

## Tricks Up My Sleeve – Prologue

The year I met Brandon was the year everything fell apart. It was the year we were always in danger, never certain, always running, never bored. It was the year I put everything back together again. It was the year I made real friends who could share in everything I knew and everything I did. It was the year we fought the powerful. It was the year I stopped being a kid. It was the year Jimmy became Jim. It was the year Allie became a goddess to a brood of underlings. It was the year my parents found out who I am. It was the year I found out, in turn, who they are, themselves. It was the year I learned Spanish and the year I taught another to regret.

It was the year I fell in love, then out again, then back in.

It was the year I learned to fly for five minutes.

Before I write it all down, before I turn it into something like a tidy narrative in which everything seems to make a sort of sense, I want to take a second to remember it as one big fat messy jumble. I want to make sure you know that it didn't feel linear or neat and it certainly never felt resolved. I want to remind myself of that a little bit, too. It's a funny thing: the year I'm describing, from the inside, was a whirlwind of uncertainty and terror and overconfidence and satisfaction, all experienced simultaneously, all occupying one interminable, undifferentiated "now". If I step outside the narrow space of the direct experience of that year then it falls into place as a sequence of events. I hate to get way outside of it, all the way out to the very beginning, word processor in front of me, blank representation of the page just waiting to be filled, before it starts to regain some fraction of that chaotic whorl it had at the time. I have to see it from ten thousand feet to see it the same as I did from within and anything between the two looks way too organized to be accurate.

Mr. Jackson, my Advanced Math teacher, says that life is "a funny old thing". It's only funny when it's over, though, when we can step back and catch our breath.

I'm not quite there yet, but I'm working on it.

It was junior year of high school and it wasn't very long ago at all.

**Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Zero**

*How rad is it living in a microscope? / Broadcast into every single living room.*

*--Get Seduced, The Faint*

It was the first week of Junior year and Marc Greene was at his locker taking books out of his bag and swapping them for others. It was five minutes before the bell would ring to signal the end of second lunch and Marc would need to go to English class. Marc was a junior also, but I was in the “Academically Gifted” version of eleventh grade English and he was in “college prep”, though he could have placed up if he’d wanted to. He didn’t want to. He wanted to sleep through straight A’s and he wanted to be the smartest kid in the room. I could sympathize. I wanted the same thing, too, and sometimes I was lucky enough to get one or the other or both. I sidled up to his locker on the opposite side of the open metal door so that when he shut the locker I was standing there, suddenly, unexpectedly, like I’d just stepped in from another plane of existence.

I had a lollipop, one of the kind with candy inside, and I was absently twirling it between my puckered lips and looking at him.

“H... Hi, Scott.” We weren’t friends, or even acquaintances, but it was a smallish school and I was the out gay kid. Everyone knew who I was. Every single person on that campus knew my name.

“Hi, Marc.” I took the lollipop out and waved it back and forth, like I might be about to point it at him or might be about to put it back in my mouth or might be about to throw it across the hall in the blink of an eye. “Got a minute? We need to talk.”

He glanced around and opened his mouth but I held up my sucker and waved it to shush him. “Let me correct that,” I said. “I need to talk. You need to listen, and then at the end you’re going to say yes.”

Marc closed his mouth. I went on.

“I need to talk to you about Julia. You know Julia, don’t you? Average height, dark hair, she wears it in a bob. She has a penchant for scarves she knits herself and hose in complicated patterns. She’s always quiet in class but she’s actually a secret genius at mathematical proofs. Did you know that? She got a 720 on the PSAT last year. She’s a sophomore. That’s pretty fucking impressive.”

Marc looked around again but I reached out and put just the tips of my fingers on his upper arm and his eyes snapped back around.

“I’m not done talking, Marc. Do you understand me?”

My eyes had widened a little, and then I narrowed them, slowly ratcheting them down from annoyed anger to something chilling and calculating and certain of its prey. Marc’s neck throbbed when he gulped and I wished I had a video camera because I would have spanked it to that twice a day for a week.

“You like quiet girls, Marc. I’m guessing that’s why you like them. You liked Julia at a party in July. I have to wonder if the alliteration was what got you interested in the first place – on a subconscious level, I mean. Are you familiar with the historical Julia, by which I mean the daughter of Augustus?” I waved the sucker around and Marc’s eyes followed it for a moment. “No, I doubt you are. To summarize, she was really smart, had a very sharp wit and was mocked, punished and eventually

exiled for 'adultery' but that's pretty open to debate. I mean, everyone agrees she got around but she probably wasn't at all like some people said she was. It happens a lot to girls, you know: they try to assert the same liberty as the boys around them and they get branded a slut for it. Same as it ever was." I shrugged. "On the one hand, life is a sequence of misfortunes but on the other, well, eventually a Julia comes along who isn't interested in being defined by rumor or abuse."

Marc's eyes widened just a little and he looked like he was about to make a run for it so I slammed the locker door shut and held it there. It wasn't enough to break the skin of the fingers he still had in there, but it hurt like a bitch and he gave a strangled cry before I shushed him gently.

"Here are the rules, Marc. Julia knows what you did to her, and so do I, and so do some other people. We all know there's no point in calling the police because what can they do now? It was months ago. At first Julia was confused and then she was ashamed and then she was angry but she's a nice quiet girl who's good at proofs and revenge is not her specialty. She's content to let things lie given a few conditions. Are you ready for them?"

Sweat had broken out on Marc's forehead but he nodded, jerkily and haltingly. He looked a little pale.

"Condition one: you never do that to anyone again. Your days as a wine cooler date rape paramour are over. Condition two: you will never put yourself in a position where you possibly *could* do this again. You will not ask any girl in this school, or any other school, out on a date for the rest of the time that you and I are in the same town or a part of the same ecosystem. You're going stag to the prom this year, and next year, and to everything else to which you might once have thought of asking a girl. If you break that rule then I will know and I will punish you. You may wonder how I can possibly know your every action but suffice to say I have eyes... everywhere. There are a lot of people in this school who owe me a favor, or who know that I can cough up the very best of gossip if I ever need to. Those other people who know about Julia, the ones I mentioned before, some of them are the people in this school who start the rumors. They don't just spread them, they originate them. I have a theory that some people are natural aggregators of information by some means or another – maybe they have good hearing or they're natural confidants or they simply notice the little details and put them together – and some of those people are the people I'm talking about. If I give the word, they will destroy you. Every word that comes out of their mouths, about you, will be a little machine designed to eat you and your reputation alive. If you doubt me, look twice at a girl who's quiet and might, from certain predatory perspectives, look like a good candidate for Victim of the Week. If you find yourself thinking about following a girl down a hall at a house party a year from now, take a moment before you do and ask yourself if it's possible that I'll find out. I will. If you feel that little thrill on the back of your neck and wonder if someone is watching you, don't wonder; just know that I am."

I took a second to work the sucker and look at him, to gauge whether he comprehended this. He was utterly silent and as white as a bleached sheet.

"It isn't just gossips who owe me favors, by the way." I smacked my lips together and smiled a little; a very little. "I know some big boys, some big mean boys who've got a lot of frustrations they'd like to take out on someone. If you touch a girl again, I'll let the gossips destroy your reputation and I'll let you think, when it's all over, that at least you weren't hurt, that at least no one came along and broke any fingers or toes or pushed your chipped teeth halfway down your esophagus." I paused, and gestured at my own chest with the sucker, up and down. "That's the long tube in here, just in case that's news to

you.” I was being a relentless dick and enjoying it. “Just as soon as you think it’s over, I’ll send one of those guys around. It won’t be over. It will just be starting. I know about more than Julia, Marc. I have some theories about at least a couple of other girls. I’d hate to have to take revenge for them, just in case, just to be sure that they haven’t been raped and somehow haven’t been avenged.” I shrugged at him, my body language open and friendly. “That’s just how it is, Marc. Note that I didn’t say that’s how it was going to be; that’s how it is right now, already, ever since the moment we started having this conversation. There are people who have seen us talking who will assume that means you did something bad and they’re going to be keeping an eye on you. Just by being associated with me in some small way there are going to be assumptions about you.” I shrugged again. “Sorry about that, but it’s the price you pay; it’s the price you are paying and you will pay until you are gone from here.”

I stopped leaning on the locker next to his and stood up straight, letting go of the locker door. He drew his hand out quickly and shoved it in his pocket. I made as though I were about to walk away then put up a hand. “Oh, and if you think you can solve this by transferring across town, or to T.D. Wilkerson or something, no such luck. My net is cast wider than you can imagine, Marc Greene, and I will haunt you from now until the day we are both gone from this place. I am the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, all rolled up into one and pissed off. Julia asked me to fix this problem and I have to tell you, in all fairness, I enjoy fixing this kind of problem. It isn’t my problem but it’s one no one else can fix and I see this – this little conversation we’re having, and the careful surveillance I plan to extend to every corner of your life for the next two years – I see all this as both a pleasurable hobby and a service to the community.”

Marc stared at me, aghast, still pale, now sweating from the forehead. I bit through the sucker in an abrupt, violent crunch and yanked the candy center out between my teeth, chewing it with mercilessly slowly. He stared at me.

“Mmmmmm,” I said, and then I smiled. “I love the very center at one of these. I love working my way around the outside, sure, but what I find really satisfying is when I finally break through to the heart of it and get my teeth in there, good and hard, so I can yank that candy out and chew it down to nothing. I can practically hear it scream and I love that imagined sound. Have a nice year, Marc. Be good.”

I turned and walked away this time. I didn’t look back. I didn’t hurry. He could have run after me, sucker-punched me from behind, tackled me, screamed, any number of things, but he didn’t because he couldn’t. I’d turned every empty corner of every room into a spy ready to tattle on him. What I’d said about being able to find out what he did was mostly true, probably, right now, but I didn’t need it to be entirely true all the time. The part about big boys full of frustration was purest fantasy but it was one he could maintain in my absence. I’d turned Marc Greene’s imagination against him and that was probably going to be good enough.

The next day, at lunch, Julia came to me. My friend Allie sat there and listened approvingly as I told Julia that it was done and that Marc would never bother her – or anyone else – ever again. Julia thanked me and asked if I wanted to be paid. I told her for what had to be the fifteenth time that I didn’t want payment. “The work is its own reward, Julia,” I said. “Consider me paid in full in the currency of satisfaction.”

**Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter One**

*I know that it's true / it's going to be a good year / out of the darkness / and into the fire.*

*-In The New Year, The Walkmen*

It was the day after Labor Day and I was already in trouble. School had been open for all of two weeks. It had been like this last year, and the year before, and I didn't see any good reason to change things around because it all seemed to be working out so far – minor infraction, slap on the wrist, lather, rinse, repeat – but this time Mr. Strickland wasn't happy giving me a detention and going back to whatever it is a Vice Principal does. The school had a new security camera system and I'd been spotted on it over the long weekend, which had to be it. I didn't do anything bad, no real crimes, nothing I was absolutely sure even counted as breaking the rules, but I was on school grounds during off-hours and the Vice Principal had called me down to his office from home room that morning so that had to be it. Mrs. Hale looked over her glasses at me, then at the door, to signal that I was free to comply. She was grading vocabulary quizzes from one of her regular classes and speaking would have broken her rhythm. Pop quizzes the second week of school. It had long been known that her philosophy was simple: rule with an iron fist until after New Year's and her classes would spend second semester thinking she'd hung the moon every time she cracked a smile. It was a weird bit of psychological trickery but it totally worked. My cousin Rob had her four years ago and said most kids fell for it.

I fancied myself a savvier consumer of psychological manipulation, thank you very much. Besides, I just had her for homeroom. I didn't see it being worth her effort to try very hard to win us over. A kid can only answer roll call with so much enthusiasm at 7:45 in the morning.

The waiting room of the school's office – centrally located in Y Building, a name that was often stated with varying, experimental inflections by future poets and other artists working in the medium of unsubtle irony, saying to one another, "But... *WHY*, building?" and then "Why? *Building!*" – was brightly lit by the September sun and the leaves on the single-trunk-thin line of trees along the other edge of the narrow parking lot were still green but that morning, for just a moment, I'd seen a little autumn scuttle past and I couldn't wait. I was sick of summer, sick of my dumb customer service job, sick of not having any mysteries to solve. I still had the job but my hours were cut way back and school meant I could get back in the mix. I was ready to see what trouble the other kids in school could throw my way and instead I was sitting around waiting for trouble to land squarely on top of me, feet first.

Feh.

The door to Principal Flynn's office was closed and he was on the phone. I could just see him through that little strip of glass all the office doors had on them. He looked angry as all hell, red in the face, redder than that in the nose, and I knew he must be arguing with the county about something. Budgets were no better in our school than anywhere else. They could always get money for football uniforms but never for books because nobody in town has a business selling textbooks; the secondhand sporting goods place, on the other hand, was only too glad to send over a few shoulder pads for space in every home game program. I was just contemplating shoulder pads, and football players, and getting lost in my thoughts, when the door to Mr. Strickland's office shot open. He didn't look at me; he looked at the secretary. "Owens down here yet?" She pointed at me with her pen then tucked it into her crazy beehive. "He's waiting for you, sir." Her voice was a little squeaky and a little throaty, a soprano with a smoking habit.

Strickland looked at the lobby like he'd never seen it before and it was a hundred yards away, squinting eyes and practically holding a hand up to his forehead to shield his eyes from some distant savannah sun. "Owens. Come in." The words were polite but the tone was an order, a get-the-hell-in-here in sheep's clothing. I stood, backpack in my right hand, my left in my pocket. I was wearing new jeans so the denim felt a little rough and everything was a little baggy on me. My running shoes still looked new and my t-shirt still itched. My hair was still long because I'd whined like old brakes against the back to school shearing. My cheap watch still had a working wristband. I walked past Strickland and he said, "Jeez, kid, you look like hell." I thought I looked a lot better than I usually did by Halloween, when I'd had a chance to muddy or mutilate or otherwise break in the usual stock of new-school-year goods.

"Thanks." I didn't try to sound thrilled to be there, I just said it, flat. "What's this about?" The door clicked behind me, Strickland sidled around the end of his cheap desk and into a creaky chair, and gazed at me for a few contemplative moments.

"I'm sure we both know what this is about."

Like I hadn't heard that before? I kept the lid on a chuckle and sat back. "I'm pretty sure I cleared the books at the end of last year and I kept my nose clean all summer. You're going to have to spell it out for me."

Strickland had done this thing he does, where he laces his fingers together, elbows on the arms of his chair, and then locks his index fingers together to tap his upper lip with them. It's like he was playing "here's the church, here's all the people," but with kissing the steeple at the end. He wasn't bad looking, or maybe hadn't been in some more athletic youth, but now he was old and doughy and he wore expensive brand-whore golf shirts that fit his shoulders but not his larger belly. It's hard to respect someone dressed for that trip to the 19<sup>th</sup> hole he already had planned for the second the final bell rang at 3:10, but he did that lip tap thing as though it lent him undeniable gravitas, like it made him some ideal combination of Judge Judy and Solon. Finally he opened his mouth, drew a thin breath and said, "What were you doing on campus this weekend?"

So, it *was* that. I knew it already, I just didn't want to give anything up I could make him work for instead; also, I'd kind of hoped against hope that it wasn't actually about me. I'd spotted the cameras a few minutes after I got there – yet another thing the county bought in place of books, I guess – and then I'd left. I hadn't broken into anything, I hadn't peeked through any windows, I hadn't tried any locks and I hadn't messed with any school equipment. I'd walked around, seen the cameras, walked around for thirty more seconds and left again. I tried not to let it be obvious that the cameras were why I was leaving, either. I didn't have a great excuse for why I was there, but did I need one? "I was going to meet a friend," I said. "But then she texted me and said to meet her somewhere else, so I left."

Strickland dropped the next part like it was a massive revelation. "Scott, we've got cameras on campus now. We haven't tried to hide them but we haven't bragged on them, either, so you probably didn't know that." He smiled just a little, a teensy-tiny smirk. He had pulled a fast one on the nosy kid and he loved it. "We've got footage of you wandering around between the buildings."

"I took a walk while I was killing time." I didn't show surprise at the non-revelation about the cameras; neither did I try to downplay it. I wanted to deny him the satisfaction of generating an emotional response of any sort.

"You took a walk around the school grounds, between buildings, around the quad and behind X Building, just for the hell of it?" He smirked again, more broadly.

"I've never felt at home on the track," I replied. My voice was flat, my mouth full of sand and venom. "Was it a problem to be on school grounds? If so we can meet elsewhere in the future."

Strickland looked like an old doctor about to deliver some bad news: a once-sculpted face, now flabby, falling in slow motion as he sat forward. "Well, I believe you, and you're right that you cleared the books last year, but technically being on school grounds outside of attendance of school or an authorized function is trespassing. I can't make an exception for you and be taken seriously by others. That's why we got the cameras installed in the first place, to catch things like this."

That was a lie, of course. I mean, technically, yes, but they got cameras so they could catch whoever did something real to the place. They didn't get cameras so they could sit around watching for loiterers on the grounds on the Saturday of a holiday weekend. "Okay. Detention?" I held out my hand for the pink slip that would be my ticket to an hour of enforced study some Saturday morning.

"More than that," Strickland murmured. His watery old eyes slithered a little closed and he sat back again. "Technically I could give you in-school suspension for this." He put up a hand before my cry of protest had time to get out of my mouth. In-school suspension? It was solitary confinement for the kids whose crimes were bad enough to warrant isolating them from whatever it was that got them to get out of bed and keep showing up at school every day past



the age of sixteen but not so bad as to warrant sending them home – or for kids so very, *very* bad that sending them down the driveway to roam the town for a day might be more trouble than paying some power trip frequent flyer to sit on them for a day. He wanted to send me there? A day or more locked up with the school's *real* criminals, in a tiny trailer, with a near-sighted ex-coach, behind the Careers Education wing of Z building? He might as well drag me down the hill to the highway and throw me under a bus with his own two hands. "But I'm not." I closed my mouth again. I was pissed off, but not at him; I was pissed off that I'd let him get that emotional reaction he so clearly wanted from me. He was smiling a little now, a real smile rather than a simple smirk. "I'd like to make some arrangement that's more..." He licked his lower lip, just a little. "Productive for both of us. You don't need that kind of treatment but it might do you some good to see what you could turn into if you let yourself stay a screw-up."

I lifted my right index finger and said, very calmly, "My grades are excellent, as we both know."

"Yes," he said, "And let's hope they stay that way." He arched his eyebrows in significance. "But that's my point, actually. As of this moment you are the after-school math tutor for any kids in in-school who need a little help understanding their work. You get to be a good academic example for them and they get to be a bad example in everything else, for you. You start tomorrow. Report to the Media Center by seven in the AM. You'll be tutoring for an hour, a different student every day."

I blinked at him. "I have a job after school, at night. It keeps me up late. I can't be here at seven."

"Then we'll do this right after school. Report to the Media Center at three o'clock this afternoon."

I blinked at him. There was almost certainly a regulation somewhere that said he couldn't do that, but what good would it do to say that? He was certainly guilty of unnecessary roughness but I didn't need my parents getting dragged in here yet again. I didn't need to give him an excuse to play hardball next time. "How many days?"

"Eight." It was a Tuesday, so that was the remainder of the week and all of the next. "That would add up to one day of in-school suspension, were you to go that route, so I'm calling this even."

"Six," I said. It slipped out before I thought. It was a reflex. I like haggling.

Strickland didn't. His eyes narrowed further still, little slits, wrinkled at the corners with brewing anger. "Don't test me, Owens."

I looked at the floor for a second. Silence was my acquiescence.

"I'll meet you at four o'clock to lock up behind you when you leave." He flicked a couple of fingers at his office door. "Now get to class." He paused for a moment, then added very casually, "You should be glad I happened to notice you on the tapes. Better to get in line now,



while it's still possible to start the year on the right foot, than to wait until something bigger lands on you. Do you understand me, Mr. Owens?"

I stood up, put on my backpack, walked out without responding and slunk past the receptionist – who out of years of habit studiously did not observe my passing – and got halfway to home room before deciding, screw it, I had a good excuse to be out of class and I wasn't going to waste it. Instead I walked very slowly to my locker, then very slowly to the room where my first class met, and along the way I counted cameras and made a mental note of where each seemed to be pointed. Part of why I didn't acknowledge Strickland's last little point was that I couldn't think of a thing to say other than that I didn't for a moment believe anything just "happened" to be noticed. There's no such thing as coincidence; there are only complications.

The question of why I was actually on campus in the first place was... well, it was complicated, and it's for another time. I'll simply say that by then I'd gotten a reputation in my school. It was not the kind the jocks have, where the jocks all compete with each other to be craziest. It wasn't the kind the stoners have, to be the one who cares the least. By the beginning of tenth grade I'd started to be known as the kid who could solve problems. I didn't know how it started, or when, but sometimes other kids would come to me because something was going on, something they thought they couldn't fix, and they thought I could. Allie said it made me a "fixer" like in a detective story but I didn't buy it. I just fixed problems. I didn't feel the need to complicate it. I was having fun and I just wanted to keep on having fun.

OK, so maybe I read a few detective stories and maybe I liked being thought of as a fixer, but I hadn't sought it out.

At first.

One of the low-level meatheads from the junior varsity football team yelled "queer bait" at me from down a hall but it barely even registered. For one thing, no big, and I've saved enough bacon in this school to open a butcher shop so honestly I could call on more friends – or at least more people who owe me one and know it – than he could ever dream; for another, an opinion is simply not worth consideration when it comes from some underachieving troglodyte perpetually trying and failing to score human growth hormone in a town with a research university in the middle of it. If you want something medical and illicit and you can't find it here, the conventional wisdom goes, then *you are the problem*. What he was saying was true – sort of, in that I *wished* some guy would show an interest in me and that wasn't a secret I kept from anyone – so there was that. It didn't make me hate him any less, though, for saying it, and in my heart of hearts I wanted nothing so much as something that would humiliate him.

Happily, he tripped over his own feet when he turned away, snidely cackling, and wound up with his ass in the air and his feet twisted around at odd angles with his teammates laughing in his face.

Allie was unimpressed when I told her about the mandatory tutorial sessions.

“So, what, this is some combination of extending their detention, giving you a sort of detention and stirring in some ‘scared straight’ shit to go with it?”

I shrugged at her, my mouth full of hummus and celery. We were sitting out beside the entrance to the band room during lunch. One could go there the normal, open, outdoor route or instead slip out a back door of the cafeteria. I considered my lunches there to be my equivalent of office hours. If I could be found there then I was open for business to fix people’s problems. Nobody else was coming around to ask for help that day, though. Apparently I’d filled my own plate with my own problems.

“Is that legal?”

“That’s what I wondered,” I murmured, then swallowed hard, then took a long pull from a bottle of diet soda. I smacked my lips in satisfaction. The hummus was homemade. I couldn’t afford to buy it from the store but making it at home was cheap and easy and cheap and easy were just my style. “But what am I going to do? Call the school board to complain that I’m being punished in a slightly unorthodox way for a slightly unorthodox offense?”

“Some offense.” Allie pouted a little on my behalf, but with her a pout never stayed passive for very long. She didn’t have much use for feeling bad but anger was something she could really work with. “You ought to do something to get back at him.” The faintest glimmer of a smile danced around the corners of her mouth and her eyes looked briefly and evilly darker. “He’s got it coming.”

I waved both hands, calling off that play. “No thanks. Last thing I need is to wind up digging myself in deeper. My guess is he wants a couple of things out of this: he wants to play hardball with me early so he has one fewer problem child on his hands for the rest of the year and he wants to be able to go polish his own apple in front of Principal Flynn by saying he’s set up tutorial sessions for the repeat offenders. It makes him look proactive and it gets me out of the way for a while and it gets back at me for all the time I’ve spent in the revolving door he calls an office.” I waved it off one more time for emphasis. “I’m going to do my thing, smile when I say ‘yes sir’ and keep my nose clean for a while. Honest.”

Allie snorted. I knew that she knew that there was no way I could stay out of trouble. I really thought I meant it at the time, though, and I was getting ready to make my case when the door from the lunchroom swung open. Two guys walked out of it, walking towards us with obvious purpose in their stride. The taller one was a guy I’d seen around before and certainly noticed but with whom I’d never spoken: Brandon Nguyen, second-string quarterback for the varsity football team. The other kid was a sophomore named Geoff Sylvester. Geoff had spent the previous year following Allie around at a polite distance, like a stray dog waiting to be noticed by a human with some food. It was a little bit sweet and a whole lot pathetic. Allie had

noticed just as surely as I had, probably before, but she didn't have a lot of room in her life for a slightly round, crew-cut wearing admirer who didn't bring any skills to the table beyond basic computer literacy and limitless infatuation. Allie was the ruling computer queen of North Shepherd High and most days she dressed somewhere between Goth Lite and *Mad Max* but in her mannerisms she was all whatevs-teenager with one exception: if you wanted something done with a computer, she could do it or she knew someone who could. I wasn't the only fixer in the school and these lunches out by the bandroom, behind the cafeteria, weren't just *my* office hours. Allie was never mean to Geoff, though; she just didn't do much to encourage him. It didn't seem to do anything to *discourage* him, though.

I, on the other hand, had *plenty* of room in my life for a 6'4" half-Japanese, half-Cherokee stud with shoulders as wide as a two lane bridge and close-cropped black hair with, somehow, faint blond highlights streaked through it irregularly. I couldn't for the life of me imagine what trouble he was in that he needed one of us to help with but I neither could I conjure up a nearby alternate reality in which he would want to hang with a couple of self-declared outcasts just for the hell of it, either. It wasn't that Allie or I were picked on or particularly the "freaks" of our school – there were plenty of people for whom that identity had become a sort of protective armor and they flaunted it at every opportunity as a parallel and mimicking social track operating beside, and occasionally in competition with, the "normal" hierarchy of the popular kids, the talented kids and their assorted and overlapping lackeys – but we were absolutely not a part of the normal ecosystem, either. We didn't want to be, and what we did for others made it somewhat impossible for us to be in that mix anyway, and so we were outside of it without being either above it or beneath it. Maybe we were another parallel social track but one where the politics were made simpler by there being only two of us. I don't know. I didn't fully comprehend our standing then and I still don't now but I knew enough to know that we were not able to be found in the normal stratification of high school society or, if we were, our layer was exceptionally thin to the point of being invisible to the naked eye. Allie was the girl with a knife and a jailbroken smartphone and apps she wrote herself and I was the gay kid who liked winning other people's battles without picking fights, who didn't care if people called him names as long as he got to do something *new* all the time, and between the two of us I think there was enough volatility showing that people wanted to keep their distance in a lot of little ways without ever being rude or impolite or unfriendly to us.

All that is to say that I didn't see a lot of reasons why a jock would want to hang with us, even a second-class jock like Brandon. Geoff walked up and smiled at everybody, just glad to be in the same space as Allie, but Brandon hemmed and hawed a bit before speaking.

"So, are you Scott Owens?" He looked at me. My heart leapt out of my chest, spun three times in the air and landed in my lap but I shrugged at him.

"Maybe." I put on a poker face that would have turned the Medusa to stone. At least, that's what I hoped it looked like.

"I..." Brandon stopped, worked his jaw for a second and then said, "This is going to sound odd, but I'm trying to start a club? And I thought that maybe you two," here he nodded at Allie for a second, where she was eating an ice cream sandwich Geoff had brought her, unsolicited, "I thought maybe you would want to join?" He gestured with one thumb at Geoff. "Maybe you, too? If they do?" Brandon tried the jock smile – open-mouthed, jaw slanted, teeth showing a little, as though he's about to click one cheek but stopping short – and I loved it and hated it.

None of us said anything. Allie and I had learned a long time ago to let the other guy fill the silence until he said something meaningful.

"So," Brandon said, "A little about the club." He gave us the thumbs up pistols, like he was selling a car. "It's a gaming club."

"Gaming?" I arched one eyebrow. Allie arched the other.

"Like... Dungeons & Dragons?" She sounded halfway annoyed and halfway interested. She's interested in any new idea, though. It was why we got along so well: we lived to be excited and we tended to be susceptible to one another's infectious excitement.

