

2016-01-01

# Meet Me at the Liberty Tree: Book I

Aaron J. Romano-Meade

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [aromanomeade@gmail.com](mailto:aromanomeade@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Romano-Meade, Aaron J., "Meet Me at the Liberty Tree: Book I" (2016). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 945.  
[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/945](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/945)

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

MEET ME AT THE LIBERTY TREE: BOOK I

AARON JOSEPH ROMANO-MEADE

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

---

José de Piérola, Ph.D., Chair

---

Jeff Sirkin, Ph.D.

---

Joshua Fan, Ph. D.

---

Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Aaron J. Romano-Meade

2016

MEET ME AT THE LIBERTY TREE: BOOK I

by

AARON JOSEPH ROMANO-MEADE

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2016

## Table of Contents

	Page
Table of Contents .....	iv
Critical Preface.....	1
Epigraph .....	16
Chapter One.....	17
Chapter Two .....	42
Chapter Three .....	72
Chapter Four.....	96
Chapter Five.....	116
Summary of the Entire Narrative.....	139
Bibliography.....	144
Curriculum Vita.....	146

## Critical Preface

In his book *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*, Orhan Pamuk writes that “the center of a novel is a profound opinion or insight about life, a deeply embedded point of mystery, whether real or imagined.” This “center” should ultimately bind the novel together into a coherent whole. However, “the center” is not predetermined from the outset, rather it “gradually emerges” as the author writes the novel.

This thesis is only about the first forty percent of the novel *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree*, so while I suspect that “the center” of the novel will continue to develop as I keep writing, at this point I do know that “the center” of the novel revolves around the individual’s relationship to the state, particularly how an individual can effect change in the state and to what degree an individual is morally obligated to participate in the governing of the state, especially in a representative Democracy like the United States. If a government is the embodiment of a people, what do those people do when they feel that the government does not represent them? How far are they ethically obligated to go? In our representative democracy how much responsibility does an individual have to try to change government policies they don't believe in?

The novel takes place in Boston, Massachusetts between October of 2024 and May of 2025, as the United States recovers from the Second Great Depression. While the main protagonist, Branden Walsh, is better off than most people and could choose to keep his head down and live a nice, peaceful life, he doesn't. He believes that the municipal, State and Federal governments are corrupt and do not represent the interests of the people, so he decides that he must do something about this, and like Henry David Thoreau, he feels the need to follow his principles and stand up for what he believes to be right, even at the expense of his own safety and freedom.

## Origins

The origins of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* lay predominantly in four disparate events that coalesced in my mind over a period of years to provide the foundation for this narrative. I lived in Kazakhstan from 2006 to 2008 and the country was just starting to pull itself out of the economic collapse following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. After witnessing firsthand what had happened to a former superpower that had hit rock bottom, I began to wonder what would happen to the United States of America if, or when, it experienced a similar economic decline. What would the U.S. look like if it became part of the so-called “Third World?”

The second event occurred when I worked at a boarding school, and a colleague of mine made an offhand comment as we sat at a table in the school dining hall surveying the students around us, fifty percent of whom were from wealthy families in mainland China. We had been discussing the futures of some of these students, many of whom would no doubt go on to be CEO’s of multimillion-dollar companies or important government officials. As we looked around the room, he said, “You know what we’re doing? We’re educating our future Chinese overlords. That’s what we’re doing.” I found the comment highly amusing, and from that comment I became interested in the idea of China, and perhaps more importantly Chinese corporations, engaging in a neo-colonial activities in the U.S.

So I had my setting. Sometime in the future with the United States just pulling itself out of a second Great Depression, and Chinese corporations engaged in pseudo neo-colonial activities within the U.S. I wanted to write about the people who would protest, and when I first started this project, I had recently read *Wall and Piece*, a book by the British graffiti artist Banksy, which contained numerous examples of political street art. As I pictured this fictional

world, I imagined political graffiti on the walls of abandoned buildings around a dilapidated city, and that image led me to decide that my protagonist would be an artist who creates pieces of political graffiti.

The last event that shaped the foundation of the novel was when I was reminded of Thoreau refusing to pay his taxes because of his opposition to the Mexican-American War and slavery. While it was not a long or trying experience, Thoreau went to jail because he refused to support a government that he thought was acting unethically and against the interests of the people. This is an uncommon occurrence, and I decided that the protagonist of this novel would be such a person. Someone who would put their principles above their own personal safety and comfort, even if common sense told them it was a fool's errand. So, by combining all of these elements, I had a setting, a protagonist and the beginnings of a plot and several potential conflicts.

## **Structure**

Years ago I read that Chinua Achebe had modeled his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, on Greek tragedies and chose to have a fear of appearing weak function as Okonkwo's "hamartia", the character flaw that ultimately becomes his undoing. I decided that following a similar path would be a good way to structure my first novel because it would give me framework in which to organize the novel and give the reader a familiar structure with which they could relate. Branden's "hamartia" is his stubbornness and inability to compromise. Branden almost always views the world in a kind of ethical black and white which makes his choices not ones of competing alternatives but between right and wrong, and because Branden views the world through this omnipresent ethical lens it is difficult for him to compromise or be pragmatic which

leads him to participate in a series of political protests, most of which are extra-legal, that escalate in severity, and because he insists on following his principles, he is unable to be pragmatic, which leads to him making what many would consider to be a series of poor decisions.

In terms of plot, the events in the story generally follow the form of the tragedy with the inciting incident being Branden getting laid off from his job for arguing with clients about politics. As a result of this he has the time to join the Sons of Liberty and engages in an escalating series of protests against the government (rising action) that ultimately lead to his downfall when he realizes that the radical wing of the Sons of Liberty has gone too far. When he tries to stop them, he has to put himself in danger as well and ultimately gets arrested for Anti-Patriot Crimes and gets sent to a work camp in Alaska. The novel also follows a traditional narrative structure that corresponds to N.J. Lowe's concept of the "Classical Western Plot" where a series of causal actions ultimately culminates in a climatic event.

If Branden Walsh is Protagonist 1A then Alisa Prescott is protagonist 1B. Branden and Alisa are married, and while the spine of the novel is Branden's traditionally structured tragedy, Alisa has her own story independent of Branden's. Like her husband, Alisa is trying to change their world for the better, but she is much more pragmatic than Branden and has decided to work within the system rather than outside of it. She is fine with bribing people and playing the political game if it gets results. At the beginning of the novel, she is involved in trying to fix the problem of her building's brown tap water, and after a series of setbacks while trying to influence the municipal government, she runs for a seat on the condo board, which allows for a satire of both the American election system and government legislatures. The goal is for Alisa to

be affected by Branden's behavior and his storyline, and vice-versa, but Alisa is also supposed to have her own narrative arc.

Both Branden and Alisa disagree with the way the other one is trying to effect change. They think that the other person is doing more harm than good. Branden thinks Alisa is helping to perpetuate a corrupt political system dependent on bribes and cronyism, while Alisa thinks that Branden's tactics are completely ineffectual and are nothing more than egotistical shouting from the moral high ground. Later in the narrative she also thinks that he is putting himself too much at risk. He could potentially go to jail because he uses ineffectual and risky tactics and Alisa almost views this as him abandoning the family. As Branden becomes more and more involved in the Sons of Liberty, this tension between the two of them escalates until at one point Branden moves back in with his mother and both Branden and Alisa contemplate the possibility of divorce. This occurs towards the end of the narrative when the police are after Branden, the radical wing of the Sons of Liberty is starting to behave like domestic terrorists and Alisa is contemplating giving up on trying to change the world and focus on surviving as best she can.

## **Narrators**

The plan for the novel has always been to tell the story from multiple perspectives. This allows for disagreement among the tellings because the different characters and narrators interpret events in different ways, which forces the reader to consider the bias of each telling. There is one first person narrator and two third person narrators in the novel, and they each have their own biases and opinions, so they will each interpret events in different and sometimes contradictory ways. There will not be a Rashomon style retelling of the same scene from different perspectives, but the different narrators will discuss the major events of the novel from

their own perspective and with their own biases, so the reader will have to weigh the different interpretations and come to their own conclusions about why things happened and who was right or wrong.

This is important to the novel because there is not supposed to be a clear right and wrong. My goal is to create a situation about which reasonable people can disagree. Is Branden right? Is Alisa right? Are the people in the government really doing that bad a job, or are people just impoverished and angry and engage in anti-government protests and xenophobic scapegoating of the Chinese because they don't know what else to do? Like in our world, there are not supposed to be any clear cut answers in the fictional world of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree*. This will hopefully function as a kind of mirror for our world, and when making the comparisons between our world and the fictional world of the novel, the reader will hopefully question some of the things that they are certain about right now.

One of the narrators is Branden telling his version of events from a first person point of view. He is telling the story shortly after his imprisonment in an Alaskan work camp/gulag and the narration is colored by the fact that while he is telling himself that what he did was right and had to be done, some doubt is beginning to creep in. The second narrator, a third person narrator closely focalizes on Alisa and tells her story. This narrator only has access into Alisa's consciousness and no one else's, so in many ways this narration functions very much like a first person narration. There are a few times when the narrator will flash forward to the future, years after the events of the narrative and give the reader a glimpse of what Alisa is doing or thinking in order to affect the tone of the story and allow the reader to further empathize with Alisa because the reader knows that her life continues after the events in the narrative have come to a close. The third narrator is an omniscient narrator who is similar to the omniscient narrators of

the 19th Century. This narrator narrates sections of the novel that I refer to as "interludes". Neither Branden nor Alisa are present during these scenes, and the focal character is often a minor character like Guowei, Sean or Inspector Zhang. The purpose of these scenes is to show the reader a number of different people and places in the fictional world, which provides context for Branden and Alisa's story and adds detail and roundness to the fictional world and adds to the verisimilitude of the novel because the details and different perspective will help convince the reader of the believability of this fictional world. These minor characters will also show up at some point in the main narrative of Alisa and Branden and play somewhat important roles.

In the interlude scenes the reader will see these minor characters going about their own lives before they appear in the main story line. This shows the reader the fictional world exists beyond Branden and Alisa and hopefully allows the reader to see that Branden and Alisa are just one part of this world, not its entirety.

While the focus of this narrative is not the Chinese immigrants, I think it is important to spend some time with them during these "interludes" so the reader sees them as individuals, and not as simply stereotypes or agents of the People's Republic of China. Also, some of the characters in the main storyline are xenophobic racists, and it will be interesting for the reader to see the Chinese immigrants from a different perspective. The "interludes" will also feature documents from the time period including newspaper articles, government edicts and transcripts of subversive podcasts.

## Scope

I originally conceived of this narrative as a novel of about 250-300 pages; however, it has become abundantly clear that this is not possible. It seems that in order to go into the depth and detail that I think tells the story best, the narrative will probably cover three separate novels.

I sometimes think of Book I of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* as the radicalization of Branden Walsh. How does Branden get to the point where he decides that taking a Thoreau like stance is the right decision? The inciting incident of the whole narrative is that Branden gets laid off, or secretly fired as he calls it, because of what he considers free speech issues. At a bar a client wanted to talk politics and Branden made the mistake of actually telling the man what he thought, and they got into a small argument. While the client wasn't particularly upset with Branden, his boss was, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back, so Branden was laid off. While he is not working, Branden has a lot more time to think, and he comes to believe more and more that the government is horribly corrupt and needs major reforms. After losing his job, Branden has several mediocre options, and his decision about what he is going to do provides one of the main questions for the novel. Does he continue to stick to his principles, or does he compromise? He tries to find another job in Boston, which is nearly impossible given both the unemployment rate and the references some of his bosses would give. He considers emigrating to Brazil or possibly Europe. One of his bosses, Phil, has indicated that if the company gets more work, which could happen in a couple months, Branden could be hired back if he behaves and agrees to certain conditions, which Branden would no doubt consider punitive.

This decision is a critical one for Branden, and in the novel the goal is to have the reader think that all of the options are viable by suggesting potential plot lines that could exist for all of them. Branden had friends who have emigrated to Brazil, and as he thinks about emigrating

himself, the reader can picture Book II and possibly Book III being Branden in exile in Brazil, the American as the illegal immigrant in search of work. Alternatively, Branden could choose to accept the conditions imposed by his old company, and while working under these conditions, he would become angry and bitter, and the reader could see this making him crazy, possibly turning him into a xenophobic nut job who embarks on a one man crusade against the government. The options should be potentially viable in the reader's mind and will function as red- herrings to keep the reader interested and engaged.

Ultimately, towards the end of the Book I, his old company offers him a job, but he will have to take a pay cut and sign an agreement saying he won't talk about politics at work, or be politically active on the Internet or do anything that will associate the company with anti-government activities. He would also have to sign an open letter denouncing certain anti-government activities. Branden decides that of course he can't work under those conditions, and that emigrating is like running away, so he will stay in Boston and fight the good fight. Financially this is feasible because Alisa's income as a doctor allows them to live off one salary, though they can't save any money for retirement, Kira's college fund, a car or put any money away for a rainy day fund. They live paycheck to paycheck, which in Books II and III exacerbates the tension between Alisa and Branden because he feels guilty about not contributing financially and feels like a freeloader, and Alisa is upset because she doesn't understand why he can't swallow his pride for the good of the family.

In Book I, Alisa is drawn into local activism after she becomes involved with a movement to clean up the tap water in her building because it sometimes comes out of the tap brown. Alisa tries to use existing power structures (Condo Board, city council, etc.) to achieve her goals, and in Book I the reader sees her learning how to work within the system under the

tutelage of Molly Byrne, an upstairs neighbor who has experience with these sorts of fights. We see Alisa struggle to work within the system, attending numerous meetings and bribing local officials, and everything seems on track until Molly is attacked in her apartment and ends up in the hospital. While the police call it a burglary gone wrong, Alisa thinks Molly was targeted because of her activism, and Alisa's sections turn into a kind of detective novel where Alisa tries to hunt down Molly's attackers, only she is unable to come to any sort of conclusion, and has to face the fact that even someone as strong and connected as Molly Byrne could have been killed by a random act of violence. In Book I the reader sees Alisa learning how to work within the system, and she sees that it is possible to be successful, and after the attack on Molly, Alisa resolves to try to be a leader herself.

My thesis is a small part of the entire narrative, and this beginning section has two primary functions. The first is to introduce us to Alisa and Branden and the world they live in, and the second is to lay the groundwork for the conflicts that will occur over the course over the narrative. To use terms traditionally associated with tragedies, my thesis is the exposition, inciting incident and the beginning of the rising action.

## **Framework**

No novel exists in a vacuum. The reading of a novel is always influenced by the novels the reader has previously read, particularly those novels which are similar to or part of the same genre as the novel being read. Publishers put novels into genres for marketing purposes, and each genre, even literary fiction, has its own set of conventions and expectations. If a book is marketed as post-modernist and experimental, the reader has certain expectations about the novel and will judge the novel partly on how it fulfills those expectations.

Because it is set in a bleak future with a repressive government, *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* will most likely be considered a type of dystopian novel, though I believe the novel to be semi-dystopian at best and think that there are some critical differences between it and a typical dystopian work. However, the novel owes much to the dystopian genre, and I have learned a tremendous amount from reading dystopian novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Road*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Day of the Oprichnik*, and many others. In particular it has been useful to study the various techniques authors use to create these unique settings because world building is such an important part of these novels.

When I first started the project I would have certainly called the novel dystopian because it was set in the year 2054, and China had essentially colonized the United States. The colonial government that existed in that version of the novel was certainly authoritative and totalitarian and would fit nicely into the dystopian genre. Over time I changed the focus of the novel because I wanted to write about a world that was not so black and white. I thought it would be more interesting to write about a world that was more complex and contained many shades of grey, and much like our own reality. This would allow me to better imply parallels between the fiction world and our own. So, in its current incarnation I would not classify the fictional world of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* as a strictly dystopian one. It is perhaps possible to see a potential dystopian future on the horizon if things do not change, and Branden, Alisa and others feel compelled to act in part because they can sense that if things continue as they are, their future might be very bleak. The reason that I do not want this world to be a fully dystopian one is because I want Branden to have the option to live a fairly decent life. His decision to take an ethical stand, while prompted by his getting laid off, is one that he does not have to make. He chooses to do this. In a dystopian world, the dire circumstances usually limit the character's

choices significantly. I also want the fictional world of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* to resemble our world as much as possible, because the intention of the book is to get the reader to think differently and/or critically about events in our world. Dystopian novels also tend to be very black and white. There is often an evil government or authority figure and a lone hero who must triumph against them. I am trying to write something that hews closer to reality and has a little more uncertainty in it. I don't want there to be easy answers for anyone, including the reader, in this novel. Is Branden right to do what he is doing? Is Alisa's way better? Is the government actually that bad? Are the Chinese corporations really the problem? By making this world as close to ours as possible, I also want to make it as easy as possible for the reader to draw parallels between the two.

