Luna’s house in the middle of the day and beating my head against a wall. It’s where he ended up.”

“You know,” Treadway said. “I’ll have to bring you in if you’ve buried the son-of-a-bitch.”

“The garage,” Ridley said. “We’ve got him tied up out there.”

“I’m sorry, I must confess to being a little hard of hearing and whatnot, but what the holy hell are you talking about?” Treadway said.

“Bobby,” Ridley said, leading the way to the garage, “he attacked me like he was completely bonkers. Ripped my face bandage off with his teeth and everything.”

“Creepy, and a tad theatrical,” Treadway said, examining the doorframe as he entered the garage. “And you’re Blanca? Did you tie these knots? You’ve got skills – do I need to be worried about you?”

“You have to understand, sir,” Blanca said, giving the officer a soulful look. “He practically tried to kill Ridley, and he might’ve killed me. What would you expect? Ridley was just protecting me, that’s all.”

“Call me Bobby, hon. So, *he*,” Treadway said, gesturing to Ridley, “was protecting *you*.”

“Scout’s honor,” Blanca said, putting up three fingers.

“And you would say he presented an immediate physical danger to both you and to Mister Royko. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “No question in my mind.”

“And that’s how you understand things to have occurred, Master Ridley?”

“Yes, Bobby. Exactly,” Ridley said.

“What the hell, did you have some kind of adrenaline surge? Been taking steroids and amino acids and whatnot?”

“I guess it was like a mom trying to save a baby under a car or something,” Ridley said, looking at Blanca. “I didn’t want anything to happen to her.”

“All right, love birds, I think I’ve got something close to the truth. You got any bleach?”

“Yes sir, I’ll get right on that.”

“It’s Bobby, miss. So, I’m taking this weasel in for questions, and I’m hoping this leads to us figuring out what happened to your sister and Melissa. I’m here to protect and to serve, you got me?”

“Yes Bobby,” Blanca said. “I’ve got you.”

“Good. Ridley, you better help her mop up that blood. Be a gentleman. Jeez, the way you two young’uns tied him up, I could just carry him like a big ugly purse or something, couldn’t I?”

Treadway slowly lifted the rope, which had the effect of pulling up opposite ends of Asher Wolf. In response, Wolf began screaming from the pain and cursing furiously.

“Nah, I guess that would be cruel and inhuman,” Treadway said, lowering Asher back to the floor. “Probably bend him right in half and whatnot. Missy, why don’t you disconnect the ropes you so expertly tied so I can at least drag his happy ass out to my car. Otherwise, the neighbors might complain.”

“Sure,” Blanca said, crouching down to undo the rope. “Just please make sure he pays for what he did to Luna, OK?”

“Lying bitch,” Asher slurred. “I didn’t do shit to your sister.”

“Shut the hell up, or I’ll take the bumpiest roads back to the station house,” Treadway said, throwing one of Asher’s arms over his shoulder and steadying himself

under the weight. “Son, would you mind hitting the overhead door so I can get this bastard out of the young lady’s house?”

“No problem,” Ridley said, punching the button on the Genie. “Oh, and sir?”

“Bobby.”

“Have you heard anything back from the audio lab on that tape?”

“Um, no Ridley,” Treadway said. “Not a peep. But as soon as I hear anything, you’ll be the first to know. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good,” said the officer. “Have a safe afternoon, and lock your doors, young lady.”

Ridley and Blanca watched as Sgt. Bobby Treadway carried Asher down to the curb, and then struggled to pour him into the back seat of the squad car. As he pulled away, isolated splatters of rain started appearing on the driveway.

“So,” Ridley said, pushing the Genie button again to lower the door. “Where do you guys keep your bleach?”

“You know, I’d really like to just get on to our first date,” Blanca said. “All we’ve done since we’ve met is falsify grades, patch up your wounds, defend ourselves from a psychopath and clean up blood with industrial cleansers. Are you sure you can show a girl a good time?”

“All joking and evidence aside, I’m pretty sure I can,” Ridley said. “I can’t drive yet, but once I get my bike fixed, the sky’s the limit.”

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot,” Blanca said. “Fix the bike that was slammed into a curb by a psycho. Then we’ll go out and party.”