Brandon's face was open, honest and considering. He shrugged. "Maybe. I was thinking more like chess, *Go*, *Axis & Allies*, *Fortress America*, that kind of thing."

Where Allie and I differed were in the things that would pique our interest to begin with. Case in point: my reaction was to say, "You own a copy of *Fortress America*?"

Allie, on the other hand, gave a slightly dismissive, entirely reflexive sigh and said, "Analog gaming?"

Brandon's face fell a little, but he said, to me, "Yeah. I do."

I couldn't help smiling a little. I'd read about it before: board game, multiple foreign invaders attacking the continental United States; a very paranoid output of the Cold War era. I had never played it and didn't have any interest in that style of game in general but you know how it is when you start clicking links and an hour later you're reading about artisanal grape growers in Timbuktu and all of a sudden that seems like the most fascinating thing in the universe, right? A complete, original, unopened copy of the game went for hundreds online. That was the other reason it stuck in my head: I don't have any of them, and I don't really want any of them, but I am endlessly fascinated by the things people value especially when those values seem so arbitrary. Ninth grade Economics & Civics had taught us all about supply and demand curves and weird little hobbies like that seem like such a perfect expression and simultaneously a perfect *prosecution* of the whole concept. The only reason anyone would pay five hundred bucks for an unopened copy of a twenty five year old game – which would immediately lose 90% of its value if they ever opened it – was because *someone would pay five hundred bucks for it*. It was the ultimate economic case of *petition principii*, the logical fallacy of stating one's yet to be proved proposition in the initial argument that itself seeks to prove that proposition. When someone says, for instance, that security cameras around the school reduce

crime because they are a deterrent, they are technically committing a logical fallacy. That they deter crime is assumed already when stating that they prevent it; they're synonyms.

What can I say, sometimes Wikipedia is the rabbit hole and I'm just another boy in Alice drag.

Anyway, all that ran through my head while Brandon waited for some response and, eventually, as he opened his mouth to say something to fill the silence I blurted out, "Wow, that's great, how much did you pay for it?"

Allie laughed and said, "Damn, that is so rude." Geoff laughed a millisecond later. Brandon blinked. I blushed a deep crimson.

"I'm... sorry, I've never played it but I have read about it? Online? And I know it's really valuable, and I figure you must be a collector and I'm really interested in the economics of collecting because it seems so – "

But there Allie kicked me a little and smiled at Brandon. "It's not really my bag, but good luck. Did you need help with something?" Allie was usually the more socially adept of the two of us and she was also better at the clean disengage.

Brandon blushed this time, and mine deepened. "Sorry. I thought maybe..." He trailed off and my heart leapt again, but not as high. It might have even been just a twitch.

"No, it's cool," I said. I tried to give him a smile I thought would be encouraging. I had no problems waltzing into the vice principal's office and trying to play conversational ping pong but this stuff, where there was a cute guy and he was feeling awkward and I was feeling awkward and there was hummus on my fingertips – I abruptly licked my fingertips, which didn't help with the un-weirding – was not territory with which I was well familiar. "I wish I could help but I'm..." I sighed. "I'm kind of tied up at the moment. I've got a lot on my calendar." I didn't feel like explaining. I felt like it would be too weird.

Brandon rubbed the back of his head and, well, wow. I got actual gooseflesh all over my arms. He looked a little disappointed, maybe even wounded, but maybe that was also wishful thinking on my part. He shrugged. "No worries. I thought I'd ask. Let me know if you change your mind. I need three other people and a faculty sponsor and then I can go into the announcements and, like, reserve rooms at the public library and stuff like that and I don't have any of that but, y'know, gotta start somewhere."

He turned around and walked off and I felt a part of me die inside. The poor guy. I thought, for just a moment, that he actually kind of wanted to be friends with us and we'd totally screwed it up. I watched him go, this time leaving by the more public, outdoor, open route, and for all that I regretted our conversation's outcome I didn't at all mind the view as he left.

Allie snorted aloud. "Wow. Let me know when you're done with the opera glasses, perv."

I blinked and turned a deep crimson, the heat from my cheeks practically burning my eyelashes. "Oh. Sorry." Geoff chuckled at me two seconds after Allie did.

Allie waved it off. "Don't mind me. I just thought you'd want to know your eyes had hard-ons."

Geoff thought this was the apex of wit. I frowned and went back to my hummus.

I was in a long-sleeved t-shirt that was striped, black and light gray, and I couldn't help but note the ironic similarity it bore to the prisoner uniforms in old movies and cartoons. My first day as a tutor for the theoretical worst of the school's worst and I was dressed for the part. Of course, I knew that the kids in in-school suspension were hardly the worst of the worst. They were troublemakers who were dumb enough to get caught. Maybe some of them were genuine menaces, sure, but most of them were just kids whose brains didn't conform to the specific contours of organized education in some way or another. In my heart of hearts I wanted them to turn out to be a gallery of loveable rogues, like Batman's villains in high school. I didn't want any of them to be my best friends but I would have liked to discover that they could coexist with the out gay kid in school without inflicting open harm.

I showed up at the school library – the term "media center" was grating to me, somehow, despite it being entirely literally true – at the appointed time and Strickland was standing by the doors to check to make sure I showed. "Good day in school, Mr. Owens?"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know when it's over." I put my hand on the pull to open the library door but he clapped one of his meaty ex-jock paws across the gap in the double doors to stop me. I looked over and up – he was taller than I was or than most kids and he clearly loved that – and he was smirking again. "Don't get cute, Owens. Be a little grateful I'm willing to bend some rules for you. Not every principal would be so generous to someone with your... reputation." He had to work at that last word, like he wasn't sure it was the right choice or maybe like he enjoyed the taste of it too much to let it easily go.

I met his eyes and, very slowly, raised one thin eyebrow at him. I was always in trouble at school, always in low-grade trouble at home, always annoying professional educators by getting good grades despite never paying attention, never staying up late studying, never seeming to try very hard at anything at all. I was out, I was outside the normal human pyramid of social rankings, I was trusted by many of my peers and, because they had trusted me so many times, sometimes I was a little resented or feared, too. I honestly wondered, deep in my heart of hearts, which of the many choices of "reputation" he might mean. "Do tell?"

He blinked at me, not sure what I meant, not aware of what I wondered, not accustomed to getting a reaction other than acquiescence that fell somewhere on the range between sheepish and snide. "Huh?"

I snorted audibly. "I believe I have an appointment to keep inside, if you don't mind. One hour of tutoring. Don't bother trying to keep count all the way to eight; I'll do it for both of

us.” I pulled on the door again and broke his grip – he wasn’t trying to hold it shut with any force, he had just interrupted the motion of my opening it in the first place – and walked inside. He opened his mouth but I pulled the door shut behind me to cut him off.



## Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Two

*Remember, take hold of your time here / give some meanings to the means / to your end.*

*-Not Even Jail, Interpol*

Sitting inside the library, at one of the big round tables for six, was Sammy Heath. Sammy wasn't a bad kid, just a serious stoner with surprisingly gifted skill at mimicking the handwriting of others. Everyone knew if you wanted a hall pass, a parent's signature, a permission slip, anything involving the literally written word that might carry a specific authority because of who wrote it, and you couldn't obtain that via legitimate means, you went to Sammy Heath. He could usually be found behind Z Building, on the south side, towards the woods. There were no set prices but they did tend to float in a specific and frankly quite reasonable range: a couple of bucks for a hall pass, maybe ten for a teacher's signature on something that had to be signed that day. I'd heard the year before that he would forge teachers' or principals' signatures on letters of recommendation – for college applications – for bigger bucks, as much as fifty or a hundred. I hadn't personally verified that but I kept it tucked away just in case I couldn't butter up any likely marks a year from then when my public track record would matter more. He spent a lot of time in Z Building – sometimes said with a bad fake French accent as *Zee Beeldeeng* – because that was where he took drafting classes. If he didn't grow up to be a petty crook for some meth-lab mafia out in the hills then he'd probably make a great architect one day. He took real pride in his work even though he was, in all other contexts, mostly checked out most of the time. He even had an office of sorts, in the old greenhouse behind the building. No one used it anymore – the horticulture classes were cut in some budget or another somewhere along the way and the Future Farmers of America spent too much time staring at tractor porn to do anything involving actual plants – so he'd set up an old desk and a filing cabinet. He kept a few different varieties of paper and a few pens and some drafting tools back there, very old-school, very explicitly in rejection of the era of CAD software, and he basically hung out there getting high and drawing elaborate and geometrically perfect floor plans when he wasn't flawlessly affixing the name of our red nosed reindeer of a band director onto a permission slip for someone to go off-campus every Friday afternoon.

He was short and kind of round – last year he was thinner but rumor had it that he had spent all summer experimenting with how to cook pot into clarified butter and that had to be tough on a waistline – with an afro right out of some bellbottom blacksploitation flick. We were no strangers to one another, I had been his customer many times, and he looked a little surprised to see me walk in.

"What'd you get busted for, Scott?" His voice was quiet – the library makes whisperers of us all, even the kids in in-school suspension – and he looked at his phone to check the time. I was exactly on time when I arrived, by choice, but he seemed vaguely impatient.

“Long story,” I said. It wasn’t, but I said it anyway. “So what year of Algebra are you taking?”

Sammy wrinkled up his brow at me and then said, “Oh, are you the guy I’m supposed to meet?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, though I wasn’t sure why. “Yeah. You’re here to get tutored in Algebra, right? In-school suspension?” I put the tips of my thumb and index finger together and touched them to my lips to mime sparking a joint. “Somebody go poking around the greenhouse or what?”

Sammy smiled a little but he put his finger to his lips as though someone might be around listening to us. “My backpack has a roach problem, sure, but I like to keep that discreet, y’know? I’m in here soaking my toes over a signature that wasn’t up to snuff instead.” He shrugged with one shoulder. “I’m taking Trig.”

“Geometry. OK. I can do that.” I settled into the seat next to him and pushed my hair back out of my eyes. “Homework? Test coming up? What’s the last thing covered in class?”

Sammy pulled out his book and flipped through it and we talked math for a few minutes. I was going to walk him through the sine and cosine functions but he interrupted me after maybe thirty seconds. “Are we going to get to the homework?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Do you already know this stuff?”

He considered that for a moment before giving me a nonspecific and muddled sort of, “Ye... yeah? I just kind of need to cut to the chase.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant but I said, “OK, let’s jump ahead to the homework, then. If you’re going to be able to it, I mean.” I paused, hesitated, then said, “But, if you can do the homework, why do you need a tutor?”

“Well, I have some questions,” he said, “And I need to get through the whole next week’s homework.”

“Today?”

“Y – yeah?” Sammy seemed as unsure as I did about what we were supposed to be doing. “I mean, you’ll be tutoring someone else from in-school tomorrow, right?”

I hadn’t considered the specifics of it and shrugged at him. “Maybe? OK, if so, let’s get to your homework for the rest of the week.”

It took us about thirty minutes and it was clear that he didn’t know the material. I started trying to explain it again but he didn’t seem very interested. Finally I gave up and just did it for him. It was faster and easier and, to be honest, less work. He seemed to like that just fine. Maybe he needed to get back to the greenhouse for something or maybe he just really hated math despite being so damned good at the math of drafting. I didn’t need to figure out his particular problems. I needed to finish the hour and get out of there.

When we were packing up I said, “So who am I tutoring tomorrow?”

Sammy looked like he didn't want to answer and he said, almost directly into his backpack, "Leon Panelli."

I blinked. "Lunatic Panelli?" My eyes were like saucers, and spinning ones at that. "Christ. How's he going to take notes in a straightjacket?"

Sammy snickered. "He'll be fine. Don't worry. He's a kitten under all that hardware."

"A kitten with really big claws." I frowned out the windows of the media center, at the strip of green and walkway that ran between it and Y building, as deserted as a ghost town by four in the afternoon. "Do you think he still holds a grudge against me?"

"What for?" Sammy's eyebrows both went up and he smiled at the farthest corners of his mouth. Everyone hated Lunatic Panelli but he had his fingers in every pot in the school. If you were up to something in any way potentially hinky then you were either giving him a cut or he was *taking* it. He'd been in in-school suspension off and on for approximately the last twenty years and he was presumably roughly that many years old. Last spring I'd kinda-sorta-totally-by-accident gotten him busted for selling switchblades. He was a knife nut, and that was fine with me as long as he kept his toys to himself. He had an uncle who was a cop somewhere, or so he said, and he claimed his coat was a gift from him and lined with blade Kevlar so he didn't care what people did with all those knives but, y'know, the rest of us don't have Lunatic's uncle on our side so I'd put a stop to things. I wasn't sure how widespread that information was, but apparently not as wide as I'd assumed. I had always figured Lunatic knew who put the finger on him, for sure; it was the safest choice in paranoid stances I could adopt. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe he did. I guessed I'd find out the hard way the next afternoon.

"Long story," I said.

"Same story that got you roped into this, uh, *tutoring* gig?"

I didn't like the way Sammy said that, but I didn't like anything that happened after Lunatic Panelli's name got mentioned. "Enjoy the rest of the week," I said. "Here's hoping you don't get bored with the view inside Alcatraz."

When I strode out of the library it was 4:01. Strickland wasn't there, but he was standing in the faculty parking lot, through which I had to walk to get to the junior lot behind it. "Have a good night, Owens." He sounded so fucking smug when he said it. "Try to stay out of trouble."

"No promises." I didn't slow down or look at him. I just kept walking, got in my old Escort, coaxed it to life and gave it some gas to get around the back of the school, down the drive and across town to my house. Traffic was light still; it never got bad until approximately 5:01 when every street around the University of North Carolina at Shepherdstown would simultaneously clog with faculty and staff jockeying to be the first ones out of town and back to wherever they called home.

"You're home a little late." My mother was way too nice to assume the worst or to yell or to guilt-trip me for being an hour later than usual. It wasn't that unusual for me to take my

time getting home. Still, she worried. It struck me that she and Sammy now had roughly the same morphology: my mom was also short and kind of on the round side. Dad was very tall and very slender. I'd wound up with his build but the average of their height. She had noted my late arrival with nothing more than casual interest. She had gotten home about five seconds before me by the look of things: her messenger bag was on the floor by the couch and she was unwinding the power cord for her laptop before settling in to do some work or something. "Hanging out with your friend Allie again?"

I rolled my eyes, on the inside. Sometimes when my mother said it like that I felt pretty sure she was hoping that I would come home and undo my coming out. She'd never been judgmental of me or condemned me or anything like that – neither had Dad, and that had surprised the hell out of me – but she hadn't thrown any parties, either. I had the impression that they had taken it like the news of some weather related disaster in another part of the world: they weren't happy about it but neither did it really matter to them, either, and they knew there was no one to blame and nothing to do about it but to acknowledge it and move on. We weren't religious and never had been. My parents had sought out Shepherdstown in part because my mother is a research biologist and UNCS has a way of winning good grants and in part because they were tired of living in little towns full of nosy fundamentalists. Shepherdstown has its share of churches but there aren't very many of them that are *obnoxious* about the rest of us.

I hoped the half of a heartbeat of hesitation was invisible and undetected. "No, I got asked to do some tutoring."

My mother stopped and gave me the same slow eyebrow arch I'd given Strickland earlier. "Do tell."

I shrugged and tried to look wounded. "I'm doing math tutoring for some kids for a few days. It's nothing special and maybe it will earn me a few brownie points."

My mom didn't buy that for a second but she didn't really *want* to know, either. "Well, I'm glad your intelligence is being recognized. Who's organized this? Is it a club or something?"

"Vice Principal Strickland initiated it." That was absolutely true, and my mother's ability to detect a lie, which never seemed to read that far off, was assuaged by how firmly I believed that when I said it. Still, it was something of a surprise.

"What? *That* Nazi?"

"He's not a Nazi, mom." I smiled. "He just thinks brown complements his eyes."

"Your father will be home with dinner in two hours." She didn't approve of the joke, but it amused her; she didn't approve of her own amusement at it, either. "I'm sure you have some homework to ignore." A wave of her hand dismissed me to go do schoolwork. I clicked my cheek and gave her the same finger-pistols gesture that Brandon had given me earlier that day before going down the hall to my room. I did have a little homework and, y'know, all that porn on the Internet wasn't exactly going to watch itself.

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"I've been thinking about the cameras," Allie said. We were sitting out by the bandroom again, the next day. She'd gotten rid of Geoff by sending him for a second thing of chocolate pudding. He was easy to ditch for short periods of time. I was drinking from a bottle of water and made an incomprehensible, nonverbal sound that she nevertheless understood to mean that she had my undivided attention, one of those little nonverbal noises of assent we make a hundred times a day. Neither of us made a move to turn and look at the nearest camera but we had both taken every chance to be on the lookout for them since the day before and we both knew there were two pointed directly at this spot at all times. I was tempted to flatter myself by thinking Strickland gave enough of a damn about me or Allie or both of us together to single us out for double coverage but I knew that was just my ego stroking itself. "Odds are they're using DVRs to record the footage. That gets pricey, though. What day was it when you were on-campus over the weekend?"

"Saturday night." I took another bite of apple.

"And it was Tuesday morning that he called you into his office, so they're keeping three whole days on there. That's a lot of disk space."

"Unless the image quality is really poor." I smiled a little.

"But it can't be *that* poor, can it? He recognized you and he said they had clear images. Storage is crazy cheap these days, anyway." She frowned at nothing, at her train of thought and the questions she wanted answered. "He could always have just been bullshitting you, of course."

I nodded. "He could. It sure would be nice to know for sure."

She smiled a little. "It sure would. They make fake cameras, you know. They're cheap, and they have blinking red lights and they say, 'Look at me! I'm a camera!' Which do you think the county was more likely to be able to afford?"

I shook my head. "Sure, but he knew I'd been here, and I *had*. The cameras are real or he was sneaking around the place himself."

"Or someone else was and they told on you."

I wrinkled up my eyebrows. "I'm not sure that holds water. Why would someone *else* be sneaking around the school and then turn me in to Strickland? How could they without turning in themselves for also trespassing? No, it was him or the cameras are real."

She pondered for a moment and then nodded her assent. "OK. I agree. I want to find out if the cameras are real and, if so, how much they record at any given time. It's got to be like any other video surveillance system, where if they store the images at all then they only store them for a limited time. I want to know that limit. I also want to know where they're stored and how hard they are to access."

I smiled and I am quite sure my eyes sparkled a little. I loved it when Allie sought out trouble. I was better at letting trouble come to me; she was better at making it all on her own. “And you’ve already got an idea, haven’t you?”

She smiled. “Maybe a little. I’m still working on it, though.”

The bell rang and I chucked my apple core. “Fair enough. Speaking of work, time to jet.”

We went our separate ways via our separate ways. Allie always cut through the lunchroom, the invisible means of reappearing in the middle of the quad, but I always went the public route. To hell with anybody who didn’t like where I was or what I was doing.

Strickland was standing by the doors again that afternoon to make sure that I showed up but he didn’t have any fancy wordplay with which to wow me that time. We didn’t even acknowledge one another’s presence. I walked in, looked around and walked straight towards the only occupied table in the joint.

Lunatic Panelli was sitting in the library with his feet up on the table and his hands behind his head, laced in his perfectly unkempt, slightly greasy-looking black hair. In the middle of the dog days of summer, in the southeast, he was wearing jeans, motorcycle boots, a black t-shirt and a leather jacket that looked like it would actually serve as body armor if he needed it. Maybe all the stuff about the cop uncle and the Kevlar was legit. We all called him Lunatic because he was crazy, yeah, and everyone with any sense considered him dangerous, but... how crazy could he really be? Could he really be so crazy that he needed the body armor stuff? He had a pre-algebra textbook sitting on the table by one of his boots. It looked as pristine as the day it was printed, with the exception of one long motorcycle tire track diagonally across the face. It was like something out of a cartoon, something he might have drawn in magic marker. Lunatic had failed a lot of years, everyone knew that, and nobody knew exactly how old he was but he was definitely over the age of eighteen. State law prevented anyone from staying in high school so long that they turned twenty one while still enrolled; if they tried to enroll for a year during which that would happen then the county was supposed to automatically reject them and then it was off to GED land for them. I wondered how close Lunatic was getting, how long he had left and whether I had been the person who got him busted back down one time too many and now he *had* to graduate or something like that. Books were about the only thing it was hard to imagine him hitting. I couldn’t quite picture him sitting there on the last day of classes, number two pencils all lined up, sweating through enough of the end of year tests to jump the hurdles of GPA and No Child Left Behind and all that shit so that he could get a diploma and walk out of here under his own power. He wasn’t just a big fish in a little pond; he was a small shark.

“Hi.” I said it as flatly and as neutrally as I possibly could. It was always safest to approach Lunatic in a way that would make the minimal impact. He opened his eyes – though

surely he had heard me walk in, obviously – and twisted his face into something approaching a little smile.

“Scotty Owens.” I hated it when people called me Scotty. “I never expected to see you become another victim of the system like the rest of us.” That was the thing about Lunatic: he wasn’t stupid. He was smart. That was part of what made him so dangerous. “So you’re my tutor for today?”

“Looks that way. How’ve you been?”

“Staring at walls,” he said. “And kicking shit when I get a chance. Yourself?”

“Weighing the pros and cons of the straight and narrow.” I settled into the seat and reached for the book. “Let’s get started.”

“You’d have a pretty tough time with that, wouldn’t you?” His booted foot shot out and landed on the book to keep me from moving it. He didn’t kick my hand but he got his heel within a couple of inches of it and he did so with tremendous and undeniable precision. “At least, with the *straight* half.” His smile widened a little but my eyes narrowed. He was a madman, yes, and a menace, and I was more afraid of him than anything else, but some things you don’t let go. Some comments you can’t allow to pass and still look yourself in the mirror in the middle of the night. He laughed all of a sudden, a big, round, good-natured guffaw, and swung his foot away from me and the book and my fingers. “Just giving you some shit, man. Learn to take a joke.”

On the other hand, maybe I could brush my teeth with the lights off.

I slid the book towards me and tried to move things along. I just had to survive the next fifty seven minutes, right? That Strickland was around meant nothing. He was probably twice as scared of Lunatic as I was, or anyone else, because this one kid could fuck up Strickland’s whole career. “What unit are you on? What’s the last thing you covered in class? Or is there something in particular you need help with?”

“Chapter Four. We’re supposed to do every odd-numbered problem tonight, then the even numbered ones tomorrow night. The problems from Chapter Five over the weekend.” Then he pulled out a cell phone and started... texting.

“I’m not just here to do your homework for you,” I said.

He smirked. “Right.”

What was I going to do? I still didn’t know whether he knew that I’d been the one to sink him in the spring. I had to assume he did. He was acting so cocky that I had to assume *something* was up, but then again, it was Lunatic Panelli. He might have just been riding one of the high arcs of whatever fucked up personality disorder he’d manifested this week. I took a moment to watch him – sure enough, he was instantly lost in his phone, like I wasn’t even there. He was serious. I *was* there to do his homework. Whatever, I figured. Whatever got me through the hour.



I did his homework in fifteen minutes and slid it across to him. “You know it won’t do you any good if you don’t write it all out yourself before you turn it in, right?”

He smirked at me, lips curling with disdain. “Like this is my first rodeo.” He snickered to himself and got to his feet. “Thanks. Keep the change.” Ten bucks appeared out of nowhere, as though he were a stage magician who had kept it palmed the whole time, and he picked up the homework and textbook and walked away, just as easy as you please. I blinked. Money? He was paying me for doing his homework?

I looked at the ten dollar bill, reached for it, picked it up, turned it over. I memorized the serial number for lack of anything else to do. I waited while he walked away, heard the doors open and close, checked the reflection of the room behind me in the screen of my phone to make sure he was really gone. Then I held the ten bucks out as though Lunatic were still in his chair, as though he’d never left, and said, “I don’t need your money, Panelli.” I held it out as though he were reaching for it, then dropped it instead of handing it to the imaginary him about to take it from me in my mind. “I don’t take payoffs from losers. Once you’re out there humping soup cans onto store shelves on the graveyard shift for eight bucks an hour you’ll be glad to have it back.”

In my imagination I was a lot tougher than I am. I didn’t keep the money, though. I couldn’t. I’m not great at playing by anybody’s rules but there are things you don’t do, money you don’t take. It was that mirror again, the one you face in the dark of the night.

I heard someone cough in the distance and nearly screamed in fright. Instead I produced a muffled sort of URMF, my own hand over my mouth, and looked around in a near-panic. At the farthest end of the room, as far as he could possibly get, was Brandon Nguyen. He was playing a board game by himself, one involving a huge board and a lot of pieces and a bunch of dice, and as I watched him he stood up from his seat, walked slowly around the table without taking his eyes off the board, seated himself diagonally opposite his original chair and started playing the opposing round against himself.

He looked up, finally, lifted one hand to wave once, turned a darker shade for a second, and went back to his game. I got up and left and prayed to all the gods of all the churches of all the religions in the world that he hadn’t heard me or that, if he had, a meteor would fall out of the sky and turn me to ash and trace elements.

Halfway across the parking lot, under the watchful eye of Vice Principal Strickland, a rock came out of nowhere and landed a few feet ahead of me. I jumped when it landed, looked around, hands balled into fists out of reflex. Strickland was way too far away to have thrown it, and surely he wouldn’t go there, would he? It had come straight down, rather than being thrown at me, and nobody else was around. I kept waiting for someone to pop out of somewhere, but no dice. Eventually I bent down and picked the rock up to look at it: nothing special, everyday driveway granite, maybe half an inch on each side. It was slightly warm,

though. I looked at it, looked up at the sky and then tossed the rock over my shoulder. The last thing I needed was the universe deciding to screw around with me.

I'd been debating whether to tell Allie about the ten bucks for some reason. I didn't like what it suggested, or how I tied it together with something Sammy Heath had said the day before that. I didn't like thinking that ten bucks might be really useful sometime, either. That job I'd told Strickland about was just a couple of weekend afternoon shifts at a sandwich joint in town. I was lucky to pull down fifty bucks a week and that didn't buy a lot of gas for a kid who does a lot of scooting around town in the course of other business. Busses don't usually show up when they're needed for a discreet escape or run on a fixer's schedule, either. I had to do a lot of sneaking out in the middle of the night and Shepherdstown People's Transit might as well have run for five minutes on alternate Wednesdays for all that it didn't run at the times I really needed it.

The other thing I really needed was a case, because otherwise I was going to go crazy from boredom and this tutorial thing eating up my afternoons wasn't helping my state of mind. At least one of my problems got settled for me when Brandon Nguyen strolled out the back door of the lunchroom while Allie and I were sitting in silence just staring at one of the cameras out there, then turning and staring at the other, in intervals of thirty seconds. We figured if they really were cameras, and Strickland really was sitting around stroking it to security footage, the least we could do would be to freak him out a little.

"You left this in the media center yesterday." He was wearing mesh basketball shorts and a tank top and his arms were perfect in every way, as though sculpted by Michelangelo with the specific goal of turning on every breathing human being that had the chance to look at them. At the end of one of them was a ten dollar bill but I was having trouble focusing on it. I opened my mouth and looked at his shoulders, then his biceps, then his forearms, then the portrait of Alexander Hamilton pressed between his thumb and bent fingers.

"He was America's first politician brought down by a sex scandal." I said it as though it meant something to anyone not outside the occasional rolodex of trivia that's always spinning somewhere in my brain. My eyes traveled back up his arm to his face but stopped short of his eyes. My heart was absolutely pounding and I had no idea why I had just said that.

"Is that so?" I could see the line of his jaw flex and bunch as he smiled a little, nearly laughing. Allie was completely silent but I could *hear* her put a hand over her mouth to stifle some sort of reaction. "What did he do?"

"He had an affair with a married woman. Her husband knew, and blackmailed Hamilton. Eventually Hamilton had to admit to the affair to stop the blackmail. He was publicly humiliated by this guy who published a sort of newsletter. Think of it as the original TMZ. It was pretty nasty. Eventually he got shot in a duel and died. He told his wife he would let himself be killed

rather than deal with the guilt of killing his opponent.” All of this tumbled out of my mouth in a long rush and then my mouth closed.