In addition to being pseudo-dystopian, the narrative is also a political one and a tragedy. I have discussed the tragic elements of the narrative in the Structure section, so I will focus on the political aspect of the narrative. This is meant to be an intensely political novel. One goal is absolutely to criticize specific policies of the current U.S. government: Guantanamo Bay, Citizen's United, The Patriot Act, etc. I also have taken many political issues from modern China (extreme pollution, censorship, rampant, corruption) and inserted them into the United States in 2025. While reading the novel, my own personal political opinions might not be that hard to figure out, but the goal is not to present just one side or use the novel as a platform from which to shout my political ideas. The goal is to make the novel as messy as possible in some regards, and thereby create a polyphonic narrative in which several characters' differing viewpoints are heard, and ultimately it is up to the reader to decide for themselves which character they agree with. By having all of these competing ideas about the best way to effect change, I am trying to get the reader to question some of our assumptions about representative democracy in general, and in

particular the individual's relationship with the state. The goal of this novel is not provide answers, but to get readers to ask themselves questions about how we choose to organize society.

### **Technical Difficulties**

There have been many of these during the course of writing this narrative, and I choose the word narrative because what started out as one novel has grown into potentially three, and this decision about how long to make this narrative has been one of the most challenging I have faced.

A typical novel is generally somewhere between eighty thousand and one hundred thousands words. As I was writing the novel, I kept this in the back of my head as a target. Unfortunately, as I was writing I discovered that I had around forty thousand words, and I was still in the first part of the story. This was too long for one novel, so I resolved to speed things up, and what happened was that when I submitted sections of the novel for workshop, one of my classmates said that it seemed like much of the novel was the characters having conversations while drinking beverages, which was a trend I had also noticed. One, the novel was a little beverage heavy, and I had to watch that, but also I realized that this was true, the characters were talking too much and doing too little. I think one of the reasons for this was that I was trying to cram too much into too little of a space by summarizing several events over the course of one conversation. For example, instead of having Branden meet a pack of hungry coyo-wolves in an abandoned building, I would have him mention that people had been talking about the pack of coyo-wolves that had been roaming the city streets.

So I realized that I was going to have to go into even more detail. The story I want to tell has numerous plotlines, and with both Branden and Alisa's story, it is almost like there are two

whole novels there, so I came to the conclusion that one novel was not going to be enough space, unless I wrote a nine-hundred page monstrosity. So after mapping out the whole storyline, I came to the conclusion, which could very well change, that this narrative probably needed to be a trilogy. This would give me enough space to tell the story the way I wanted to tell it. Also, by making the first part of the narrative a stand-alone book, I was forced to make it more interesting. Before I could make the excuse that the beginning was just setting us up for the more interesting middle and end, but once I decided that this narrative needed multiple books, I had to make the first book strong enough by itself that people would want to read the second and third one. By making the first part of the narrative its own book, I have forced myself to come up with more interesting events in the early parts of the narrative, which I think has strengthened the narrative immensely.

The other main technical difficulty that I encountered was the narrators. I knew I wanted to have more than one, but it took me a while to find the right combination. I have flipped back and forth between first and third person narrators for both Branden and Alisa. I always knew that Branden's story could benefit from a first person point of view, but I was adamant that at the end of the narrative Branden is sent to the work camps in Alaska where he disappears and we have no idea what happens to him. Because he disappears at the end of the narrative, logically he couldn't tell his story in the past tense, and the present tense was just too awkward. After a while I realized the choice of point of view was more important than knowing exactly what happens to Branden at the end of the novel. So I became much more flexible about the ending and changed Branden's sections to first person told in the past tense, which I believe is the most effective point of view for his character.

I also tried out Alisa as a first person narrator, but trying to write a believable first person narration of a character of another gender is challenging and I thought, Why give myself another challenge in my first novel when I already have so many? So, I changed Alisa narration to a closely focalized third person that functions much like a first person narration for much of the time, but I can also create some distance when necessary, so it seems like the best option. There also used to be a plural first person narrator that represented the people of Boston and told the rumors and stories that people told about this time in the city's history. However, this voice was redundant because the third person narrator of the interlude sections can do pretty much the same thing, so I decided to simplify things and get rid of the plural first person narrator.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned during this process is that I need to keep an open mind and keep nothing sacred. At one time, I had the idea that the narrative needed to be in a certain range of words and for a while I was insistent that Branden couldn't tell his story in the past tense because he disappeared at the end of the novel. I was inflexible and tried to cram the narrative into a pre-existing shape, and the results were not good. Once I let go of those preconceptions and allowed the narrative to flow more organically, I got much better results. So as I push forward with this narrative, I need to remember not to fall in love with any particular idea and to keep my options open.

"I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless."

-Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"

## Chapter One

Even after all these years, Lady Liberty's still turning tricks in an alley just off Commonwealth Ave. Sure, these days you don't actually have to go down the alley to see her. Photos of her are all over the Internet, but there are those who still make the pilgrimage to see her in the flesh. Some go as a way to remember days past, while others go to catch a glimpse of something they were too young to see. The years and the rain have faded her enough that you have to get up close to see the details, but if you wander down the alley and make your way past the dumpster overflowing with trash, you can still see her painted up there on that brick wall.

Aside from the fading, Lady Liberty hasn't changed at all. Her back is still to you, and when you see her, you still feel like you're standing in a living room looking at her through the open bedroom door. She's standing next to the bed, and her torch and stone tablet are on the nightstand. Her hands reach up to her shoulder to untie the knot of her toga, and once she does, the pale green fabric that so perfectly matches the color of her skin will drop to floor, leaving her

standing there bare and exposed. She's still wearing her crown though, and most seem to think he's told her to keep it on. That he likes it better that way.

He stands next to her, leering. His black suit coat already draped over a chair as he takes off his purple tie. You can guess what will happen next. You feel like he bears a resemblance to someone you've seen on TV or in a photo somewhere, but you can't quite put a finger on it. All you know for certain is that he looks Chinese, and your eyes linger on his profile for a second, but then you glance toward the shadows just to the right of the bedroom door. Leaning against the wall and dressed in his Stars and Stripes top hat and suit, Uncle Sam grins as he counts the large stack of green and red bills in his hands. Dollars or Yuan, it's all the same to him. When he's done counting, he'll slip the bills into his jacket pocket and head out, leaving her all alone with the man in the purple tie.

\* \* \*

I remember looking at the Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam thread on TurnDit the morning Phil called. Someone had posted an update saying they'd checked all the streets around Paul Revere's house, and there was no sign of it there. For some reason, a bunch of people had been speculating that it was near some revolutionary location, so they'd checked near Paul's house, the Bunker Hill Monument, the Old North Church and even down by the harbor, supposedly near where they'd dumped the tea in. Back then it was more like a game than anything serious. There was a whole group of people who wanted to be first to find it, so after a photo of a new piece of political graffiti art was posted, people would go search the city streets in their free time for the wall or alleyway where the graffiti had been painted. Once someone found it, they posted the

location in the TurnDit forum and then someone else had to verify out and then the person who originally found it got bragging rights, and some people really got off on being the first person to find one.

I never got into that, but if a piece was good, I did like to see it in person. Sometimes the photos just didn't do them justice. Though once in awhile someone would photoshop the hell out of it and make it way better than the original. I really wanted to see Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam. The colors were just so vivid. Especially the green and red of the money in Uncle Sam's hand. Those bills just leapt out at you. And the shade of green of Lady Liberty's skin was somehow just mournful. I didn't want those colors to be photoshopped. For some reason it was important to me that those were real. That those colors existed out there in the world.

So that morning, I stood there in the kitchen and leaned against the counter and looked at my phone as I scrolled through TurnDit posts speculating on the location of Lady Liberty when Phil called me again. Jesus Christ, I thought. He'd already called like four times today, and I hadn't even eaten breakfast yet. Him and the rest of management was panicking needlessly over the Waterstone account. I'd sent god knows how many texts to Donaldson the night before, reassuring them everything was on track. They didn't pay me enough to answer calls this early in the morning. I hit ignore and glanced over at the stove clock and saw that it was already 7:02. Kira would be coming in for breakfast any minute, and I still needed to make my lunch. I needed to get going. I shook my head in an effort to clear out the molasses like fog that seemed to fill my head for the first twenty or thirty minutes after I woke up.

I had a couple of unread text messages on my phone. My mother was reminding me about dinner tonight, and Robbie was texting me again about wanting to grab a beer sometime soon, maybe either tonight or tomorrow. Tonight was no good, maybe tomorrow. I'd text them

back later. I put the phone back in my pocket and went to make my lunch. I got the bread out from the breadbox and opened the fridge to get out the cold cuts. I surveyed the contents of the refrigerator. The usual condiments, a container of pasta with no sauce, milk eight days past the expiration date, I took the cap off and sniffed it- still good, a few eggs, Kira's congee, strawberry jam and some apple juice. No turkey. No roast beef. No salami. No cheese. Not even lettuce or tomato. I glanced over at the load of bread sitting on the counter. No. Bread alone wasn't going to be enough. I looked back into the fridge to see if I'd missed anything. The milk stared back at me.

"Alisa," I shouted as I stared back at the milk, "We don't have any cold cuts?"

Alisa's voice came from somewhere down the apartment hallway, "I don't know. Check the fridge."

I heard giggles behind me. My ten-year-old daughter, Kira, was standing in the kitchen doorway. "Yeah Daddy," she said. "You should check the fridge."

"Oh, you think that's funny do you?" I swung the fridge door closed and walked over to Kira and began tickling her in the ribs. She shrieked in delight as she tried to twist away.

After a minute of squirming and shrieking, she said, "No, time out! Time out! I need to eat breakfast. I'll be late."

I let go and she panted, trying to catch her breath. "Likely excuse," I said. I headed over toward the loaf of bread on the counter. Might as well make some toast. "Alright, what do you want for breakfast?"

"Congee."

I groaned theatrically. "Again?"

She nodded vigorously.

"What about scrambled eggs? Or cereal? Or pancakes?"

She shook her head and opened the fridge and got out the plastic container of congee she and her mother had made on Sunday.

"What about waffles? Delicious, delicious waffles with butter and syrup." I put two slices of bread in the toaster. Then I got the coffee pot and turned on the water. Aw, shit. The water was light brown. I let it run and hoped it would clear up. This had been happening for the past three or four months. Rust in the pipes or something. God only knew what kind of heavy minerals or lead or whatever was in the water. You would've thought Alisa and her Condo Board would've fixed this by now. Finally, it started to run clean. I let it go for twenty seconds and then filled the coffee pot.

"Do you even know how to make waffles?" Kira said as she put the container of congee on the kitchen table and went to get a spoon and bowl. In order to reach the bowls in the upper cabinet, she first had to get the small footstool from the corner.

"Yes, I know how to make waffles. Don't be silly." I decided not to mention that we didn't have a waffle iron.

As I waited for my toast to pop up, I turned the radio to the local news. They were interviewing some economist from MIT who was predicting that President Horace would not be able to curb inflation like he had promised. No shit. When was the last time that guy had done anything of any substance? We clearly needed the Feds to step in and wield some of that authority, but the State's Rights movements had put an end to all that. So now all those jackasses in D.C. did was makes even more promises they wouldn't and or couldn't keep, but somehow they were still better than our own local government. Hard to believe as that was. We were in year three of the reign of that jackass Chairman Yonsen La Ri. Why those assholes at the State

House had put him in charge when the city went bankrupt, I had no idea. My phone vibrated in my pocket again. This had to be a joke. Sure enough it was Phil again. I put the phone on silent and put it back in my pocket.

Kira had gotten her bowl and was using a wooden spoon to scoop the congee out of the container and into her bowl. The pasty rice porridge fell from the spoon in clumps that reminded me of chunky glue. She'd discovered the stuff in her world history class. She'd first made it for a project on Chinese culture. They'd been spending an awful lot of time on China, and I'd remarked that maybe this was less of a history class and more of a Neo-Colonial indoctrination program run out of Beijing. Kira told me China was the world's largest and oldest continuous civilization and should be studied, and Alisa just shushed me. Anyway, Kira loved making the rice gruel, she loved it, and it seemed like she ate it almost every day for breakfast. She also claimed it made you smart. I'd asked her where she'd gotten that idea, and she said that everyone knew that. When she said that, I got this image of mid-level bureaucrats somewhere in the windowless basements of the Department of Education being paid off to slip Chinese propaganda into the curriculum. Of course if I were to say that out loud it might make me seem like I should be living in a shack in some remote mountainous region of the Adirondacks with a collection of tinfoil hats and newspaper clippings tacked all over the walls of my cabin. Though was it that far fetched? I don't think so.

Kira put her bowl in the microwave and set the timer for two minutes, and I said a silent prayer that the thing wouldn't burst into flames. I was convinced that it would one of these days. It had been repaired who knows how many times by Fifth Floor Terry, and now seemed to be held together mostly with duck tape and super glue. I was halfway convinced that one day it

would kill us all. Terry said it was fine, and Alisa trusted him more than I did. The damn thing was probably giving us all cancer.

As I waited for my toast to pop up, I listened to talking heads from the radio debate the recent Supreme Court decision to uphold an Alabama Court's ruling that significantly expanded libel laws. They had brilliantly decided that a website's owner was responsible for all of the content on their site, including the comment sections, so websites would now delete anything controversial, which in some ways might be a good thing seeing as the comments section of most websites were filled with so much ignorance, racism and misogyny that Gandhi would've had to reconsider his optimistic view of humanity had he read them. But it was just one more avenue of free speech that had been shut down. The media's self-censorship apparently wasn't enough anymore. Next they'd just be straight up banning sites. Shit, what was TurnDit going to do? Someone paints an unflattering picture of ol' Chariman Yonsen and then that asshole can sue the site and the artist. Fuck. This was not goo- my toast popped up. It was too early to think about this anyway. I shut the radio off and got out the butter and jam and sat down at the table with my toast.

Kira sat across from me eating her rice porridge. What would my mother have said if I had told her I wanted rice porridge for breakfast? She probably would've said, Rice porridge? You want rice porridge? Fine, go ahead and make yourself some.

Kira had gotten out the box of raisins and was mixing them in with the congee.

"You going to want some honey with your rice gruel?" I said.

"Congee."

"Rice gruel."

"Congee."

"Whatever. You want honey or not?"

She nodded, and I reached back and got the honey off the counter and handed it to her. We sat there at the table together eating our breakfasts pretty much in silence until Alisa walked into the kitchen. She was still in her yellow bathrobe and her hair was wrapped up in a towel. She walked over to me and handed me her cell phone. "It's for you," she said in a tone that let me know she wasn't pleased about being my answering service. Then she walked out of the kitchen without looking back.

I put the phone to my ear, "Phil, this had better not be you."

"What? Yes, it's me. Why the hell haven't you answered your phone? I've called you seven times this morning."

"I am aware, Phil. I am all too aware. This was dirty tricky, Phil. Some low down sneaky shit. So please, enlightened me. What was so goddamn important that it couldn't wait until nine?"

"Branden, I don't know how to tell you this..."

There was silence for a moment, and as I listened to that void on the other end of the line I began to re-evaluate what was going on. After what was probably only a couple of seconds, I broke, "Jesus, Phil. What happened? Did someone die?" I pictured Marci or Dave dead on the office floor from a heart attack, or lying in a bloody heap on the road after being hit by a bus. Kira was now staring at me from across the table, her face full of concern.

"No, no. God no. It's just...shit, Branden. I don't know how to tell you this."

"Hold on a second," I covered the phone with my head and whispered, "No one died, Baby." Kira looked visibly relieved. "Phil is just upset about something. I'm going to go calm him down, okay?" She nodded understandingly. People getting upset and needing to be talked to

reassuringly was something she saw every day at school. I got up and walked out of the kitchen, across the narrow hallway and into the living room.