Ridley let the conversation fall for an uncomfortable few seconds. “You know,” he said, rubbing his still-throbbing forehead. “Did you ever hear Treadway read Asher the whatever – ‘You’ve got a right to remain silent’ and all that?”

“Ridley, did you listen to eighth grade civics? Miranda Rights,” she said.

“Hmm, that must’ve been in the AP classes,” Ridley said. “But seriously, did you hear him?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I did,” Blanca said. “I mean, that’s standard, right?”

“Sure, it’s like on *Law & Order*,” Ridley said. “If you don’t read them their rights, you’ve got to let them go.”

Blanca walked to the utility sink and started running the hot water. “That’s just not right. And like, correct me, but he didn’t exactly arrive with sirens and lights blazing, did he?”

“Well, no,” Ridley said. “I mean, I just called him on his direct line. I didn’t call 911 or anything. I just asked him to come over, remember?”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. “It’s just weird. Can you bring me one of those Clorox bottles from the cabinet?”

“Sure,” he said, walking over to the row of cabinets lining the back wall of the garage. “So, how do we do this?”

“I don’t know – splash some bleach where Asher was bleeding, and then I’ll mop it up. Nothing too complicated – just mop until there’s no Asher left?”

“I can’t think of any better systems. But I’m new to all this.”

“Are you calling me experienced?”

Exhausted, Blanca and Ridley diligently splashed bleach and mopped with hot water, trying to keep their energy level going to complete the task before Blanca's parents came home. After one final mopping and using four paper towel rolls to clean up the residue, they moved to the bathroom to take on the other big mess.

"Mom will totally kill me if she notices, but I think I'm just going to throw out these hand towels," Blanca said. "Anyone tell you that you bleed a lot?"

"You're hilarious," Ridley said, wringing out the mop in the toilet. "But hey, if a lunatic is trying to beat you to death in a small bathroom, it's all going to end up in one place, right?"

Blanca stopped cold and set down the paper towels on the counter.

"Everything all right?" Ridley said.

"I don't think so," she said. "I really don't. Ridley, I've got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Well, you gave Treadway the tape, right?"

"Sure – that's what me and him were talking about earlier, remember?"

"Right, that's what you and he were talking about," she said, correcting him like a good editor. "He didn't have anything to say about the tape or what they might have found when they analyzed it?"

"Exactly," Ridley said, frowning his eyebrows. "But I guess that takes a while."

"And he never read Asher his rights?"

"Like you said, it didn't look like it."

"And how did you meet Sergeant Bobby Treadway?"

“Well, he kind of, not exactly arrested me, but he just kind of caught me,” Ridley said. “He took me to the hospital, and that’s where my parents picked me up.”

“So,” Blanca said, not blinking and deadly serious. “Why him?”

“What do you mean?”

“He seems to be constantly available, always ready to help,” she said. “But we got attacked, and we don’t even know if he properly arrested Asher.”

Ridley thought about the incongruities and empty gaps, all masked by amiability and an outward desire to help. He almost instantly trusted Treadway. Maybe everything was going according to plan. Maybe they were mopping up evidence. Maybe they were being played for fools.

“Well, there’s one way to know for sure,” he said, walking over to the red rotary phone and dialing. There were three rings and a pick-up. “Hello?”

“Hey man, it’s Ridley.”

“Nice,” said Max Wolf. “I thought you were supposed to let me know what happened, dipshit.”

“What? You didn’t see the Royko Family Embarrassment Tour on the news?”

“Oh, everybody saw it. Good thing you’ve got the summer ahead of you to live it down. Ridley, I thought you’d keep me in the loop. Is Blanca with you?”

“Yes, she is,” he said, smiling at a girl he felt like he could call his girlfriend.

“You’re not going to believe what an amazing badass I’m with.”

“And Max?” Blanca said, pulling the receiver toward her. “I’m with a pretty amazing badass, too, if you can believe it.”

“Really, a ‘pretty amazing badass?’” Max said. “Does Ridley know?”

Ridley raised a cupped hand next to his face to ask Blanca to pass the receiver.