“You should probably take a breather after moving all those words around.” Brandon’s smile had widened and I finally managed to get a fleeting glimpse at his eyes. It would be tempting to say they were obsidian or coal black or something like that, but I knew that they were simply a very dark brown, a perfectly natural result of having a Japanese father and a Cherokee mother who had, if I recalled correctly, passed away from cancer when we were all in fourth grade. I somehow managed to keep all that inside my brain instead of doing a barrel roll out of my mouth. Regardless, in my heart of hearts, his eyes were solid black.

I didn’t say anything in reaction and Allie eventually couldn’t handle it anymore so she spoke up. “Thank you for bringing it to him. He’s very grateful. Aren’t you.” There was a gentle push in the middle of my back, just one finger poking me one third of the way up my spine and I breathed again.

“Yes. Thank you. I’m sorry. I didn’t sleep much.” I held out my hand, purely on autopilot, and Brandon unwound his fingers for a few hours then used them to fold the bill in roughly half and press it into my palm in super slow motion. I couldn’t help but notice, somewhere inside, in a place that had isolated itself from the rising tide of panic and hormones, that Brandon didn’t seem to be in a hurry to pull his hand away. He did, though, after just a half a second longer than was necessary. “But...” I blurted that out as his hand swung back to his side. “But this isn’t actually mine.”

“I thought I saw Lunatic hand it to you,” Brandon said. That snapped me out of it and I blinked. My reputation was on the line, and that was way more important than anybody’s perfect biceps. I was still holding the ten dollar bill and I felt something catch in my throat. Allie was very still and I knew that meant she had taken an interest. When she was paying close attention she could play the statuary game like a professional. “When your tutoring session was over?”

“He...” I swallowed dust. “He tried to give it to me but I didn’t...” I trailed off and then regrouped. “Take it.”

That sounded like a request or an order less than it did a conclusion to the sentence and Brandon’s hand twitched as though he were about to take the ten dollars back. I tightened my hand around it.

“I didn’t take it then,” I said, repeating myself to interrupt him. “But now I’m reconsidering.” I studied Brandon’s face while I said that and something was there for just a moment, some shadow of a thought or a question or maybe a judgment. “It seems odd that he gave it to me. I don’t know, maybe he goes around flashing cash at everyone he thinks is his flunky and maybe he further thinks anyone who helps him with anything is a flunky of a sort.” I wasn’t really talking to Brandon anymore. “That might explain some things.”

Brandon blinked three times in rapid succession. "You're quite a talker," he said, but the smile was still there. For a ridiculous four seconds he lifted his right hand, the one that had twitched to take the ten bucks, and used it to rub the back of his head like he had the day before. I tried not to whimper. "See you this afternoon. Am I supposed to bring ten bucks?"

I blinked back at him. "This afternoon?"

"Yeah," he said. "Technically I'm in in-school this week." Brandon shrugged it off, like being out of in-school suspension while still *in school* was no big deal. "Today you're my tutor. AP Calculus, though, so bring your A game." He clicked his cheeks and turned to walk away, back through the lunchroom door and gone. After he left there was a long silence while my blood pressure returned to pre-incident levels and my mouse-brown hair stopped standing on end. At long last, finally, Annie cleared her throat.

"Two things." Her voice was very steady, meant to help bring me back to earth. I turned and faced one quarter of the way towards her, a few degrees calculated unconsciously to indicate that I was listening but that my thoughts were simultaneously elsewhere. She had seen that stance a hundred times before. It was possible that I had learned it from her. She accepted it and kept speaking. "They are, first and foremost, ten bucks from Lunatic for being his tutor? And you refused it? Story time. Second, and this is way more important, did you notice what I noticed while you were talking?"

I sifted my mind for possible answers and then shook my head. "Enlighten me, please."

"Brandon Nguyen wasn't wearing any underwear." She practically gleamed while she said it, then she knocked back the last of a bottle of water and wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve. "Just thought you might want to know that."

### Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Three

*Hung around here long enough / I've seen the smooth / but only caught the rough.*

*--Gotta Reason, Hard-Fi*

Strickland wasn't around that afternoon when I showed up at the library that afternoon. I hesitated for a moment, like maybe he was going to jump out from around a corner and shout *boo!* Nothing happened and I pulled open the doors. The ten bucks was still in my pocket. Allie had agreed that it would be a compromise of our general *modus operandi* to take the cash and actually *use* it. We weren't above taking cash for solving a problem, by any wild stretch, but that wasn't why we did it and anyway some money was just too grubby to spend. For now I was hanging onto it as a reminder of the thing that kept needling the back of my head: why did everyone think this tutoring gig made me *in* on something?

Brandon was sitting at the table, book open, scribbling notes. He was – it thrilled me to realize this – actually reading the *words* in a calculus textbook and writing notes. There was one major problem here: I wasn't taking Calculus. I had no real idea how to help him with his schoolwork and besides, wasn't it obvious that a guy reading and taking notes on his own, after school, in the library, didn't actually need help?

That didn't stop me from admiring the view as I walked up to the table, though, with his back to me, bent forward ever so slightly to show off the perfect lines of bone and musculature, like a photograph embossed and drop-shadowed in sinew by some three dimensional printer of the gods. I only let myself admire the twisting meat under the flesh of his neck for a moment before walking around him and sliding into a seat. He looked up for a moment, met my eyes before I could look away, and smiled. "Hi."

"...Hi." I had no idea what to say or do. "You started without me."

He shrugged it off with one motion of a shoulder, like something moving in the depths crashing a tiny wave at the surface. "I wanted to get finished in time to make it to practice."

"Oh, yeah," I said. Football. They had a practice field next to the real field, just outside the stadium. Football took up a lot of real estate and it got every square foot it wanted. "When is practice?"

"Quarter after four," he said. His eyes were still on mine, but they shot away and back down to the paper in front of him. "I don't mean to rush you. I don't really know what your style is."

"I..." I cleared my throat. OK, that had been weird and it hadn't just been me being awkward. "Normally I ask what was the last thing you covered in class and then I try to re-explain that." I paused. "And then, apparently, I just wind up doing the other guy's homework

for him.” I sighed a little. “Not exactly what I was expecting, but it’s just seemed... easier.” I blushed. “That sounds so weak.”

Brandon smirked a little, or maybe it was a real smile, I couldn’t tell. The important thing was he looked back up at me. “Nobody’s perfect.”

“Or neither of us would be here.” I smiled back a little, then looked at my fingers where they seemed to be busy tapping on each other, then back at him. “What landed you in in-school?”

Brandon considered his answer for a surprisingly long time and then, looking back at the book, said, “That’s a long story. You?”

I smiled this time. “The same, but I doubt it’s the same story. I kind of feel like I got railroaded into this.” I caught my breath. “No offense, I mean, it’s like, I didn’t...” The seed of resentment planted when Strickland saddled me with this despite having no right to do so, knowing I had no real way to fight it off, started to bud. “I didn’t *do* anything. I was on school grounds over the weekend. But all I did was, like, walk around. That was it. I didn’t do anything. I just showed up, walked around and left again.”

“But he nailed you?” Brandon knitted his eyebrows together in a way that made me want to reach over and smooth them with my thumb. Christ, it was just not fair. People should have to get a license to do that kind of thing, maybe post a public notice, something, anything.

“Yeah.” I drew a breath to start bitching again and then instead let it all out in one long sigh, drew another that was more shallow and more collected, and said, “It doesn’t make any sense but being here is easier than fighting.” I frowned at myself. “Weak, I know. Twice in as many minutes.”

“Sometimes you don’t get a lot of options,” Brandon said. He was looking at me again. He frowned in turn and somehow even that was hot, a little pouty, a something that sought intervention. “I didn’t do anything, either, but here I am in in-school suspension the first full week of September.” He shook his head at his own homework as he turned back to it. “Strickland’s seriously had a bug in his ass this year.”

“You mean, worse than normal?” Brandon glanced at me to nod and I said, “Ah. I thought this was just about preventing me from being a frequent flyer. Again.”

Brandon favored his note-taking with a sly little smile. “You do have a reputation for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Let the record show that I’m more often in the right place at the right time. That’s probably his biggest beef with me.” Brandon looked up and I smirked back. “So, um, here’s the thing. I don’t know how to do calculus.”

Brandon shrugged at me. “No sweat. I don’t need help.”

“So... what are you doing?”

“My homework for the next week.” His hands kept scribbling as soon his eyes were back on the paper.

"All of it? In an hour? Before the lectures?"

He shrugged. "It's math. It's not hard."

Well, that made *one* of us.

For twenty minutes I sat there and did my own homework, but that was all I really needed. Like Brandon's math class, apparently, none of mine was that difficult. I ripped through it, imperfectly but well enough, and by then my curiosity had gnawed at me long enough. I put my pen down and looked at him, a tiny bead of sweat visible at his hairline while he worked. I wanted to wipe it off for him. What was it about him that made me want to reach over and touch him all the time? I didn't think like that about people. I mean, yes, obviously I was hot for him, but I didn't generally want that sort of... intimacy. He was melting some defense barrier or another that I had unconsciously constructed around a part of myself in my dealings with others, a gap that I created to keep them at a distance, and it bothered me to no end.

"So what did you do?" I licked my lips and swallowed. My voice was croaking from the silence and how dry everything seemed to get around him. "To wind up in in-school, I mean?"

"Long story," he said again. "And I need to get to practice."

Nothing quite caught my attention like a question someone avoided answering. I arched one eyebrow just a tiny millimeter out of pure habit before cranking it back down, practically by hand. "Was it bad?"

"No," he said to his homework. He shot me a glance for just a moment, just a percentage of a fraction of a second, and was back at his work. "It wasn't anything that bad. That's why I say he's been coming down like a ton of bricks on anyone and everyone this year. He's got it bad. Worse than usual."

"Are you..." I licked my lips again. "You know, in general, I kind of have this reputation for..." I paused. I wasn't sure what to say or how to say it.

Brandon looked up now, attention fully on me, a kind of subtle weight I hadn't expected nor had I been ready to bear it. His eyes were beautiful, like no eyes I'd seen before. They were as beautiful as the ghost-gray eyes of every model in an ad for cologne, every porn star who counted a pretty face among his many assets, but they were the inverse: dark and dense instead of bright and open, and just as alert. I could imagine light bending from its path to turn towards those eyes, being soaked up and never escaping the tremendous gravity he could bring to bear. "For what?" When he spoke it was a surprise to me to realize I'd been silent for so long.

"I solve problems," I said. It sounded like a confession more than a solicitation. "And... and you keep telling me that there's a problem to be solved. And I want to help."

I didn't know where I was going with this, but it was a way to keep the conversation going.



He smiled a little at me, eyes sparkling in the afternoon light as it swept in the little rectangular windows along the top of the off-kilter, angular seam in the ceiling, built like the giant living room of some modernist home. “You want to help?” He asked it as though he hadn’t quite heard it right, prompting me to repeat the notion.

“Yeah.” I licked my lips a third time. I would have killed a man for a bottle of water. “Something is up with Strickland, right? I think...” I hesitated. “I kind of think he might have thrown a rock at me in the parking lot the other day. He busted me for something that was literally nothing. He busted you for something that you decline to describe but it doesn’t...” I pointed at the book, at his notes, at the table at the other end of the room where I’d seen him playing wargames against himself the afternoon before. “It doesn’t make sense to think you’d be doing something bad, so okay, I’ll take your word for it: he busted you for something that’s also ultimately nothing in the grand scheme of things, am I right?”

Brandon shrugged again and he was still smiling a little so that was a good sign. “Sure.” Hesitance there; I noted it with interest but kept rolling along.

“So what’s up with Strickland? What’s tied *his* shoelaces together? There’s something going on and it’s affected me so why the hell don’t I figure it out?” I frowned at nothing, leaned back in my chair, kicked my feet out ahead of me, crossing one ankle over the other in a reflex movement of simultaneous relaxation and annoyance I did probably only a couple of thousand times every single day.

Brandon adjusted in his seat at the same time, sitting back to listen to me as I dove headlong into soliloquy, and I realized abruptly that our legs had wound up pressed to one another along the shins, at opposite angles. A lump of ice shot out of my stomach and into the middle of my throat but I didn’t skip a beat or show a reaction for fear of what reaction I might show.

“So, yeah,” I said. “Nobody’s come to me with a problem to solve in, like, *days*. The one I picked up last week has turned out to be a dud now that I can’t go poking around the school whenever I damned well please, and now I’m bored as hell and stuck tutoring the school’s resident axe murderers – um, no offense intended, but you are not exactly the typical fare, which I assume is better represented by one Lunatic Panelli, whose ‘tutorial’ you witnessed yesterday.” I made air quotes as I said it and my hands dropped open onto the table in front of me, palms up and arms extended across my closed books and notebook, across the top of my backpack, towards Brandon in something like supplication for his belief or support or something, as though I were trying to *convince* him. “Why don’t I make myself my new case?”

Brandon had been tapping his chin – his perfect chin, it has to be noted – with a pen while I talked and now he leaned forward and tapped my right palm with the same end of the same pen, just once, while he spoke. “Sounds like a good way to deal with your situation.” He smiled a little. “Oh, and no offense taken, but remember, those of us who get caught don’t always get busted just for being stupid. If only idiots fell into traps then mice would all be

rocket scientists.” There was a pause while that slid into place in my brain, slightly sideways and off-kilter as something that I wasn’t quite sure was literally true and took a little processing anyway when delivered at the speed of repartee, but Brandon pressed on. “You get... ‘cases’? People come to you for help?”

I worked my eyes around in a circle behind closed lids for a second. “I... that sounded weird, didn’t it? I’m not... let me explain.”

“You’re a troubleshooter,” Brandon said. He shrugged again, like we were talking weather. “Everybody knows that. Nine hundred kids in this school, it isn’t that hard to keep track of the ones with reputations. You fix things.” He smiled again, a little sideways. “In the movies they call that person a ‘fixer’.” Brandon blinked slowly and smiled more broadly. “There was a British TV show about that kind of thing. I liked it a lot.” I opened my mouth to say something but I immediately forgot what when he reached over and picked up my still-open hand in his own, running his thumb around my palm in two swift strokes that nearly cracked my belt buckle. I shuddered reflexively from the pure head-to-toe thrill of that touch and my breath shook. He didn’t notice. Instead he looked at my hand and then he smirked for a moment, still holding it between the two of his. “You’ve got a heck of a lifeline, Scott Owens.” I tried to incorporate that into everything else I was thinking but it just sort of landed in the inbox, unread, for later. “It runs for days but it’s got breaks in it left and right. I should tell you to play it safe, I guess, but what’s the fun in that.”

Then he winked at me before finally letting go of my hand.

“I...” My voice made some noises that weren’t words. I wasn’t involved in their production other than to catalogue them as they went past.

Brandon stood up in one swift, practiced, elegant motion, a boy who knew what ever cell of his body was doing at every moment he was alive, and somewhere inside me the eternally vigilant would-be detective noticed that he was blushing, very faintly, under that perfect skin. “Sorry to hit and run, but it’s time for practice; I’ll be needed on the sidelines, I’m sure. Maybe the coach will need someone to hold his clipboard for a while.” He said it in a cocky, playful, self-deprecating way but another shadow moved across his face, something genuinely dark and unhappy this time, unmistakable by the bitter taste it seemed to leave in his mouth. “I sent you a friend request today. My number’s in there. Let me know what I can do to help you... help me.” The playful jock was back from whatever borderlands he’d visited when thinking about practice, the team, his place on it, something along those lines. Another wink and he turned and walked out the doors of the library like he was on his way to get an ice cream cone.

I sat and gaped at my own hand, still laying there open on the table. Then I packed my bags, numb from just about the top of my head to the bottoms of my feet, and stood there looking at my own reflection in one of the plate glass windows for two minutes. What the hell had just happened?

Also, Allie was totally right: totally commando.

I was halfway across the parking lot again – that magical distance where all things weird happened – when I realized I could hear glass being broken. That was like a dinner bell and a fire alarm to a kid who liked trouble as much as I fancied I did. I dropped behind a tree and put it between me and the school and hoped there weren't any cameras mounted at a distance that I'd yet to notice. It was tough going keeping a map in my head of all those points of *knowing* hanging out there and their likely fields of view. There was more sound of glass breaking, the jingle of tiny silver bells in several short sharp staccatos. I knew that sound well enough: it was someone cleaning out the jagged edges of a window they'd just shattered to break in somewhere. Okay, so I had just given myself a case, sort of, but this was something I *had* to look into. A kid like me couldn't just ignore someone breaking in; they might need to be caught or they might need to be helped.

I swung around the tree towards the end of T Building, which seemed to be where the noise had come from. It was the math and sciences building. I crossed the parking lot towards its back entrance at a crouched run and came up under one of the cameras, pointed away from my approach. I considered picking up a rock and trying to take it out with a throw but I'm no quarterback and the last thing I needed was for the last thing that camera recorded to be me taking it out. I looked around for other sources of inspiration and settled on the next best thing: picking up a stick from nearby I gave the camera's protruding lens a gentle nudge and found that I could turn it relatively easily. I grinned to myself and continued to push it away from the corner I would have to turn to make it into the back of the hallway. Then I looked around to make sure no one else was visible.

Inside, through the cheap thin windows bought decades before, I could hear conversation coming from a classroom not far enough away for me to feel good about staying where I was. I ducked around the façade's edge and dropped the cuff of my long-sleeved tee over my hand to tug the door handle once underneath the recently and obviously – and messily – shattered window. The door swung open with just a slight pull; the morons had broken a window they didn't have to break. That's how most people get caught, you know: they do something they see on television but the reason it's on television is because the fictional criminals have to do something that can lead back to them in order for the fictional detectives to succeed.

I slipped through the doors and into the hallway. I have to confess to you that I love that moment when I step through the doors into the school at an hour I'm not supposed to be there. It isn't that I love North Shepherd so much or anything; it's that I'm not supposed to be there. I don't know why but that moment of forbidden behavior, that sensation of plunging beneath the surface of what is mainstream, what is acceptable or expected, of setting the world a little off its center in some tiny fashion, is incredibly intoxicating to me. I don't get off

on being destructive, and that's probably what's kept me from winding up in real trouble all the times I've been caught doing something a little shady in the name of a case, but I do love the simple act of trespassing. I love seeing someplace from a perspective that isn't supposed to be available or at a time it's supposed to be closed. Those moments are something integral to the human experience; where would we be if some cave dweller hadn't decided life would be easier if they invented math? What would our world look like if enough European mathematicians hadn't gone against the grain and started adopting the Arabic numerals, especially zero, when the Church was telling them that numbering system was the work of Satan? Transgression is an implement in the toolbox of society, and those of us who live and labor at its edges are doing the world a service by being willing to expand the human experience beyond the borders of that which our parents and government and third grade teachers tell us is a good idea.

An empty school hallway, after hours, could be a lot of things to a lot of people but to me it's basically what I suspect the dented body of some worn classic car is to someone who sees it and fantasizes about its restoration: empty, desolate, full of problems, surrounded by persons who would all too readily declare it a lost cause, but also full of potential, of possibilities, of ways to be of value in the world. Lots of us – maybe every one of us who lived that long – would look back on high school from some vantage point in the distant future, some point ten or twenty or fifty years from now, and say that high school had been a massive time sink of neutral entertainment and education value, at best; or hellishly filled with abuse dispensed in discrete units of eight hours, fifteen minutes, one hundred eighty days every year; and some small percentage would say it had been fun or, gods help them, the best years of their lives. I'm not sure I'll be any of those. I think I might wind up describing it as a place where I learned a tremendous amount despite the school itself and my own efforts in it. An empty school can be creepy, too, to be sure, as countless old slasher flicks aimed at Generation X would tell you, but what did I have to be afraid of? I'm usually the one who's doing the creeping around after hours.

I'm the reason the door down the hall just creaked. I'm the footfall in the distance. I'm the thing you're supposed to be afraid of, and I'm okay with that.

An empty school isn't anything to fear or hate and being caught in it isn't anything too bad and anyway it's all - every extra heartbeat and every shallow breath - worth that moment of stepping through the looking glass to examine up close the canvass on which so much of our lives so far have been painted.

There was clanking and conversation coming from down the hall, in the direction of the first science class on the left, and I had to know what the people inside were doing because I am who I am and I find it almost physically painful to resist that urge to *find things out*.

The door to 107 was hanging open and the screwdriver they had hammered in to break the lock was still sticking out. The dumb bastards probably got it stuck, and hadn't figured out how to get it out. My sleeve-clad hand couldn't budge it; theory confirmed. I listened at the doorway for a moment and immediately recognized the voices: one of them was the "queer bait" guy from a few days before – Buck Horne, no joke, a defensive end on the junior varsity football team – and the other was his usual partner in crime, named Jamal Morrison, likewise junior varsity. They were two lumps of beef with something like an autonomic nervous system somewhere at the top of their respective spinal columns; between the two of them they probably had enough other brain cells to get one person past the eighth grade reading level exam on the third try. These were not great thinkers, is what I'm trying to say, and I could only imagine what half-assed purpose they had in breaking into a science lab after class. Copper tubing, I guessed. On the roulette table of the mind, that's where I put my chips. I gave myself a second to think of what to say, then took my phone out of my pocket and flipped it open and turned on the camera. I wasn't supposed to be there any more than they were, of course, but the sound effect of the camera going off – that electronic approximation of a shutter's click – might just buy me the ability to walk away after catching them red handed.

I took a breath, steeled myself and turned the corner of the doorframe to push open the door, phone held up, thumb on the button to snap a picture. The classroom was empty, but the door at the back was also open. It led into the chemical storage room that was sandwiched between the two main chemistry classes on campus. So that's why there were clanking noises: everything was stored in big, thick, brown glass bottles and jugs. Goddamn, I thought, what are they in there trying to steal?

It was a little anticlimactic to ready myself for confrontation only to find no one to confront, so my heart was racing a little when I crossed the room and took up my position against the wall beside *that* door, but I repeated the process, took my deep breath and turned to stand in the entrance to the supply room. My voice didn't waver once as I said, with what I hoped to be a rakish smile on my face, "You know, since you called me 'queer bait' and I *want* to attract a queer, I think actually I'm supposed to be *flattered*."

Jamal and Buck were standing over a garbage can they had rolled in from somewhere outside, one of the big rubber ones with an enormous tent of a bag in it, and they were setting jugs of unidentifiable substances into it, Buck leaned over the edge to reach for the bottom and Jamal standing next to him with what *looked* like a two-gallon jug that read [!!! SULFURIC ACID !!!] in huge letters.

My phone made the camera noise and I smiled at them. "You boys look busy," I was *going* to say. "Perhaps I should come back another time." At least, that's what I would have said if Buck hadn't dropped whatever he was lowering into the trash bin when my phone's camera went off. He said, "Oh, shit," and then there was a sound of glass shattering against glass, and

the bottom of the bin produced a sound not entirely unlike a soda being shaken up and then opened but the soda can was the size of cement truck.

Buck stood up rapidly, and whatever brain function the two of them had left made them both step back, away from the can as it hissed and spat and started, I'd swear on a stack of Bibles, to shake back and forth a little bit. "What the fuck have you got in there?" I squeaked.

They stared at me.

I shut my phone, shoved it back into my pocket and said, "Christ, the can is melting, run! You don't know what's being released from that can! Get it outside!"

They looked at each other, then back at me again, dumb as a brick and twice as motionless.

Something like heat ripples started to shimmer over the top of the open can and then I realized that they weren't *like* heat ripples because they were exactly that: the bottom of the can was starting to bulge and discolor as it melted away from the heat of the reaction and with a roar that sounded surprisingly distant a single blue flame shot out of the trash bin and back in. "Fuck it, just run!" They finally seemed to realize what was happening and looked at one another in tremendous surprise.

"We gotta go, man," Jamal finally said. Buck and he tore open the door into the *other* science lab – apparently the doors into the chemical room itself weren't locked, but the ones in the hall were, which was just eight flavors of stupid but that kind of stupid is my bread and butter every other day of the week so I filed it away for future reference. They disappeared across that classroom and I was left standing there with a burning trash bin and a growing cloud of greasy black smoke. A part of me catalogued the things that could start a fire spontaneously involving sulfuric acid and the list was pretty short. They'd probably grabbed some sodium chlorate – illegal now in lots of places but nobody knows what all is kept locked away in the nation's chemistry classrooms, do they? – or maybe potassium permanganate, something like that, something there would be a little of and in their limited worldview they would see a tiny bottle marked DANGER! and think, in their limited capacity to do so, that must make it valuable or something.

The rest of me was scared as shit, debating whether to go for a fire extinguisher or to get the fuck out of there, and a moment later flight won out over fight. It didn't hurt that the trash bin collapsed on itself and a burning purple sludge – definitely potassium permanganate – shot in all directions across the floor, setting a wooden cart on fire with a touch. The building was going up and I, for some unknown reason, was still standing inside it.

I yanked the collar of my tee shirt over my mouth and nose and took off running back the way I'd come. The two of them, Buck and Jamal, were nowhere in sight so I hit the first door available, the one I came through to get in. I heard a window shatter somewhere behind me; the camera on the outside of the building – the one I pushed out of the way to get inside – gave off a spray of sparks. The fire had hit the electrical system that fast? It occurred to me that the

chemistry lab also had a bunch of Bunsen burners built into the lab tables and natural gas lines running to them.

I put on an extra push of speed across the empty parking lot, arms pumping, legs chugging, and felt the shockwave from the explosion right after I heard it. There was a sound like a hundred cannons going off behind me and then what felt like a barn door slamming shut on my back and I landed a few feet away, rolling, arms tucked under my chest by instinct. I rolled to a stop a few feet away with something warm on my cheek and my heart pounding.

The science building was erupting in flames and a chunk of the outer wall of the chemistry labs had been blown out completely. Loose bricks, sections of wall and chunks of mortar and drywall were scattered across the faculty parking lot. At a glance I'd guess I was thrown four feet, maybe five, but it felt like I'd been lifted into the air and come back down a mile away.

Off to the left, just inside the edge of the thick woods that bordered the main part of campus, I heard two things: I heard Buck Horne say, "Well, shiiiiiiiiiiit," in that extended, drawling way of hicks everywhere that usually indicates someone just lost a digit, and I heard a cellular phone make that cheap electronic squawk in imitation of a camera shutter. Jamal was holding up his camera, some sort of vicious intelligence in his eyes, and he smirked one corner of his mouth at me.

"Nice work, queer bait." He took his time enjoying those last two words.

I had gotten up, flipped them the bird and then taken off running for my car. I needed to put some distance between myself and whatever it was that had just happened – oh, holy shit, the science building had just burned down – and I meant that in the most literal sense. Halfway home I had stopped and pulled into a gas station parking lot to send Allie the picture I'd just taken. *Will explain later*, I wrote under it, and off it went. Five seconds later I opened my phone again and sent another: *We really REALLY need to find those DVRs!!!*

I was sitting there trying to catch my breath when there was a knock on the driver's door window and I screamed aloud in surprise. It was Brandon Nguyen, standing between his car – a green hardtop Mustang coupe from the early 1990s, nowhere near as cool looking as that car is supposed to be – and mine and he looked worried. I cranked down my window and said, aloud, the first thing that came to mind: "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I saw smoke coming from the school and you were still there when I left and I..." He paused for a moment and rubbed the back of his head. Christ dipped in batter; I actually started salivating. "Well, I was worried about you, and then I saw a car that looks like yours go tearing by me and I thought maybe you were hurt or something and I thought I'd... come..." He was abruptly winding down and his voice dropped with the last few syllables, "Make sure you're okay." Then he smiled, after a heartbeat, to try to give it a nice finish.

I blinked at him. "You saw fire coming from the school?"



He took a moment to consider his response, or my question, or something, and then he shrugged. "Well, yeah. I was leaving school after, y'know, our tutorial session, but it took me a few minutes to leave, and..."

"You said you had to be at practice." My voice was flat and calm because some part of me had to be.