"All right Phil, what the hell is going on? Just tell me."

"I'm sorry Branden. I really am... they're going to lay you off today."

For a second, my mind was completely blank. I just stood there and stared out the window at the pine trees in the courtyard. I mean, I hadn't thought they'd actually... "What?" I finally said, "You can't be serious."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, man. Donaldson called me last night to let me know. I guess they made the decision at yesterday's afternoon meeting. They're laying you off with the interns."

"Are you kidding me?" I shouted. "They're-" I glanced over to the kitchen where Kira was still eating her congee, and then I walked over to the living room window, lowered my voice to a whisper and continued, "It was TempCorp wasn't it? They're firing me over that bullshit?"

"Yeah. You really pissed them off with that, especially Donaldson. You know that. And they're not going to fire you. They're going to lay you off, which matters. For unemployment and references. Look, the Huichan project is wrapping so they're going to roll you in with the temp layoffs."

Those sneaky fuckers. They were just going to roll me in with their regularly scheduled end of the project temp firings...no layoffs. If they fired me, I might have a lawsuit. But laying me off? Shit. Those happened every day all over the city. Suddenly Donaldson's nocturnal texting made a lot more sense. Outside the window, the sky was a mass of grey clouds. The forecast was for wind and rain. Of course it was. "So what, they're just going to call me in when I get there in the morning and kick my ass to the curb?"

"Pretty much."

"Jesus Christ," I was practically hissing at this point. "Those greedy, kowtowing bastards. This is complete bullshit. It's horseshit like this that's the reasons this coun... Fuck. I'm going to tell those cowardly corporate stooges-"

"NO!" Now Phil was shouting. "Do not do that. Do not." I could hear him taking a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Just listen. I know you want to go in there and tell them everything that's been in the back of your mind, but please, don't. This is why I'm calling. Yeah, Donaldson wants your ass gone, but Mark likes the work you do. Terry probably couldn't give a shit either way, but he sides with Mark more often than not. Just because you're getting laid off today, doesn't mean they won't rehire you later. Donaldson's just having one of his hissy fits. So yeah, they're serious, but they also want to see how you react to this. They pulled this same shit with Rebecca like three or four years ago, and she's back. She's doing fine now, isn't she? They just want to scare you into behaving. In a month-

"This is complete bullshit and you know it. I mean-"

"Branden, do you know what the job market is like out there? Thirty-two percent unemployment. Thirty-two. It's not like graphic designers are in great demand. And how much work is being outsourced to Mumbai or Chennai these days? You think you can get another job, just like that?"

He was right. What could I say? Nothing. I just stood there, and Phil just waited and let the silence stretch for a minute to make his point.

"So listen Branden, in a month or so when another project comes up, they're going to need more people. We're running a skeleton crew as it is, and I think they're doing this more as message to you than anything else. They're going to want to call someone who knows how we do things. They don't want to have to train someone all over again. If you say the right things on the

way out, they're gong to call you. Donaldson will be over his hissy fit, and Mark likes your work. They figure you'll be scared straight, as you goddamn should be, and they'll hire you back. So, today, do not make a scene. Be polite. Acknowledge that you fucked up. Lie, I don't care. Say you're sorry and that if any work comes up in the future, you'd love to be considered. Smile when you shake their hands goodbye and pretend you mean it."

I stared out the window as the wind picked up and made the branches of the pine trees in the courtyard sway back and forth. Jesus. Fucking fired. My right hand held the phone to my ear, so with my left hand I reached over and pinched my right forearm.

It hurt.

Damn.

"Branden? Branden? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here." I closed my eyes and stared at the blackness. "Look, Phil. Thanks for calling. I really appreciate it. I know you didn't have to. You're putting yourself out there on a limb for me, and...and..., well, just thank you. I owe you for this. I do."

"You're welcome, and we'll get a beer after work one of these days, ok? And look, I know I probably don't have to tell you this, but do me a favor, don't let them know I told you. Act surprised when it happens."

"Yeah, of course."

"All right. I better get going. I got to make sure the kids get to school. I'll see you at the office."

"Okay, and thanks again for the heads up, Phil."

"Of course. See you."

Phil hung up and I put the phone back in my pocket. The wind had died down and the trees were no longer swaying. I couldn't believe this was actually happening. I knew Donaldson had been pissed, but I didn't think he'd been harboring this deep seeded loathing that eventually manifested in this Machiavellian plan to get rid of me quietly. Yes, at the bar after the meeting I argued with some Vice-President from TemCorp over the Philadelphia riots. And yes, I may have said somethings I shouldn't have to a client, but number one he was trying to justify the police using batons to clear the square, and the protesters were just sitting there, doing nothing. Yes, it was past curfew, but the protesters were using passive resistance and I realize that picking each one of them up and carrying them to the paddy wagons would've been a lot of work, but just wade into the crowd and start swinging? It was an egregious use of force, no question. And number two, the vice-president, whatever his name was, said it himself, we were in a bar, after work, having a few drinks and people could speak their mind. He wanted to debate. It was only Donaldson who over at that corner table nursing his martini that was freaking out.

I headed back to the kitchen where Kira was finishing up her congee. She looked up at me with a concerned look as I walked in, and I gave her a thumbs up.

"Daddy, what happened?" Kira said as she looked up at me from her bowl of rice gruel.

"Nothing, Honey. Just the usual stuff. Um, someone messed up some of the artwork for a project. I have go in and help fix it." Yeah, Daddy to save to day. Keep telling that one.

"Ugh," she stuck her tongue out to show what she thought of that. "Is it a lot of extra work?"

I sighed. "You know, probably not."

I bit into my toast. Cold tasteless mush. I took another bite of cold toast and chewed mechanically. I'd get one more paycheck, so we'd be fine for November, but after that... I tried to do the math in my head. How much for the mortgage? Utilities? Food? Insurance?

As I calculated the mathematics of our financial Waterloo, Kira finished her rice gruel and washed her dishes. Then she went into her room to finish packing her school bag. I needed a pen and paper, but I didn't want to get up for whatever reason. I was trying to do it all in my head. Alisa was making more now, and we'd probably be able to-

Alisa walked into the kitchen dressed in jeans and a grey sweater. She'd change into scrubs when she got to the hospital. "Hey", she said, "Is Kira ready for school?"

"Packing her bag."

Alisa walked over to the coffee maker and got her thermos down from the cabinet above it. "You want any more?"

I shook my head, and she poured the rest of the coffee into her thermos. How do I even bring this up? Hey, so, guess what? We might have trouble paying the mortgage next month.

"I'm going to go help Molly knock on doors," Alisa said. "You've got Kira right?"

"Knock on doors?"

"Getting people to come to the Condo Board meeting tonight. Remember? The meeting you're skipping because this is apparently the only night you can go talk to your mother."

"Oh yeah. That one. "

"Yeah. That one."

As Alisa poured cream and a little bit of sugar into her coffee, I tried to debate the merits of telling her about Phil's phone call right now, but my brain wasn't working. There were literally

no thoughts going through my head. Just an empty void as I watched Alisa put the cream back in the fridge and then sit down at the table across from me.

"Are you doing ok?" She said.

She took a sip of her coffee and she closed her eyes for a second as if to better savor the taste. Starting the day without coffee was not an option for her. Should I... no. No. It was better to wait. She only had like a few minutes before she was going to leave. This conversation needed more time. Besides, it'd be better to wait until I had all the facts. Yeah.

As least that's what I told myself.

"Yeah... I'm fine," I said. "I just, I don't know. Maybe I didn't get enough sleep."

"Staying up too late cruising the interwebs no doubt. But you're all set? With Kira?"

"Yeah, I got it."

"All right, I'm going to go. I'll see you tonight." She came over and kissed me lightly on the lips. Her lips tasted like vanilla chapstick. Then she walked off to say goodbye to Kira. I said Bye so faintly she probably didn't hear.

As I stared off into space and tried to figure out the best way to tell Alisa what had happened, some part of my brain heard Alisa reminding Kira to make sure she gave Ms. Anderson the permission forms for the after school program. Shit. I had completely forgotten.

And then Alisa was walking past the kitchen door on her way out. She smiled and waved, and I tried to save that image in my memory. Who knew what was going to happen and smiles would not be so carefree in the coming days.

Kira came bouncing into the kitchen, "Dad, you ready? It's almost time to go."

"Yeah, give me a second."

Kira ran off to the coat rack, and I picked up a bit of cold toast and put it in my mouth. As I chewed, the cold toast turned to mush, and when I swallowed, it felt like some sort of grey lump descending into my stomach. There was still one piece of toast on my plate. I picked up my plate and walked over to the trash and tilted the plate so the bread fell on top of the garbage that was already in there.

"All right, Kira. C'mon, let's go."

\* \* \*

"...So the meeting is tonight at 7:30," Alisa said. "And it's really important that we get as many people there as possible because..."

As Alisa continued her stock speech about the importance of the special Condo-Board meeting where they could confront a representative from city hall about the issue with the water, she could tell the man wasn't really listening. Sure, he was being polite enough as he stood in the doorway of his apartment with his hands in his pockets, but his eyes held that vacant look that Alisa had seen in so many of her neighbors' eyes that indicated their minds were probably somewhere else. So after Alisa finished, and he promised to make it if he could, she turned and headed back down the stairs. She hadn't gone down two steps when the harsh sound of the closing steel door reverberated in the concrete stairwell.

You were seeing more and more of those steel doors these days. You had them installed in front of the normal wooden door that every apartment had, so there were two separate doors to the apartment. They were billed as the ultimate in home protection. There was a deadbolt lock for when you left the apartment, but when you were inside, you slide a steel bar across the inside

of the door so there was no possible way anyone could open the door from the outside. Branden called it the portcullis, which wasn't really accurate, but he said it was close enough because more than anything else the doors resembled some sort of medieval castle defense designed to keep out the Vikings or the Huns. They had talked about getting one, but they were so expensive.

Alisa had knocked on all the doors of this unit, so she headed down the stairs to meet Molly. They were going to do the next units together. When she got outside, Molly was already waiting, and the two of them turned and headed for Units H and I. There was still dew on the grass of the small park that lay in the center of the apartment complex. Sure sometimes the grass in the park was more weeds than lawn, and the flowerbeds were empty half of the time, but there were trees, some benches to sit on and a playground with slides, a swing and a jungle gym. It was nice to have someplace to go and sit outside and feel the sun on your face. You could take Kira out to the playground and sit on a bench and read a book or talk with your neighbors. She had a favorite bench by a stand of pine trees where she liked to-

"All right," Molly said. "We're going to knock on every door, but if they don't answer pretty quickly, forget it. It's already 7:40, and we don't have the time to stand there all day and wait for them." Then she muttered, "Though, we may have to make a few exceptions."

"The people who have been affected the most?" Alisa said.

"No, the people who yell the loudest."

Molly laughed at Alisa's confused expression and explained, "Look, I'm trying to get people all riled up. You'd be amazed what an angry mob can accomplish at a public meeting, and it's an especially effective tactic when dealing with Barry the Pompous Jackass Thorton."

"He's the guy with the beer gut who decided that he needed to give a speech at the Patriot's Day Picnic, right?"

"The exact same red-faced fool," Molly said. "He's got the spine of a jellyfish, and sure, he loves to pontificate, but if you actually corner his fat ass, he folds like sheets just out of the dryer. As if anyone had a dryer anymore. Anyway, we get a crowd of angry people yelling at him tonight down in that basement, and you know how things echo down there, and after a half hour or forty minutes of being shouted at from all sides by an angry mob, I'm betting he'll cave."

Alisa stopped walking and stared at Molly, who with her grey hair, long green skirt and sweater with vaguely wintery designs on it, looked like the least likely person on Earth to incite a riot, "Are you serious?"

"Are you kidding me? Absolutely. It's our best shot. Thorton doesn't give a rat's ass if we drink dirty water. Half the water in the city is probably contaminated somehow, and that little snot is just trying to do the bare minimum."

Alisa nodded her head in agreement as they approached the door to Unit H. Crushed beer cans and cigarette butts lay scattered around the entranceway, and there seemed to be more than the usual amount of plastic bags, pieces of paper and soda bottles in the bushes and flowerbeds. But Alisa wasn't sure if that was really true or if she was just projecting because of Unit H's less than stellar reputation. Unit's H and I were widely considered to be the most dangerous in the apartment complex. Alisa felt nervous just walking by them, especially at night. Alisa didn't know anyone who lived in those units, but she'd heard the stories of muggings, drug deals, sexual assaults and even a few rapes. A couple years ago, three bodies had been found in the stairwells, all with their throats cut. They'd never found out who'd did it. All this was nothing compared to other parts of town, but still it-

"Alisa, you look terrified," Molly said. "It's 7:25 in the morning. No one's going to mug you in the stairwell. All those idiots are asleep right now after a long night of drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and making obnoxious amounts of noise."

Alisa felt her cheeks flush. She'd thought she'd been hiding it better than that.

"Really? Shit," Alisa said. "I was trying to project confidence. I don't know... I just don't go in there often. Once I get used to it, I'll be fine. I've just heard too many of those stupid rumors," Alisa said.

"You'll be fine," Molly said. "You ready?"

Alisa nodded.

Molly headed for the door to Unit H, and Alisa followed. Molly placed a key card against the scanner on the steel door and after a second, they heard a click. Molly pulled open the door, and Alisa followed her in. It was dark in the Unit H stairwell. To the left were concrete stairs just wide enough for two people to pass each other, though your shoulders almost inevitably touched. To the right, underneath the stairs was a storage area where people had locked up bikes and battered strollers.

Molly led the way up the stairs and their footsteps echoed in the same hollow way that Alisa's did when she walked up the stairs to her apartment. They reached the first floor landing, and Alisa tried to figure out which door they should knock on. She felt her heart beating in her chest and tried to calm herself down by picturing a kindly old grandmother answering the door. She'd be feeding her grandkids breakfast because their mother had already left for work. Although with her luck, she'd get some angry guy in a wife-beater who would scratch himself and then slam the door in her face.

Molly didn't even hesitate. She just went up to the first door and knocked. Nothing. She waited for about ten seconds and knocked again. She waited for a moment and went and did the same on the other two doors in the landing. While they were waiting, something was dropped on the stairwell a few floor above, and as the harsh metallic noise reverberated down the stairwell, Alisa whipped head around and looked up the stairwell suspiciously.

"Relax, Alisa," Molly said.

No one came to the door, so they made their way up to the second floor landing, and Molly knocked on three doors at once, saying it was quicker that way. The middle door opened and a woman Alisa's age wearing jeans and white shirt stood there with a look that said, What could you possibly want?

The sound of a television sports show seeped out into the hallway from the apartment. Alisa watched as Molly introduced herself and confirmed that this apartment was having problems with the water too. Just as Molly was about to tell the woman about the meeting, the apartment door to Alisa's left opened up. An elderly man in a sweater stood there, and Molly glanced over at Alisa with a look that said, That one's yours.

Alisa stepped toward the man and said, "Good Morning."

"Morning yourself," the man said, "How are you doing today?"

"I'm doing well, thank you." Alisa said. "You?"

The man smiled and Alisa could see he was missing several teeth, but somehow that didn't stop him from having this warm smile. "Oh, can't complain," he said. "So, what can I help you with?"

Alisa asked if he was having problems with the water, and when he said that he was, she told him about the meeting and that they wanted as many people as possible to show up. As she

talked, the man listened attentively and nodded along to what she was saying. He said that he was just as frustrated as she was, and that he would definitely be there, and he'd try to bring as many people as possible. Alisa thanked him for his time, and he wished her luck. After he'd closed the door, Alisa smiled. She took a couple of relaxed breaths and felt the nervousness begin to slip away. See, it's fine. When she turned around Molly was grinning at her, as if she knew exactly what Alisa was thinking.

"C'mon," Molly said. "Let's hit the third floor before everyone leaves for work."

As Alisa followed Molly up the stairs, she felt optimistic about the meeting that night. Maybe they'd finally be able to get something done.