“Jerk. Everything OK over there?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m calling because Luna just showed up at my front door. And she wants Blanca here. And Ridley?”

“Yes sir?” Ridley asked.

“Whatever you do on your way here, stay the hell away from that cop.”

Chapter 14

Blanca and Ridley, he on his freshly rebalanced wheels, pulled up to the Wolf house to see a collection of ominous vehicles, including a plain-white fleet Taurus with a magnetic *Tulsa World* logo on the driver's side door and, and a familiar car that diminished Ridley's new confidence: a hunter-green Pontiac Bonneville.

"That can't be good," Ridley said, putting his feet to the pavement and steadying his bike. "How have my parents ever helped a situation? Brace yourself, Blanca, you get to meet the parents."

"Well, you get to meet mine, too," she said. "Ray Molina is here in his company car. We don't really need to tell anyone our relationship status, do we? It might not be the time."

Ridley's first thought was of all the times Barb learned that he had a crush, how she weaponized her son's emotions and made him feel silly and small for liking a girl in his class. In 15 years, it happened enough times, and with such negative feelings over something that should never feel so bad, that Ridley carefully guarded everything he felt around his family. When Ridley walked through the Wolf's double front door, he would keep his emotions secure.

"Is your dad going to hate me?" Ridley asked, and Blanca shot him a nasty look.

"He's got other things on his mind," she said, swinging her foot toward the kickstand on her mountain bike. "My mother and father are good people — smart people, because I know you value that. And they're going to like you, Ridley. They really will. Because I like you, and they love me. The best thing you can do is treat them with the respect you show me."

Ridley considered Blanca's words. From a still-beginning lifetime of television and sit-com crises, not to mention his own twisted homelife, he was conditioned to think of relationships as conflicts; that once you became something to anyone, you had to spend every available minute battling a series of misunderstandings, miscommunications, temptations and challenges to just stay with that person. TV was only partly to blame. Barb and Roger Royko's chaotic, prosecutorial approach to raising Ridley did most of the heavy lifting.

"So, you can be my boyfriend next week, or the week after that," Blanca said.

"Whenever it makes sense. Trust me, you still will be."

Ridley felt his eyes start to dampen and a heaviness in his chest. It was everything he could do to hold everything together, and he was not sure he would.

"OK. I trust you," Ridley said. "And I'll follow your lead, if that's OK."

"We've got this," she said. "I'm just worried about my sister right now. All right, Ridley Andrew Royko. Let's do this together."

Blanca rang the "Copacabana" doorbell. It felt out of place, a fart in church. They exchanged looks of both anxiety and reassurance as they waited for someone to answer.

"Blanca, oh thank God," Luna said as she grabbed her sister and squeezed her tightly, like Blanca could be torn away by an unseen force. "I am so thankful that you are here, baby?"

The two sisters held hands as they walked down into the split-level den, where Ray Molina, his prematurely gray hair long and swept behind his ears, stood up and pulled his younger daughter to him. Marisol Molina moved to Luna, who in this moment, needed contact and care. Ridley watched as Blanca's family expressed their love and

responded in a moment of real need to the people who did not simply live in the same house. They lived, truly, together.

Barb and Roger stood.

“Are you coming over here or not?” Barb said, putting out her arms and pointing a look of expectation and obligation at her son. “We were so worried about you.”

Ridley walked stiffly, warily toward his mother and put his own arms around her so she would stop waving her arms like Frankenstein.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, whispering. “I’m sorry I brought you guys into all of this.”

In his recliner, trying not to be seen, was Bud Wolf. The big man grasped a tumbler and regularly rattled ice around the steadily diminishing brown liquid between hard, bitter pulls. His pink cheeks were wet. Just nearby, a fit man in a suit with black-framed glasses sat with his arms resting on his knees, and he watched as Luna walked her mother back to the sofa and stood up straight, her simple, white t-shirt tumbling over some loose jeans.

“Um, I need everyone’s attention for a moment,” Luna said. “Earlier this afternoon, I gave a statement to this man, the one who looks like an FBI agent. He is one, by the way.”