Brandon blinked. "I did. Yes. But the coach said he didn't need me today." His face flushed with honest emotion, something like frustration or embarrassment or both, and I remembered: second-string. And he had been flirting with me. I was certain of it. I was absolutely certain that he came on to me, one of the handful of openly gay kids in the school, and there's no way I was the first to figure it out. He'd be in a locker room with a bunch of his fellow studs five or six days a week for four months out of the year, at least, and that's assuming football was his only sport, which it almost certainly wasn't, it was just the only one about which anyone gave a damn. I just bet the coach told him he didn't need him. I wondered if Brandon was really the second best quarterback on the team or if he was just the second best at being straight.

I licked my lips and croaked a little when I spoke. "I'm fine. But thank you." I took a breath and said, "I really mean that. Thank you. I appreciate that you... cared enough to make sure I'm okay." My eyes started to well up for some reason and the part of me – the part all of us has thanks to millions of years of primate evolution in a world full of large predators and unexpected threats – that's always calm and rational and observational and objective couldn't figure out why I would possibly be about to start crying when I hadn't cried in years, easily, but my breath caught all of a sudden and I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the escape of something guttural and distressed. The other was clamped onto the door frame, over the recess where the window goes when you crank it down, and Brandon looked both ways before putting out one fingertip and touching it to one of my knuckles. He wasn't holding my hand, but he'd felt that urge or something like it, and this was what he could do in public. I knew that as sure as I knew anything else in the world.

"Hey," he said, voice hushed, low, almost a stage whisper. "Hey, it's okay. You're okay."

I nodded, took my hand away from my mouth to wipe my eyes and sniffled a long, wet snarf from somewhere deep within. "I'm sorry. I'm not..." I blinked it away for a second, cleared my throat. "I'm not, like, a big drama fag or anything."

"Don't use that word." Brandon's face was set in place, and he was trying to look me in the eye. "Not like that."

I was mildly surprised, to say the least, but it shocked me out of the moment of rising panic and despair and worry about what the hell was going to happen next. "I..." I cleared my throat again, sitting up straighter. I hadn't moved my hand; he hadn't moved his finger. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

He looked at me still, then smiled, then laughed and looked at the ground. "Listen, you want to go somewhere and talk? Tell me what just happened?"

My eyes widened and I shook my head. "I didn't have anything to do with what just happened." It was a reflex.

His eyes twinkled when he replied. "You always have something to do with what just happened, Scott. That's why people respect you enough to let themselves need you when they're in trouble. Come on. Let's go to the park. Okay?"

He made me look him in the eye by sheer charisma and I nodded. "Okay," I finally said. "Lead the way. Let me call my mom and tell her I'll be late." I instantly felt bad, like it wasn't okay to mention mothers in front of someone who had lost his own, but my worry circuits were already blown by that point so I skipped the opportunity to scold myself over it.

He smiled just a little. "OK. I'm going to get back in my car. You signal me when you're ready to go and follow me. It isn't far. It's going to be okay, whatever it is." He rubbed that fingertip across my knuckle, back and forth, twice each direction. It was actually comforting. I watched him do it with surprise, then looked at him again. He stood up and got in his car and I dialed the phone. It took a lot of effort but I sounded convincingly normal, which for me is never very normal in the first place.

I had a text from Allie that read, *OK?*

I sent one back: *Yes, for now, but something weird is up with Brandon Nguyen.*

## Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Four

*You don't understand, this is in demand / and I think that I have to show you / Try to look inside,  
take me for a ride / In a day and a night get to know you.*

--Boys Say Go!, Depeche Mode

Brandon drove to the park off of Martin Luther King Boulevard, which used to be called Mountain Highway and there were people who were offended that its name had been changed. I couldn't believe how some people could carry a grudge like that for so very long. My therapist – my parents sent me to one after I came out because, I don't know, maybe they thought it would turn out to be a phase, but the therapist and I didn't really get along that well and I told them that if it didn't stop I would get *really* gay so it stopped – told me that some people use anger as a way to keep something current. A grudge becomes a way to drag the past forward into the future with them. When someone gets over something they have to let go of that thing and also the time in their life when it happened but if they can stay angry over something, some slight real or imagined, then they can stay in that moment no matter how much older and otherwise wiser they get. It's a way to keep alive some part of their life they can't quite give up. I don't know if I buy it, but it's an interesting theory. I think if it's true then it's just one more reason to think how stupid we all are.

I followed Brandon to a space off to one side, behind some trees, and we got out of our cars together and, much to my surprise, he walked over and wrapped me in a big hug. I wasn't sure what to do but it certainly did feel nice, so I hugged him back. My suspicion that he had chosen to park here, out of sight, so that he could do that was confirmed when a car turned into the parking lot from the street and he abruptly disengaged.

"Sorry," he said, clearing his throat in something approximating embarrassment when the other car didn't show up. "I just..."

"You're in the closet," I said, and I shrugged. "So was I for a while."

He wasn't sure what to say and rubbed the back of his head again but this time it had the air of a genuine unconscious habit, a reflex of sorts, a way to do something with his hands when he wasn't sure what to do otherwise. It was endearing, honestly. I felt real sympathy for him despite the fact that I had decided back at the gas station – I had already suspected it after his performance in the library, but now I felt like I *knew* – that he was up to something shady and he was flirting with me as a part of it.

"Have you ever been to this park?" The abrupt change of subject was also honest and also a little endearing. I shook my head and he nodded in the direction of the open grounds. "There are some picnic tables over there. I figured we could sit and talk."

"Sure," I said, and I gave him a little smile. All of a sudden he was off his game after my pointed observation, just a little bit, and those moments in my interactions with others, the second and a half when someone is off-balance, were always when I tended to find my own. "Lead the way." I chuckled. "That's twice I've said that to you in five minutes."

"Why is that funny?" He had put on a light running jacket and tucked his hands into the pockets, shoulders scrunched, in a way that made him look a bit like a kid.

I shrugged at him. "I don't know. Probably because I'm usually on my own and I usually feel completely in control of a situation? I'm..." I shrugged again. "Okay, social situations aren't my forte, but I'm not usually the one who's nervous when some excitement happens." I held out a hand as though addressing society at large. "I'm a little out of my depth when it comes to buildings burning down." The panic thumped me in the chest again and I gasped a little. "Oh, fuck." I let out a long breath and drew another. "T Building is *on fucking fire*." I stopped abruptly, "Fuck, we have to call 911. Someone has to report it."

Brandon put a hand on my shoulder in a way that was both comforting and uncomfortably big brotherly. "No, there were people at practice, they heard the explosion. I'm certain someone else has called." He whipped out his much fancier phone and typed on it for a minute, then held it out for me to read the screen. The local news station's website already had a BREAKING NEWS banner at the top. My heart sank. Surely I was on a camera somewhere. There was no way Allie would be able to... to what? What did I think we would do, break in, find the DVRs, erase them, get back out and leave no trace? The place was a crime scene. They probably wouldn't even have school tomorrow. If I got busted just walking around over the weekend then I was well and truly fucked now. I should probably just go jump a train and become a hobo before the wanted posters went up.

Brandon somehow read all of that in my eyes and my facial expression and yanked the phone away. "Whoah," he said, waving a finger. "Whoah whoah whoah. No despair. Nuh-uh." He tugged on my shoulder to encourage locomotion. "Let's go sit down. You tell me what happened and then we're going to talk about how everything is going to be okay. Remember?" He clapped my shoulder once and I was warming to the big brotherly thing. I needed it at the moment. I wasn't proud. Not right then, anyway.

I let him essentially force march me over to the grass and then across a little trail and, a few dozen yards away, some spiffy park benches paid for with stimulus money. I'd read all about them. Everyone liked them but a third of the population didn't want to pay for them because at least a third of the population at any given time is obsessed with celebrating its own shortsightedness.

Ah, misanthropy, my old friend.

I started to sit down on the bench part of the picnic table but Brandon sat on the table itself, back to the woods, staring out at the park environs and so I moved up to sit beside him but a couple of feet away. Much to my surprise, he very slyly turned a leg stretch into scooting

closer to cut the distance in half. “Now,” he said, “Start at the beginning. What happened after I left?”

When I was done explaining it, he was smiling right up until the end, when they called me queer bait and took a picture, at which point his face fell. “I fucking hate those guys,” he said. “The JV squad is such a bunch of losers. They know they don’t rate the big leagues and they hate everyone for it. They hate us more than anyone, probably, but they all try to buddy up to us because they think they can make the team that way.” He shook his head. “Jamal and Buck are two of the better ones, believe it or not. They’re too dumb to be genuinely evil. They’re too dumb and they think they’re really smart, which just makes them even dumber.” He laughed abruptly, then shook it off and said, “Sorry, you probably don’t think anything is very funny at the moment.” He cleared his throat and, oh yes, it was very endearing indeed. A part of me thrilled to it and a part of me watched it with the critical objectivity of a playwright who can no longer really enjoy a performance on the stage.

“Do you know why they would have been in the chemistry lab?” I surprised myself by asking that. Out of all the concerns I had at the moment, that of finding out what was going on still managed to fight its way to the top of the pile. Brandon shrugged at me and shook his head.

“No. There’s no way to tell. They probably thought they could find something to steal and sell for beer money. They’re idiots. They probably didn’t know what they were doing.”

“They’re idiots with a picture – maybe video, who knows – of me running from a building right before it explodes.” I emphasized the last word with my hands, fingers spread, palms bursting apart to mime T building tearing itself apart.

“Well, that’s no good, that’s for sure.” Brandon said it like he’d made an observation about the weather and I gave him a look of irritation.

“No shit, Sherlock.”

He put up both hands. “Whoah! Okay, sorry, it’s worse than no good. It’s really bad.”

I sighed. “I have a picture of them standing in the room loading chemicals into a trash can. They have pictures of me running from the building. What are they going to *do* with it?” I was so frustrated. Normally these little adventures of mine were about getting the drop on someone else. I wasn’t accustomed to someone having the drop on me.

“Would you like some... advice?” He was a little shy about advancing an opinion, and I wasn’t in much of a mood to hear one, but I nodded at him. “Well, the thing is, these guys now have something on you. And you have something on them. But these are both single-use, limited-time resources that lose all value once expended but also lose all value if the other side expends theirs first.” He clapped the back of one hand against the palm of the other as he spoke, becoming more animated after the first few words. “So the question isn’t what you should do. The question is whether your opponents are the type to place more value on the

potential use of their pictures – or video or whatever they have – or on the expenditure. If you're both essentially self-interested and limited to a defensive posture then neither side will ever use what they've got because they don't want to be the first one to pull the trigger. That's where the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves by sometime in the mid-1960's. They both had so many nuclear weapons that either of them could completely obliterate the other but, from both of their perspectives, so did the other side and, more importantly, they had both come to understand that there was no such thing as 'winning' a nuclear war. Even if one side or the other survived, public opinion would immediately destroy any government that could be shown to have been the first one to pull the trigger." He shrugged. "Do you think Jamal and Buck are smart enough to think in terms of détente?" He looked at me expectantly. I mulled it over and shook my head.

"No, I don't, but you know them better."

"Know *of* them," he corrected. His head dipped a little and he said, "But you're right, they're not. They'll probably try to lord it over you for a while and then they'll get bored of that and decide to use it against you to see if that's more fun." He rolled a shoulder in a perfect arc to indicate what seemed like some medley of disgust and resignation and acquiescence.

I shook my head at the park, at the rolling open field of green and the playground and the little pond that had been cut out of the ground by a bulldozer a year before, and said, "No, I can't tolerate that. I have to do something first."

"Like what?" Brandon had scooted another couple of inches closer, I realized, and he was regarding me from an angle slightly above and off to my left and I knew something was up, that something wasn't right with his interest and his finding me at the gas station but goddamn neither did I care one bit at that moment.

I shook my head again and crept another inch or two closer to him in my own right. "I don't know." I hesitated and then opened my mouth. I was going to say something – ask if I could lean on his shoulder for a minute or something, I don't know, anything that would initiate physical contact between us, whatever would be the first thing to spring to mind when my voice got up a head of steam – but I got interrupted by Brandon suddenly swooping in for the kiss towards which we'd both been building for ten minutes.

I should probably take a moment to say that this was not my first kiss. My first kiss was a guy named West Slade, a name that is butch in direct inverse proportion to West himself. He was a senior when I was a sophomore and he was the first kid to come out in anything like what could be considered my cohort: the kids who were close enough to my age to have an identity despite not being my year. I had been a second year student who wasn't yet out of the closet and wasn't ready to come out but I was sure as hell ready to kiss a boy. West was older than I was but he was still a horny teenager and he was flattered that a boy who was at all even vaguely butch had show an interest and I was kind of a troublemaker and that was close

enough for West's fantasy life. I had put a note in his locker that read, in its entirety, "Sophomore boy ISO first kiss from someone cute. Leave reply with time and location in locker 628, Y Building." That wasn't my locker; it was an empty locker to which I knew the combination because I'd cracked it one day after school. Mass-produced combination locks like that are too easy.

West's note indicated to meet him behind the lunchroom, outside the band room, after school on a certain day, so I did, and we made small talk for forty seven excruciating minutes before I finally grabbed him and planted a big wet tongue-y French kiss on him. He squeaked when I did it, like a dog's squeak toy being bitten once to generate a quick sharp eet and then dropped so that air was drawn back into it long and slow, a haunting whistle as he sucked breath from the corners of his mouth. I was new at this, I didn't know what I was doing, I just knew I wanted to keep doing it.

He told me later that it was his first kiss, too. I wouldn't say we "went together" but we sure as hell came together enough times over the next six months. There were times when I wouldn't hear from him for weeks or months, and a few times when I passed him in the hall and he actually looked away, but sooner or later I'd get another note in 628 and he'd act like nothing had ever been weird between us. When he graduated he departed for a life of waiting tables and attending beautician classes in New York and ceded me that bench where we shared out first kisses with one another. Ever since, Allie and I ate there every day and on the first day of the school year she found me an empty locker to crack open so that we have a mailbox other than our "normal" one even though everyone just texts each other anyway.

When Brandon kissed me it was something completely different, something less animalistic and much more controlled. Brandon knew what he wanted and he was getting it but he was making it fun for both of us along the way. One of his hands was in the middle of my back in a flash, like he'd placed it there a hundred times already, and I caved. All of a sudden we were just hands trying to get each other's clothes off in the middle of a city park and that realization made me pull way back all of a sudden, moaning little protests as I did, scooting back a few inches and putting one hand in the middle of Brandon's chest.

"What's wrong?" He looked a little hurt. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," I said, then I laughed abruptly, a reaction I didn't totally understand. "No, not at all, but we're..." I gestured at the park. "Not exactly in private." I shrugged. "I mean, you are in the closet, right?"

Brandon looked around and then sat back up and moved a foot or two away, pulling his shirt back down and straightening it with his hands. "Sorry," he said. "I..." He drew a blank. I waved it off and shook my head.

"Don't be sorry. Please." I didn't realize how much I meant it until I said it. "Just please don't be sorry. Think of where and when we can again, instead."

He blushed, then smiled, then blushed harder as he ducked his head down and regarded the toe of one of his shoes. He didn't say anything, though, and for once I fell for my own trap: I spoke to fill the silence.

"Was that your first kiss?"

He took a long time to answer before saying, "It's the first one I meant."

I nodded. I'd not lasted long enough to do a lot of making out with girls to try to cover my tracks, but I knew it happened all the time. The Internet is a great teaching tool to someone who doesn't have a lot of information readily at hand. "I'm very..." I didn't know what to say. I'd never have guessed I'd be *two boys'* first kiss. "Flattered?" I considered that for a moment. "If that's the right thing to say? I..." I gave up and fluttered my lips with a long breath. "Whatever. Thanks. I'm glad I got to be the one." I was surprised to hear myself say it and surprised to mean it. "I mean... it's..." I cast about for the right word. "I guess I should just keep saying 'flattering' over and over again for a while."

Brandon chuckled and his cheeks were still pink. He did the thing of rubbing the back of his head again, ruffling his own hair, and I would have killed a man to make the rest of the park go away for a while. And still, that part of me that observes and analyzes and can't ever just leave something alone wondered whether it was a sincere instance of an unconscious nervous habit or whether it was calculated to be sympathetic and attractive.

"I think I'm going to take that picture to Strickland before Jamal and Buck have the opportunity to use it against me." I said this out of nowhere, the question he had asked me feeling like it was old enough to walk and talk and ask to borrow the car.

"Why?" Brandon's eyebrows had gone up and the blush had drained from his cheeks.

"He who tattles first gets the better deal," I said.

"The prisoner's dilemma: the first one to rat out the other gets the better deal, *maybe*." He shook his head at the idea. "I don't see it as the right play. You show your hand to Strickland and you only have a chance of coming out ahead of those two lumps of skin. Better to wait a while and see what happens."

I told him I'd think about it, but I already had.

Four hours later I was sitting in my back yard, talking to Allie on the phone. I'd told her everything, and after a long silence she had said, "Okay, so what are the possible explanations here? One, and let's not, like, get in a huge hurry to write this off, is that Brandon Nguyen is super-secretly way into you and he just can't resist any opportunity to get in your pants."

I snorted and a puff of mist shot out my nose. The nights were already turning chilly up in the mountains and I was pulling my hoodie tight to myself with my other hand, knees pressed together, trying to shrink into something that might manage to stay warm. "Right. That doesn't solve the monkey problem, though."

"The monkey problem?"



"Yeah," I said, "The problem of what we're going to do with all these monkeys flying out of our butts."

Allie gave me the single chuckle – *heh* – she reserves for jokes she thinks didn't manage to land but meant well anyway. I took what I could get. "Second option, he wants you to do something for him."

"Gods, I wish."

"It doesn't sound like you're going to have to wish particularly hard to get there," she said. "I mean something else."

"What, a case? He could just ask. Everyone just asks. Everyone knows that."

"Not everyone. And sometimes people pay us."

"You think he's... trying to... pay me?" I shuddered. I hated the idea, and I loved it just a little bit.

"Maybe so, stranger things have happened."

"No shit. Stranger things have happened *today*."

"No jumping ahead. We're getting there."

"Okay. Third possibility?"

"That I have no idea what I'm talking about here."

I laughed. "Makes two of us."

"Just... be careful. This shit has all gotten pretty, you know, real in the last few hours. We need to know why Jamal and Buck were in there in the first place. Those two aren't smart enough to know what's valuable in there and they had to think there was something they could do with all those chemicals once they got them out the door. I don't like the list of possible, y'know? If you're going to be the one to beat them to Strickland then you've got to know why they were there in the first place."

"I'm working on that," I said. "I've got an idea I'm considering. What if Strickland could be convinced to sanction me turning this into a case? Maybe give me some official cover or something?"

"Okay, explaining time?"

"I haven't gotten everything together in my head yet. It's just an idea for now."

"Well," Allie said, and I could tell she didn't like the idea of winging it, but I winged it by habit, one of the differences between a programmer and a kid who just likes to stick his nose where it doesn't belong, "Play it safe, 'kay?"

"Safe as ever," I said.

She snorted back at me and hung up the call.

I sat there weighing the possibilities and trying to wrap my head around what I would say to Strickland the next day for five or ten minutes. It was a nice night, no reason to waste it inside. I heard what were unmistakably footsteps in the underbrush between our row of glorified ranch houses and the one behind it. The light in our back yard didn't work anymore

because I'd flipped the breaker to it and then looped the wires so that no matter what it would never come on again. It made getting out through the back yard in the middle of the night much easier for me but I'd never stopped to consider that it might make it easier for someone else to get in. I stood up and flipped open my cell with my left hand so that its light would catch the eye of anyone looking at me; with the other I picked up a landscaping brick.

"I've got a phone," I said aloud. "I can dial 911 before you can get to here to stop me."

Brandon's voice came back from the darkness. "Easy, tough guy." He had his hands open to show that they were empty, like I'd snuck up on him in the dark instead: assuming the pose of a victim to generate sympathy. I'd done it a hundred times. "It's me."

I closed the phone, but I didn't drop the brick. Sometimes I'm a little paranoid. Brandon started walking closer but I stayed where I was. "What – what are you doing here?" I licked my lips and said, "Um, that wasn't supposed to sound the way it sounded."

"Yes it was," he said, but I could see that he was smiling. It was gorgeous. I set down the brick. His eyes followed my hand and he might or might not have known exactly what I'd been holding but he certainly got the gist. "But I can't blame you for that. Did you watch the news?"

I shook my head, then spoke aloud. "No, I couldn't quite bring myself to do it with my parents right there." I sighed. "Weak?"

"Natural." He was a regular font of assurances, that one. "No school tomorrow, but we're still playing the game tomorrow night. The fire department says they're investigating it as a faulty pipe for the gas lines or something. The guy from the local station asked the fire chief if he thought it was an act of terrorism." Brandon seemed to find this funny but my heart froze. I had a real sense of things spinning out of control with this and I didn't like that one bit. "The fire chief looked at him like he was a dumbass and said, 'Bob, I'm pretty sure this is not a case of terrorism.'" Brandon laughed. I didn't. "I... maybe you had to watch it to get the tone." He cleared his throat.

"You came to tell me there's no school tomorrow?"

He'd gotten maybe a foot away and I still hadn't moved. I was looking up into his eyes and his went from the brittle brightness of cynical laughter a moment before to something soft and shining in the dark. Somewhere down the street a porch light or a street lamp or headlights made it just far enough to be reflected in his eyes as a perfect arc of silver. "No," he said, "I came over because this isn't a city park and here there's no one watching."

Then he leaned in close and the second kiss he'd ever really meant went much better than the first. He pulled back too soon for my tastes but only because I could have stayed there, in that moment, until the heat death of the universe. "I hope that was okay," he said. I opened my eyes and found his already were. He was looking at the red mark on my cheek from where a bit of parking lot gravel had caught my cheek and nicked it. He ran one thumb under it very lightly and then kissed it all of a sudden. It was very sweet and totally unexpected and he

looked genuinely upset in a way I couldn't account for in all my armchair analysis. We kissed again – this time it was my idea – and then I pulled back with my hands behind his neck.

“How good are you at climbing?”

He blinked. “Why?”

“My room is on the second floor.”

I smiled. He smiled. I didn't give anything even remotely like a damn about that nagging suspicion that there was something not quite right about his involvement in all of this; too much felt right about him being there in the first place to spend a lot of time asking why.

The administration office was open the next day and I wasn't wasting any time dicking around with this stuff. I drove to school around ten in the morning after spending thirty minutes debating whether to dress like a good little church boy or like a scruffy kid who couldn't possibly be a threat to anyone in the world. Eventually I settled for something in between: jeans, old All-Stars and a plain white oxford that I hadn't tucked in and had never seen the hot side of an iron. I parked in a visitor space and walked inside with my phone in my hand. The secretary looked over her horn-rimmed glasses at me and said, “Mr. Owens, there's no school today. May I help you?”

“Might.” It was a reflex. I knew I screwed up English all the time, too, but that one bothered me, even though I did it myself all the time without realizing. She didn't even realize it was a correction. “I need to speak to Vice Principal Strickland.” I glanced over at the door to his office and was surprised to see that he was standing in it already, arms crossed, looking back at me.

“Mr. Owens.” He said it as a greeting, an observation, an entry in a roll call of troubling concerns. He also said it oddly quietly. He was normally something else – angry, intimidating, ingratiating, sarcastically saccharin, anything other than mild – but at the moment he just seemed tired. There were big dark circles under his eyes, the baggage of the decades that stretched between whatever glory day he'd once seen as a teenaged jock and the lawn-watering nostalgic he'd clearly become. His hair was normally gelled to within an inch of its life and swept in a particular and perfect backwards swoop across the top of his head like a piece of pressed plastic but today it looked rumpled, like a bomber jacket he'd slept in. I imagined he'd had a long night. For all that I loathed him as the pinnacle of petty authority I supposed he probably didn't love having the science building blown to smithereens more than anyone else in the world would do.

“Mr. Strickland.” I nodded at him. “I needed to speak to you about something very pressing.”

He snorted once, and then nodded his head to invite me in. His characteristic snappishness showed itself for a moment: “Clara! Hold my calls.” She used complicated artificial fingernails to mash some buttons on the big old office phone in front of her but

otherwise didn't say a word. She'd probably heard the same thing in the same tone a thousand times a year for her entire career but today it seemed to bother her just a little. Maybe she'd just noticed for the first time.

I walked around the big desk and into Strickland's little six-by-six toilet of an office. The furniture was still cheap and the chairs were still designed, it seemed, to make one's ass hurt inside of two minutes to try to get them back out the door, and the fake plant was still green and the pictures of his fat wife and his fat kids were still rowed up on a filing cabinet in the back where he didn't have to look at them all day but something about the whole environment seemed a lot more sad that morning, a lot more shopworn – no, more than worn, *tired*. Something about him and his environment and this whole space he'd created where he was a little higher in his seat than everyone else and the tiny space made him seem much bigger than he was just exhausted. I could practically hear the room wheezing.

"What's this about?" He balled up one hand inside the other and started playing his knuckles like a flute or a game of whack a mole. "I've got a lot on my plate today, so let's make it quick."

I cleared my throat and found my pride was a lot easier to choke down when I thought of this as just playing a part. "I appreciate your time, Mr. Strickland. First, I wanted to make sure that I didn't need to do the tutoring today." I figured it was best to make sure I maintained something like the appearance of willing participation in this whole tutorial business.

He waved that away with one hand in a single flutter of fingertips. "Of course not. Christ, kid." Ah. He was starting to wake up a little. Good.

"Okay, thanks. Second, I think I know who set the fire." That last part I just said, as though observing that the sky is blue except when it isn't, as though the idea that the fire was set on purpose was an established and well known fact.

Strickland didn't show surprise. Instead, his eyelids narrowed just the tiniest amount and I could practically hear the shriek of metal gears turning inside his head. They sounded like they were badly in need of lubrication. Maybe that was his problem: maybe he was a drunk and last night he'd tied one on when he got the news about the school building going up in smoke. "Oh yeah?" That's all he said. He waited for me to fill the silence. I'd fallen for that once in the last twenty four hours but I was here to do the talking, after all, so I drew a breath and nodded.

"Yesterday, after my tutorial session was over, I was leaving campus and heard what sounded like..." I shrugged. "Well, like a breaking and entering in progress. So, I went and checked, maybe there was a problem, maybe it had just been an accident, maybe someone needed help, you know?" I tried to sound like I was winging it just a little bit. "At any rate, the noises I'd heard were coming from T building and when I got there I found two students who appeared to be in the act of stealing chemicals from the supply room between the chemistry labs." One of the reasons I needed to get down to the school and start singing a song as soon as possible was so that I could beat the investigators and the news to the details. If this was going

to have a chance to float at all then I was going to have to tell Strickland something that either he would later have confirmed by someone objective or something he'd already heard but that I couldn't possibly know if I hadn't been there myself. There was no point in holding back. "They were Jamal and Buck, they're two guys on the jayvee football team." I shrugged. "At any rate, they had one of the big trash bins and they were filling it with jars from the store room. When I walked in they knew they'd been caught. One of them threw a jug into the bin, smashing it – I don't know why, but these guys are not chemistry all-stars so maybe they thought it would, like, make a cloud of smoke they could use to escape or something – and the resulting reaction created a chemical fire." I cleared my throat. The part about *throwing* the jar was key in a lot of ways; I needed to give them some explicit involvement that would explain why they would have had the drop on me in the moment and why they would have wanted to blame someone else for what had happened, namely that they had done it on purpose and wanted a patsy. It also removed the possibility of being blamed for causing an accident by appearing as I did. "There was, I want to emphasize, *liquid fire* running across the floor in all directions in a couple of seconds. I looked around for an extinguisher but it seemed like it was too late already. By the time I realized what was happening and made it outside, they were way ahead of me. I didn't see them again until the gas lines went up and the wall blew out. When I was laying in the parking lot I heard them nearby. They seemed to be taking my picture. I know where they got the idea, though." At that point I held up my phone, with the picture I'd taken of them, over the trash can, on the screen. "I took this when I walked into the room. I think they thought they'd try to do the same to me by taking my picture running from the building as it burned." I let out a long breath and held up the phone where he could see it.

"May I see that?" Strickland had listened to all of this with a completely passive expression and had said nothing, an unusual turn of events in our little chats. I managed to stifle the corrective reflex just this once. I nodded and he took the phone from my hand, looking at it for a long moment. "When did you say you took this?"