\* \* \*

The alley had puddles everywhere thanks to the rain during the night, and the sounds of rush hour traffic had just begun drifting down from the street at the alley's mouth. It was the noise that eventually woke Sean up. He lay there for a minute listening to the sounds of cars driving by and people talking on cell phones as they walked past the alley. As he stared up at the inside of the cardboard refrigerator box he'd slept in, he could see that it was wet. The rain had soaked through during the night. He hadn't expected rain, so he hadn't put any plastic on top of the box. Well, this box was shot. No way the sun would dry it out, not at this time of year. Luckily he'd laid down some plastic sheeting underneath the box, so the bottom still seemed mostly dry when he reached out from his sleeping bag and felt underneath him.

After extracting himself from the box and stashing his sleeping bag in his backpack, Sean decided to try to get some breakfast at the Beacon Street shelter. It was probably too late, but he

might get lucky. He left the alley and joined the rush hour crowd making its way down the sidewalks. Men and women going to work in offices, restaurants, grocery stores and hospitals. These days he didn't have to fight his way through the crowd as people generally gave him a wide berth. One of the few advantages to not bathing regularly. As he turned the corner, he had to maneuver around a pile of trash bags that was as tall as he was, and when he got clear of them, he saw a group of children waiting to cross the street. They stood there in their coats and khaki pants that were no doubt part of a school uniform. Some of them held lunch boxes and one boy even had a brown paper bag.

Someone had taken the time to pack that boy's lunch this morning. Maybe it was a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich or maybe turkey and cheddar. There'd be a piece of fruit like an apple or an orange and a juice box. Whoever had made it had probably looked in the fridge and debated which juice box to pack. Which juice would be the boy's favorite? Which juice would make him smile when he opened up his lunch bag? They would've added a snack too. Something like string cheese or fish crackers. The boy probably wouldn't appreciate the time they'd put into making his lunch his lunch, but whoever had made the lunch would know that they were doing-"

The light changed and the kids ran across the street laughing and giggling, their backpacks bouncing against their backs. Sean shook his head as if to clear it. No need for all that, he thought.

He continued down toward the shelter, and when he got close. he saw that the line was already around the corner. A ragged line of people in tattered clothes and ill-fitting hand-me-downs. There were old people, families, teenagers. Some sat on the ground and leaned up against the building as they waited for the line to inch forward, while others impatiently tried to peer

over the shoulders of the people ahead of them in a vain attempt to see what the hold up was. They would run out of food long before he got inside.

Sean turned away and crossed the street. He knew a couple of good dumpster diving spots, and hopefully one of them would pan out today. As he looked down the street ahead of him, he saw that the grey clouds still covered the sky, and the smog hung close to the ground like fog, so that just two blocks ahead the buildings disappeared into the mists. He pulled a crumpled and stained red bandana out of his pocket and tied it around his face like a train robber in the old west. He shoved his hands in his pockets and trudged down the sidewalk, his boots splashing puddles that he didn't even try to avoid.

\* \* \*

On the top floor of City Hall, Sebastian Insworth sat at his desk in front of the door to the Chairman's corner office and went through the mail. Most of it went straight into the wastepaper basket next to the desk. The letters were pleas for funding that didn't exist, invitations to events hosted by unimportant people and your every day run-of-the-mill complaints from citizens. Those Sebastian had to read a little more diligently to make sure there weren't any death threats because those he had to put in the log and then notify the police. The police kept a computerized database that they had access to, but the Chairman insisted on having his own physical copy. So, the threat-log was a leather bound notebook that Sebastian kept in the lower right hand drawer of his desk.

Through the wooden doors of the Chairman's office, Sebastian could hear snatches of the Chairman's conversation while talking on the phone. Sebastian listened closely, and from snippets he could hear, he was beginning to piece together something about a construction

project in East Boston when the sound of footsteps coming down the hall interrupted his eavesdropping. Sebastian went back to looking at the letter in his hands, a complaint about the ten foot high piles of trash that lined some streets, and as the interloper rounded the corner, the footsteps proved to be those of one Kenneth Templeton, who had worn the black three piece suit with a red tie today. Kenneth was certainly not scrimping on his wardrobe. In Kenneth's hand was a manila folder that looked to have several pieces of paper in it.

"Is that finally the prospective donors list?" Sebastian asked as Kenneth dropped the folder on the desk.

"Yes, and I still don't see what all the rush was," Kenneth said. "We've got plenty of time."

Kenneth was referring to the fact that it was still three years before the Receivership in Boston ended and power was given back to the mayor and the city council.

"We, Kenneth? We?" Sebastian said. "If you still want to be part of this 'We' in three years, you'd better get your head out of your ass."

Kenneth smirked but said nothing. He no longer got flustered when provoked. It seemed that he had learned some self control these past few months. Sebastian said, "What is he going to do when the Receivership ends?"

"Run for office back home," Kenneth said in the tone teenagers use when they want to let their parents know that they're incredibly bored by the conversation at hand.

"Oh good, you've been paying attention," Sebastian said. "Now Kenneth, what do you need to run for public office?"

Kenneth rolled his eyes, "You need mon-"

"That was a rhetorical question, Kenneth," Sebastian said. Kenneth had ideas about advancement that went far beyond his talents, and it was necessary to put him in his place from time to time, even if he was one of the City Clerk's favorites. "We need to begin fund raising now. Not next month, not next week, not tomorrow, now. Plus, you need to learn to perform your tasks efficiently. You do not have all day to do something, and you've been here long enough now to get things done the way we want them."

"Sure, absolutely," Kenneth said.

For Sebastian that was the end of the conversation, and he picked up the manila folder and began skimming through the list of names. At this point Kenneth usually retreated back down the hall, but he was still lingering in front of the desk.

"Yes?" Sebastian said without looking up from the list.

"Have you seen the Herald today? It's buried in the metro section, but there's another article about the blood transfusion-"

"No. Stop right there," Sebastian said. "I don't even want to think about that right now. If it becomes a problem we'll deal with it, but until then, I don't want to hear another word about it."

"Okay, fine. Just one other thing. Some reporter called," Kenneth glanced at the doors to the office behind Sebastian's desk. "And asked if it was true that he had proposed renaming Columbus Park after his mother."

"Some reporter?"

Kenneth looked away, "I didn't get her name."

"And what did you tell your little Lois Lane?"

"I said I didn't know. That I'd have ask."

Sebastian wistfully imagined picking the stapler up and stapling Kenneth's ear to the desk and then giving him a couple of sharp kicks in the ass. Instead, Sebastian tried to remain calm as he said, "Kenneth, I know I did not brief you on that particular situation, but you should know by now that he would never, ever, put forth a proposal to name anything after his mother. That proposal was put forth by Councilman Bertrand. Now, find out who-

The intercom on Sebastian's desk crackled for half a second before a voice thundered out from the speaker, "Maple latte, orange slices and pistachios." The intercom fell silent. More orders from beyond the door. Sebastian hated the stupid intercom. It scared the hell out of him every time it screeched to life, and what the hell was some obsolete twentieth-century technology still doing in city hall anyway?

Sebastian looked out the window. Grey and rainy. Cold no doubt. Wind probably cut right through you.

"I presume you know which coffee shop to go to?" Sebastian said.

Kenneth cursed under his breath, and then headed back down the hall.

"And make sure to arrange the orange slices in a circle. You forgot last time."

## Chapter Two

After I got to work, I took an hour or two to finish up the Waterstone account and then sent it in. I spent the rest of the morning sitting at my cubicle expecting them to call me in with the temps just before lunch, which was what they always did when they laid them off. But they called the temps into the conference room and then fifteen minutes later they all came out looking dejected like they always did, and still no one had said a word to me. I had to go out and get a sandwich for lunch because I hadn't packed anything, figuring I'd be gone before noon. For the rest of the afternoon, every time I heard someone walking through the office, my head snapped up as I looked over to see if they were coming to fire me.

At 4:23 I was still sitting in my cubicle. I guess it shouldn't have been surprising that they were going to make me work the full day before shit-canning me. The weasels. Although, it wasn't like I could be productive in this state. I'd spent the better part of the past hour changing the color of the house in the ad from blue to white, and then back again. For most of the day I'd been rehearsing what I was going to say to Donaldson. I'd been working on this scathing speech about the importance of free speech, the need for healthy debate in a democracy and how

sometimes it was necessary for people to put their convictions ahead of their own material self-interest.

That was the speech I wanted to give. Of course, I had another one, and that one was much shorter. It had to be. I would say as little as possible, thank him for the opportunity and say that I hoped we would be able to work together again in the future. If it was any longer I would no doubt choke on my own hypocrisy. That was Phil's way to respond, which was probably the best move, almost certainly the best move. It was the same thing any other person in my position would say. Knowing that fact did not provide me any solace, and as I sat there in my squeaky office chair amid the piles of paper and folders on my desk, I kept glancing over at the old clock on the wall. There was something so final about a clock with twelve numbers and two metal hands that ticked inevitably onward. After awhile I imagined I could hear it going tick, tick, tick as the seconds ticked by.

At 4:34, Ramona came wandering over to my cubicle and began running her index finger along the edges of the fern that was on my desk.

"What you working on?" Ramona said.

I changed the house back into a light blue, "Oh, can't decide if this house should be white or blue."

"I like the blue," Ramona said.

"Oh yeah?"

Ramona nodded, "and Phil wants to see you in his office."

"Phil?" I said.

"Yeah," Ramona said, "Phil said he needs to talk with you. He's in his office."

"Ok, thanks."

Why the hell did Phil want to see me? Had the whole thing been called off? I began to wonder if Phil had jumped to conclusions prematurely? Maybe they were re-evaluating my performance and liked what I'd done on the Waterston Account? I stood up in daze and before I knew it was walking past the other cubicles to Phil's office in the middle of the back wall. I mean, the Waterstone account was one of the firm's largest, and I thought we'd done a great job on it.

Once I reached Phil's office door, I exhaled slowly to try to calm myself and then knocked. After a moment I heard him say come in. I walked in and closed the door behind me. Phil was seated behind his desk, on top of which was a computer and the obligatory photos of his kids. Three boys and one girl. All between seven and twelve years old. On the bookshelf to the right of the desk were more photos of his kids at little league games or playing the piano. The only other pictures in the room were a series of nautically themed prints he'd put up on the walls. Lots of sloops and cutters from the eighteenth century, which was odd because it wasn't like he went sailing on weekends or owned a boat or anything.

Phil was checking something on the computer and motioned for me to have a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. While he finished up, I nervously tried to examine his face for any sign of what was to come, but I couldn't see any indication either way. As he sat there with his receding hairline, glasses and suit, he looked stoic almost, or maybe like a banker or an accountant. He was still looking at something on his computer, clicking away with the mouse. If they'd reconsidered, he would've looked at me by now, wouldn't he? Yeah. He'd be talking in that excited whisper of his, eager to tell me the good news. So why had he call-

"Holy shit," I said. "They're making you do it. Aren't they?"

Phil grimaced and then took his hand off the mouse and leaned back in his chair and nodded.

"Were you even doing anything right there?" I said gesturing at the computer. "Or were you just killing time trying to figure out what to say?"

His shoulders sagged a little, "Was it that obvious?"

"If it had been good news you would've looked at me. And what? You didn't even prepare anything, you were just going to wing it?"

Phil reached down and opened one of the bottom drawers of the desk, "I tried. Everything I came up with seemed trite and ridiculous." He pulled up a bottle of scotch and put it on his desk and then he pulled out two glasses and put them on top of the desk. He pointed at the bottle and raised his eyebrows as if to say, So, are we doing this?

I nodded.

As he poured, I said, "So, when'd you find out you were doing this? This morning?"

He shook his head, "About twenty minutes ago. Donaldson came by and asked me if I'd be willing to do it. Said it'd probably be better coming from me." Phil smirked as he handed me one of the glasses, "I don't think this is what he had in mind. And sorry, there's no ice."

"Doesn't matter." I took a sip of the scotch and winced a little at the strong taste, and then said, "Why'd he ask you to do it? I would've thought he'd relish the opportunity to fire me."

"He would. If he thought you'd go quietly. But he's not an idiot."

So Donaldson was afraid of the "Take This Job and Shove It" speech. I knew that shouldn't have made me feel better, but it did. "That's because even he knows this is complete bullshit, Phil."

Phil took a sip of his scotch, and seemed to take a moment to enjoy the flavor before responding, "It is. Mostly. But you also have to try to see things from their perspective, Brand-

"The man asked us what we thought. He explicitly said he wouldn't hold anything against us."

"Who cares what he wanted? What do Donaldson, Mark and Terry want? That's what you need to care about. Did you see anyone else there volunteer to get into a political argument with one of the firm's biggest clients? Shit, that Temp-Corp vice-president was probably amused by the whole thing. He didn't really give a shit what anyone really thought. He just wanted to get drunk and argue. But for Christ's sake, Branden. Donaldson saw you get into a political argument with a client and in his version of events you basically called Jones a fascist and said we were copying, what was it, the totalitarian practices of our future Chinese Overlords."

"No, that's not true. I didn't call him a fascist. I said fascist tactics. And I may have said that about the Chinese, but we talked for like a half hour and we were fine. He had no problem with me."

"Yeah, fine. But Branden, Donaldson is thinking about the next client, who might not be so understanding. He's also never liked you criticizing the Chinese. He's got his eye on getting more Chinese clients, and what happens if word gets around that you're bad mouthing the People's Republic?"

"Who's going to tell them?"

"I don't know. And you're right, it'd probably never happen, but it's a possibility. And Donaldson just doesn't trust you."

"Donaldson doesn't even like me."

"True. And he's terrified right now. You saw what happened to Steiner Brothers, and if we lose a couple of big clients we're screwed. And he's thinking, why keep you on as a liability? He can just push your work onto Mary and Kittridge. And if we need someone in the future, we can just hire you back." Phil took another sip of his scotch. "Which you should pray to God happens, because there are plenty of qualified people out there who can't get a job."

"Phil, the man asked me for my opinion and I gave it. That's all that happened. It's not like we were in the conference room before a meeting. Are you telling me that I can't have political opinions? Is that what you're saying?"

"Fuck, Branden. Not at work. Damn it, we're not having this conversation again. Look, this is not the first time you've pushed the envelope. Don't try to tell me that part of you didn't know exactly what you were doing. I know there was a little voice inside the rock hard head of yours telling you not to say anything, but you didn't listen, did you? You went and did what you wanted. You knew the rules to the game, and you made your choice."

"It's not a fucking game, Phil. It's my goddamn life."

Neither one of us said anything for a while after that. We just sat there in the fading autumn light, sipping our scotch in the silence.

After I finished my drink and calmed down a little, I said, "Phil, I don't go around forcing people to listen my political opinions. I don't start those kinds of conversations. But if people ask me, I'm going to tell them what I think. I'm not going to keep quiet just because it's more convenient."

Phil looked at for a moment and then in a low voice said, "And look where that's gotten you."

We looked at each other for a minute, and I started to get pissed, but what was the point.

Then he said, "Shit. Look, I don't know how to handle these things. Can I do anything? Can I help in any way?"

"A letter of recommendation would be great."

"Done. Already working on it."

I tried to think about all the bureaucratic crap I'd need to do, my last paycheck, health insurance, unemployment, how the hell did that work? I said, "Technically I got laid off, right? That's how I should file for unemployment?"

He nodded, "And I asked Jim to stick around. He knows all of these details, so he can answer any questions you might have. He's also got all the paperwork for you to sign."

"Then I think we're all set. I'll just get my things and go. Everyone's probably taken off by now, so that'll spare me some awkwardness."

"Look," Phil said, "Donaldson said that after I broke the news, he was going to come talk to you if you were, what were his words, taking it in an appropriate manner. In other words, if you want a shot at getting hired back, he wants to see you before you go."

I thought about it for a minute, and I decided to keep some doors open. I could always slam them shut later if I wanted, "Fine. Tell him I'm taking it appropriately."

Phil got on his computer and sent Donaldson an IM and then we made awkward small talk about our kids until Donaldson showed up. He knocked twice, and then walked in. I stood up and reached out to shake the hand he had offered.

"Branden, I'm sorry it has to be this way," Donaldson said, "but with things how they are, well, you know how it is these days."

And this was it. My opportunity to look him in the eyes, hold onto his hand and not let go until I had told this corporate stooge everything I'd always wanted to about his cowardice and hypocrisy.

I looked him in the eye and said, "Mr. Donaldson, I understand. It's been a pleasure working here, and if the opportunity every arises for us to work together again in the future, I would welcome it."