“That’s right. In fact,” the FBI agent said, pulling out a laminated card attached to a metal clip. “I want to pass this around the room so everyone can look at my Bureau ID and see that it’s real. Seems there has been some confusion over who is law enforcement and who isn’t...”

Ridley was the first to palm the card. “Nice. Looks like...”

“I know, *The X-Files*,” said Special Agent Dave Waterman. “You’re Ridley Royko?”

“Yes sir.”

“So, when you were approached by Sgt. Bobby Treadway, did he happen to show you his badge?”

“Well, he was wearing a shield, but I didn’t get a good look at it or anything.”

“A shield. OK. Look, I don’t expect a kid like you to know about things like this — you haven’t been in any trouble that I’ve been able to dig up. Up until now, you had no reason to know that Tulsa Police wear a seven-pointed star.”

“Oh ... shit,” Ridley said.

“Ridley!”

“Please, ma’am,” Waterman said, then turned to Barbara’s son. “Ridley, I was going to say it’s a rookie mistake, but you’re 15, and you’re not a cop, and I think you already know this: neither is the man calling himself Sergeant Bobby Treadway.”

He shot his fingers through his forelock and squinted in frustration. “He made us clean up any evidence that Asher was ever in the Molinas’ house. I am such an asshole!”

Blanca walked over and cradled Ridley’s face with her hands, making him look her in the eyes. “You are not an asshole, Ridley. Don’t talk about someone I care about that way.”

Waterman tried to pull things back to business. “No one in this room is guilty of anything other than going through a part of hell, especially the Molinas and the Wolves.”

“Wolfs,” Bud said from the corner, then turned to Ray. “They won’t refer to us as Wolves in the paper, will they?”

“No, Bud,” said Ray. “AP style says the pluralization of ‘Wolf’ as a name is ‘Wolfs.’ Not that I’m looking forward to any of this being in the paper, but whatever it takes —”

“To arrest my son?” Bud said, downing the last swallow from his tumbler. “Look, I don’t know what to say other than I’m so, so deeply sorry for what my son did to your daughter. I just don’t know what happened to him.”

“You don’t?” Barb said. “You seriously don’t remember?”

“What are you getting at, Barbara?” Bud said, his red eyes narrowing as he stared across the den. “Do you have something to say about my parenting?”

“No,” Barb said. “I was just there when Ash brought that dog up to the campsite.”

Ridley heard fragments of versions of this story, an early ‘80s camping trip when he and Max were in preschool, during his mother and father’s evening drinking. These sessions could escalate into accusatory drama and startling, soap opera-like revelations about family and friends. He braced himself.

“He threw a rock at that little Yorkie he found wandering by the banks of the Illinois, and you didn’t make him apologize directly to that young married couple,” she said. “What did that teach him?”

“Barbara, *I* apologized to the Reinharts, and I took care of everything. I did what I needed to do.”

“I think on that note, we’ll leave you to this,” Roger said, putting his glass on a coaster before standing up and fishing a card out of his wallet. “Ridley, get your things.”

“I’m staying, Dad. I need to stay. With Blanca.”

Roger sighed and held out his card to the agent. “Agent Waterman, just call me at the office if you need anything else. Let’s go, Barbara. Ridley, call if you need me to pick you up.”

“Look, Mamá, Papá, I just wish I told you before all of this and put you through the treatment centers and everything else without just telling you what happened to me,” Luna said. “I don’t want to say everything I told Agent Waterman, but Melissa and I thought it would be fun to hang out, have a few beers with Ash — I’m sorry Mamá — and Ash was playing around with us when I started to feel like I was more than just a little drunk.”

“You mean this boy drugged our Luna?” her mother asked the agent.

“Yes, and your daughter remembers a lot, despite that,” Waterman said. “Listen to what she has to say, Mrs. Molina. I think you’re going to be proud of her.”

“I was starting to get really sleepy, like I could barely hold my head up in the back seat. So, Ash had his arm around my shoulders, but he suddenly wasn’t there and he let me drop onto the seat. I knew something was wrong, because he was outside the car, opening the trunk, and ... Agent Waterman?”

“You’re OK.”

“But sweetie,” Ray Molina said. “We can talk about this later, if you need to.”