"Yesterday afternoon." I folded my hands together to keep from fidgeting. This felt a lot like snitching and nobody likes a snitch. You can't be a fixer and a snitch at the same time. People have to be able to trust you to tell you what's really going on in the first place and it isn't just that no one trusts a snitch; no one goes near one.

"And have you..." He shook his head a little as he contemplated suggestions. "Have you called the police? Told anyone? Talked to anyone about it? Have you shown this to the fire department or called that asshole from channel 13?"

I blinked at his use of what administrators and busybodies everywhere term "language" in front of me and reflexively shook my head. "No, I wanted to come to you first." That was also important. I'd done my song and dance; now to sell him the full package. I drew a breath and laid it out there. "You and I both know that if I've got a specialty it's in finding trouble." He looked at me over the top of the open phone, eyes blank, expression unreadable. It was

unsettling to see him with such dead eyes. I was about to unroll this whole sales pitch for turning this into a case, letting me go investigate it. I was going to tell him that Jamal and Buck had to be up to no good in some fashion but that he would never be able to find out what on his own because anyone who would know anything would clam up the second he walked into the room. I had tickled myself pink with the idea that I could pull a fast one and get Strickland to back me up on a case. I didn't see it as selling out, I saw it as making him give in and cry uncle for once. It was too intoxicating an idea; it was absolutely irresistible to me and I had to give it a shot. I opened my mouth to speak and then closed it again when his thumb moved on the keypad and I heard a sequence of clicks and beeps that I recognized all too well: the sound of a picture being deleted. Strickland closed the phone and held it out towards me but not far enough for me to reach without moving. He was *starting* to offer it back to me but not quite doing so yet.

"That picture didn't mean a goddamn thing," he said. "That could have been anything. That could have been them cleaning up the locker room a year ago."

My reflex for correction kicked in. "No it couldn't," I said. "What? That doesn't even make sense. They were standing in the chemistry lab. They were holding jugs that said DANGER and SULFURIC ACID. I even think I know what caught fire in the bottom of the trash bin for Christ's sakes." My hands shot out in surprise as I spoke, struggling to embrace a world where he could be so fucking thick in the head.

Strickland bounced the phone in his hand like a laser pointer he was fondling between slides of a lecture presentation. "Maybe they were told to clean out the chemistry lab. Maybe they were being punished – just as you are being punished, I might add, for trespassing, Mr. Owens, the same thing you have just told me you were doing yesterday, again, despite that punishment still being in effect." His watery old eyes were sharpening as he got warmed up. "Maybe you used a computer to fake that picture in the first place. Maybe, actually, you never had it at all." He looked at the phone for a moment as though it were an artifact from another era and, given its design, it practically was. "That picture is gone now, Mr. Owens, and let that be a lesson to you: it could be wiped out and gone forever in a second." With his other hand he snapped his fingers sharply, out of nowhere, in sharp contrast to the still mild tones and even keel of his voice. I'll be the first one to admit that I might have jumped a little in my seat. "All because it had something bad in its..." He licked his lips and enjoyed the next word way more than I was comfortable hearing. "Its *memory*. Do you understand what I'm saying, Mr. Owens? I'm saying that nothing good could ever come of that picture. It would be too easy to twist, to misunderstand, to misinterpret, to misstate. It would be too easy to misconstrue its contents or to misidentify the acts involved. On the other hand, its absence from the universe of ideas will not, to alliterate further, be *missed* and I would find it a pity if someone were to say the same thing of the poor, misguided soul that took that photo in the first place. Do you agree?" He

looked at me with great significance but I was still trying to parse everything. Was he threatening me?

"Are you threatening me?" I put one hand to the center of my chest in what I hoped looked like body language for some wavering thread of 'come at me bro' but I could tell it didn't work; it looked more like Scarlett O'Hara in the throes of abandonment and self-interested concern. "Did you just threaten me?"

"No," Strickland said, and the weak smile that spread across his features was all the more sickly and wan for its framing in his tired old sagging face and those eyes that looked haunted and dark and, for just a flickering moment, observably evil. "I'm merely reminding you what can happen to people who go where they shouldn't go and ask questions they shouldn't ask. Forget that this ever happened, Mr. Owens. Forget that you were anywhere near the school yesterday afternoon. I don't want you to ask questions about this. I don't want you to..." He chewed over the candidates for a moment and then spat out the one he disliked the least. "I don't want you to *investigate* this. I know that's what you fancy yourself, you know. I know that you get people to tell you their troubles and then you go around smashing windows and picking locks and digging up dirt until they think their little lives are fixed but leaving every drawer and pocket and uncomfortable topic turned out, emptied and on display for all to see and that you think it makes you good." He managed a sick little twist at the corners of his mouth. "I know you think you do people favors and I'm sure they sometimes agree but you never stop to think about the people whose efforts you disrupt in the process, do you?" He tutted once, the tip of his tongue clicking against the back of his yellowing teeth in a tsk of disapproval, and then held out the phone. I reached for it. He pulled it back and made a little grunt that might have been a chuckle somewhere far away, when it started out, but sounded smug and heavy by the time it reached the surface. "Do you understand me? Stay out of this. You saw nothing. You took no photo. If you tell anyone then I'm sure I'll be able to coax a few more of your crimes out of the cameras or your attendance record or else *something* will turn up, in time, and I will make your life much worse than it needs to be. I want you out of this, Owens. I don't need you under my feet. I don't need your fingers in my pies. I need you out of sight, out of mind, out of goddamn town. Is that clear?"

I couldn't believe my ears. I was still holding my phone out and looking at his face as it twisted and turned in directions I never would have guessed. He held the phone out between his thumb and fingers, hand in the shape of a c-clamp, and he wiggled the phone back and forth to get my attention.

"I said, is that clear?"

"Yes." I rasped it out, voice yanked right out of me by this turn of events.

"Yes *what*?"

"Yes..." I cleared my throat again. "Sir."

Then he dropped the phone onto the floor in front of his desk and said, "Get out before I have that rattletrap out front towed."

I bent forward, scooped up the phone and walked outside without slowing down, without saying anything to Clara and without looking back. I got in my car, cranked it up, drove slowly from the parking lot, down the hill and away towards town. I went directly to the "historic" gas station on the way between school and town, the one with the grill and the great bacon burgers, and I texted Allie.

*I need you to text me back the picture I sent you yesterday. We need to talk. Strickland is dirty.*

Thirty seconds later, the picture was back on my phone. That was the one thing I could count on: the vice principal in charge of disciplinary issues might be able to crush any student like a bug at any time he wanted but he probably didn't understand the essential nature of digital communications: there's no such thing as the "original," nor is there any way to destroy it by deleting one copy.



## Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Four

*They beat him up until the teardrops start / but he can't be wounded 'cause he's got no heart.*

*--Watching the Detectives, Elvis Costello*

Allie had a case she had been working that she hadn't been at liberty to discuss with me in great detail but I knew it had to do with tracing someone's activity on one of the computers at the public library. That was the interesting thing about what she did, by which I mean making computers sit up and beg: it's a legitimate service and it's highly technical and not just any old yahoo with too much time and curiosity is able to do what she can do so sometimes she makes real money at it doing it for real people for real reasons. In this case she had a cousin who worked for the public library who thought a guy might have been using it for something shady but with the Patriot Act it gets weird asking the police to look at library computers so this cousin wanted Allie to take a look at it first and tell her if there was anything to it or not. If there was, she could go ahead and call in the local swine squad and if there wasn't then she could save herself a lot of headaches and a little embarrassment. Allie had given me enough details to work out that much with near-certainty; where I started into guesswork was the point at which I guessed it had to do with porn, probably kiddie porn. There are people in the world who think that having the Internet in every public library is a bad idea because it enables that kind of bullshit but those people never stop to think about all the abusers and fuckups who get caught because they go to such a public place to do their thing. I wouldn't volunteer to mop the bathrooms but I have to admit that it's a little funny to think every library in the land has been turned into a honey pot – an irresistibly attractive trap – for stupid predators.

The long and short of it was that she was locked away in the public library's back offices with a bunch of computers all day, apparently, so she didn't even text me back until that afternoon and then we weren't sure where to go to talk about Strickland and all this crazy shit with the science building but if the game was still going on then I couldn't think of a better place than there. For one thing, there really is no better place to hide than out in the open. For another, it would be a chance to stare at Brandon Nguyen's ass in football uniform pants.

We were sitting off to the side of the "stadium" – a set of oversized cement steps, like the layers of a Mayan pyramid, embedded in the hill on one side of the field – during the first quarter and Allie hadn't said a word while I described what had happened the afternoon before. Well, to be perfectly accurate, she'd said two words in a variety of inflections and tones: specifically, "Oh, shiiiiiiiiiiiiit," over and over a hundred ways, sometimes with her hands over her face and sometimes with her eyes bugging out at me. She was dressed more on the Mad Max end of the spectrum that night, with a surprisingly tattered hoodie on over her more

normally fashionable ensemble, but then I realized that the tatters and tears were intentional: she had cut huge rips in the hoodie, sewn them up to seal them again almost invisibly, then worked oversized safety pins into the fabric to appear to repair the rents. She could have set off a metal detector from across the room. I dug it.

When I got to the part about Brandon “finding” me at the gas station she gave me a look and said, “Oh, girlfriend, please. Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly decided to believe in coincidence.”

I snorted at her, a lovely sound I immediately made a mental note to try to stop doing in case Brandon might ever hear it. “No. That’s the second thing that bothered me about him yesterday afternoon. He came on like a ton of bricks in the library and then he must have been watching me after he left. How else could he have just wound up there at the gas station than if he were following me? And I saw him in the library the day before? And then the first thing he wants to do when he finds me at the gas station is go somewhere and make out? Either that’s the most complicated first date in history or there’s way more to this than I know right now.” I rolled a shoulder to shrug and barely noticed that it was the same way Brandon rolled his the day before in the park. I shook my head abruptly and let my eyes wander over to him. He was sitting on the sidelines, where he always sat. The coach, some beer-bellied asshole who was chomping an actual cigar on the sidelines in open defiance of one of the few rules I could really generally support, didn’t seem to have any plans of putting him in even though the team was losing already and didn’t seem to have the ability to move the ball at all. I’m no sports fanatic but I know enough to know what it looks like when a team is losing and ours was definitely losing. It didn’t all seem to be the starting quarterback’s fault but he wasn’t helping and I couldn’t imagine that Brandon was so bad at this throwing and running shit that he would be that much worse.

We hadn’t seen Strickland yet, but he was almost certainly there. I imagined the administrators had to be at basically every home game of everything to show the flag.

There were big strips of yellow caution tape up across half of the back parking lot to keep people away from the science building and I was surprised to find that the whole place smelled vaguely of yesterday’s campfire: the scents of ash and smoke and soot turned bitter by a lot of water and a day in the sun to stagnate and sour. It smelled like an abandoned ashtray. It was wretched.

The game itself was heavily attended, and I imagined that was in part because of the hope on people’s parts that they’d get to do a little gawking on their way through the game. The closest they could get was the far, far corner of the stadium, where they could gaze through a chain link fence at a whole lot of nothing: a vague shape in the darkness and more of that yellow plastic tape. If they found that fascinating, I couldn’t say why, but they certainly seemed to see something there worth staring at. Bored kids would get shooed over to that end of the stadium by their parents just to get them out of their hair and while they were there,

running up and down the steps and generally doing whatever it is normal ten year olds see in running around and screaming all the time, they would take occasional breaks to go lean against the fence and dare one another to climb it. Nobody did, because there were sheriff's deputies and EMTs and all kinds of other uniformed personnel present in the stadium – more than I supposed was normal – and even a dumbass kid knows not to do something stupid in front of a bored cop.

Then I told Allie about Brandon showing up at my house the night before, and the kiss, and about climbing the back roof over the garage to get to my room, and her jaw nearly fell off and went clattering down the cement benches of the stadium. Eventually she recovered enough to close her mouth and open it again with some words all lined up to go. She put one hand on my forearm and shook me back and forth lowly in sync with each syllable. "Tell. Me. *Everything*. How was it?"

"It was..." I searched around for the right poetry but all I found was a grin and then, "It was fucking amazing."

She waggled her eyebrows at me like Groucho Marx. "And amazing fucking, eh? Eh?" She laughed at her joke, and I laughed at it, and I turned so red my skin felt hot against the eventual red western sky of a late summer sunset.

Geoff showed up, of course, and hung around going to the concession stand for Allie over and over again. I felt a little bad for him but he honestly seemed to be enjoying it and, kind of to my surprise, so was Allie. She was very nice to him, for all that she was using him as her personal slave, and it occurred to me that maybe my sudden romantic developments might be turning her to think of the same possibilities in her own life. Allie was beautiful and Geoff was, well, not, but situational comedies have long since proven that seems to be the pairing that works the best, isn't it? I read a thing once where it was called the *King of Queens* effect.

Brandon never got put into the game to play, in fact never needed to put on his helmet despite seeming eager to offer opinions or something. He would approach the coach and they would have a short conversation and then the coach would put him back on the bench and pat his ass as he walked away. A part of me that I didn't even know existed would yank at its chain and growl when that happened and I realized abruptly that it was jealousy.

Allie had gone to the restroom and it happened and Geoff I guess was looking at me at exactly the right moment to get a glimpse of my expression. He looked back and forth from Brandon to me about a dozen times and then said, "Whoah. It's true?"

"What, did Allie tell you?" I wasn't bothered by it but I wasn't thrilled, either. Had I thought to tell her that he wasn't exactly out and proud? Did I need to? "Listen, keep it under your hat, okay? I don't think he's exactly ready to be the grand marshal of any pride parades."

"Oh, so you know for sure? Like, for sure for sure?" Geoff seemed a little surprised but then shrugged it off. "I guess that gaydar stuff is real, huh?"

I blinked at that, because it just didn't parse, and shook my head back and forth to clear it. "Wait, okay, what?" I pointed at Brandon, the point I sometimes have to give someone to get the truth out of them; the pointed finger their mothers have already used to program them. "Explain."

"Well..." Geoff shrugged, suddenly very sheepish. That ice under his feet seemed to have gotten awfully thin all of a sudden. "I... it's nothing."

My eyes narrowed and I simply waited for him to keep talking. He would look at me, then away, then back at me, and finally it worked.

"Okay," he said, sighing heavily, then his voice thick with reluctance. He had kind of a gravelly, syrupy voice to begin with but this was like crystallized Mrs. Butterworth. "There've been, you know... rumors. For a while."

Rumors? How had I missed this? I didn't say that, though. Instead I kept my eyes narrowed and directly on his own, and waited for more. Geoff caved again and started coughing up the goods.

"Okay, so there was a rumor last spring that he was, you know... gay? Is that okay to say? Is that offensive?" He looked genuinely concerned and I softened one iota when he went on. "I know kids say that shit online all the time and I know that isn't cool and I don't want to be like one of them so if that's not cool just say so man it's cool I'll totally use whatever words is cool but like I know a lot of words that obviously are not cool and 'homosexual' sounds so damned like clinical and shit but I want to just use the right word," but this all came out in one long, unpunctuated rush of breath so that I finally closed my eyes and put up my hands, just a little.

"It's fine. Please do go on." I licked my lips and opened my eyes again with something like resignation.

"Okay, man, sorry. I... I just wouldn't want to make you mad."

"Because if you made me mad that would make Allie mad? Or because you don't want to make me mad?" I arched one eyebrow at him and he blushed a little pink in the cheeks but he didn't say anything. "Let's assume both," I said, "And I'm sorry for interrupting your story."

Telling me whatever the rumors had been was a way out of confronting the dynamic between Geoff and Allie – and me – and he took it. Mission accomplished. "Well, like," he stammered but then he dove back in after a fortifying gasp. "Like, in the spring there were rumors that he had been caught doing something? I don't know what. Anyway, there were rumors that it had to do with West. You know, that gay guy who graduated last year? Anyway, there was a rumor that he and West had a thing going or something but that it blew up on them. I got the feeling, from what was being said, that maybe that's why Brandon's warming so much bench this year. They," and he paused to take in the whole rest of the stadium with one nod of his head, "They don't take too kindly to a quarterback who's, um... who's gay. No offense."

"None taken." My mouth was dry and I wasn't sure what to think. Brandon had told me that I was the first kiss he'd had because he wanted it, but it sure didn't sound that way. A turbulent relationship with a closeted jock might have been just the thing to explain how West had come to be so stop and go with me, too. He might have simply had one too many irons in the fire at any given time, and when he wasn't getting it on with me before his parents got home from work then West might have been entertaining a much more reticent gentleman caller, one with perfect shoulders and a flawless smile and a habit of rubbing the back of his head in a way that made you want to see what it felt like back there your own self.

I didn't love thinking about that, thinking about how close Brandon and I had been to one another if that were the case: just one boy between us and neither of us any the wiser. I didn't hate it, either. It just *was*, a molecule of the reality that others' lives go on even when we aren't watching, something at which I wasn't great and still am often not until later, after it's all resolved, when I try to sum everything up in a neat little package at the end of a case and I try to tie it all together into a narrative. For all that it didn't especially explicitly bother me, though, I felt like that September night was a little more chill than it should have been in the South, even in the mountains of the South, and the wind that shot through the tops of the trees encircling the football field for North Shepherd High seemed to be rattling something dead and desiccated rather than combing something lush and alive.

"Where did you hear this?" I pulled out a tube of lip balm and ran it around my mouth to give my hands and face something to do other than ball up and hit something or someone. "From whom?"

Geoff did some hemming and hawing and finally produced, "Well, you know, around. Places. From people. I don't really remember, it was just kind of, you know, in the mix last year."

"Geoff, you know what Allie and I do for fun, right? You know that we solve people's problems when they feel they can't because we're both so fucking bored with school and the people in it that we need outside stimulation or we'll turn into bad eggs who do things like steal cars and invent crystal meth, right?" Geoff nodded at me, eyebrows slightly raised, mouth slightly open. "It's my job to know what people are saying and what is around. I don't mean that figuratively or metaphorically, either. I mean that it is literally a vital part of what I consider my *work* to know what people are saying and this is all totally news to me." I capped the lip balm by slapping the top with the palm of my opposite hand and then working it back into my pocket. "Don't yank my dick over this. Where did you hear it?"

Geoff swallowed a lot of air and then sighed. "I heard it in in-school suspension. The guys were talking about it." He licked his lips. "But you know how it is in there. You know how those guys are."

"When was this?"

"It was, um, it was in March. That's when I had in-school suspension for two days." He looked genuinely embarrassed. No, he looked more than embarrassed; he looked ashamed. "Sorry."

I couldn't help smiling at him just a little. "I'm not your sainted mother, Geoff. I don't give a shit whether you had in-school suspension or not, but I am curious as to how on earth someone as..." I sought, and I eventually settled, "Someone as gentle as you managed to wind up there."

He blushed a little harder. "I was doing some car stuff." He said it like a child trying to hide an offense by rushing past it in the lowest possible voice. I raised an eyebrow and nodded at him and he kept going. "I was drag racing in the teacher parking lot."

I switched eyebrows, filing that away for future reference, and we fell silent until Allie returned.

"So what's the deal with Strickland?" Geoff was still there but Allie seemed to be perfectly happy to let him at least listen in on our conversation and it seemed pretty clear over the course of the night that he was now her *thing*. I didn't know what, whether pet or project or boy toy or slave or friend, and it wasn't my place to ask; that was an integral part of the partnership Allie and I enjoyed: she had her things, I had mine, and we had our things, but we didn't go crossing those lines.

"I've been thinking about that all afternoon," I said, watching the starting quarterback throw another interception. The crowd groaned collectively but I tallied it as yet another point in favor of the argument that Brandon Nguyen was not as in the closet as he thought himself to be. "The thing is, Strickland clearly wanted to warn me off of this whole T Building thing. He didn't want me nosing around, he didn't want me making accusations against Jamal and Buck, he didn't want me anywhere near that and he made that clear with a relatively neutral order and a lot of implied threats. It was almost like he was protecting Jamal and Buck and their stealing from the chem labs." I shook my head at her. She was working her way through a big cardboard box of popcorn and Geoff was watching us with his lips slightly parted and his eyes slightly wide. "But why?"

Allie tapped a kernel of popped corn with one long fingernail painted black with a stripe of silver down the middle. She drove an old Beetle she'd painted herself in the same pattern: solid black with a silver stripe right over the center of it like a gothic-industrial cousin of Herbie the Love Bug, visiting from Berlin. "Maybe he was in on it."

I waved that off with one hand. "If Strickland wanted to rob the chemistry labs' storage room he could just walk in there and box it all up. He's a vice principal. He's got keys."

Allie smiled at that. "Ah, but then the mystery would be where all the chemicals went without there being a break-in in the first place."

I pondered that – she had a pretty damned good point – but then I shook my head again. “Okay, sure, but why trust it to a couple of low-life gorillas like Jamal and Buck? They’d be just as likely to fuck everything up as to get him a bunch of chemicals.”

“Precisely. Maybe he did it because they would fuck it up and provide an obvious trail to follow but if the police were led back to them then Strickland would already have taken delivery and there wouldn’t actually be anything to tie them to the crime.” She regarded me with a sideways glance. When the two of us were spit balling a mystery like this we tended to work through a bunch of ideas in rapid fashion.

“Man,” I said, shaking my head and click my cheek. “I kind of like that. He wants a crime that doesn’t look like it was done by anybody very smart so he gets a couple of idiots to do it.”

Allie smiled and I smiled back. We loved nothing more than to decide we had divined someone else’s actual motive. “It doesn’t actually work, though.” She took a long slurp of a diet soda the size of a fire hydrant and went on. “It doesn’t work for two reasons. First, he knew you were on campus and he would never have scheduled this for a time when you were around because you’re a known shit kicker.” I wagged my head. I didn’t like that as much as the idea itself of someone having picked Jamal and Buck because they wanted morons. The “queer bait” thing had stung more than I thought, I guessed. “Second, it doesn’t work because he would never *bank* on using flunkies who would be caught. That’s way too flimsy. If he wanted someone to break into the place he could, like, get college students from town. He could find an actual thief, maybe.”

I snorted. “Because vice principals have so many underworld connections?” It was meant in fun, though. We had to try to expose weaknesses if we were going to reveal ideas that had strengths.

“Well,” she said, the popcorn making a crunch noise as she ran her hand around in it. “He could have at least found a competent criminal in the school’s existing population. Lunatic Panelli might make a good candidate. If he weren’t, he’d know someone who is.” She pointed at me and cocked her chin down to give me a wordless ‘you know it’s true.’ I couldn’t deny it right away so instead I looked out at the field and tried to walk myself through it. If Strickland wanted chemicals from the chemistry lab he would... fake an inspection and find a bunch of “bad” chemicals. He would just use his keys to waltz in there and bust in a window himself. He would use competent criminals. He would be his own criminal. He wouldn’t use anyone to whom the trail could ever lead back because then he would be as good as exposing himself as the mastermind. He would have sent them with handling instructions on what *not* to mix in order to prevent exactly the circumstance we were in now: a suspicious chemical fire and millions of dollars in damages. He isn’t a chemistry teacher, so maybe he wouldn’t have known. On the other hand, if he wanted something from there, he would have known what he wanted or he wouldn’t have sent anyone after it. He would have been there to oversee it himself because he’s a power freak. He would have turned off the cameras.



"I know an easy way to settle this," I said. "And it's dark, and I bet they don't lock up *all* the buildings until *after* the game is over, usually."

Allie smiled at me. "I'm way ahead of you, but first we need to find out which building."

Five minutes later we – all three of us, including Geoff – were huddled under a corner V Building (English, History and Foreign Language) on the end that was separated from the administration building by one segment of covered walkway. Above us was one of the cameras. Allie was taking little steps in a circle trying to get the right angle to see the back of it and finally sighed, then snapped her fingers at Geoff. "On one knee. I need to see it up close."

I blinked.

Geoff blinked.

Then Geoff dropped to one knee and held the other at a ninety(-ish) degree angle to create a step for her. Allie smiled, kissed her left fingertips and then reached out to "place" the kiss on top of his head, which she then also used as a handhold to steady herself while she climbed onto his thigh with her Doc Martens. At least the soles had been worn basically smooth over time.

That gave her enough height to get a better look and she smiled. I opened my mouth to ask her something but she saw me look in her direction and put a finger to her own lips to shush me without saying anything in her own right. She pointed at the front of the camera and then pointed at her own ears: microphones. Wow. The cameras were wired for sound, or at least appeared to be.

Gripping the metal girder that supported the outer edge of the walkways covering, Allie adjusted her stance and moved around to give a better look at the back of the camera, then followed something with her eyes and leaned farther out to see where it went. A second later she ducked her head back under and pointed at Geoff, who reached out to take her hand and steady her as she came back down. "I need a hand up onto the walkway," she whispered, and Geoff was so fast to comply I wondered if he'd even listened to the whole sentence. One foot in one pair of cupped hands *later* and Allie was swinging up onto the top of the walkway and then taking off down it from above.

Geoff and I hustled to keep up and when we got to the doors of the administration building we both sidestepped around a pillar and – we hoped – into the well of invisibility we assumed to be under each camera. If multiple cameras were trained on this location we were screwed, but you do what you can do in the moment and that's all you can ever do. Allie reappeared, leaning over the edge of the walkway, and swung a remarkably gymnastic dismount over the side, landing in a crouch. She puffed deep purple bangs out of her eyes with a gust of breath blown from an upturned lower lip and then she nodded at the door into the administration building and pointed along the edge of the roof line. I didn't see it at first but following her finger I was able to see it finally: a narrow plastic tube that seemed to guide a



couple of cables down over the edge of the walkway, and from the nearest camera as well, through a hole drilled in the brick facing on the outside of the building. There were wires, but most of them ran over the top of the walkway: harder to notice or to screw around with up there. Allie took out her phone, held up a finger to us, and started pressing buttons in rapid, well-practiced fashion. Geoff's and my phones buzzed a few moments later with a text she'd sent. It was written in abbreviated English but that drove me crazy when I saw it so I refuse to reproduce it here. She said:

*The cameras have sound recording capabilities but no speakers. The wires are concealed overhead; probably too expensive to run them underground. To find out more we have to go to where the DVRs are, if there are any. Time to commit or not: there will be cameras inside, and if we go in there we fail at our own peril. In or out?*

I glanced sidelong at Geoff and waited to see what he would do. I knew already that I was in, but that's because this was trouble and trouble is my business. I wanted to see if he was ready to run with the big dogs. His thumb wavered for a moment and then we both got back a text from him that read, simply:

*In.*

I looked up and met Allie's gaze to nod once. She hadn't really needed to know whether I was in or out, had she? I wondered how much of this was her testing Geoff and how much of this was her testing my ability to welcome Geoff into the situation.

I reached out, put my hand on the door to the administration building and pulled.

It opened, and I walked inside like I owned the place. I could hear the announcer call the two minute warning before the end of the second half.

Once we were inside Allie used a little flashlight to trade the tube of hard plastic that we knew had wires in it. The tubing disappeared through another roughly drilled hole near the ceiling – I could just see them saving a few bucks by having the janitor drill through the drywall instead of getting a professional to do the installation – and that seemed to disappear somewhere into the back of the school office. There was a walled-off room back there that had “TELECOMM” on a small placard on the front. I'd always assumed that was where the Internet stuff for the school must live; there or the library. Maybe the telephone stuff, too, or the cable TV stuff for the old Cable in the Classroom thing? I looked over at Allie and nodded at that sign.

“The sign is new,” she said, smiling. “It used to say ‘STORAGE’.”

We'd stopped at our secret spare locker on the way across the building, following the pipe, and I'd gotten a small pouch of fake leather from it. When I drew out of that what were obviously lock picking tools – a tensioner and a static wiggle of flimsy metal – Geoff's eyes went wide. I grinned. I was going to love having him around if he was this easy to impress. The door to the administration office was locked, of course, but not well or expensively. Who would break in during a home game, with cameras all over the place, and what would they steal,

anyway? I worked the lock for twenty quiet but breathy seconds and then heard the satisfying click of it surrendering to me. Allie pulled the latch while I held the lock in place and then tucked the pouch into the back of my jeans.