He cocked his head a little and offered a thin smile, "Well, that's good to know, Branden. Hopefully work picks up in a little bit and we can give you a call."

I smiled back. He wished me luck, and left the office, closing the door behind him. This feeling of intense self loathing came over me, and while it would slowly fade, some part of it would remain like some ever present bitter aftertaste. I stared at the closed door for a moment, and then I turned around and said, "I guess I'll be taking off."

Phil had stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry Branden, I am. We'll talk next week? Maybe get a beer?"

"Thanks, Phil. I'll see you later."

I opened the door and walked out into the office. The lights were still on, but all the cubicles and desks were empty. Everyone had gone home. Except for Jim. I could see the top of his head sticking up over the top of the cubicles. I headed over to do my paperwork.

\* \* \*

Alisa repositioned herself on the metal folding chair, the damn things were so uncomfortable. The meeting had just started, and at the front of the room the Condo Board

officers sat behind plastic folding tables. Doloris Burton, the president of the Condo Board, had just read off the minutes of the last meeting, and now she had opened up the floor for announcements and general comments. An older man in a blue sweater was at the mic asking people to donate to the annual turkey fund for needy families. Alisa made a mental note to donate, but she really wished they could skip the announcements today and get the representative from the Somerville branch of City Hall up there. What was his name? Thompson? Thornton? She reached into her pocket to make sure her notes were still there. They were.

Alisa glanced around the large basement room and was still shocked at how crowded it was. Every one of the metal folding chairs was taken, and there were people actually standing along the walls and in the back. There had to be at least two hundred people crowded into the windowless room, which was unheard of. Condo Board meetings were dull affairs and hardly anyone attended them. It was usually just elderly residents looking for something to do and a mix of people who liked to complain and people who felt that since they lived in the building they had an obligation to attend the meetings. Alisa belonged to the last group.

Alisa wiped a couple of droplets of perspiration from her forehead. There were so many people crowded into the room, it had to be at least ten to fifteen degrees warmer than usual. From her seat in the middle of the crowd, Alisa could see Molly seated at one of the tables at the front of the room, taking notes like she always did at the meetings. An older woman named Betty Gibson stepped up to the microphone and Alisa groaned. A couple of people seated in front of her glanced back at her, and her cheeks flushed. Alisa had never spoken to Betty, nor had she seen her outside of Condo Board meetings, but almost every week Betty got up to the mike and gave the same speech about litter in the stairwell of Building #3, Unit N. It was practically the

same speech word for word every week, and she always took up the full five minutes. Alisa knew the whole speech almost by heart, and at this point she felt it was bordering on torture.

Where the heck was Branden? Alisa scanned the crowd again, but there was no sign of him. She checked her phone and there were no new voice messages or texts. This was not all that surprising. Branden was probably using dinner at his mother's as an excuse not to come. While escaping from Teresa could be difficult, if Branden wanted to, he could. Alisa texted Branden, Where are you?

Even Jenny had made it to this meeting, and her building wasn't even having any water issues. Jenny, who was sitting in the seat to the right of Alisa, was currently on her phone and engrossed by [felinensemble.com](http://felinensemble.com), a website that featured pictures of cats wearing historical costumes. There were thousands and thousands of photos. It was unbelievable. She said she preferred her felines dressed as pirates, complete with cutlasses and hats. According to her, the wild, long-haired breeds pulled off the look the best.

At the moment, Jenny was checking out a Siamese that looked pretty sharp in a Victorian era suit complete with a gold pocket watch and miniature bowler hat. All he needed was a cane to stroll down the boulevard with. Jenny'd always liked looking at kitschy little stuff like that, but what worried Alisa was the amount of time Jenny had been spending looking at cat photos. Whenever Jenny was stressed about something, she'd fixate on some inane, pointless thing like Armenian music videos or Chipmunk Solitaire. She'd just escape into these obsessions to avoid whatever thing it was she couldn't fix. And Alisa had no idea what that was this time. So as Betty Gibson droned on about the empty soda cans and plastic bags in the stairwell, Alisa decided that now was as good as time as any to find out.

Alisa leaned over and whispered, "So what's this, hour three of Felinensemble? It's Krazy Kristal Kwest all over again. What's going on?"

Jenny shrugged and continued scrolling through pictures of cats, now dressed in togas. Alisa stared at her. And stared. After a minute of this, Jenny glanced over at Alisa who was still staring and said, "Hey, I've been meaning to ask, is Branden coming tonight?"

Alisa rolled her eyes, "Real subtle."

Alisa waited, but Jenny just kept scrolling through photos. Betty was now listing the kinds of candy bar wrappers she had found on the stairwell. Jenny would tell her eventually. She always did.

As Betty went on and on, people had started to talk, and the noise was getting louder and louder. Betty seemed unfazed. She continued right on talking. Jenny shifted in her seat as she put her phone into her pocket. She sat there with her hands clasped together in her lap looking at the ground. When she spoke, Alisa could barely hear her, "You remember the health inspector who came in last month and demanded that ridiculous \$27,000 bribe because we're supposedly don't have the proper ventilation system?"

Alisa nodded. The bribe had eaten up all of Jenny and Dave's savings and then some. They'd had to take out a emergency loan at the bank just to cover the difference.

"Well, he came back last week. He wants \$60,000 this time."

"Jesus H. Christ," Alisa hissed. A bit too loudly because the guy in the gray sweatshirt in front of her looked back at them. She lowered her voice, "Are you serious?"

Jenny nodded. "Dave's at the diner right now going through everything for the umpteenth time, crunching numbers and trying to figure a way out. We've been doing it for the past week. I just had to get out of there. Couldn't take it anymore."

That explained her presence at the meeting. But that was so much money.

"A \$60,000 bribe to pass a health inspection?" Alisa said. "That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard of."

"I know."

"I mean health inspectors are what? Probably civil servant grade five or six? It's like four or five thousand for those guys, max. What's this guy thinking?"

Jenny still hadn't picked her gaze up off the concrete floor, but she was getting angry. The muscles in her cheek had tightened, and icy edge crept into her tone.

"Grade five or six? Not even. Health inspectors are only CSG four. Bob was \$1,000 every time. This guy though. He just waltzes in and says \$60,000. When he said it, we didn't believe it could be that high. Dave told him he was full of shit, and the guy brings out his tablet with the official health inspection form that's already been filled out with our names and the restaurant and everything, and he hovers his stupid stylus over the failure box as if he's going to check it, and once he submits that, it can't be changed. Other inspectors have to come check everything out and it's a big deal. So Dave freaks out and is like ok, ok. Give a us week. And the asshole agrees and just walks off. He's coming back the day after tomorrow."

This was a disaster. Jenny and Dave were barely makes ends meet as it was. The diner was keeping afloat, but just barely. And with their savings gone... "I'm so sorry Jenny. This is awful. But there has to be a way to fix this. We just have to think."

Jenny kept staring at the ground.

"Can't you turn him in?" Alisa said. "Sixty thousand is so ridiculous that his boss might be pissed. That's just trying to take too much. His boss may get paranoid that someone being that

greedy will attract way too much attention. Or you can get the police involved. Can you videotape him taking the money?"

"What money could we give him?"

That was a good point. "Doesn't he need to provide proof of a violation? Document it somehow? Photos? Video? What does he have?"

"Alisa, we're in violation of any number of health codes. He'd just have to pick one."

"What? Seriously?" Alisa pictured the banana waffles she'd just eaten there the other day.

"Relax. Everything's sanitary. There's just no way we can afford all the specific equipment they require. The fryers also have to have these specific backups and the stove has to have this wiring, the ventilation has to be from these companies and on and on. That stuff has to be specially certified. And that's expensive."

"How much are we talking?"

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"Are you kidding me? Why so much?"

"Almost all of it has to be imported. Europe or Asia. Whichever. No one makes that kind of stuff here."

"So what do you do for ventilation? Don't tell me you just open the windows."

It was Jenny's turn to roll her eyes. "Yeah, and where's there's a lot of smoke, we just use a piece of cardboard to fan it out the window. Look, there are plenty of contractors here that can make a perfectly fine ventilation system for a reasonable price. The same goes for stoves and fryers and fridges. It's just not certified. So when health the inspector comes around..."

"You have to make a donation."

"Exactly," she said.

"And this guy..."

"Is an asshole."

"This is bad," Alisa said.

"Yeah." Jenny nodded. "It is."

"What are you going to do?"

Jenny stuffed her hands in her pockets and looked at Alisa for a moment before quietly saying, "We're going to have to take out another loan."

"Another loan? God, I suppose you have to. Unless you want to sell."

Jenny looked up with so much pain in her eyes that Alisa had to look away for a moment. That was a level of pain Alisa associated with funerals. Jenny and Dave had poured everything into that diner. Alisa knew there was no back up plan. They had bet on themselves, and it had been a long shot, they knew that. It had been touch and go in the beginning, but after three years it looked as if they were going to make it, and now everything was unraveling.

"Ok," Alisa said, "how long will the bank need to approve the loan? They're going to need time for that amount of money, right? Is he willing to wait?"

Jenny didn't respond. She just looked at Alisa with an expression that practically wondered out loud how someone could be so naive. It took Alisa a moment to figure it out, and then she felt like the stupidest person on earth. Of course the bank wouldn't give them another loan. No bank would give them a sixty thousand dollar loan in less than week.

"Jenny, no." Alisa whispered. "That's not a good idea. You don't want to owe those people money."

"Do you have a better idea?"

Alisa shook her head. "It just sounds like terrible idea."

"Well, you give me a better one and I'll take it," Jenny snapped. People turned around to look at them, and Alisa remembered where they were. She had completely forgotten. She glanced up at the at the front of the room. Doloris was giving a summary of the bids for the recycling contract.

Alisa turned back to Jenny, who had gone back to looking at the floor. Alisa decided not to say anything. Better to let her cool down. Loan sharks were a shitty idea. But the more Alisa thought about, the more she realized that it was either that or sell the diner.

After a minute Jenny took her hands out of her pockets and ran her fingers through her shoulder length dark hair, "Sorry, I'm taking it out on you. Don't listen to me."

Alisa didn't talk. She just put her arm around Jenny and hugged her close. The two of them lapsed into silence.

\* \* \*

The brown paint on the outside of my mother's house was peeling and cracking. The cracks were so plentiful that the side of the house looked like a map of dry riverbeds tracing their way across the desert. It'd gotten to the point where she stopped complaining about it, and now whenever she walked by it, she'd just stare at it for a second, shake her head in disgust and then keep going.

I made my way up the walk, past fallen leaves of orange and yellow, and used my key to unlock the front door. I had to step over a pair of kids' boots that had been left right in front the door. The Howards lived in the first floor apartment and had three kids. The rest of the family's

shoes were lined up next to their front door underneath the coat rack. My mother loved them as tenants, unlike the guy on the third floor.

I walked up the wooden stairs to the second floor and used my keys to open the both the deadbolts. Once I got inside and was taking off my coat, I heard music coming from the kitchen, some oldies station, and I could smell the sauce and wondered if there'd be sausages and meatballs, or just meatballs. My mother appeared in the kitchen doorway and a wide smile broke out across her face.

"You're late. What happened? And why didn't you bring Kira? Where is she?"

I walked over and gave my mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek, "I told you, Kira's having dinner at her friend's house tonight."

"She can't come over and see her Nona? Alright, Alright. At least you came." She led me into the kitchen and went over to the stove to stir the sauce with a wooden spoon. I sat down at a kitchen table that was big enough for six, but only set for two.

"And Alisa?" he asked, "Is she at the hospital?"

"She's at this incredibly boring and pointless Condo Board meeting."

"You didn't have to be there?"

"I'd much rather be here."

She smiled at that and turned the heat up on the pot of nearly boiling water. "We'll get the water boiling, and then I'll throw the macaroni in, and we'll be all set. Oh, let me make the salad."

As she got the salad ready, I told her what Kira was up to and how she was doing in school. I had the perfect opportunity to transition into the Chinese classes, but I didn't. Instead I asked about my uncle Angelo, which got me a description of his health problems, most of which

were gastro-intestinal. I barely listened. I'd heard it all before. My mind kept flashing back to a piece of street art I'd seen on the way over. It was a new one in the Ratnessmen series, which featured rats dressed as businessmen. They had them getting out of limousines or berating an office full of tiny, scared mice and things like that. This one had a couple of Ratnessmen eating a sea turtle with chopsticks at fancy restaurants with rats dressed in traditional Chinese clothes, and unfortunately this was just as racist as usual. The rats in the traditional Chinese clothing had giant buckteeth and slanty eyes. I loved the whole Ratnessmen concept, but every time there was a Chinese rat, it just ruined it.

Once the pasta was cooked, she poured the sauce over it and set out a bowl for each of us. I poured some more sauce over the pasta and got a couple meatballs.

Is that all?" she said. "You used to be such a good eater."

"I'm fine, Ma." And as we sat there eating, I kept thinking that I might as well get this over with. No sense in prolonging things till the coffee. The Bank of Teresa Walsh was once again open for business, and these days its only customer was here to take out a loan. Between my mother's overly frugal nature, the rent from the tenants and the way she bartered the fresh vegetables from her garden, the woman put some money aside. On more than once occasion, Alisa had suggested that the money might be in shoeboxes in the closet, but I was pretty sure my mother had better sense than that. One hundred percent sure? No. But pretty sure.

"Let me ask you a question," I said.

"What? And you haven't eaten anything. I can't eat this all myself." My mother pointed to the small, blue tureen filled with tomato sauce, "You want more gravy?"

"No. And it's not like it's going to go bad. We don't have to eat them all right this second. Look, I want to talk to you about something."

"What? What's wrong? What happened?"

"Ma, nothing happened. Kira needs Chinese classes. All right, need isn't the right word. But they're offering an after school tutorial in Mandarin. It's a great opportunity. All these kids applied, and Kira got accepted."

"She beat out all those kids? That's wonderful, and she'll be able to draw all those characters and everything. But why are you talking to me about this like somebody died? What is it? You need money?"

I looked down at my plate and pushed a meatball around before stabbing it with a fork and eating it. Was it that obvious? "Yeah. We need money. Look, we can make the monthly payments, but they want three months in advance as a down payment to get the teacher, and we only got one month's worth. We used up almost all of our rainy day money to get the washing machine fixed." And with me out of a job there's going to be a significant cash flow problem. But we won't be talking about that tonight. "So, If you can help us out with just two months worth, that'll be it. That's all we'll need. I'm sorry to ask, but the tutorial-

"Of course. Of course." My mother said patting my hand. "Chinese, it's the future. Will this help with getting into an exam school?"

"That's the hope. They've put Chinese language as one of the optional sections on the entrance exam, so if she does well on that, it might help her get in."

"Who's the teacher?"

"Someone from Tufts. A native speaker. That's one of the selling points."

"Someone from Tufts? That's good." Her expression showed that she was impressed. But then she folded her arms across her chest and said, "But let me guess, they're going to charge an arm and a leg."

"You got it. \$6000 a month." Here it comes.

"Six thousand dollars! Are they crazy? Every student has to pay that? My god, they're making out like bandits."

"I know. I know. But it's only ten kids. They keep the tutorial small so that each student gets individual attention. And some of the money goes to the school to pay for the room, materials, Internet access, and whatever else. Snacks and stuff."

"That's a lot of money for snacks."

"I'm sure the snack portion of the budget is very reasonable. You can see why we need help. Look, I wouldn't ask if it weren't important. But Kira's pretty good in Chinese right now, and this has the chance to take her over the top."

"No, that I understand. It makes sense. It does. It's just a lot of money. But this is why you save, right?"

I nodded and took another bite of pasta. My mother ate a little more and then said, "You know why you can't afford this class, don't you?"

Oh shit. No this again. "Ma, please. I don't-"

"It's that apartment of yours. The rent is outrageous. Who pays that kind of rent? Especially for a place that's falling apart after, what? Seven years after they built it?"

She wasn't wrong. "Ma, you know why we live there. We're right next to the best school in Somerville. Almost sixty-five percent of the students there go on to the exam schools."

"I know. You've told me. Many times. It just seems ridiculous to live in a place where the water comes out of the faucet brown, the electricity goes on and off willy nilly and the walls are stained with rust or whatever that is."

"Ma, it's fine. We've only got another two years there, and then we'll sell the place to some other parents desperate to get their kid into the Brown. We were really lucky to get that place. Really lucky. But, back to the main question. Can you loan us the money?"