“I’m... I’m fine,” Luna said. “I can do this. He pulled a green sleeping bag onto the grass beside his Camaro, and then opened the driver’s side door and dragged me out.”

Ray Molina buried his face in his hands as Luna told them about hearing the truck and what sounded like a door being rolled open. She said she had the presence of mind to

understand she was in danger, but the drugs in her system made it difficult for her to get away.

“I finally got out of that sleeping bag and just tried to get as far as I could away from Ash and his Camaro, and then I look back, and see Ash and this guy pulling Melissa into the back of that truck, and a few other girls, and Melissa is fighting and fighting and fighting, but she’s got whatever Ash put in all his Mickey’s Big Mouths in her system. And I’m screaming as loud as I can to make them stop, but then the truck drives away, and Asher’s car is just sitting there. So, I crawled under there, beneath his car. I waited for the drug or whatever to wear off, and it took a long time before I could stumble away.”

“And that’s why you were in such terrible shape when you showed up at our house,” Blanca said. “That son-of-a-bitch.”

“I know, and I feel like shit, but I was scared of them coming back for me, and now I don’t know what happened to Melissa or Nicky and neither does anyone else, but I was so scared. I’ve been so, so afraid that your son and that awful bastard who kept saying ‘this and whatnot’ and ‘that and whatnot’ would throw a bag over my head and I would never see any of you again. I just don’t want what happened to them to happen to you, Blanca, or to any other girl.”

“Agent Waterman,” Desiree said as she sat down on the arm of Bud’s recliner. “That police officer — he talked kind of folksy, like it was a tick or something. He said his name was Treadway.”

“Yeah,” Ridley said. “Robert or Bobby or whatnot.”

Chapter 15

With the Beastie Boys' *Ill Communication* freshly unwrapped and spinning in Blanca's boombox, Ridley and Blanca passed the latest issues of *Melody Maker* and *NME* between them, circling reviews in highlighter. Six days after Luna told her story to the FBI and then to everyone in the Wolfs' living room, they were taking tentative steps toward actual summer vacation, because little before felt like it. As the unstoppable grooves and furiously traded verses of "Root Down" transitioned into the brutal opening crunch of "Sabotage," Luna opened Blanca's door.

"Turn on CNN — now!" she said.

Blanca reached up from the floor, turned on the TV, and shut off the Beasties. Switching to cable news, Luna, Blanca and Ridley watched a helicopter shot of a port, with the camera focused on a blue shipping container surrounded by vehicles with flashing light bars.

"What is it, Luna?" Blanca asked.

"Papá got a call from Waterman," Luna said. "They arrested Asher and that guy who impersonated the cop down in Miami. I can't believe this — they actually got the son-of-a-bitch."

"So, what did Papá say? Do you have to do anything?"

"Well, he said I will probably have to testify against them, but that could be months from now," Luna said. "He is getting some pressure from his editors to get me on the record, though."

Ridley pointed at the screen. "They're starting to bring people out — Jesus, how long have they been in there?"

“My God ... who knows?” Blanca said as two men in reflector vests helped a woman with dark, matted hair, her body wrapped in a mylar blanket, walk out of the open container on the screen. “However long it was, it probably felt like forever.”

More women came out, some able to move better than others, most crying and squinting from the Florida sunlight after being kept in darkness. As a string of women emerged from the container, Luna’s face sharpened and she walked up to the 19-inch TV and tapped on the image of one woman coming out with long, dirty blond hair — normally in spiral curls, now flat and matted, and she looked down as rescuers walked her toward one of the ambulances.

“That’s her! Melissa’s alive! I mean, it’s her, right?” Luna said, laughing with tears in her eyes. “She made it, and that scumbag Asher will go to prison.”

“So, are you going to go on the record with your dad’s paper?” Ridley asked. “That can’t be easy.”

Luna was still staring at the screen. “Well, it cannot be as hard as what Mel just went through,” she said. “And seriously, Rid, I could have been right there in that shipping container with her. I think I have a responsibility to tell what I know about what happened, and I seriously think they’ll treat me pretty well as an editor’s daughter, or Papá would go off pretty hard on them. So yeah. I’m doing it.”

Blanca wrapped her arms tightly around her sister.