“Ladies first,” I said, then walked through before her with a laugh. It felt so good to have something to do again.

The door to the room marked TELECOMM wasn’t even locked. I wrapped my hand in the sleeve of my hoodie, pushed down on the door latch and it swung wide. I clucked my tongue; sloppy of them, but understandably so. They probably still thought hardly anyone knew about the cameras; they also probably didn’t really think someone who was going to break in and pick one lock would be slowed down much by another.

The room on the other side of the door was plain, utterly unadorned, and there was a set of metallic shelves on one side that had tons of small boxes the size of a DVD player stacked on them. At a rough glance I estimated something like three dozen or so of these boxes. They all had a name on the front that was obviously Japanese or Korean and no other indication of their purpose other than there were two lights on each: a green light over which was the word POWER and a red light over which it said SECURING.

“Securing” instead of “recording”. Classy.

There was a small monitor on one of the shelves, just a regular flat panel computer monitor, and a switch box next to it with a bunch of numbers and a dial. I nodded at it and Allie nodded back. “KVM switch,” she said. “You can select which feed to watch.” Her fingers twitched and I was surprised she’d held back those few seconds. I looked back at Geoff, who was still hovering in the doorway as though this final act of trespass was perhaps one too many for him, and smiled as gently as possible. “Keep watch?”

He nodded and turned his back, wiping sweat from his brow. Poor thing.

Allie was turning the dial one notch at a time and fiddling with some rinky-dink plastic speakers hooked up to the monitor. Soon she had an audio feed coming in and we could hear the sounds of the football game in the distance as though it were being played inside a tin can which was, itself, inside a sea shell. Allie’s eyes were wide and sparkling and I thought it was entirely possible that she was either going to go catatonic from glee or she was going to weep tears of joy openly and forever. “Want to watch everyone leave the stadium?” She was grinning as she said it, her eyes on the monitor instead of me or Geoff. It was like we were spirits haunting a room where she was certain she wasn’t alone but she had nothing more concrete to hold her attention. We were there but we didn’t *matter*.

There were people already streaming out of the stadium – there were not enough miracles left in the universe to save the game for our team – and Allie took special pleasure in catching them on one monitor, watching them walk to the edge of its field of vision, and then quickly flipping to the right monitor to pick back up right where they had been or very close to

it. I marveled at this display of open and unabashed voyeurism. I had to wonder if Strickland, when this system was completed and the work to install it was completed and he was finally left alone with his wonderful new all-seeing eye and all-seeing ear, had stood here and done the same thing, pawing at his new toy like a puppy with a fresh tennis ball. It took at least three or four minutes for her to snap out of it and stop simply following various random strangers from the stadium, across parking lots, down hills, down staircases and to their cars, then out to the edge of campus, where the ability of Strickland – or her – ended at long last.

“There’s your boyfriend,” Allie chided. Her voice was sly, almost snickering, and her mouth curled up at one corner as though it were meant to be snide, but I knew it wasn’t. She pointed at the monitor. “See that? Definitely him. He just walked out of the back of the field house on the side of the home team locker room. He probably didn’t need to shower since the coach wouldn’t let him break a sweat.”

I nodded and blinked. “How did you recognize him?”

“Gait recognition, of course. It’s worth studying everyone when they walk. It makes it much easier to identify them later.” She shrugged, as though everyone did this at all times: clinically studied the body language of those they know in order to identify them carefully.

He was walking along and stopped to check his phone. A light went off in my own head. I had texted Brandon that I was coming to the game and asked if he wanted to meet up after. He had said yes, that I should hang around after and he would let me know when he was ready to leave. I’ll be the first one to admit that a part of me was really excited and kind of turned on by the idea of being the boy waiting for the jock to get done with his game to go make out but another part of me was less than thrilled about the idea that on day two of whatever we were I had been reduced to waiting for him to get done doing whatever he does after a game. Selfish, maybe, but maybe on both our parts, and maybe I was also just intensely overanalyzing everything.

I took my phone out of my pocket and watched it, eyes dancing back and forth between the Brandon on the monitor and the screen of my phone, until I got that buzz that heralded the arrival of his message: *Still around?*

I started typing a response back: *Yes, where should we meet? I’m parked in* but Allie reached over and put her hand on my arm to get my attention. I looked at her and her eyebrows were scrunched together. She nodded at the monitor. “Look at this.”

I looked. Brandon wasn’t alone anymore Jamal and Buck were standing there, and thanks to the microphones in the cameras we could hear every word they were saying.

“Good game?” Jamal asked it and Buck snickered from behind him. They both grinned like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard or said. “Get your hands on a lot of balls?”

Brandon visibly stiffened his spine and regarded them with contempt that was obvious even over the washed out image from the cheap camera. “Get the fuck out of the way, *boys*.” Wow. I... had never heard him talk like that. His voice was deep and already had its heels set in

the ground. It was the voice of someone who was more powerful than they were and knew it and wasn't afraid to show them if it needed to. It was a voice I would have found... commanding. It didn't seem to work like that for Jamal and Buck, though. Buck put his hands in his pockets but Jamal wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Instead he cocked his head back and said, "Boys, huh? Speaking of, how's your new best friend?"

I blinked. Allie blinked. I could practically *hear* her blink.

"I said get out of the way." Brandon started to take a step towards them but around them – he didn't want to let them slow him down but he didn't want to have to go completely around them without making them move just a little, either. He was definitely bigger than either of them but they were still a couple of animals and one of those adjectives was especially important: couple. There were two of them and only one of Brandon.

Buck's hand came back out of his pocket and he planted it in the middle of Brandon's chest. "We didn't say you could go yet, Brandon. What's the hurry? Is your *boyfriend* waiting for you or something?" There was something deeply ugly in Buck's voice: something small and angry and made of shadow, something that thought it had never gotten what it wanted nor a moment's unfettered joy in all its life. It was the voice of the things that drive the people who come after us for being who we are, the things that make people hurt and kill, the tiny anger in the bottom of your chest that never goes away no matter what.

Brandon tried to push past but Jamal swung and sucker-punched him from the side. Brandon sprawled sideways, his feet going out from under him, and then Buck kicked him in the gut the second he hit the ground.

"You shouldn't have gotten that nosey little faggot involved," Jamal said as Buck delivered a second kick and then leaned down over Brandon to spit in his face. "You don't want real trouble, but trust me, you queer the deal on this and you'll have more trouble than you know what to do with, you understand? We've got a good thing going, Brandon. We don't need anybody fucking this up for us."

Jamal grabbed the front of Brandon's t-shirt and hauled him halfway to sitting by it, then delivered another punch to the face. "This is going to seem like the warning it *was* if you don't straighten up and fly right, little man." Jamal dropped Brandon back into the dirt and I could see blood welling at the corners of his mouth.

Allie and I were both still standing there in shocked silence. We watched Buck and Jamal walk away, leaving Brandon to lie there in a pool of light, unabashed in their violence, unafraid of retribution, unafraid of cameras or of being caught. Of course, I thought: the whole team was still in the locker room, showering, changing clothes, having a post-game talk, whatever it was they did in there. Showers running, lockers banging, they wouldn't have heard a peep. Hell, maybe the coach had made sure they were all out of the way. Maybe everyone was in on this. Maybe Strickland had sent them himself. Maybe they didn't care about the cameras because they knew the cameras would never be used against them and they didn't know that "never" doesn't mean that for most people.

We stood there, Allie's hand still on my arm, and then she called out, "Geoff!" He spun on a heel, practically leaping out of his own skin at having his name barked at him, and without looking at

him she went on. "You have to go to the football field with Scott. I need to stay here and write down some information on these DVRs and tape the door locks so I can come back tomorrow."

None of that registered for me except for the part about going to the field house. I had stood there and watched my... I don't know what he was, whatever he was, I had stood there and watched him get his ass kicked while I couldn't do anything about it. I looked around wildly for a second and Allie seemed to sense my motive. She shook her head at me. "It's simplex – it's all one way. The sound, I mean. There's no microphone here because there are no speakers there. Strickland can record sound but he can't broadcast it to a particular location. Get down there and see if Brandon needs to go to the hospital. I'll be alright." Then she practically shoved me at Geoff and he nodded at her, over my shoulder then found something like iron in his own voice.

"Come on, Owens," he said, sounding a lot like a coach in his own right, "Let's get out there and see what we can do."

My head was swimming but I nodded and the two of us took off running for the field house, fighting upstream to get around people making their ways to their cars.

**Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Five**

*You had a charming air / all cheap and debonair*  
*--The Mariner's Revenge Song, The Decemberists*

We could see from the top of the hill that Brandon wasn't still lying on the ground where he'd been when they had beaten him and that was a good sign. Behind the field house was a practice field with an old dugout where the baseball team used to play. The band used it for marching practice now but leaving the old dugout standing was a lot cheaper than tearing it down so it was still there, mercifully dark and empty, and well out of view of anyone leaving the field house to go home after the game. It was there that we found Brandon, echo-locating him by the wet sounds of someone coughing out blood and possibly teeth. Geoff, I realized later, was surprisingly quick with a generous sensitivity: he and I ran into the dugout together and Brandon, not knowing who we were, whether we might be Buck and Jamal coming back for round two, maybe someone else entirely, visibly shrank as we stepped into view. The fear in his eyes was real, in that moment, more real than I had ever seen it since and more real than I would ever want to see it again in future. It cut deep to see him that afraid: his eyes wide and one hand up in front of him, a thick smear of burgundy blood swept across it. I tried to say something but my voice was choked off in my throat. Brandon's left eye was stolen and he was blinking tears out of the other one and Geoff said, very softly, "Brandon, it's Scott and Geoff. We're here to help."

Brandon's hand over his own face faltered, and then sagged, and then he let out a long, ragged breath that was half sigh and half moan before staggering back just a little. My feet kicked at the earth for a moment, uncertain steps, and then I moved a little closer, my own hand extended. "Are you okay?"

Brandon shook his head and then stepped back. He shook his head again. I reached closer to him. "Brandon, it's me. It's Scott."

There was a long period of silence, marked only in contrast by heavy gasping breaths from all of us, and in my periphery I saw that Geoff had stepped out and looked around to make sure no one was coming. The rest of the team seemed to still be shut away in their locker room, or gone already; whatever the case, they weren't around to see this or interfere or interrupt and that was good. Brandon shook his head again. Geoff said, very quietly, "He might have a mild concussion. We should get him to the emergency room or something. He may not really understand what's going on or who we are. I'll get the car." He disappeared at a run, surprisingly light on his feet as he ascended out of view. I could have hugged him for giving me a moment alone with Brandon.

I turned and took Brandon's hand – he flinched a little, but I gently squeezed his fingers between just two of mine – and said, "We saw them attack you." He had his head lowered so that I couldn't see his face. I sat down next to him on the cement block bench built into the structure of the dugout and with a bit of dodging and weaving I was able to make him meet my eyes for just a moment. "I heard what they said." His eyes dropped and he looked down and away for a moment, then out at the practice field. There were a lot of things I thought about saying – exactly how in the closet did he think he was, or what was "the deal" they were worried he would screw up, or why wasn't he in there with the rest of the team – but I didn't say any of them. I didn't know what to say. Usually I'm such a glib little shit but for the moment I wasn't sure what to say or do. I knew already that the world could be a violent

place, and West had told me about being bullied, something I somehow managed to escape, but never had I witnessed real, skin on skin violence like this before. It wasn't like in a movie. It was just one person hurting another because they wanted to hurt them.

West. That name practically glowed in the air before me.

"Did you have a relationship with West Slade?" I said it before I could talk myself out of it. I said it very softly, while Brandon still looked out on that darkened practice field, while we were still in shadow and silence and the only signs of a world beyond us were the sounds of cars and old brakes and people trying to leave the campus, after the game, at what sounded like a distance of a hundred million miles. Brandon didn't quite give anything away when I said the name but he did blink. Then he blinked again, still not looking at me. I licked my lips and took the hand I was lightly holding in one hand and turned it over to look at the lines of his palm just as he'd looked at mine the day before. "I did." I said this to fill the silence but also to try to get the wheels going, somewhere, somehow. "I had a relationship with him last year. Well, I say 'relationship', but we just fucked a lot." Brandon blinked again and turned his head halfway towards looking at me but didn't quite get there.

"He told me he was a virgin," Brandon murmured. His voice was thick and his posture was slowly sagging, relaxing. "I told him so was I."

"Were you?"

Brandon smiled a little, but it had a smirking edge. "Yes."

"You told me yesterday that when we kissed it was the first time you'd done it because you wanted to." I smiled a little at him even though he wasn't looking.

"That was true," Brandon said. He laughed a little, a flash of the giddy, and I saw tears welling up in his eyes. "That was actually true."

"So what's going on? Why did Jamal and Buck come after you? How is it that they know about us?" I tried not to sound angry because I wasn't; it was hard not to sound pressing, though, because I knew deep in my gut, way down in the part that guides me towards a resolution every time I wind up in a mess that I have to solve – other people's messes, usually – that the answer to that question was important.

"Because we all work for the same guy," Brandon said. He licked his lips and shook his head a little. "Because they know I want out, that I've wanted out for a long time, and they never liked the idea of trying to bring you into this in the first place." He shook his head again, and it looked more like he was trying to get water out of one ear than trying to deny something. "They did that because they think I might have tried to bring you in just to get them all busted."

Well, at least we were getting somewhere. Too many questions were competing to be the first one out of my mouth and my ego won out. "Is that the case? Did you come on to me to try to get me to fix some problem you've got?"

"Yes," Brandon said. It was a long, slow sigh, a word he didn't enjoy saying, and that same devil in my gut knew it as truth just as surely as it had ever known anything in its life. "But it turns out that I really do like you." He finally turned his head just enough to look at me from the corners of his eyes, still not facing me but getting there bit by bit. "I promise you that. And I promise you I told you the truth when I said that kissing you yesterday was the first time I'd ever kissed someone because I wanted to."

The devil in my gut couldn't find any lies there, either. I smiled a little, but then I plunged ahead.



"Who's the guy you work for? Is it Vice Principal Strickland?" I set my face hard and knew I was rolling the dice.

"How do you know that?" Brandon seemed genuinely confused, but he didn't do this all the time.

"It's the only thing that makes sense." I said it flat, as though that were true. "It would explain a lot." I grimaced, though, and let out an annoyed sigh. "It also opens a lot of questions for which I don't have good answers." I shook my head. "Why on earth would he send Jamal and Buck to steal from the chemistry building?"

"He didn't send them," Brandon said.

Headlights splayed across both of us as Geoff's beater Civic hove into view driving across the practice field and right up to the dugout. Geoff hopped out and jogged over, huffing a little. His headlights were still shining on Brandon and his hand had gone up to protect his eyes but Geoff stopped a few feet away and said, "C'mon, man, I need to see your pupils to check for a concussion."

I blinked. Geoff was a regular Boy Scout.

Geoff drove us around to the front of the administration building and then past it, down the faculty parking lot, around the corner and out of sight to the spaces nearest where Allie and I hold office hours at lunch. She was standing there already, book bag over one shoulder, and she jumped into the passenger seat. Brandon and I were in the back, using up Geoff's first aid kit on Brandon's face and generally avoiding looking at one another for too long. So there it was: Brandon was compromised somehow from the get go. I'd known it all along, even talked about it openly, but now that I knew it for a fact it ate at me like I hadn't thought possible. I had hoped he was interested in me just because, way more than I thought I had, and when that psychic bandage had been ripped off I had not been ready for it.

"Assuming one DVR per camera," Allie said as she got in, "I count forty cameras, even. I wrote down where they're pointed. Three of the channels are static, which I assume means those were the ones attached to T Building prior to yesterday." She took a moment to look in the back, unabashed in her examination of Brandon's puffy face and his obvious injuries. After a moment she said, simply, "I'm sorry that happened to you." No questions, no demands, just a moment of human empathy. I wished I'd thought of that. Brandon nodded at her once and then went back to daubing at his cheek with an antiseptic wipe, checking to see if the bleeding had stopped.

Allie looked at me, raised her eyebrows; I shook my head. *Not now*. She looked back at Brandon and then turned to Geoff. "Thanks for going with him." Again, something I should have thought to say, but hadn't.

Geoff flushed a little and shrugged. Allie's eyes sparkled for a moment. That was, in its own way, just as shocking as anything else.

We sat in silence until Geoff pulled up in front of my house, Allie giving directions the whole way. Brandon's face had stopped bleeding and one of his cheeks was starting to turn from red to purple. He was going to have a hell of a bruise in the morning. I'd asked him if we should take him home but he'd shaken his head. "My dad will ask too many questions," he said, and I decided not to ask any about that. I knew what that probably meant.

We thanked Geoff and Allie and climbed out. I put my hand out to Brandon and he stared at it for a moment. "Want to meet my parents?"

He blinked. "You're joking."

"No." I shook my head. "Not in the least."

We walked up the drive to the side door into the kitchen. "My mom's going to flip out over your face. Don't hold it against her."

"I could stand to have a mom flip out over me, to be honest."

That's me, always with the worst thing to say.

My mother did, in fact, flip out over his face. She insisted on sitting him down in the kitchen, under a strong light, and redoing all the cleanup we'd just spent the whole ride over doing. I introduced him to them by saying, "This is Brandon Nguyen. He'd my, um, friend." They had never heard me describe someone as an "um-friend" before and they divined the exact meaning immediately with a long, meaningful silence and a glance the speed of light. My father shook his head and my mother swabbed his face in enough hydrogen peroxide to bleach a cow's hide blonde. He sat through it politely, thanked her and did his best to answer my father's questions. Dad was very impressed that there was a boy in the house who was wearing a letter jacket. This was one area where my parents had held out some hope, if not much, and I had resolutely ignored them: I wasn't a musician, I wasn't a politician, I wasn't in clubs and I didn't play sports. I was a kid who went to school, more or less, and excelled no matter how little effort I put forward. I would find out later in life just how many people have the same experience in high school but at the time I felt like a weirdo and my parents seemed to share my opinion or at least never sought directly to contradict it.

My father and Brandon talked about football and soccer – his spring sport, he said – and my father settled easily into the kind of guy talk I'd seen him have with his friends but had never been able to engage in or tolerate in my own right.

I was a little jealous, to be honest, but mostly I was relieved. Neither of them asked Brandon where he'd gotten his face kicked in, or why, and when she was done my mother said, very mildly, "Well, all done, though you're going to have a big black eye tomorrow. I wish I could fix that. I'm sorry. Scott, would you help me put away all of this?" I looked at the kitchen counter and saw that "all of this" was a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, a bag of cotton balls and a box of tiny bandages.

I picked them up and said, "Sure, mom. Sure."

"Great," she smiled. "It all goes in the back of the house."

We walked back there, to the master bath, and she closed the door behind her.

"He's your... boyfriend?"

I shrugged and cleared my throat. "I don't know. Maybe."

She nodded. "How long have you been seeing each other?"

I snorted. I couldn't help it. "Since yesterday." I tried not to laugh. It was like she was accusing me of having an affair.

She nodded, and finally looked at me. "So, you haven't been sneaking around with him?"

I blinked. "Uh... no?"

She looked at the wall for a second and said, "You know, we don't think you're a bad kid, Scott." She sighed lightly and looked back at me. "But you sure do seem to love trouble. We worry. I worry. I

worry more than your dad does, but we both worry. He says things like, 'Well, Martha, don't forget what we were like at that age,' and sometimes he says, 'Well, Martha, every boy goes looking for trouble sooner or later.' She pitched her voice down and gave a half-hearted impersonation, part joke and part mockery. She sighed again. "I tell him that I do remember what we were like at that age and that's *why* I worry." She looked away. "Did he get beaten up because he's gay?"

I opened my mouth, unsure exactly how to answer "Sort of," I said, finally. To her credit, she didn't stare me down or rush me to answer. She seemed focused on something far away, something that might only be happening in her mind's eye.

"Are you in danger of being attached by the same people?" She still wouldn't look at me.

"Yes, but I already was, for other reasons." There was no point in lying. She would know.

She looked at me after a few seconds and said, "Are you going to be able to prevent that from happening? Is he going to protect you? Do you have the ability to protect yourself?" Her face was set very hard.

"I..." I shrugged at her. "I'm working on that."

"Do whatever you have to do to stay safe," she said, looking me right in the eye, the kind of gaze that only a mother can give to her child, the gaze of someone who would tear down a stone wall with her bare hands to fight a velociraptor. "And if anyone tries to hurt you, hurt them back." She nearly growled it and I was shocked. My mother had always been so mild mannered, so easy going in her attitudes. She had always been the mother who counseled me to play well with others and been disappointed when I inevitably did not. "Never let someone walk all over you, never let someone hurt you for being who you are. Hit back. Punch, kick, bite, do whatever you have to do. Never let someone shame you and never let them turn you into a passive target." She seemed angry, almost.

"He..." I swallowed air. "He didn't have the chance to fight back. There were two of them. They jumped him when he was by himself."

My mother's jaw was like a steel beam. "I'm not talking about him, Scott. I'm talking about you. If he's worth caring about, he'll do the same, and you'll do it for one another, too. If he's worth your time and effort then the two of you, as a team, will be stronger than any two dickhead bullies that come your way." She put up one finger to emphasize that last point and I know my eyes went wide because my mother never, ever talked like that when she thought I could hear her. "Do you understand me?"

"Y... yes?"

"Yes what?" Her eyes were like brown stones, hard and sharp and mean in the harsh light of the bathroom fluorescent. Her shabby weekend sweats were like the armor of Joan of Arc and her wilting hair was like raised hackles on a lioness' back.

"Yes... m'am?"

She nodded curtly, turned around and walked back out the door and down the hall to the kitchen. I stood in the bathroom for another ten seconds and finally said, aloud and in falsetto, "What... the... fuuuuuuck."

When I got back to the kitchen my parents had gone back to the living room and were watching television or at least pretending to. Brandon was sitting there looking around, hands in the pockets of his jacket, looking like he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. "I..." He sighed and rubbed the back of his head like he does. "Thanks."

"I'm sorry they jumped you because of me." I needed to say that and get it out of the way. I needed not to pretend like this, too, was someone else's problem for me to solve. There were other things that needed saying, though. "And we need to talk about what's going on."

"Maybe I should just go," he said. He shifted on the counter stool and stood up and did something with his hands like he wasn't sure whether to offer me a handshake or a hug or nothing at all but I took his hand with both of mine, again, and held him fast.

"You are not running out on this," I said to him. "I... I refuse to be a passive target." I set my jaw. "I spend a lot of time solving other people's problems. That's why you came to me. That makes this my problem now, and no... no two dickhead bullies are going to screw this up." Brandon blinked and I went on. "If you walk out that door, you're just going to get your ass kicked again, and then mine will get kicked, too, because if you're wrapped up in something heavy enough to try to seduce me so that I'd help you then it's pretty fucking heavy indeed and they're never going to believe that we just split up after a day and went our separate ways."

Brandon pulled his hand away and put it in his pocket. "Yes they will. I'll tell them that I told you to shove off and that you're out and they'll leave you alone." He shrugged at me and it was the shrug of the jock who gets his way. I hated it; just as fast as a tossed coin spinning in the air, I hated it with every fiber of who I am. "I know how they work. Ultimately they're just cowards, Scott. They're afraid of you in some weird way. I'll tell them you're off their trail and they'll stop being afraid. They aren't smart enough to think beyond what someone tells them." He smirked. "Tell your mom I said thanks."

I smiled back. "You think you're going to walk outside, but you're not." He had taken a step, but he stopped. That had worked surprisingly well. "You see, Brandon, you chose to involve the person you knew never lets something go once he's got his teeth in it. Think about that for five seconds. *You* involved *me* in this. You got me interested, you got me close to something bad, and you did it because you wanted me to unravel the knot of whatever you're stuck in. I'm going to do that, Brandon, because that's what I do. You're getting what you asked for whether you want it anymore or not. If you want to let those junior varsity wannabes get their way, great, let them hold power over *you* if you find that acceptable but they will never, ever hold power over me."

He was still turned halfway to the door but he still wasn't moving. "Fine," he said after a few seconds of consideration, over his shoulder. "If you want to stick your nose in, fine, it's your nose, but I don't have to be involved and I don't have to suffer for it. I've already had mine knocked in once tonight, I don't need to sign up for more sessions of the same treatment. Once I put a little daylight between us, whatever you do is whatever you do."

"You're not hearing what I'm telling you, Brandon." I crossed my arms and shifted my weight to one hip. "Those guys went after you but it was about me. I have to answer back, but I can't just return the favor. I have to do what I do to people, and that's to figure out their secrets and turn them around on them. If those guys have a secret they're trying to protect then I will absolutely positively find it out and then I will use it, somehow, to tear them to pieces." I licked my lips. "And if putting daylight between us means you're closer to them again by the time that happens, I can't guarantee you won't get caught in the blast. You've got a secret, too, that much is obvious. Don't think you can keep it safe. Don't think I won't use it to get back at them if it proves useful to me." Brandon turned back towards me and there was a deeply satisfying shadow of fear there. I stepped closer. "You're no angel, Brandon. You never answer my question about West Slade, and that's all the answer I need. I know why you

aren't the starting quarterback. I know that if the junior varsity team's resident gorillas can taunt you about being queer then they weren't the first ones to do so. I know you think you're protecting yourself but here's the thing: I don't have an off switch. I'm going to dig out every iota of information I can on Jamal and Buck and I'm going to figure out why they were in that chemistry lab, why you're all working for Strickland, why he's got cameras on every corner all of a sudden and why two of them are on me. I'm going to unearth every scrap of dirt I can and meld them into a weapon and then destroy anyone who thinks they can stop me and I'm going to do it just to prove that I *can*. If it turns out that you are one of the things I can dig up and use against them, so be it. You wanted someone to fight this fight for you and you got it. You can't put the genie back in its bottle. Pandora can't close the lid fast enough on that pretty box she's got. I *am* the nuclear option, Brandon, and you've already pressed the red button." I licked my lips again and swallowed hard. I was just a foot away from him and he still hadn't moved. "But if you stick with me," I said, voice much more quiet now, "If you're on my side when the dust settles, then maybe you'll be okay. That's your choice now, Brandon: are you going to be one of the things I dig up and use against them or are you going to gamble that we can come out on top of this together; that we're better as a team than we are apart?"

Brandon drew a shallow breath. "Would you? Would you just use someone – me – like that?"

I didn't blink, I didn't release the ragged sigh I wanted to. Playing hardball was a lot harder this time. "Yes." I meant it, though. "If I let them fuck with something of mine once they will fuck with things of mine again. I will hit back, harder than I was hit, every single time until they learn their lesson. It's the only way I know to win."

Brandon did blink, and his face slackened a little, but I couldn't tell whether it was resignation or dread or fear or all of the above or nothing at all. "And if I stick with you?"

"Then when the dust settles I'm not the only one who's bulletproof. Does that sound like a great idea or what?" I held out my hand, offering to let him take mine this time. "Are you in?"

He sighed a little, very softly, and looked at my hand. "Maybe? Would we definitely win?"

"I don't make promises I can't keep," I said with a little shrug, a roll of the shoulder just like his, but this time I meant to do it. "All I can promise is that if those guys think they can beat up someone just because they think he's my boyfriend, oh buddy, let me tell you, they are in for a most unpleasant surprise."

Brandon blinked. He was still staring at my hand, not taking it, so I stepped closer. "Now," I said, putting my hand in the middle of his chest, half caress and half condescending swipe as though brushing off a mote of dust. "Let's go outside and you can tell me exactly what the hell is going on."

The darkness was inky black and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The night had cooled rapidly, even though it was still September in the South. The dog days slip away quickly after dark in the mountains. Orion had risen and that always makes me smile. That constellation has looked essentially the same to human eyes for longer than there have been human eyes and whenever I looked at it I felt this weird sensation deep in my chest, like somewhere a musical note had been played that resonated with some obscure detail of my being. To look at Orion and see something of note is to share an experience with literally countless generations of humankind. Looking up becomes a way to sense all the unbroken history stretched out behind us no matter who we are or when we are or were.