"Loan? Why a loan? I'll give you the money. I'm happy to do it. It's for Kira. I just wish you didn't have to live in such a dump. What if there's an electrical fire one day? You said the wiring over there is horrendous."

"Yeah, it's probably a lot safer here. We'll just move in across the street," I said gesturing out the window.

She looked out the window at the houses across the street that had burned and been left to rot. Some of them just looked charred and had windows boarded up, while other were half the house they used to be. In a couple the outside walls had fallen down and you could see into rooms, like some kid's diorama for a school project on the dangers of leaving the stove on.

She hurrupmed at me, and then said, "There are still good places around. Not everywhere burned down. Besides, all I'm saying is you could move into the third floor apartment. You don't have to pay rent. It would-"

"Ma, for umpteenth time, we're not moving in upstairs. Besides Clive still has time left on his lease right?"

"Him? With the things he does I got reason enough to get rid of him anytime I want. And tell me it doesn't make sense. You could save a lot of money."

"Would you have wanted to live in the same house as your mother-in-law?"

My mother glared at me with barely concealed rage, "I am not your Grandma Molly. Don't you compare me to her."

"Of course not. Completely different situation. But look, we're in that apartment for another two years at least and that's it."

"All right, all right. What do I know? You want the money now?"

"If you got it. You aren't keeping too much cash lying around here are you."

"I got as much as I need. Don't you worry about me. I'm not the one asking for money."

She got up and headed for the bedroom. "But you know I'm always here for you. Whenever you need anything. You just ask."

"Ok, Ma."

She disappeared into the bedroom, and I stayed at the table and finished my meatballs like a good little boy. Thirty-six years old and I still needed to beg my mother for money. Pathetic. Hell, even when I wasn't asking for money, I still felt like a teenager sometimes. Does that ever stop? The thought of vowing never to ask my mother for money again crossed my mind, but who the hell was I kidding? That had become a semi-annual promise at this point.

I tried to figure out what she'd want in return. I wouldn't be getting out of this debt free. She wouldn't take any money, but she'd get her pound of flesh in other ways. Maybe Sunday dinner every week for two months. Maybe she'd insist on having both Alisa and me over for coffee and trying to get us to reconsider moving in. That was a conversation Alisa had told me she never wanted to have again.

It's not that I felt obligated to do these things for her, it's that after giving them the money, she felt entitled to ask. And maybe she should. I don't know. By the time she got back from her bedroom, I'd finished my pasta. She handed me the cash, and I slipped it into my pocket. She brought out the salad, and as I filled my bowl I wondered if there'd be pitzelle's with the coffee afterwards. A day as shitty as today should have at least one silver lining.

\* \* \*

Alisa looked around the room, the crowd was agitated after sitting for so long and there was a buzz from the back as people talked and a group up front on the right hand side was laughing a little too loud. Alisa scanned the crowd for Branden, but all she saw were unfamiliar faces. Alisa started to think about what would happen if Jenny and Dave lost the diner, but it was too depressing, so instead she focused on the back of the grey sweatshirted man seated in front of her. The sweatshirt was wearing thin to the point where tiny holes had appeared and a miniature galaxy of them spread out across his back. The holes even seemed to swirl like the Milky Way. Alisa started trying to form constellations and lost herself in the act of making patterns from the randomness. She'd found a big dipper or a reasonable facsimile, half of Orion and was trying to create Ursa Major when she heard Doloris' voice over the PA, "I'd like to introduce Barry Thorton, deputy commissioner of the Somerville Branch of City Hall. As most of you know, we have been having some issues in a couple of our buildings with the quality of our tap water lately-"

"Yeah, it's shit brown," someone in front said loudly. Some people nearby in the crowd laughed at the comment, and all over the basement the buzz that had filled the room died down as people started paying attention to what was going on at the front. It seemed like Doloris had chosen to ignore the comment. "Well, we might as well get right to it. I'm sure you all have plenty of questions for Mr. Thornton. Please welcome him." Doloris looked over toward the door at the front of the room where a heavysset man in a grey suit and blue tie stood. He smiled back and walked over to shake Doloris' hand.

There was a scattering of applause, some of it of the sarcastic slow-clap variety. Doloris installed him at the center seat of her table so that he was in the middle of the room directly in front of the microphone that was just in front of the center aisle. Doloris sat down on his left. Thorton leaned into his microphone and said, "I'd like to thank everyone for coming out tonight. Civic participation is the lifeblood of any community. Now I know you had some concerns about the quality of the water, but let me assure you, The city of Boston and your Somerville representatives are doing their best to ensure that you have the best services available-"

"How?" Someone from the front right yelled loud enough for everyone to hear. It looked like Molly's plan was getting off to a good start.

Thorton produced a half smile that showed the crowd a sliver of his teeth and not much else. He glanced over at Doloris who gave him a weak smile. She was going to hear about that after the meeting.

"Look. Clean water is a fundamental right of any citizen, we are investigating this problem as thoroughly as our resources allow. You have to remember that these problems can come from any of the pipes in these buildings-"

The sound of groans broke out all over the basement and more than a few people started shouting. A man behind Alisa shouted, "Are you kidding me?" and a woman off to the left said, "They've checked our pipes four times already. It's the city pipes!" The buzz of crowd came back as people started complaining to each other again.

Thorton tried to speak above the din, "I know you're frustrated but we're doing all that we can."

This was met with laughter and more than a few people yelling bullshit. Thornton looked over at Doloris. He was starting to get red. He loosened his tie and used a handkerchief to wipe off his forehead. Molly knew what she was talking about.

Doloris came to his rescue. She leaned down into the microphone, "We have limited time, and I'm sure you all want to ask your questions, so let's get right to it. Deputy Commissioner Thornton has about a half hour with us, so please keep your questions brief. The procedure, for those of you who are unfamiliar with our rules, is that anyone who has a question can come to the front and wait in line to ask. So, those of you with question please form a line."

People popped up from their seats and made a beeline for the microphone. Alisa sprung out of her seat, but then looked down at Jenny.

"Go, go on," she said.

"We'll talk later?"

Jenny nodded.

Alisa squeezed past her and the other occupants of the row. By the time she got near the line, there were already two dozen people ahead of her. She wondered if all of them would have time to ask their questions. She should've arrived earlier and sat up front, near the center aisle. She made sure her notes were still in her pocket as an older gentleman in a blue cardigan stepped up to the mike.

"Could you tell us what is currently being done to fix the problem?"

"Sir," Thornton said, "We've got crews from public works investigating all the possibilities."

"So they're looking at it right now? They be working on it tomorrow?"

Thorton smiled at him, "Sir, I can't be certain. They have a very busy schedule and limited resources. Every day they get a list of high priority problems and they have to attend to those first. Now-

A man in the front right corner of the room stood up and shouted, "Are you telling me this isn't a fucking high priority problem?" He had slurred a couple of his words and was holding a plastic cup in his hand.

Doloris leaned over into the mike and spoke sharply, "Sir, profanity has no place here. If you would like to speak please join the line and keep it civil." His friends, who were sitting on either side, pulled him back into his seat, but you could hear people all over the crowd agreeing with him.

Doloris smiled at Thorton, who looked at the elderly gentleman in the cardigan who was still standing in front of the microphone and said, "Sir, thank you for your question, but we've got a lot of people to get to, and I want everyone to get a chance to speak, so could the next person please step up the podium."

The older gentleman didn't move for a moment, and Alisa got the distinct impression that the man wanted to say something else, and as he turned away and headed back to his seat, he cast a withering glance back at Thorton.

Next in line was Tina Sullivan. The matriarch of the Sullivan clan. Cheering erupted from the front right corner, and suddenly all the noise and cursing from that direction made sense. The Sullivans were notorious and there were a ton of them living in Units H and I. All of them were somehow related even if it was only distantly. It was a mystery how so many members of the same family had managed to get apartments in the same Unit but the rumors involved the usual stories of favors exchanged and paper bags full of cash left on doorsteps. Some of the Sullivans

were rumored to be selling drugs or involved in burglaries and your more basic insurance scams. There were certainly people going in and out at all hours of the night. At any rate, Alisa figured it wasn't any of her business, so she didn't ask any questions. The crowd over in the front right seemed to be a good chunk of the Sullivan Clan and now that Alisa paid attention to them, they did not look particularly sober.

Tina pointed at Thorton and said, "Why don't you know what the schedule is?"

Thorton frowned, "Excuse me?"

"The repair schedule. Aren't you supposed to be in charge? Shouldn't you know when things are going to be fixed? Isn't that why we pay our taxes, so you know things like that?" The Sullivans hooted their support.

Thorton smiled condescending in a way that Alisa was sure Tina didn't appreciate. "I don't want to get into the technical aspects of it. It really is very complex, but yes, there is probably an issue with a pipe and perhaps the filtration system. Thank you for yo-"

"Oh, it's complex is it? Great, I'm sure my tiny little brain can't understand all this complicated crap." She paused for a second and her voice echoed off the concrete walls of the basement. "So let's keep this simple. When's this gonna get fixed? That's what I wanna know."

"We're working as fast as we can to fix the problem. So if-"

"Now Mr. Thormpscun, why isn't there a crew working on it right now? Cause I don't see anybody fixing anything around here." The hoots were not just coming from the Sullivans anymore as the rest of the crowd was getting behind her. Some people were standing up and clapping while other were shouting for him to answer the question. The Sullivans had all stood and were cheering Tina on. Alisa glanced over at Molly who was looking down at her notes, but

was trying unsuccessfully to suppress a grin. Molly may have been more active in her recruiting than Alisa had realized.

Thorton was clearly agitated and his voice was starting to lose the steady, calm tone it had at the beginning of the meeting. You could barely hear him over the jeering, "Ma'am, they'll get to it as soon as they can if you could just-"

"I asked you why there was nobody working on it right now. You're giving me this nonsense about busy schedules. What's the real answer?" This drew more applause and whistles of encouragement.

"I don't know when they'll get to it. It's a big city." Thornton was not even attempting to smile anymore. "Now, there are other-"

"Don't give me that crap! I got water the color of dirt coming out of my tap, and I wanna know when it's gonna be fixed." Applause and shouts echoed off the walls filling the basement with so much noise that it was hard to hear and now half the crowd was standing and sweaty and it felt more crowded than ever. Thornton's face was red and he was visibly angry, "Ma'am you need to sit down so someone else can-"

"It's a simple question, Thohorn. I don't see-"

He made the mistake of raising his voice, "Just sit down and let someone-"

The Sullivans erupted. Some of them leapt forward and had to be restrained. They all were yelling and cursing at Thornton, giving him the finger and many in the crowd joined in. The noise was deafening and it seemed like everyone around Alisa was standing and shouting.

The Coke can moved through the air as if in slow-motion. It tumbled end over end as droplets of soda spilled out in little streams. Though you could tell there was still plenty of liquid in it from the way Thornton grunted when the can hit the side of his face.

The basement practically exploded and people began shouting even louder and throwing things at Thornton. Wadded up balls of paper, a couple of shoes, and people in the crowd surged forward shouting and cursing at him. The crowd surged within a few feet of him, but some in the crowd held the angriest people back, and people contented themselves with shouting, waving their fists and a few even started spitting at him. Thornton seemed stunned, and Doloris grabbed him by the arm and managed to force her way through a less aggressive section of the crowd and led him out a side door followed by a couple of Condo-Board members.

The crowd shouted at him as he left, and people started applauding and didn't stop until he was long gone. Molly waited a moment for the noise to die down and then she walked over to the microphone and picked it up off the table.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming out tonight. I know you're frustrated and angry. I am too. Hopefully tonight will show City Hall that we're not going to take any more of their incompetence."

The crowd applauded and cheered, and the noise echoed off the walls, but it was a cheerful noise, one that seemed to Alisa to have some hope in it, and people to feel like they had finally done something.

"So thank you again for coming," Molly said, "We'll keep you updated on what happens, and remember, we need your support. So keep coming to the meetings. If anyone has any questions, I'll be here after the meeting. Have a good night."

With that Molly switched the microphone off and the meeting officially ended. Everyone who wasn't already standing did, and people started filing out. Alisa hadn't gotten to ask her question, but she was ok with that. God, Branden was going to be pissed that he had missed this. Alisa smiled at that. Then she turned round and headed back through the crowd to find Jenny.

As Alisa and Jenny walked back across the small park that lay in the middle of the apartment complex they talked about some of the more mundane things in life. The kids' school, rising grocery prices and which shops had the best produce. When they got to a fork in the path, Jenny said she had to get back and help out Dave because they needed to make a decision. Alisa told Jenny that she would come over to the diner tomorrow or the next day to find out what they'd decided, and Alisa made Jenny promise that if she needed anything, she would call. Jenny agreed, but Alisa wasn't sure if she actually would. They said their goodbyes and Jenny headed down her path. In soft light from faux 18<sup>th</sup> century street lamps that lined the park's walkways, Alisa watched her friend head back home. Jenny had always been short, but with her arms folded across her chest, she seemed to sink into herself as she slowly walked down the path. She looked like an old woman from some fairy-tale disappearing into the dark forest.

When Alisa got home, Branden was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a beer.

"Hey," he said.

Alisa sat down at the table next to him. "You missed the best Condo Board meeting that there'll ever probably be."

"Oh?" he said softly.

Alisa reached for his beer and took a sip, but from the way he said Oh, she knew something was wrong. He looked pale and tired.

"Branden? What's wrong?" Alisa said, "Is your mother okay?"

"No, she's fine. It's just..." He reached over and picked up the beer and took a sip.

"It's just what?" Alisa reached out and took hold of his hand, "What happened?"

And so Branden explained. He told her about the call from Phil that morning and how he hadn't believed it. How he'd sat there all day waiting for the call, and still hadn't be ready for it when it came. How Phil had been patient with him and made sure ended things well. How he'd had to sit there and take Donaldson's condescending platitudes when he wanted to rip into the hypocrite. How he'd spent all evening doing the math in his head, that on just her salary and whatever meager unemployment there was, they should able to make the mortgage payment and buy food, pay the basic bills the utilities, but it was going to be close. He didn't know how they'd pay for insurance, or Kira's college fund or retirement. Alisa felt tears slide down her cheeks, and when he was done, she went over and sat in his lap and hugged him close. She whispered in his ear that it was all going to be fine, that they were going to be alright. She didn't know if either of them believed her, but they sat there like that for a while in the quiet of the kitchen holding each other, and the only sound was the old clock on the wall, ticking away.

## Chapter Three

In a back alley somewhere in the South End, a door opened and the scent of cooking pork and spices wafted out into the night. A tall, lanky man stepped out holding plastic bags in each hand. In the plastic bags were white, cardboard take out boxes filled with fresh dumplings and steamed pork buns. This man was in fact Liang Guowei, the owner and proprietor of Lucky Dragon Dumpling House. The Lucky Dragon was not a large operation. The front half of the restaurant was a small cafe with six tables and the back half was the kitchen where they made the dumplings and buns. The staff of the Lucky Dragon Dumpling House consisted of Guowei, his wife Jiayi and their niece Liqiu.

Guowei was very pleased that evening as he put the bags into the basket on the front of his motorbike. It had been a good day. An excellent day. Business was now so good that he was thinking of hiring someone to help him with the deliveries. That way he could handle just the major orders and even spend more time at the restaurant itself so Jiayi and Liqiu didn't have to rush frantically about to fill the orders and deal with the customers in the cafe.

Guowei went back into the restaurant and brought out more plastic bags filled with orders and put them in the plastic crate on the back of the motorbike. After putting on his helmet, he got onto the bike and kick-started it. He cruised slowly around the trash bags and wooden crates the

employees of the nightclub next door always tossed into the alley. When he reached the street, he turned right and accelerated into a gap in the traffic. He weaved his way through traffic, passing slower cars and maneuvering around others that were trying to turn or park. Eventually he found his way to Tremont Street, which at night glowed with the light of ten thousand neon bulbs. Tremont Street had become the heart of New Chinatown, and the real estate had become so expensive that only the wealthy could afford to live there. Shockingly enough almost all the old four and five story brick buildings now had neon signs jutting out at all angles. Reds, whites, blue, greens, lights of every color. There were bright red fish, green and blue beer bottles, a yellow sun, and above several restaurants there were 1940's style movie theater marquees lit up with the night's specials.