“Thanks baby,” Luna said. “Rid, be sweet to Blanca.”

Ridley gave Luna a quick hug as she left the room. It felt good to be around girls and not feel so intimidated by their mere presence that he was unable to speak or

function. They were more fun to be around when he saw them as real people with genuine feelings and internal lives, not as objects of worship.

Blanca watched as CNN cut to a reporter on the docks. “This is a national story, Rid, and we’re a part of it.”

“An embarrassing part of it,” Ridley said. “We’re the ones who cleaned up a crime scene and let that fake cop take the tape.”

“I know, but Papá told me I’m not expected to know police procedure at this age, and I’m choosing to believe him on that one,” Blanca said. “I have plenty of time to learn about the law. For now, though, I think I’m going to start going to my father’s office. I want to know more about journalism than I’m learning at the *Bainwood Bee*, and if I ever find myself facing anything this awful again, at least I can report on the experience.”

“What’s stopping you now?” Ridley said. “Write it up this summer, put it in the first issue of the *Bee* when we go back in the fall. It will be amazing, Blanca, because you’ve been so close to this story for so long, and you’ll tell your version better than anyone else.”

Blanca smiled. “Thank you. I’m going to do it, Ridley, as long as you help me transcribe interviews.”

“That sounds like homework to me,” Ridley said.

“And that’s another thing,” she said. “It’s one thing to fix your grades...”

“My God, did you fix my grades,” he said. “Just a little more generosity from you, and I would have made the honor roll.”

“Right, but who would believe that?” Blanca said, laughing. “You think your parents are rough now, imagine how suspicious they would be if you had valedictorian grades after nearly flaming out in Geometry?”

Ridley knew she was right. “So, you were saying, it’s one thing to fix my grades, but... what?”

“That was the last time.”

Ridley felt a sharp pain in his stomach. “You’re not going to help your own boyfriend?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said. “I just won’t help you falsify grades anymore. I will, however, help you study. You need to stop thinking of school as a burden on your life. I know it’s popular to think that way with some people, but not with me. Not with Max, either, and Jesus, what about Max? How would you like to be the brother of Public Enemy Number One?”

Max was going to have it rough, and there was a fair question whether Bud and Desiree would even stay in town with all the negative attention, Ridley thought. “I think I’ve got to be the best friend I can be to him this summer,” he said.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Blanca said, kissing Ridley. “You don’t have to be your parents, and you don’t have to be what your parents say you are.”

Blanca’s phone rang, and Ridley looked at the Caller ID box on her desk.

“Says *Tulsa World*,” he said. “Got to be your dad, right?”

Blanca was on the phone for less than 30 seconds, during which time she responded with “OK” a few times, then “I love you,” before hanging up.

“He said Melissa’s parents are already on a flight to Miami, but that the press is coming, and we should probably leave the house or prepare to barricade ourselves,” she said. “What do you think?”

“Turning out the lights and hiding would be one way to go,” Ridley said. “Let’s go downstairs and see what it looks like. Is Luna still here?”

“No, I heard her car,” Blanca said. “I think she might be way ahead of us.”

Ridley and Blanca ran down the stairs quickly and moved directly to the front entryway, where Ridley peered through the half-moon window at the top of the door.

“I think we might be good,” he said. “Got your shoes on?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve got my keys and I’m wearing a shirt. I am shockingly prepared for whatever this is going to be.”

“Really?” he said, and surprised Blanca by kissing her deeply.

“Wow,” she said. “Did you have to let it linger?”

“Funny,” he said. “Oh shit, Blanca, a KTUL van. Down the street, do you see the big “8” on the hood?”

She looked, and there was no question. The doorbell would be ringing constantly unless they left now.

“I think we should do it,” Blanca said. “Are you ready?”

“As long as I can keep up,” he said.

Blanca hit five buttons on a panel next to the door, arming the Molinas’ security system. “It’s time.”

“I’m following you,” Ridley said.

Blanca looked across the street as the van was pulling up to the nearest stop sign, three houses down from them.

“It’s now or never,” Blanca said. “Ridley, are you with me?”

“You’re not rid of me.”

“Good,” Blanca said. “Run.”