We sat down on the old bench my mother keeps trying to get roses to grow behind. Brandon had walked in silence beside me the whole way out there. I didn't need to look back to know already that at least one of my parents would be standing in the kitchen, possibly in the dark, watching us and wondering whether we were okay. I eased into the seat but Brandon sat heavily and his face was as shadowed as the bottom of a well. He put his hands over his face, then leaned his elbows on his knees, bent forward, and I resisted the urge to reach over and put an arm around his shoulders.

Then I wondered why on earth I was resisting, and though he flinched at my first touch he then sagged and gave in to being offered a molecule of comfort. After a few long seconds of this he finally lifted his face. He didn't look at me but he did look slightly in my direction, head turned a few degrees, eyes searching the darkness for a lot of nothing.

"It's my father," he finally said. I didn't say a word, not now. "He's why all this is a problem." Brandon sighed. "Well, he's how Strickland got me under his thumb. The coach, last year – I had a magazine in my gym bag. You know the kind. Stupid, I know, and it's so old-school, but my dad and I share a computer and magazines don't have browser histories." He shrugged. "I thought a magazine would be safer. So, I had a magazine that I bought in Asheville and I didn't realize it was in my bag and the bag was open and to be honest I think the coach searched my bag." He shrugged. "Anyway, he wanted to throw me off the team. He went to Strickland and busted me for having 'adult material' on school property. Strickland spent a few seconds flipping through the magazine and then looked at the coach with this..." Brandon trailed off and shook his head. "This *look*. He told the coach that he couldn't throw me off the team. I'll never forget what he said, too. 'We can't throw him off the team just for being gay, Hal. Find something to do with him but he stays on the team. I'll handle disciplining him, that's my job. You coach football, that's your job.' I got the feeling that there was more going on there. The body language they had was all angry and resentful. I spend a lot of time watching receivers and defenders and linemen and how they move to try to understand what they're thinking, you know?" Brandon actually did look at me now, and I nodded quickly, just twice. I didn't say anything for fear he would stop. "They hated each other. I could tell that right away. Strickland was the one with all the power, I could tell that, too. God, they hated each other. Strickland was like a cat with more mice than he knew what to do with. So anyway, he sends the coach back to the locker room and I'm in there alone with him and he says, after staring at his desk for a few seconds, 'Mr. Nguyen, did you know your father and I are acquaintances?' I had never heard him talk like that. I guess I hadn't been in trouble much, maybe never. So, he says that and I shook my head and he says, 'I've heard your father speak on the topic of homosexuality. I don't think he'd be very pleased to learn of this.' I told him something, I don't know, something like 'no sir' or whatever, and then he said, 'I think I know a way we can save him from ever having to hear about this matter.' Christ, Scott, I thought he was going to ask me to have sex with him." Brandon visibly shuddered and, I realized, so did I.

"He didn't? Because that's sure as shit what it sounds like to me." I still had an arm around him and I very explicitly did not remove it but I was not ready to be one step removed from Vice Principal Strickland in the sex diagram of North Shepherd High School.

Brandon shook his head. "No. He said, 'I need a favor. Specifically, I need a way to extract a favor from someone in specific, someone whom I think you would perhaps find agreeable as a friend and confidant.' Strickland has this smile, you know, where he thinks he's got you cornered and he's holding all the cards, and he gave me that smile. 'Do you know West Slade?' I did, I mean, who didn't,

right? But I said I didn't. 'You're lying, but perhaps you're taking my meaning too deeply. Do you know who he is? I need something from him, Brandon, and I know the perfect way to get it.'" Brandon gulped back some amount of bile, obviously embarrassed – no, humiliated – and ashamed. "He told me to seduce West and..." He trailed off again. "He wanted me to get the names of other gay kids. You know, get them from West. I figured he was trying to build a blackmail list. Maybe he would go after them himself. Maybe he would use me to get to them. I don't know what he wanted with them. I didn't really see that it mattered much what he wanted with them, you know? He said if I didn't do it that he would tell my father about the porno mag in my gym bag. He said he 'didn't want to have to make that choice'." Brandon's face twisted and he was suddenly angry for a moment; angry and very bitter. "What a piece of shit."

I wondered whether he meant Strickland or himself or both.

"So, you did it. You got involved with West." I said it rather than asking it. I didn't want to leave room for responses that might be lies. I wanted to deal in absolutes, in certainties, unpleasant though they might be. I couldn't blame him for what he'd done, really, but on the other hand I totally could.

"I hooked up with West, yeah." Brandon sniffled and very gingerly wiped his eyes and cheeks with the cuffs of his letter jacket. "I asked him about other kids, too, and he told me about them." Brandon blinked and looked at me again. "He told me about you. You were the only one he knew of, and you already had a reputation. He'd heard rumors about some other kids – looks he'd caught in the locker room, that kind of shit – but he wasn't some endless stream of blackmail material that I figure Strickland wanted. I tried to milk him for something, anything that I could take back to Strickland, but the harder I worked at it the worse it made me feel. Eventually I stopped, and I told Strickland that West didn't know anybody else, that I was his first, and Strickland didn't like it but he sucked it up and said alright, he'd put me on 'probation'." Brandon made air quotes that dripped with venom. "He said he would leave the porno mag thing lying, you know, but that he'd come back to me when he needed something. He came back to me at the beginning of this year. You were out by then. He didn't need someone to find out you were gay; you'd told everybody yourself. He wanted you under his thumb somehow. I think..." Brandon smiled a little. "I think he's afraid of you, and he wanted you..." Brandon searched my face. "What's the word you used for me? 'Compromised.' I think he wanted you compromised early on. He wanted to put the fear of God in you and get you to stop nosing around so much." Brandon shrugged, and the physical exhaustion of being beaten earlier was starting to catch up with him because he winced noticeably.

"Okay," I said, after a minute of languorous silence in which we both looked at the sky and I let Orion reconnect me to all those who'd been confused before me at any point in human history; all those who'd been misled and found themselves disoriented and befuddled. "So, Strickland uses his position of authority, as the vice principal in charge of disciplinary issues, to... what? To turn those he thinks are valuable into information gatherers?"

Brandon shrugged. "Some of us, yeah, but I get the impression that some people he just milks for their profit potential."

I blinked. "Profit potential?"

Brandon shrugged. "He didn't lay out his operation for me, complete with a diagram and a game map. I just know I'm not the only person he's got in his pocket and that a lot of the kids who get cycled



through in-school suspension are in there as a way to get them into his operation, or because they wanted out of it, or something like that.”

“So, in-school suspension is Vice Principal Strickland’s mafia? And he’s the don?” My eyebrows were climbing ever higher. If he were running some kind of operation like that I can see why he’d want to keep me out but to send a hot boy after me didn’t make a whole lot of sense. I mean, sure, I fell for it, but what would that get him? Confirmation that I was gay wouldn’t serve any purpose that I could possibly imagine. “But why did he send you to get in my pants?”

“He needed someone smart for an operation he’s got going.” Brandon blushed hard, I could see it even in the half-light of a distant security light and the moon above us. “I think that’s part of the payment system he uses, actually. He wants a way to get a bunch of people’s homework basically done for them, or the answers to a bunch of homework so that they can be sold to whoever is willing to buy them, and so he needed a brain to spit all those answers out in a hurry. The guys he’s got by the short and curlies aren’t exactly known for their high GPAs. I... suggested you.”

I blinked.

“I didn’t mean for all this to happen,” he said, and something in the sweep of his hand managed to mean us, his face, none of this, “But I needed to make sure you got interested and stayed interested and I thought, hey, it worked on West, and I knew from West that you could get into some action, and I figured once I got you involved then you, being you, would... do what you do.” He shrugged again.

“And by that you mean that you hoped that once I was caught up I would notice that something was wrong and that I would fix it.”

“Sort of.” He ducked his head in a way that seemed halfway to being an apology and halfway to being an ‘it is what it is’ of body language. “I knew that you would notice that something wasn’t right when guy after guy just asked you for homework answers. I figured you’d get shaken up and off-balance enough to start looking around if I came on strong when it was my turn to get tutored. I figured that I could engineer some way to get you headed to your car at exactly the right time to notice that Buck and Jamal were up to something after hours.”

“So if you knew they were going to break into the chemistry storage room, what were they doing there?”

“That I don’t know,” he said. “I just knew they were up to something and I figured I should put you and them in the same area at the same time and hope nature took its course.” He rocked his head back and forth. “It was sloppy tactics but it was what I had to work with.”

“Did you...” I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair on the right side of his head, careful not to brush any of his bruises or other wounds. “Were you honestly just hoping that I would notice something wasn’t right and get sufficiently pissed off or wound up or curious that I would throw a wrench into things?”

Brandon favored me with a grin that perfectly balanced impishness and innocence. “Yeah. I figured Strickland would buy the idea that you would make a good brain for his operation and that if I coached the guys on how to arouse your suspicion a little bit – I didn’t tell them that’s what they were doing, I just told them that I knew someone who knew you and I knew how they should act to get you to just do their homework for them, no muss, no fuss, get everybody out of the room and home early, you know – that sooner or later something would click. I could always figure out some way to push things to make it sooner if I needed to. And here we are.”

“Ever the strategy gamer, I see.” I arched my eyebrows at him and he shook his head.

“I... yes.” He had the decency to look a little ashamed.

“So if I’m going to fix this, I have to find out everything Strickland is up to and then use one or some or all of those things to bring him down.” I shrugged. “It’s that simple. It’s so very easy to say.”

Brandon shuddered once. “It sounds simple when you say it in so few words, sure, but that’s some scary shit you’re suggesting.”

I gave him a Bitch Please look. “Yet getting me involved in order to do just that was your idea.”

He sighed a little. “I guess so.”

“And here we are.” I smiled at him, looked up at the sky again. “Do you follow astronomy?”

“Not really,” he said. “I wanted to take it as an elective, downtown at the community college, but once you’re in Strickland’s little operation he doesn’t let you have a lot of leash, you know? Anyway, I needed to be signed up for ‘athletics’ to be on the team. I couldn’t quit the team because my dad would ask why and because I’m still kind of hoping that maybe I can make an athletic scholarship happen to somewhere, and I couldn’t tell my dad what was going on because if he finds out I’m gay he’ll fucking stroke out right there on the sidewalk. He’ll just fall down dead of an aneurysm and that’s that.” He shook his head. “I’m so sorry, Scott. But I don’t regret having done this because somebody has to get me out of this and I can’t do it myself. You’re the only person in our school or near it with a reputation for being able to get people out of the shit when they need it. I don’t know how or why, I just know I need that magic right now.” He looked at me. “And I’m not sorry that I got to know you. When I told you that kissing you was the first time I’d ever done it because I wanted to, I wasn’t lying.”

I’d looked back down to meet his eyes and couldn’t resist the gravity of that moment, of that rhetoric. It was the kind of thing I’d spent years of my life waiting to hear another boy say. West was sweet, don’t get me wrong, but he wasn’t the king of pillow talk or seduction. He was a fumbling, nervous kid. Brandon had all the confidence that the reality of his situation should have forbidden. I didn’t know how it worked, or where it came from – though I suspected that sort of suave surety was the domain of anyone who was pretty good at a sport, to be honest, because of the value their culture had put on them for that reason from an early age – but it was working on me. I kissed him long and light, taking tender care around the places where he’d been punched – been punched for nothing greater than trying to get me to solve his problem, the very reason I came to school most days; been punched literally for his relationship to me, whatever that relationship was – and then I sat back.

“No one knows the origin of the Orion myth.” Brandon blinked. I pointed at the sky and turned my face to it. “See those three stars? Those are his belt.” I pointed out the others rapid-fire. “He was a giant and he was supposedly the greatest hunter in all of history. Depending on whom you read, he was the child of some pairing of one of a variety of gods and one of a variety of humans. The details differ, but suffice to say he was kind of a cocky son of a bitch who went looking for trouble. When he found it, he got blinded and then he got healed and then he got cocky again and went back for revenge. That wasn’t what killed him, but it couldn’t have helped. He went hunting with a god and declared that he was going to kill all the creatures on the earth for no other reason than that he could. Someone – another god, or maybe the earth herself – sent a scorpion to stop him and he died from the sting.” I gazed at the stars for a few seconds, then looked at Brandon. “Sound like anyone you know?”

Brandon smirked at me. “A little. Revenge, cocky, does things just because he can.”

"It sounds like both of us," I said. All of a sudden I felt like my heart might explode out of my chest. I felt lightheaded. I felt the way movies said I was supposed to feel if I were a teenager in love. "I'm so glad I met you, Brandon. I'm so glad you decided to get me involved." I reached up and ran my hand around the back of his head, through his short hair. It felt as good as it had looked like it might.

Then we kissed again, and then we climbed the back roof to my room.

**Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Six**

*I'm having a weak moment / a moment that may not end.*

*--The Burning Season, Faith & the Muse*

The problem, as I saw it, was that we had to expose something Strickland had done but we didn't really know what that was yet. Brandon knew that the guys who got cycled through in-school suspension – a surprisingly revolving door, if you paid any attention to who was in there; not quite a school within a school but not quite *not*, either – were usually under Strickland's thumb in some way but he didn't know exactly how. He had suspicions, as did I. Let's face it, there were only so many reasons to want a bunch of detailed and damaging information about students, right? Either they were being blackmailed for money – which almost none of us had in significant quantities – or they were "useful" in some way. Maybe some of them wielded influence in the school; maybe others had access to something valuable other than money. I shuddered to think that he was using any of them – any of us, I had to remind myself, since apparently I was the unknowing brain in some scam involving math homework for a week – for sex.

I filed away my reflexive revulsion at that idea in case it proved useful later.

Brandon didn't like the next idea I had, but it was the only one either of us could come up with: go to some of the people who were probably under Strickland's thumb and ask questions until they buckled or until they had convinced us they weren't involved. I could only think of two people other than us who were almost certainly involved: Lunatic Panelli and Sammy Heath. I knew which one I was willing to approach. I prayed to all the gods in which I had zero belief that I wouldn't wind up on Lunatic Panelli's front door before the weekend was out.

Sammy Heath wasn't someone I knew terribly well, at least not socially. We had seen one another at parties, sure, and we had some business dealings as I'd mentioned but we weren't buds outside of that. He lived with his mother in the house where she had grown up, near the college. It was a nice enough place but I imagined sometimes the drunk frat boys got a little tiring. They tended to radiate out from the campus in waves starting around three in the afternoon most Fridays and they would lap back and forth like waves on the shore of civilization until sometime just north of brunch on Sunday. Anyone within a four block radius of campus stood decent odds of waking up to find one of them sticking halfway out of a shrub at any point during that very long weekend window.

I couldn't just drop in uninvited so first I texted him: *Any chance we could meet for a few minutes? Need to discuss something.* I didn't get an answer right away and when I still hadn't gotten one fifteen minutes later I started to send another that read: *It's about Strickland*, but then I thought better of it. Instead I sent this: *Name your price.* Sammy was a haggler and a half and I hoped that would wake up the part of him that found it irresistible to negotiate a deal.

Five minutes later I got a text back: *Meet at One of the Perks in one hour.* I smiled at Brandon. "We've got one on the hook."

One of the Perks was the local coffee shop downtown. They had branches in a few other towns nearby but the one in Shepherdstown was the one that did the roasting so the place was half full of

complicated machinery built of giant brass funnels and pipes and knobs and the whole place smelled like the inside of the most expensive Mr. Coffee ever made. I didn't even like coffee and I thought it smelled amazing in there. It was like your nose was trying to tell the rest of you to get the fuck out of bed. Brandon and I got there around fifteen minutes early and he bought the first round. I went for tea, he went for espresso and when I made a face he grinned at me. "It makes me feel alive," he said. "It's a hell of a rush."

"That stuff will stunt your growth." I smirked a little.

"The way I see it," he said with a wink, "I wouldn't want anything to get any bigger than it already is anyway. I might scare someone off."

I laughed and the barista was kind enough not to make any snide remarks.

Brandon and I had gotten good and settled by the time Sammy arrived. When he walked in he nodded at me and then at Brandon but then did a bit of a double take. His pace slowed and he strode up to the table. "Hey. Didn't know this was a party."

I shrugged. "You know Brandon already, I assume?"

Sammy looked sidelong at Brandon and then shrugged. "Kind of. Hey, man."

Brandon nodded. "Hey. What can I get you? It's on me."

Sammy sighed heavily. "No such thing as a free lunch or a free soy latte, is there?"

"One soy latte, coming up." Brandon disappeared and Sammy slid into the seat across from me. "So, you two a thing now? I always heard some things. I mean, no offense."

"None taken," I said, and then I stretched back and scratched my stomach. "Funny thing is, I never heard anything. It was all news to me."

"How long have you two been a thing?"

"A couple of days." I shrugged at him. "Long story. Let's get down to business before he gets back."

Sammy tensed a little but tried to relax. "Okay. How can I help? Must be serious if it can't wait until Monday."

I nodded and smiled a little. "There's no way to go about this other than to ask it. Sammy, are you in something deep with someone powerful?"

Sammy blinked. "What?"

I sighed. "Okay, let me try that again. Someone on campus is running an operation involving a lot of the kids – kids like us – who operate just below the water line in the campus environment." I waved a hand at everything in general – me, him, Brandon, the table, whatever – and went on. "I'm a fixer. We all know that. You deal in a... specialized good." Sammy looked around and didn't like me saying that aloud but we weren't near the school so I went on and neither of us pushed the point. "Brandon is..." I searched around for phrasings. "He's in a similar situation. That's all I'll say." I cleared my throat. "Hypothetically, just for the sake of argument, let's say someone were in a position of power and knew that about all of us. Let's say that person were to know basically everything seriously bad that goes on and gets discovered. Let's say that person wanted to turn those skills to their own advantage in some way – maybe they need forgeries done or maybe they just like making people squirm, or maybe something else entirely. If there were such an organization then you would be a natural for inclusion in it. You're a nice guy, you're not violent, you're connected to the school's black market economy and you're smart enough to have plans for what happens after you graduate. You've got enough imagination

to picture two futures: one in which you play along with this person in order to get by and one in which you don't and get turned into an example." I stopped and took a sip of tea. "Am I pretty clear so far?"

Sammy didn't say a word. I took that to mean a yes, or at least that I was free to go on. Sammy was just watching me the entire time, eyes narrowed. I couldn't read anything in there but suspicion and worry; the problem with those is that they push a person to move and whether that happens pretty or ugly all depends on how the person gets pushed.

"Now, let's set aside entirely the list of candidates in terms of what specific individuals might have that kind of time and interest and, most importantly, knowledge. The list isn't very long, but let's forget that. " I waved a hand off at the distance, putting that topic at the center of the conversation by so overtly setting it outside the conversation entirely. "My question is simply this: has someone made you a part of that kind of network of the slightly crooked?"

"I'm no crook and you know it." Sammy's eyes were red all the time but for just a moment they also blazed. I put up both hands in protest.

"I didn't say you were a crook. You are, as we both well know, nothing if not an honest dealer when it comes to business. You have a lot of honor and ethics about what you do and I respect that. However, someone could also really nail you for it if they wanted to. You might be honest in what you do, Sammy, but that doesn't make it legal."

He smiled a little. "Nobody's going to send a teenaged kid to jail for writing a few hall passes."

"You're right," I said, and I smiled back, "But what if they're someone who doesn't need the police to enforce their will? There are plenty of people who could lord this over you without being cops." I shrugged. "But see, that drags us back to the topic of who and I don't want to go there just yet. Let's say... let's say instead that there were some sort of group like that. Some sort of... mastermind." I shrugged. "It's over the top, but let's go with it. If there were, and they approached you and they had power over you in some way, what would you say?"

Sammy licked his lips but he didn't say anything. That latte was taking forever. I smiled more broadly.

"You'd say yes. You're bright. You're going to college to study something you enjoy and you figure one day you'll be making good money and you can fix up your mom's place, meet a nice girl, sprog out a couple of kids and live one version or another of the American dream. Like I said, you've got imagination. You can visualize. Why screw all that up now? Why not just say yes and get on with it and survive?" I clucked my tongue at him. "I'd do the same thing in your position. I'd say yes just to get by and then I'd try to lay as low as I possibly could. I haven't seen you out at your office in a while, Sammy. Almost like you're avoiding your own hole in the wall." I leaned forward a little. "I think the answer to all of this is yes, you are a part of that network and deep down you hate it because all you wanted was to stick it to the man just a little, just one tiny bit, and make a few bucks and buy a little grass along the way and now that's been taken from you and turned into another way to serve the whim of another guy in a cheap suit."

Sammy and I stared into one another's eyes for a long time. His were dark and his pupils tiny. He squinted just a little. He'd spent a couple of years doing almost nothing in his spare time except getting high and staring at a page while he drew fine lines all over it in various elegantly geometric patterns. He was going to need glasses before long, I guessed.

Finally he spoke. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Each syllable fell out and hit the table with a dull thud. He was lying and he wasn’t bothering to hide that he was lying. He didn’t care that I could tell from a mile away. That wasn’t the point – or rather, maybe it was. Maybe telling a terrible lie was Sammy’s way of telling the truth: point away from the truth and let the listener find the negative space behind the words that were spoken.

“Would it help jog your memory if I said that I have a plan to take out the person who’s behind all this?” Sammy sat in stony silence for a moment – stoned silence, perhaps – and finally repeated himself, word for excruciating word:

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That was the problem with talking to Sammy first: he could imagine a world in which he kept his head down and played along and got out just fine and he could also imagine a world in which this blew up in my face and I took down with me anyone who might have whispered in my ear along the way. He could imagine a world where Strickland came down on him like a ton of bricks for saying the wrong thing.

“You’ve been a lot of help, Sammy.” I wasn’t sure whether it sounded sarcastic or sincere, mostly because I wasn’t sure which way I meant it. I fluttered a couple of fingers to give Brandon the sign that he could come back with Sammy’s drink. He reappeared and the drink was in Sammy’s hand and pressed to his lips faster than I could follow with mere human eyes. “We’ve got to go but you know how to reach me if you need to.”

We were out the door and walking down the street to Brandon’s car before we spoke. I considered the meeting to have been, relatively speaking, kind of a bust. “What was his price?” Brandon held a hand to his forehead to shield those perfect eyes from the sun as he glanced over at me.

“He didn’t name one,” I said. “Maybe knowing I’m involved is payment enough. Maybe he’ll show back up with one later.” I shook my head. “I don’t like it when I leave a situation like that.”

“Like what?”

“Open-ended.” I put my hand on the latch to Brandon’s passenger door. “I like knowing where I’m going and how long it will take to get there.” I slipped sunglasses onto my face. “Now let’s talk about how to find Lunatic Panelli.”

Lunatic Panelli, it turned out, was hard to find for a guy who loomed so large in the lives of those of us who spent any time studying the machinery under the skin of our school. We went and talked to Jonas who sold “bath salts” from a huge supply he built up ordering them from the Internet in the prior year but all he could tell us was that he saw Lunatic at lunch most days. We tracked down Marie who sells what she claims is X but is probably just Percocet, whose mother was a renowned popper of pills who had shown up to a couple of PTA events clearly out of her head and would never miss a few pills here or there. Marie said she didn’t know who Lunatic was and I didn’t bother trying to have a serious conversation with her after that. We hit a couple more likely suspects – the girl from band we knew sold acid sometimes and the guy from the golf team who was widely known always to have a case of Milwaukee Beast in the back of his car to parcel out for two bucks a can before football games. We were a school full of industrious youths but none of them seemed to know where to find their dark lord when someone came asking. At one point I mused aloud whether we should track down Rodney, the kid we had all heard could find meth when someone wanted it, but Brandon put the kibosh on that.



"That kid is crazy," he said. "I don't mean because he sells meth, though yeah, there's that. I mean that kid is fucking nuts. You think Lunatic is bad? That kid would cut us for asking what time it is." He shook his head. "Word is he's sampled enough product to be as bad off as anybody who's really hooked. I don't know if it works like that and I don't want to find out first hand but we are not going to talk to Rodney."

I agreed, but I was reluctant. Rodney sounded like trouble and trouble was exactly what I needed to find. I was itching to wrap this shit up and in lieu of a solution, well, trouble sounded like a great way to kill time.

Along the way we ran into Allie and Geoff, surprising both of us (but maybe not such a surprise after all). They were "getting coffee" at a different One of the Perks stores closer to the school. They played it off as a study date but neither of them had a book open or even in sight and I wondered what made them so shy about admitting that they were at the very least circling one another with interest if not intent. They asked to join up and when I told them I hadn't been able to figure out where to meet then Allie smiled wolfishly.

"He goes to the library on Saturdays to use the computer. I've seen him there when I was called in to work on stuff for their computer lab." I arched my eyebrows at her and she shrugged it off. "What," she said, "A small-time kingpin can't have an email account?" She made a face of amused disapproval. "I bet he uses Hotmail but I've never bothered to look."

Brandon had us to the library fifteen minutes later and we saw Lunatic's weirdly unfinished and highly customized crotch rocket out front, propped up incongruously next to the bicycle stand as though one of the cheap Schwinn road bikes had abruptly leveled up. Lunatic's bike had at one time been bright purple, a color that somehow didn't fit with his carefully cultivated image of campy arch-villain, but it had also been shoddily painted over in most places and that somehow fit just right.

Brandon nodded at it and said, "Do you for sure want to do this?"

"Yes," I said, and I tried to set my voice hard but who knows how it came out. "And this time I'm done playing coy and asking questions."

The public library's computer lab was a conference room bisected by a folding divider. On the other side of the divider was a room where various groups – you know, the local basket weaving club and the science fiction writers' circle and fanciers of all sorts of things and types – would hold meetings. Allie had told me that on nights before exams were due at the community college across town the lab would be packed with people trying to study and the meeting room would be full of old guys shouting stories past each other's hearing aids about, I don't know, their model trains. Eventually someone studying would ask the to quiet down and they would, for a little bit, and lather rinse repeat until something boiled over and someone started shouting and the library would have to throw all of them out. She loved those nights. She would volunteer to do the bouncing. Allie was like that, through and through.

Now, on a Saturday afternoon, it was surprisingly sleepy. There were a couple of kids in there looking at porn on one of the computers – Allie had crippled all the nanny software on two specific workstations, for her own purposes, and local kids had eventually figured out the absence of that particular preventive measure – and at the far end, entirely by himself, feet crossed at the ankle with a heel on the lip of the desk next to him, sat Lunatic Panelli. Much to my tremendous and sincere surprise

he had a textbook open in his lap and a bunch of notes spread out in front of him on the table and he seemed to be doing actual, honest to God schoolwork. He didn't look up when we walked in but he did when I threw out the two kids.

I snapped my fingers next to the ear of one of them to get his attention and when his eyes whipped around I said, "Go dig around in your dad's underwear drawer in time-honored tradition, kid. Scram." I was a teenager; he was a pre-teen. I wondered how often Lunatic's associates had done something roughly similar at one point or another; I wondered how many times that had to happen before a reputation formed. It occurred to me that this, right here, might be Lunatic Panelli's office hours, exactly like Allie's and my lunches outside the band room.

The kids scrambled. I didn't close the distance between us but I did stand where I was, thumbs hooked in the pockets of my jeans, head cocked a little to one side. Lunatic Panelli used a bookmark – an actual bookmark made of brightly colored construction paper with something printed on it, doubtless something distressingly and incongruously cheerful – to mark his place and closed the book. Then he smiled, like a cat at the back of a mouse's cupboard. "Good afternoon, Scotty. And also to you, Brandon." He raised both eyebrows and wagged them. "My, my. Won't tongues wag?"

Later, much later, I reflected how nice it was to live in a town and in a decade in which I could show up to talk to the school's resident criminal mastermind and not worry about being actually beaten up for being the gay kid in school. There were places and times where that still happened as a matter of routine. I was lucky and I didn't have any idea how lucky. And okay, technically now I was *a* gay kid in school rather than *the* gay kid.

I nodded at Lunatic then went straight to business. "I know that Strickland has some kind of big operation going and I want to know what it is."

Lunatic Panelli lowered his eyebrows and then raised his right one again, very slowly, and I immediately knew that I had fucked something up. I should have approached him as an equal. I should have tried to push Sammy Heath around and I should have tried to treat Lunatic with something like respect, but that kind of thing was hard for me sometimes. I respected Sammy as a fellow survivor at the fringes and I loathed Lunatic Panelli as a taker of advantages and a general vulture. He started to sit up and take his feet off the desk but then he stopped and turned it into adjusting his position in the seat instead. "Is that so?"