The neon sign craze had started a few years back as a kind of inside joke among a few business owners, a bit of kitsch for New Chinatown, but it had caught on and more and more people had started trying to out do each other, and oversized, ostentatious neon signs had become all the rage. No doubt in a few years the novelty would wear off and residents would complain of light pollution, and the city would pass ordinances limiting their use, but for now it was the golden age of the neon sign in New Chinatown, and as Guowei weaved in and out of traffic he was bathed in the ethereal rainbow glow of a thousand neon lights as the pinks, green, yellows, red and blues danced and shimmered around him.

He came to a stop in front of a building he knew very well. On the ground floor was a coffee shop that had a purple dragon neon sign out front. Some college students lived on the third floor and they were regular customers of his. He got off the bike, grabbed the two plastic bags out of the front basket and walked up to the front where he pressed the intercom button. When someone answered, he could barely hear because of the noise of what must have been a party.

Loud pop music was playing in the background and the sounds of lots of people having conversations made it difficult to make himself understood. No doubt all these little emperors and empresses were up there enjoying expensive French cheeses and wines, maybe some Johnny Walker Blue or expensive cognac. It sounded like fun, and Guowei himself would have liked to have sipped a little of the Johnny Walker Blue. He had wanted to try it for years. These days he drank the Black, and sometimes after the restaurant was closed down, he would pour himself two fingers worth over ice and sit there in the quiet of the kitchen while everyone else was asleep and enjoy a drink.

But now it was time to work, so he pushed all thoughts of expensive whiskey out of his head, and yelled into the intercom to make himself heard. Finally they understood, and he heard the door beep twice, the signal that it was unlocked. He opened the door, and headed up the stairs to make his delivery.

\* \* \*

Since I didn't have to be at work anymore, I had agreed to meet Robbie at The Lantern around 4:00pm. After giving Kira her after school snack, I had dropped her off at her friend Becky's. They were going to watch some anime about a rabbit samurai who wandered the land solving crimes or something. He rode a capybara and had a top-hat wearing mongoose as sidekick. The mongoose rode an armadillo. It was all the rage among the tweens.

After I dropped her off, I headed over toward Davis Square. It had started to drizzle, and the sidewalk was littered with wet red and yellow leaves that were sometimes slippery to walk on. The wind started to pick up, and I pulled the hood of my jacket up and shoved my hands in

my pockets to keep out the cold. It was one of those damp, fall days that let you know that winter will be here soon. Outside the Davis Square station there was a young woman in her twenties holding a large cardboard sign that read,

March Against Corrupt City Officials  
Tonight 6pm at The Common  
The Frog Pond

People had been holding more and more of those. I was glad someone was doing something, even though I wasn't sure how effective a bunch of college kids and hippies chanting slogans and doing drum circles was going to be. I briefly thought about heading down, but I had to meet Robbie and then get home and start on dinner, and Kira probably needed help with her homework. So I just continued on down the rainy street.

When the wooden sign of The Lantern came into view above the sidewalk, I picked up my pace. There'd be beer and maybe someone would've gotten a fire going, and I could stand in front of it to warm myself up.

As I got to the front door, two women walked out laughing, and I stepped aside to let them pass and then I headed in. Walking into The Lantern was almost like time travel. With the all wood interior and mahogany bar, it probably looked the same as it had one hundred years ago. I stood just inside the front door for a moment and scanned the crowd to see if Robbie was there. The place was only about a quarter full. It wasn't after five yet, so the office crowd hadn't arrived. Robbie wasn't at the bar or any of the wooden tables. Today's patrons seemed to be an equal mix of senior citizens of both sexes playing Keno, and what were probably unemployed men aged twenty to seventy-four. Looked like I was one of their key afternoon demographics. Their fireplace wasn't going, and there were some kids who were probably in college, or who

should've been college, standing in front of it. I noticed them because they were wearing those stupid Turkish Harem pants that had come back into style. The ones with the really baggy crotch and the skinny legs. Some lanky pop star with long brown hair wore them in all his videos, and now all the kids were starting to wear them again. No doubt in six months, he'd be wearing capri pants and then everyone would rush out and buy those, and then it'd be bell-bottoms or jean shorts with sapphire colored sequins everywhere.

As I made my way to bar, I had to wade through a cloud of cigarette smoke as I walked between the tables. God, what I wouldn't give to go back to the days of smoke free bars. How the hell that Right to Choose Bill ever made it through the legislature, I'll never know. All right, that's not true. It actually wasn't that hard to understand. The tobacco company lobbyists ran into the capitol building with bucketfuls of money and like clowns at a three ring circus with confetti they'd grab a fistful of cash and throw it right at members of congress so it hit them in the face. At least I assume that's what happens. If I was going to buy a vote that's how I'd want to do it.

I sat down at an open seat at the bar next to Marie, who worked in some basement office of the MBTA for 37 years and now spent her retirement playing Keno. I didn't have to look at the floor to know that there was a pile of crumpled up Keno tickets underneath her stool. On the bar in front of her was a pile of small bills and even a few coins, a pile that had no doubt been a whole lot bigger earlier in the day.

"Afternoon Marie," I said. "You try 37 yet? I hear it's a good one."

Marie was staring at some undefined point on the wall behind the bar with both hands wrapped around her vodka gimlet. She didn't even turn her head, "Thirty-seven's a shit number and you know it. Don't you get tired of harassing poor old ladies?"

"Rough day, huh?" Branden said.

"Haven't hit squat. I'm beginning to wonder if Buddha is in cahoots with whoever runs this thing to keep me in the poor house."

"Why? What'd you do to him?"

"Nothing. I've been good. Maybe he's just like you and enjoys torturing poor old ladies. Now let me focus. My game's about to start."

I glanced up at the Keno screen in the corner of the bar, and sure enough the golden numbers were counting down from thirty. I left Marie to her game and began searching for Buddha.

He was down the other end of the bar pouring a couple of shots, and after a minute I was able to catch his eye, and he ambled over. With his impressive beer gut, bald dome and a white bar towel thrown over his shoulder, Buddha looked pretty much the same whenever you came in.

"Been awhile," Buddha said reaching out to shake my hand, "How you been?"

"Not too bad, yourself?" I said.

"Can't complain. What can I get you?"

"A 'gansett. Draft. And hey, Marie's been telling me you're a sadist who's part of a conspiracy to ruin her life.

"Everybody's gotta have a hobby," Buddha said walking over to the tap to pour my beer.

I glanced over at Marie, who, without taking her eyes off the Keno screen, muttered, "Told you he's out to get me."

I turned back to Buddha, "You haven't seen Robbie by any chance, have you?"

Buddha shook his head as the golden liquid filled the glass. When he brought the beer over and put it in front of me, he said, "You want to start a tab?"

"No, probably better if I pay as I go." Didn't want to end up drinking for an hour or two and then find out I was short on funds. I pulled out my phone, and he put the e-register on the bar. The damn things still looked like fancy calculators to me. The display read \$22.50. I opened up the Pilgrim Bank App and checked my balance. \$112.42.

Jesus. Looked like I could only have a couple. Luckily my last paycheck was coming at the end of the week. I set the app to purchase and waved the phone over the e-register and then the phone made it's little ding noise and the little, green check mark appeared on the white background. I put the phone back in my pocket, and Buddha headed over toward the other end of the bar where someone was demanding whiskey, and I settled in to wait. There were two TVs above the bar and the closest one was tuned to what looked like a replay of Chairman Yonsen's latest press conference. The damn things were practically becoming a daily occurrence. The Chairman, in his black suit and purple tie, stood behind a podium with a smile so fake it looked like an aide had glued it to his face right before they turned the cameras on. Mercifully, the sound was off, and the consistently misspelled and incoherent closed-captioning offered no insight as to what the Chairman was saying. Though to be fair to those typing away behind the scenes, intentional pompous vaguery was one of the Chairman's specialties.

"Buddha, can we do something about this? I'm in no mood for Helmet Hair's nonsense," I called out as I pointed in the Chairman's direction. Buddha changed the channel until Fenway Park appeared. Night game. The stadium was packed. Looked like the Sox were playing the Yankees. Yup. 2004 ALCS. Of course it was. Who was on the mound? Arroyo was, so that made it Game 3. Oh, this was going to get ugly. Good thing they always showed Game 4 right after. You'd think people would get tired of watching games that had ended 20 years earlier, but with the best players having long ago left for the Japanese or Mexican leagues, the stadium falling

apart and an outfield that had more yellow than green in it, the replays typically got better ratings than the live games. I sat there and sipped my beer and watched the Yankees score three more runs in the fourth. Then during an Matsui at-bat a loud voice behind me said, "Well, look at what we got here."

I looked over my shoulder and there was Joey V-Neck standing there in his usual uniform of jeans and heavy duty, brown work jacket. Joe was a large man with a mess of black hair that refused to submit to any brush or comb.

"If it isn't one of my favorite Trotskyites!" Joe said clapping me on the shoulder.

"Look at you using those big words. You've been reading again, haven't you? Good for you."

Joe grinned, "You little motherfu-"

"Hey! You two." Buddha had materialized across from us on the other side of the bar and stood there with his arms folded across his chest. "Keep it civil. Not like last time. Understand?"

Joe and I looked at each other and immediately assumed shocked expressions as Joe put his arm around my shoulders. "Oh Buddha, me and my little misinformed friend here promise to be real nice and polite. Like a regular tea-party with little napkins and biscuits and shit."

"We're simply going to have a free exchange of ideas," I said, "A conversation where each party can air their views and receive constructive feedback from those who might have differing opinions."

"Isn't that what this country is based on?" Joe asked.

"That and high interest Chinese loans," I added.

"Oh, how could I forget about those?" Joe said.

Buddha did not look amused, "Great, it's goddamn Laurel and Hardy tonight." Buddha leaned forward with both hands on the bar and while he spoke calmly, there was definitely an undertone of menace. "Look, if people start to leave again because they can't stand listening to you two argue, I'm going to throw you both out. Understood?"

"Like church mice," Joe whispered.

Buddha's scowl indicated his lack of faith, but he asked Joe what he was drinking and then went to pour him his beer.

"Robbie isn't here yet?" Joe said.

"How'd you know I was meeting Robbie?"

"Because Grasshopper, you're meeting both me and Robbie, that's how."

That didn't make any sense. Why the hell was Joe in on this? As Buddha brought the beer and Joe paid for it, I tried to figure out what the hell was going on. Robbie was most likely going to try to get me to join one of his groups, and now Joe was in on the pitch? Oh, this was going to be good. Joe was a semi-regularly employed contractor who sometimes did work for the city. Robbie and I had met him at the bar one night as we were watching one of Chairman Yonsen's press conferences. All of us had had a little too much to drink and were yelling obscenities at the television. It was an instant friendship.

"So what's this all about?" I asked Joe as he sat down next to me.

Joe sighed and stared at the Red Sox game for a moment for a minute before saying, "We'd better wait for Robbie and then we'll get in to all that."

"Fair enough."

So, we sat there drinking our beer and watching the Yankees pile up more runs and waited for Robbie. Sometime in the top of the fifth inning, Robbie appeared. I'd known him since

college, and while his pale complexion, black wire rim glasses, thinning hair and a preference for black clothing made him look like he was about to read you some of his introspective, experimental vampire poetry, he was actually one of the friendliest and outgoing people I knew.

Once Robbie had gotten a beer, I said, "All right, you're here, I'm here, Joe's here. What's this all about?"

Joe looked over at Robbie with this questioning look, and Robbie said, "Yeah, I think the Warrens would be best for this."

"I agree." Joe said.

The Warrens? This was getting a little silly, "Are you serious? Aren't we taking this a little too far? What is this a spy movie? Does the PRC have the bar bugged?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," Robbie said. "Who knows, SAAC might've. I want a quiet place where we can talk, c'mon." And with that Robbie picked his glass up off the bar and headed for the back. Joe followed, and I sighed and got up and went after them.

The Warrens was a series of interconnected rooms and passageways in the back of the bar where couples or groups of people looking for privacy or quiet could go. It was a maze of narrow passageways and rooms that extended over two floors and multiple ways in and out thanks to the back and side doors. We went back down a series of passageways and then up the wooden staircase that was so narrow your shoulders scraped the walls. Robbie went down a side passageway and found us an empty room that even had a door. The room was barely big enough to hold a square table and the wooden bench that ran along the walls to provide seating. We squeezed ourselves around the table, Joe shut the door and then I looked expectantly at the two of them.

Neither of them said anything for second, they just looked at me, and then at each other, so I said, "Let me guess. Robbie, you want me to join some group, and Joe here already has, and you've brought him along to help convince me."

Robbie frowned, and then he said, "Yes and No. Joe and I are part of an organization, and we'd love for you to be part of it, but that's not the main reason we brought you here tonight."

This was surprising. Evidently this was more than one of Robbie's standard recruitment calls. "All right, fair enough," I said. "But does this have something to do with this organization of yours?"

Robbie sort of shrugged and then nodded.

"So, I was at least right about that. All right, what group have you gotten yourself mixed up with this time, Robbie? The Concerned Citizens of Somerville? The Boston Freedom Brigade? The Elm Street Shriners?"

"The Sons of Liberty."

It took a minute for that to sink in. Flashing through my mind were images of Paul Revere riding around town waving a torch, fake Indians dumping tea in the harbor and redcoats marching through the street. "What? The revolutionary group? What are you talking about?"

"We've reformed," Robbie said, "and it's tim-"

"Wait, wait, wait," I said. "We? Let me get this straig-"

"Branden," Joe said. "Yeah, the Sons of Liberty have returned, and both of us are members. And I know you probably got a lot of jokes and sarcastic comments, and I'm sure they're real funny and all, but we got something serious we gotta discuss."

The two of them stared across the table at me with some of the most somber expressions I'd seen in a long time. Evidently they were serious. I'd have to save my tricorn hat jokes for later. "Fair enough. What's on your mind?"

Joe started to speak, but then stopped and took a sip of his beer. Then he said, "A friend of ours was killed a few days ago."

"Murdered," Robbie said.

"Jesus Christ, I'm sorry," I said. "That's awful."

Robbie nodded, "Yeah, it is. He was good man."

I looked at the two of them, and you could see in their faces that the wound was still raw. "What happened? Who was it?"

"His name was Timothy Ethan Kelly," Robbie said. "He was murdered by some of YangCo's mercenaries while he was protesting their illegal chemical dumping into the Charles and Mystic rivers."

I must have looked confused because Joe said, "YangCo's private security at their headquarters. You might have read about it in the Globe."

"Wait," I said. I had a hazy recollection of a Boston Globe article from a few days ago. "Something about vandalism..."

Robbie nodded and said, "He was painting a mural on the wall of this big atrium they have there when their "security team" discovered him. He was on this scaffolding above them, and they started yelling and cursing at him to stop, and he started throwing things at them. Old paint cans, some tools, like a hammer maybe or a screw driver, a potted plant..."

"Feces," Joe said as if he was mildly embarrassed to bring it up.

"Excuse me?"

"The mural," Robbie said. "You know YangCo's CEO, Charles Xu?" I nodded. "Well, Tim was painting a fifteen foot tall portrait of ol' Charlie using feces. That's what he had in the paint cans."

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "That's amazing." Fifteen feet tall? Wow. How the hell was he doing it? Was he using different types of shit for different shades of brown? God, how that would've smelled though. Once it was up flies would've buzzed around it and everything. I can't imagine the reaction it would have gotten from the employees as they walked in for work.

"Where'd he get all the shit?" I asked.

Robbie smiled, "Dog shit. He spent hours collecting the stuff. He'd walk up to people who were walking their dog and tell them he was a grad student doing research and ask if he could use their dog's stool as a sample. He'd seal it up in empty paint cans. It took him months to get enough."

That was commitment. God, how those cans must've smelled when he opened them. Jesus.

I tried to remember what I had read. "The newspaper said they shot him because he was, what was it? Endangering the lives of the security team or something."

"Which is horseshit," Joe said.

"Absolutely," Robbie said his voice breaking a little. He coughed a couple times into his hand, and then said, "He was throwing things, sure. But he was tossing them at them over the railing, it's not like he was hurling them at them. They were cursing at him and calling him names, but they didn't start firing their weapons until he'd hit a few of them with some shit. One of them got it right in the face. And you know these, guys, ex-military, just looking for a fucking fight."