I tried to salvage it by shrugging and playing casual. "I think, anyway, and I figure that if anyone in our school knows about that it's got to be you. You're the top of the heap in everything I can think of."

He smiled a little again. Christ, his mood could turn on a dime. I wondered how he'd earned the nickname. I tried not to shudder at the things I could imagine him doing to someone on a whim. "Everything except the race for prom king."

I chuckled a little and scratched my jaw. "That's a booby prize if ever one there was. I wouldn't bear winning it as an accomplishment; I'd wear it as a shame."

Lunatic snorted a little, just once, and I had gotten close enough to see the cover of the book when he turned it over and set it aside as though to hide it.

"Accounting?" It was a reflex; I'd seen it, I was curious and I ask questions when I'm curious. I blushed a little and hoped to God I didn't sound surprised in a way that was insulting.

Lunatic grimaced just slightly. "Yeah. What about it?"

I stuck my hands back in my pockets and tried to look... small, I realized. I tried to look *small*, as though it would help me evade the notice of a predator. "I know some people who have taken it. They say it's a very challenging class. I decided I couldn't hack it. Is that a new version of the book? I don't recognize it." The prayer kept going: *oh God, in whom I in no way believe, please let him hear the flattery in the first part of that statement.*

He did. He smiled again. "It's pretty tough, but I figured it was worth my time." He paused and then offered this, out of nowhere, and I took it as an olive branch. "When a class is really worth my time I do the work myself. Accounting is something I hope is worth my time in the long run. I'd like to have enough money one day to need more than fingers and toes to count it all."

I nodded. "Wouldn't we all? I just need the knuckles of one finger, and not all of them at that."

He laughed once, a single exhaled syllable of uncertain mirth, and then he said, "Strickland, eh? What makes you think that?"

Finally. "Lots of things. Apparently he was trying to find out the names of as many gay kids as he could, for uncertain reasons, but honestly it's not that hard to assume some degree of blackmail would be the result. I think he's running a homework scam. I think he's cycling kids through in-school suspension as part of a little machine of criminality he has going. I think he got Jamal and Buck to steal chemicals from the science labs' store room and that some bungle on their part led to the fire."

"That wasn't something they were doing for Strickland," Lunatic said. He was all business all of a sudden. "That was something they had as an idea of their own." He smiled slightly. "They were trying to think... creatively." A shrug. "They aren't great at thinking creatively. They thought if they stole enough chemicals that someone would know how to turn them into crystal meth or something else more profitable than a bunch of jugs of bullshit."

I blinked. That was not the answer I had expected. That was a lot more than I had expected and at the same time totally different. "They were going to try to make crystal meth?"

"Yeah, they wanted to find someone who could." Lunatic looked at me like I might be a little slow. "They asked around about it, but nobody knows how to make it. Everyone assumes Rodney knows how to make it but he's hooked into an operation that's already established and he's just distribution anyway. He wasn't interested in getting gummed up with a couple of losers who have one working lobe between them."

"I... and they came up with that on their own?"

"Yeah. Strickland's been putting the pinch on them for cash and they thought they'd be able to come up with some in a hurry if they went that route. It's faster than jacking car stereos and old VCRs from bad neighborhoods, anyway." He coughed. "They wanted to bring in some green in a rush and they thought that was a sure score."

"Strickland wants money from them?" I just kept blinking at him. So far it was sort of aligning with what I'd thought but it was also disappointingly simple; no, it was common. I wanted something darker than simple greed. I wanted scandal and, okay, blackmail is scandalous, but I wanted something worthy of an episode of *Law & Order*. I didn't want something that would barely rate the B plot in a very special episode of something even more insipid. Things were starting to fall into place, though: his membership to a local golf club, which is never cheap; the brand-whore golf shirts; the inexplicably new car he drove. A vice principal made more than a teacher, sure, but they weren't rich and I'd never heard that he was secretly married to a millionaire. How much did he think he could get out of teenagers,

though? It wasn't like we had big allowances. It wasn't like we were some private school full of little Richies Rich. I decided to talk rather than think. "At the end of the day, we're kids. We don't have money."

"He doesn't need much. Well, normally he doesn't. He needs just enough to pay off a gambling debt. He can make payments over time, he can come up with it in waves, he can do whatever he needs to do as long as he keeps making payments. He's usually pretty good at picking winners so he never needs much, just some seed money to put down at the beginning of a season and then he can more or less just keep playing that pile and cash out a little at a time. If it were cards and he were in a casino then he'd get thrown out on suspicion of having figured out a system that works but a smart bookie knows to have a few of those guys around. They're good advertising. When someone is able to win more or less consistently then they give others the impression that they can beat the odds, too. Strickland also keeps money in circulation and that's always important. And, well, sooner or later he loses. He lost big over the summer. Now he's way behind and he needs to make it up. Normally he just puts the bite on the kids in in-school to do minor stuff for him because he doesn't need much and because it isn't actually all about the cash; it's about the power, too. He likes having people under his thumb. He likes having someone to push around. It's easy for him to be the big man to a kid. He likes that feeling." Lunatic shrugged it off like a lousy weather report. "Anyway, the gambling stuff is bigger than the school. You're a smart kid, Owens. You know your shit and you've fixed a lot of problems for a lot of people. You're a little respected and a little feared and that's more than most kids can say. I've got to give you props for that; trust me, it can be a challenge to cultivate and maintain that status. This is bigger than your turf, though. It isn't your jurisdiction." He gave a tiny shrug, just his hands unfolding and spreading apart from one another for a second before coming back together in his lap.

"What if he's inadvertently made it my problem?" I lifted my chin a little. I didn't like being told to back off a problem. I've never liked being told to back off. Backing off isn't really in my instruction set.

"How'd he do that?" Lunatic wrinkled up his eyebrows in something like concern, sympathy and distress. He was just a big old bleeding heart, one problem child talking to another.

"He got someone involved that I care about." I shrugged with one shoulder. "He tried to wrap me up in a homework for sale scheme. He got in my face to try to scare me off. He pointed two cameras at me and my best friend." I licked my lips. "He tried to limit my turf by building a kind of fence around me, and I don't like fences unless I'm looking for something to climb."

Lunatic listened to this and looked away for a few moments, then back. "Owens, like I said, I have to give you props. Just keep in mind who this is that you're talking about. The guy owns half the bad kids in school. No, probably more like two thirds. He's nothing for you to trifle with on the casual. You might do better choosing to suck it up and go home this time." He mimicked my shrug, giving it back to me. "Your call, of course."

"Thanks for the advice, Panelli." I sighed just a little. "I genuinely appreciate it."

He nodded and gave me that small smile again. "Anytime."

I called around and organized the group: I needed a war party quick. We got together in Allie's basement and together we made a plan.

Sunday, we did nothing because Allie needed all day to prep. Monday, we did nothing because I needed to think things through. I "tutored" some kid with a round face and a big round nose after

school, by which I mean I did his trigonometry homework and handed it to him without complaint or comment, then left. Strickland was there but we didn't exchange any pleasantries. I did my best to look defeated but that isn't my usual wardrobe and it itched against my skin.

I knew Strickland would probably know by now that I was onto him; I'd asked around too much for it not to get back one way or another. I wanted him to sweat. I wanted to leave him wondering.

Tuesday we made our move. Tuesday there was a pep rally and most of the school would be abandoned.

**Tricks Up My Sleeve – Chapter Seven**

*Nothing's been the same since the chain of events.*

*--Myth Takes, !!!*

At quarter to three in the afternoon, Brandon and I were hanging out in the hallway near Allie's and my auxiliary locker. I looked at my phone's outer face to check the time. "Any time now," I said.

"I still don't know if this is a good idea," Brandon said. His cheeks were flushed and I'd swear I saw a bead of sweat on his forehead. He wasn't used to this kind of thing but I was all about it. I practically had a custom outfit. I was wearing a t-shirt that was tighter than normal and jeans that were slim instead of my usual fit. My backpack was in my real locker. I didn't want anything loose or covered in straps that could be used to slow me down: nothing to be grabbed at or to catch on anything. I wanted to move like the wind, which was not my normal mode of movement. Brandon would be able to hold his own, I knew, and I realized it would be up to me to keep up, not the other way around.

In the distance we heard a car alarm go off: MWOOP MWOOP mweeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEE mweeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEE. We stood there for long seconds, counting through fifteen of them, then I detached from the locker and walked down the hall to the administrative office. The secretary was sitting where she always sat, her impossible nails frozen in the air over her keyboard as she squinted uncertainly in the direction of the parking lot.

"Hey," I said, getting her attention. "Do you know who drives the green Toyota? It has an alarm that's going off."

"Oh, good grief," she sighed and she struggled a little to get out of the chair in a delicate hurry. "That's my car! Did someone hit it?"

I shrugged in the universally practiced way of slacker teenagers throughout the universe. "It's lighting up and making noises?"

She made a little tscking noise in response to my obvious stupidity. "I'll be right back," she announced to no one though I imagine she meant it for me. "Just hang on." A purse appeared in the crook of her elbow and she walked a staccato out on heels inspired by her nails.

I smiled and nodded at Brandon. "OK, grab the files."

Thirty seconds later, Brandon came barreling out of Strickland's office with an armload of manila folders. "Here they all are," he said, and I gave him the thumbs-up from the door to the room full of security cameras. With the other hand, already raised, I yanked the fire alarm. Strobes fired from the ceiling corners of every room and from mounted klaxons in the center of the hallway and a shrieking alert, like a knife to the ears, bleated shrilly in syncopation with the lights.

Brandon ran straight for the door but I stopped to wedge an old eraser into the door latch so that it wouldn't shut and by the time I made it into the hallway then Strickland was rounding a corner and headed our way. He couldn't help but see Brandon standing there holding the files, the open door to Strickland's own office and the absent secretary. He took it all in and pointed at me, foam flecking at the corners of his mouth as he shouted, "Stop right where you are, you fucking faggot thief!"

Brandon and I ran out the doors and down the sidewalk to Geoff's waiting Civic. It took me a second to notice, but Geoff was wearing what looked like actual driving gloves and a safety helmet. He

looked like he was about to race a car in a silent movie. That was actually kind of the idea, though, so I filed it away and cut around the back of his idling Civic to yank the passenger door open.

Geoff's Civic is, I should note, not a thing of beauty. It is kind of a piece of junk when you just look at it. There's a dented quarter panel and one of the doors isn't the right color and another of the doors isn't really totally the right shape anymore and none of that matters to Geoff because under the sorrow of that off-putting exterior is the heart and body of a monster. Lots of kids spend money making their little import cars look like street racers but Geoff had actually done it. His car didn't look good because he'd spent every penny over the last year and a half turning it into a racing machine under the hood, where it counted. There was no spoiler, no weird car bra thing, none of that stuff. It didn't have paint in some places. It did, however, have a top of the line engine that Geoff had tweaked himself and a racing suspension that meant it could practically do leaping somersaults down the highway. When Geoff landed in in-school suspension for drag racing in the parking lot it had only encouraged him.

That's why we asked Geoff to drive.

Brandon dove into the back seat and I slammed into the passenger seat a nanosecond behind him. Geoff was burning rubber before I had the door shut and I scrambled to get a seatbelt around me in some fashion. "Go, he's behind us."

"Where are we going?"

I didn't know whether it was Geoff or Brandon who had spoken and I said, "I don't know or care. We just need to keep him distracted for a while."

If all went according to plan then Allie was, right that moment, slipping into the administrative office and closing the door behind her.

The thing about crooked vice principals with BMWs is that they have BMWs and no matter what model of that car you buy, no matter how fat and squat it is and how much it looks like a sports coupe that's gone soft in its middle age, it's still fast. Faster than a souped up Civic? No, but certainly able to keep pace through college town traffic. Our goal was to eat up five minutes without getting arrested or attracting the police, which is really easy and really fucking difficult when you stop and think about it, and at the three minute mark we'd had enough close calls and slid sideways through enough yellow lights that I knew we needed to do something other than just hotrod around town all day.

"We're headed to the park. The one – Brandon, what's its name, the one off of MLK?"

"I don't know, does it have a name?" Brandon was being thrown around the back seat like a baby doll we didn't love very much and he was busy trying to pull himself out of the foot well behind the driver's seat when he answered. "Why do we need to know its name?"

"*I know which park you're talking about,*" Geoff thundered, and then he signaled abruptly for a turn he took at a steep angle.

Strickland wasn't getting shaken off, but I thought I had a handle on what was about to happen – we'd have a little standoff and then we'd throw in the second wrench – when the second wrench got thrown in for us: a purple motorbike pulled alongside out of nowhere and the full helmet didn't prevent us from figuring out that Lunatic Panelli was driving it. He was chasing us, too, all of a sudden, and with one free hand he made a little gun-pop motion; very, very not good.



"What's he doing here? Why is he doing that?" Geoff's face was set and his eyes were locked on the road but he was that aware of his surroundings. He hadn't at all sounded even a little hysterical. I had a feeling Allie was going to be super into this later.

"He's the one we're really after," I said over the noise of the motorcycle and the car's engine roaring at us through the cheap dashboard and the tires protesting another too-quick turn. "Lunatic Panelli's the one who's really in charge."

Brandon was very quiet back there, and as we rounded the corner to the parking lot of the park – the name flashed by us as we entered: OLSEN PARK – and I smiled to myself. Good, he had known all along, and he had trusted me to figure it out.

It felt to me like we caught a little air on our way into the parking lot but the crash of coming back down never quite happened. Geoff's jaw was as tight as a snare drum under his otherwise generously-apportioned face and I was crazy impressed. The parking lot was only so large, though, and Geoff pulled a perfect J-turn to whip us around and point us back at the entrance. Lunatic rode up and skidded to a sideways stop in front of us and Strickland's BMW crunched its undercarriage over the same hump we'd just taken as he came in last in our little derby.

"Let me talk," I said, and then I climbed out of the car. Brandon came behind me, holding the huge, unwieldy stack of file folders. Geoff stayed in the driver's seat, engine idling, one hand on the wheel and another on the gear shifter. I'd never seen him squint with such tremendous purpose. Lunatic Panelli dropped the kickstand on his purple crotch rocket and swung off it with tremendously sexy ease. He was a monster, yes, but he was a hot monster.

Strickland ambled out of his BMW and walked over to join us. His face was purple with rage and he looked from Panelli to me. Panelli started to open his mouth but Strickland beat him to the punch. "Give me back whatever you took from my office."

I held the stack like a girl holds school books: up high, against my chest, like the armor they were. "You know what I stole. You know damn well." I smirked a little. "And you're not going to get them back just by asking."

Panelli returned the curl of my lips. "Oh, who thinks he's tough now that he's got a boyfriend on the football team?" A knife appeared out of nowhere, opened with a click; Panelli started to clean his fingernails with it. "Give the principal whatever it is he wants."

"You probably don't know what they are, do you?" I smiled more honestly now. "I told you Strickland was trying to dig up information on kids who might have something to hide, kids who might be vulnerable. You were right that it was for blackmail purposes, at least some of the time, but I doubt he even knows exactly what he would do with it himself; he can't if he isn't sure who would be swept up in that kind of operation. He needs dirt, though, because as you said it's how he keeps people under his thumb. I'm guessing it's how he's kept you sort of under his thumb for the last, what, four years? He's made sure you've flunked time and again so that you and your vast network – for high school, anyway – can stay within easy reach for a touch here and there." I nodded my head in Strickland's direction. "It might not have occurred to you that he would have actual files. He's the Vice Principal in charge of discipline. When people say 'your permanent record,' they mean the files he keeps in his office." I gestured with the stack. "You think you aren't in here somewhere? You think you're just going to walk off scot free when you graduate in June?"

“Don’t listen to this little fairy,” Strickland growled at Panelli. “He doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.”

Panelli wasn’t sure whether I did or not. His eyes were tiny slits, almost closed, and his knife had cleaned the same fingernail three times in a row now. “Go on,” he said, and he didn’t give any indication of whom he meant. I took the opening and ran with it.

“You’ve been running every underground operation in the school for four or five years, Lunatic. You have to graduate this year or you don’t graduate at all because the county won’t let you register again. You’re turning twenty one next summer. You won’t be able to register for classes again. At first, staying around for years was your idea, though, wasn’t it?” I cocked my head a little to one side. “You figured, why give up a good thing? You were probably widely feared by tenth grade, I’m guessing. I wouldn’t know, that was way before my time or his or his.” I nodded again to mean Brandon and Geoff. “In fact, I doubt there’s anyone in the school who is a student and knows exactly how long you’ve been around. You’ve elevated yourself to the status of fixture and everyone just knuckles under the second you come calling – every petty pot dealer, every forger, every jackass with a cousin who knows a guy who can score acid by next weekend, every junior varsity dipshit who thinks he knows chemistry – they all just give in and hand over what you ask because, from what they can tell, that is how it has been *forever* and that totally works for you.” I shrugged. “And why not? It’s easy money with very little risk. But not *zero* risk.”

I shifted the weight of the stack in my arms and I could see in Strickland’s eyes a kind of hunger to get them back. I kept that stack in front of me, shifting it around in my arms, keeping them both focused on the bait.

“At first, Strickland was perfectly happy to do whatever needed to be done – write ups, fake disciplinary papers, whatever it took – to keep you getting busted back down a year so you could stick around. That all changed this year, though, didn’t it? When he got the papers from the county stating that this was your last chance? I’m guessing you got sent something and he got sent something. It was probably automatic. There probably isn’t anyone at the county office who’s even bothered to read that letter and it got sent, what, weeks ago? Before, you had Strickland eating out of your hand, but not anymore. Now the tables were turned.”

“How exactly...” Strickland was a little short of breath. He was so angry a part of me was worried he’d just have a stroke on the spot – but only part of me. “How exactly did this little punk have me eating out of his hand?”

I saw zero change in Panelli’s face when he was called a punk and all that told me was how good Panelli was at controlling his expression. He’d have made a wicked poker player. “He’s your bookie,” I said. “It’s simple. He’s actually good with numbers. He even likes them, I think. He’s taking an accounting class and spending his Saturday afternoons studying for it at the public library. There’s no one else I can think of who makes a better candidate to be the bookie whom you owe big-time for a bad bet this summer. All along, he’s been letting you float the occasional loss and be his business mascot in return for a blind eye and plenty more years at North Shepherdstown High but then this summer you got in so deep he couldn’t just look the other way for a while without other customers finding out and ceasing to take him seriously – lots of people know how you’re doing or the mascot thing doesn’t work. You were in to him for, I’m guessing, thousands. It’s not the world’s biggest gambling debt by any stretch but it’s more than you’ve got handy since you probably only play with money you’ve kept off the books the

entire time. If you were to start dipping into the old Roth IRA to pay him back then the wife might ask, or your financial advisor, or your lawyer, or whoever. So, you owed him big and you had the one thing you knew he likewise needed: the ability to get him out of high school the nice way. You got together and you worked out a deal: Lunatic starts transitioning his business to you and at the end of the year you make sure he walks, maybe even with honors. He forgives the debt and you give him his walking papers. Nice and neat, but you got too greedy. You couldn't just settle for the management fast track. You tried to take control and you had this idea where people would get in-school suspension and then I would have to tutor them and then someone in the operation – maybe Buck and Jamal for all I know – would sell that homework for a few bucks a pop. It was chump change but it was better than nothing and you thought it was a way to show Panelli that you didn't need him anymore. Maybe you were trying to give him the strong arm and help him towards the door a little early. Maybe you were trying to prove that you didn't need him for ideas on how to manipulate people and commit small crimes. Maybe you were just tired of staring at each other over the carcasses of a gambling debt and an academic career."

I shrugged again and shifted the stack. Leon hadn't said anything in a nice little while and Strickland's eyes had only darted to me occasionally before going back to the stack.

"So," I went on, "I'm guessing these are the blackmail files. These are the records you've accumulated on people in Lunatic's operation over the years and the people you could dig up yourself ever since. Is Leon Panelli in here? You bet your ass he is. What if, once he had his diploma, he decided to gin up a story about how the big mean principal took terrible advantage of him and made him do horrible things? Tsk. No leaving that out there to hang you, eh? You wanted enough dirt tying Panelli to enough shit that you could take him out anytime in the future, or at least until the statutes of limitations lapsed on the dirt you've got in here. Some of them aren't crimes – most of them – but a few of them are and those all somehow involve Panelli. It wasn't just us queer kids you wanted to pick on: you wanted to pick on him, too. That was what gave me the initial idea, actually, when Panelli so accurately described you as getting your kicks from being the big man to a vulnerable child. That sounded to me like the voice of experience. He knew how you operated because you were a part of his operation and transitioning into having one of your own. You wanted some insurance, and you wanted something you could lord over him if you ever got the chance. I haven't been through these files, obviously, but I'm betting the name on the biggest one starts with the letter 'P'. I bet he's been working on this a while. Look at the knife thing from last spring, Panelli. If he were a loyal partner or operative, why did he bust you for the knife thing? He busted you because he was already starting to build the insurance file."

Panelli looked at Strickland and his face was horribly blank. Strickland, on the other hand, was visibly sweating. Neither of them said anything, so I kept talking before anyone decided to fill the silence with knives.

"So here's the deal I'm offering," I said. Their two sets of eyes turned from each other to me. "Panelli goes away. Do whatever you have to do, Strickland. Have his grades from last year changed, have his grades from this year rigged, whatever you do, do it. He doesn't have to show up to school again, ever. If he does, he's trespassing. He gets his wings and you never get to hold that over him again." I could see Panelli liked that and Strickland didn't. Panelli hated it a little, too. I addressed the next bit to Strickland. "Panelli forgives your gambling debts entirely, zeroes you out, and you find a new bookie. Extra bonus, you both know this means he gives up his operation ahead of schedule. It's all yours, starting five minutes ago. You shake hands like a couple of grown-ups and that's that. His

insurance that you'll never use the file you've built up is that I burn it right here, right now." Strickland blinked. Panelli smiled a little.

"How do you know I don't have copies somewhere?" Strickland tried to sound tough, tried to use his big man talking to a kid voice, but it didn't work anymore. It never had, really; not on me, anyway. I think that's part of why he hated me so much.

"Because you came running when we pulled the fire alarm. The first fire made you jumpy. The threat of another made you come tearing to the office to make sure you saved your precious dirt before the fire or firemen or sprinklers or insurance investigators or anybody else could possibly get to them and muck everything up. Also, to be honest, because you thought deleting a picture off my phone made the picture go away. There's something about the digital world you don't get. Real, paper copies printed on good old-fashioned dead trees, though, that's something you can get behind. Don't feel bad, Strickland, it's not uncommon in your generation." I tried to wipe the hint of a grin off my face but it was painted on.

Panelli didn't hesitate or bat an eyelash. "Agreed."

Strickland took a breath and held on in case it had any good ideas. It didn't. "What about the rest of the files?"

I wagged a finger from around the files. "One thing at a time; are you in on this deal with Panelli?"

Strickland took another to keep the first one company and still came up empty. Finally, after a couple of heartbeats that never showed up, he nodded. "Agreed."

Brandon had the lighter fluid and matches out of his pockets in a second. I dug out the fattest file, checked the name and tossed it on the ground behind me. Brandon had it doused before it had settled in place and it was a pile of flames a second after that.

Panelli put the knife away. "Good doing business with you, Owens. See you around."

"Don't strain your eyes looking," I said. "Good luck in whatever comes next, Leon."

Panelli turned, swung a leg over the bike, cranked it and was gone, just like that.

Now it was just Strickland and me. He hadn't shaken hands with Panelli but I'd take what I could get.

"What about the rest of the files?" Strickland didn't bother to hide his loathing. His voice was a low growl.

"I keep them," I said. He blinked again. "These aren't the real files anyway." I turned around and dropped them all into a pile on top of the burning papers from a moment before. Brandon gave the can of lighter fluid a squeeze and the whole thing went up. I tsked at him. "Safety first, babe." He winked. I smiled and turned back to Strickland, who had gone very white. "You were so paranoid about the files, I figured, that you'd be too worried to stop and wonder how we got them all so fast. While we've been out here, creating chaos and keeping you distracted, one of my other allies has been stealing the real files. They're mine now. I get to use them how I see fit, including as evidence of your own corruption. Don't pretend there aren't notes in there, Strickland. Don't pretend that anyone who sees the kinds of information you were gathering and tracking on specific students won't look an awful lot like something that isn't any good even if the end result is a little vague still. West Slade never hurt a fly but you probably have a file on him still, just in case; just because you enjoy having little files." I clucked my tongue at him disapprovingly. "Trophies are understandable, sure, but they're... untidy."

"You can't do that," he said, voice strangled. "I'll bust you for breaking and entering. I'll involve the police. You pulled a fire alarm, you broke into my office, you stole student records. There are a hundred ways to get you for that and I don't mean the school. I mean the law."

I gave him a snort that didn't bother to hide its derision. "Please. I also have some juicy bits off the security cameras by now, Strickland. You ever touch me, bust me or call me anything other than 'Mr. Owens' again and a lot of questionable stuff washes up on the doorstep of the county administration. There will be plenty of people willing to talk about the things you made them do, too. See, I figure sooner or later some of these kids will get themselves arrested and when that happens the law will look for someone they can be used to finger. That's how it works: they bust one person in an illegal operation and use them to bust someone else, and then use *them*, and so on, until there's no one left to bust. I am sure it can be arranged to have you be that last figure, the one they wind up cuffing on the evening news. Actually, to be honest, I consider it inevitable. I won't have to make it happen, Strickland; sooner or later it will happen on its own; if you leave me alone you just buy a little more time and since that's the best you've got, you'll take it. In the meantime, I've got footage of an attack on Brandon by a couple of your goons. I've got friends who were pulled into your weird little mafia against their will who will be only too happy to get out by ratting on you. Your days as a high school don are over, Strickland, and your files are my insurance policy and I do understand the digital age. By now they're being fed through the photocopier in the office and that is also a scanner. I'll have copies tucked in so many places online you won't want to touch me for fear of how many logins and passwords might tumble out of my mouth the second I get in front of someone who could care." I wagged a finger at him again. "No, you're done, and we're done, and that's that. And if you don't live up to your end of the bargain with Panelli then I use what I've got to take you down. Don't think you'll be able to talk your way out of being recognized as the organizer of these files, either. You have a distinctive hand, Strickland. I'm sure Principal Flynn will recognize it in any notes you made in any of these files. I'm sure a reporter from the Town Herald could be convinced to take an interest and at worst they would get to print a story that there are allegations and you won't cooperate with them even to attempt to disprove them. I don't have to prove anything. A public accusation that you were running a blackmail and plagiarism ring in the school won't even have to be proven to destroy your career depending on how you react." I shrugged. "It's that simple. I have the files, and you don't, and you're going to get back in your car and drive back to the school because Flynn and the rest of the faculty and everybody else are going to wonder where the fuck you are when the fire department tells them that someone pulled that alarm and it becomes a disciplinary issue. They are probably starting to wonder about that..." I checked my phone. "Right now."

He blinked at me again.

"Let me spell it out: there's someone, right now, walking through the crowd asking where you are. How long before that question gets posed to your boss?"

Strickland was a shade of sickly green and angry red that I don't ever want to see on another human face. "You think you've got all the cards, don't you?"

I shrugged at him and smiled. "Until the next hand, yes."

He didn't say a word. He climbed in his car and he drove slowly away. He didn't look back. I was right. I had him. It would only be for now, sure, and he would figure out some way to come at me and we both knew it, but it bought me today.

That was the best I could get and I'd take it.

Later that night, when Allie and I stood in my back yard and used my parents' charcoal grill to burn all the files, I told her about Geoff's driving and she made me tell it a second time right away. She never even asked why I was giving up all that juicy information in the files. She knew: those files were the answers to a lot of problems and I wouldn't be happy just finding an answer. Neither of us would be. We both had to make our own answers, find trouble our own ways rather than have it handed to us. Those were the rules of the game we liked to play and neither of us was done playing it yet.