"They killed him because he was throwing shit?" I said. "Actual shit? Feces?"

Robbie nodded and said yup, but Joe looked a little hesitant. He shrugged and said, "He was throwing all sorts of crap at them and it happened so fast, one of them did get hit with the hammer, but it just bounced off his back. I don't think he was really hurt. Tim was just throwing what ever he had over the side."

"Joe, the video clearly shows that the asshole who got hit in the face with that handful of shit was the first one to start firing," Robbie said. "Then the rest-"

"Hold on," I said, "There's a video of this?"

Joe nodded. Robbie just looked down at his beer and took a sip. Then Joe said, "A couple of other members of the group were there, and one was taking a video of Tim making the mural. Luckily everyone else managed to escape after Tim got shot."

"Look," Robbie said, "The rest of them pulled their weapons and started firing only after that first asshole did. No one even had their guns out before that. Its complete bullshit. Just a clear example of excessive force. He hit them in the face with a handful of shit and they killed him for it. Corporate mercenaries can now kill people with no consequences. That's what's happening here. Charge him with breaking and entering and vandalism, sure. But Tim was there exercising his First Amendment rights and they murdered him for it. It's a civil rights violation, pure and simple. I can't believe that we live in a country where things like this can happen."

"Now Rob," Joe said. "What they did is illegal and fucked up, and those ass-clowns should be thrown in fucking jail, but Tim had broken in illegally and was throwing feces, paint cans and all kinds of other crap at men with guns. He knew who those fuckin' guys were. It's not like they're the police. And Tim was always reckless as shit. You can only push them so far, before-"

"Yeah, yeah. I know," Robbie said. "Look, I'm not in the mood for to debate this again."

"And not one of them is going to be charged with anything?" I said.

"Not a chance," Robbie said. "YangCo and their buddies at City Hall will see to that. We're going to release the tape later. See if it does anything, but I'm not holding my breath. They'll say Tim was endangering the lives of the security team and that they acted in self-defense. Assholes."

Nobody said anything for a minute. We sat there in that semi-claustrophobic musty old room, each of us lost in our own thoughts for a minute. I wondered if Robbie and Joe had been some of the other members who's been there

I was about to ask, but I didn't know if they'd want to tell me, so instead I said, "So you guys knew him from The Sons of Liberty?"

"Yeah," Robbie said. "And you kind of knew who he was too. I mean, you didn't know him, but you knew of him. He was the one who painted Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam."

No.

No way.

I couldn't really think for a second. My mind kind of froze and I just had this image of a man in hooded sweatshirt standing in front of concrete wall painting Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam. They'd killed him. That guy. I couldn't believe it.

Robbie nodded, "Yeah. He was also the one who did Invasion of the Drones, Ratnessmen, and he worked on Know Your Corporate Facts and a whole bunch of other stuff.

He'd done all that, and now he was dead. Splayed out on the floor of YangCo's headquarters while his blood slowly leaked out of him.

"That guy did some great shit," I said.

Robbie nodded, "I thought you'd feel that way. That's why we asked you to meet us. We want to do something to remember Tim. A memorial. We were thinking an outdoor mural. One last piece of graffiti."

"The thing is, none of us can paint," Joe said. "But you can."

Robbie smiled, "When we were trying to figure out who to ask, I remembered that back in college you used to do a little graffiti with Jamie and them. You had those cartoons with the green aliens and the badgers and some other stuff. And you'd had that little monkey or whatever."

That was true. I had run around and done a bunch of street art back in college. It had been fun. There had been four of us and we thought we were all badass for putting up our "art" in public spaces. "I haven't done any of that in years."

"You're a graphic artist," Joe said. "I think you can handle a little graffiti."

"It's not that simple," I said. "There's different techniques and materials-"

"Look, we don't need an answer now, just think about it," Robbie said. "We're not even sure exactly what we want to put up at this point. We're still figuring that out. And we'd supply everything and we'd give you stuff so you could practice beforehand. It'd mean something to a lot of people if you did it. It would've meant something to him. So please, just think about it."

"Okay, I can do that."

One mural? I felt like I almost owed the guy that much. Now that he was gone...wait a minute. Suddenly, Robbie's peculiar interest in my unemployment made more sense. The Sons of Liberty were now without an important part of their propaganda department. Should I have seen this coming earlier? It was beginning to feel like Robbie and Joe were trying to get me hooked.

"So, just one piece of graffiti and that's it? Nothing else? Just a one-time thing? That's all you want?"

Joe grinned and turned to Robbie, "I told you he'd figure it out."

Robbie looked down at his beer with a sheepish look on his face, "You caught me. Of course we'd love to have you join us, but I didn't want to push too hard because you never want to get involved in these things. But this one is different. We're actually doing things."

Joe nodded, "That's true. And we got plans."

"So look," Robbie said, "The memorial is separate from The Sons of Liberty Stuff. You can do that, and then that can be it. Or you can see what it's all about. And I hope you do. You've seen how effective the paintings and graffiti have been in galvanizing public opinion. We need more people who can do stuff like that in the organization, and I think you'd be great at it. And it's not like I haven't tried to get you to come out to our meetings before."

That was true. Robbie had been inviting me out to "meet people" but I'd been busy and I didn't want to spend time in more pointless meetings listening to people bitch and moan. "So, I'll consider these two things separately," I said. "I'm going to have to think about it. Let's start with the memorial. If I do that, where would I do it. Anywhere I want, or you got a place."

"We already got a place lined up," Joe said. "It's all set."

"Yeah," Robbie said, "We want the memorial to go up on TurnDit and Weibo and all those social media sites, but we also want it public. We want people to see it and even go and visit it if they want."

"I'm doing some repair work on this building over by the Field's Corner T station in two weeks. We're going to put up a whole bunch of scaffolding and the owner is cool with the

memorial going up on this brick wall. The scaffolding will hide everything. You just show up for however long it takes you to do it, and that's it."

"All right, give me a day or two to think about it."

"Absolutely," Joe said and then drained the last of his beer. "And hey, I'm getting another one and this round's on me. Everybody getting the same?" Robbie and I both nodded and Joe got up and left the room, closing the door behind him.

I waited a minute for his footsteps to fade, and then I looked at Robbie and said, "So, you and Joey V-Neck are in The Sons of Liberty."

Robbie smiled, "It's a diverse group. We got all kinds."

"Fair enough."

Robbie said he had to take a piss and left. And so, I was left there with the last bit of my beer. I got this image in my mind of the two of them running around the streets of Boston wearing tricorner hats and carrying torches shouting about the British. I hoped that was how they started every meeting. But then I thought of Timothy Kelly. Splayed out on the cold floor of YangCo's office building. I wondered what he had been thinking about as he lay there and he felt the blood seeping out of him. His face pressed against a cold linoleum floor. What would have been the last thing he saw? A white wall with a water fountain next to an office door? Some hallway with ugly carpeting and shitty half dead fern that everyone forgot to water? Jesus Christ. I finished the dregs of my beer and waited for the two patriots to return.

\* \* \*

Alisa sat at Molly's kitchen table while Molly finished making the coffee. Molly had the one bedroom apartment, so her kitchen was a little smaller than Alisa's, but it was cozy on cool winter days like this one when the wind whipped around outside. Alisa liked being in

here because it reminded her of her grandmother's kitchen. Molly had similar kick-knacks all over the place. There were finger paintings on the fridge, and photos of her family were everywhere. In one of the photos, her grandchildren waved to her from the beach, and in another, one from when she was young, she and her husband George stood in front a blue house with a sign that read Sold planted in the yard. Another had a middle-aged George sitting at a picnic table next to a teenage girl that had the same eyes as him, and they both were eating hamburgers. In the most recent photo of him, his hair had turned grey, and he was sitting in a rocking chair on a porch and grinning at the camera. As Molly put the sugar and cream in the coffee, Alisa examined it.

Behind him was the beach and the ocean. Alisa could practically smell the salt air and feel the wind on her face. God, they hadn't been to the beach in forever. The last time was when she'd gone to the Cape with her mother and Kira, who'd still been in diapers. Kira had sat there on the sand in only her diaper, playing with a little green plastic bucket and shovel. The bucket sat between her cubby little legs, and she'd scoop the sand up with the shovel and put it in the bucket. You could see the concentration in her face as she tried not to spill any of the sand. Then, once she'd filled the bucket, she'd stand up and look over to make sure you were watching, and when you weren't, she'd call out, "Mama, Mama," until you looked over. Then she'd pick the bucket up with both hands and raise it to about chest level, she wasn't strong enough to get it over her head, and then she'd let out a high pitched squeal of delight and dump the sand back out onto beach. Afterwards she'd plop right down and start all over again.

Alisa was suddenly aware of Molly putting their coffee mugs down on the table. Molly sat down across from her as Alisa picked up her mug. She could feel the heat against her palms,

and the smell was intoxicating. Alisa brought the cup up to her nose and breathed in deeply and then took a small sip. It was delicious.

"Where did you get this?" Alisa said, "This is the best coffee I've had in ages."

Molly smiled as she stirred her coffee with a teaspoon, "It's pretty fantastic, isn't it? It's from Carrington's down in Inman Square. Costs a fortune. If I drank it every day I'd have to give up eating, but every once in a while it's nice to partake in one of life's small luxuries."

Alisa nodded. She might have to take a trip to Inman Square sometime soon.

"Well," Molly said. "Getting back to our water problem, it seems that my plan to shame that weasel Thorton into replacing the pipes was about as successful as a luncheon on the Hindenburg."

"Hey, it was worth a shot," Alisa said. "Thorton was definitely uncomfortable in that sweaty cramped basement with everyone shouting at him, but then Timmy Sullivan had to take it one step too far and start throwing things."

Molly laughed, "Yeah, that was a bit more than I had bargained for."

Alisa took a sip of her coffee, and asked something she been thinking about ever since that meeting, "So, am I way off base, or did you help liquor Tim and them up beforehand?"

Molly grinned devilishly, "I brought a half bottle of whiskey to the boys and told them we needed everyone there, and it needed to be loud." Molly shook her head, "However, I forgot to tell them not to throw things. That, I should've seen coming. It was worth a shot at least. Maybe. I don't know."

Molly absentmindedly stirred her coffee for a moment and then said, "Though, if he was going to do it, I wish he'd hit 'em with a full can. Or maybe a shoe."

Alisa laughed, and then said, "Well, I could see Doloris' face from where I was sitting, and when Thorton got hit, oh, the look of horror on her face was amazing. The Co-Op will probably pay for another \$18,000 "paint job" in the hallway next month just so she can slip him some cash to make it up to him."

"Oh, Jesus. Please don't bring her up. I don't have the energy to deal with thinking about that miserable....person, right now."

"Fair enough. So, let's stick to the problem at hand. What can we do to fix the pipes? A contractor won't touch the city pipes. Thorton won't do anything. Who else can we appeal to?"

Molly shook her head, "That's about it. Everything runs through Thorton. That's his little fiefdom. I talked to Walter Rosenthal over at city hall, and he's sympathetic, but he can't do anything. He has no jurisdiction, and frankly, I think he doesn't want to make an enemy out of Thorton, so he's not going to try to force anything for us."

Molly sighed and took a sip of her coffee. Alisa tried to think of some other alternative. Something they hadn't thought of. They'd tried protesting at City Hall and had gotten nowhere. The newspapers didn't care. There were far worse things happening every day. "So that's it?" Alisa said. "We give up? I can't accept that."

Molly smiled, "I didn't expect you to. There's one thing we haven't tried, but I don't think you're going to like it."

"What?"

"We take a page out of Doloris' book and play the game everyone else is."

Alisa didn't get it for a second, then she said, "Are you suggesting we bribe Thornton?"

Molly laughed, "Give that jackass money? Hell no. Someone from the city has to inspect those pipes, right? To see when they need to be replaced. We find out who does the inspecting and slip them a little money to inspect the pipes a little earlier than usual."

"Look at you," Alisa said, "Willing to play dirty."

"Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do. And it's not like we're asking them do anything illegal. Just inspect the pipes earlier than they normally would. They'll see that they're rusting and replace them. Heck, we paying them extra to do a job they should already be doing. That's it."

"You'll get no moral arguments from me on this one," Alisa said. "But this could mean getting to know some nasty people, some people who it might be better not to know. That line between bribes and extortion gets crossed all too easily."

"Oh, and how do you know all that?"

"I, um, read it in the paper."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Molly said. "Look, this won't be my first rodeo with this, and while shockingly enough some people these days do actually go to jail for bribery, I have no intention of being one of them. Anyway, we got two big problems. I don't know who to bribe, and even if I did, I don't have the money to pay for it. Do you have a secret war chest you can afford to dig into?"

Alisa shook her head.

"I didn't think so. Who does? And Doloris sure as hell isn't going to give us access to Co-Op funds for it. The tightfisted scheming little bitch. So how the heck are we going to come up with the money?"

They sat there at the kitchen table looking at each other until Alisa said, "I guess we'll just have take up a collection."

"A collection?"

"Yeah. Go door to door and ask people to contribute."

"To the bribe? Go door to door asking people to give us money for a bribe?"

"Fine," Alisa said. "We'll call it a donation to fix the pipes."

Molly sat there and thought about for a minute, "That might actually work. I can also ask some people down at City Hall about who inspects the pipes. Maybe Walter will be helpful for once."

"So that's the plan then?"

"Yup."

"All right."

Molly got up to refill her coffee, and Alisa took another sip of hers. She was almost done, but she wouldn't ask for a second cup, and she wanted to savor this one. They might actually be able to finally fix the water. Though as she imagined telling Branden, she could just picture his brow furrowing in anger as he listened, and he'd slowly work himself into a state of righteous indignation. Ugh, he'd start ranting on how bribing just made things worse. How it was a sign of a sick society. He'd pace the room, gesturing with his hands like he was giving a speech, and if she was lucky he'd keep the volume to a reasonable level. And if she actually tried to discuss it with him, he wouldn't actually listen to any of her arguments, he'd just be waiting for his turn to talk. No, it might be better, not to mention this to him. Alisa took another sip of the lukewarm coffee and let the deliciousness swirl over her tongue.

## Chapter Four

After getting shit-canned by the fascists.. ok, pseudo fascists, I spent most of those first days around the house. I'd wake up and eat breakfast with Kira, and help her get ready and then walk her to school. Alisa was working the day shift then, so I'd come home and do what chores there were, cleaning up around the kitchen, dusting, vacuuming and cleaning the bathroom. After two days, I realized I didn't have much to do until the next week. I applied for unemployment online, but that only took about forty minutes. I didn't really feel like doing anything that required thinking then so I spent most of the mornings and early afternoons streaming movies on Guojo. They had a huge listing of older films and I spent two days just watching old cop movies and westerns. It was now my responsibility to make dinner every day, which was a godsend because it gave me an excuse to get out of the house and go buy food.

On my third day at home I decided to make Sauce, but we didn't have any tomato paste, so I put on my jacket and headed out. After locking the door behind me, I made my way down the stairs, and now that I had all this time on my hands and was looking for things to do, I seemed to be noticing things I'd never thought about before. For example, as I walked down the stairs, I realized just how ugly the stairwell was. The steps were this bare concrete and the walls

were this shade of institutional light green that reminded me of an insane asylum from the mid twentieth century. One of those ones where behind closed doors they attached electrodes to your skull and told you it was all going to be okay as long as you made sure to bite down hard. It made me feel like I was living in a dilapidated housing project straight out of some sort of hideous Orwellian future.

After walking out the front door of the building, I turned left and headed down the wide sidewalk that separated the park from the flowerbeds in front of the apartment building. At least the park was nice. Grass, trees, benches, a playground. The only thing was the brick paths that wound their way through the park. Of course the bricks hadn't been installed properly to begin with, and then the frost heaves just exacerbated the situation, so there were bricks sticking up everywhere to trip on. I wasn't too worried about it personally, but I had seen this elderly couple walking along the path the other day, and I realized that the path was a regular obstacle course for the elderly. Last thing we needed was for someone to fall and break their hip. I'll never understand why they chose brick when they knew damn well they weren't going to spend the time or money to do it right. Probably some architect's ill considered homage to Boston's history.

As I made my way down the sidewalk, I saw three young men sitting on the steps of one of the apartment buildings. All three looked to be in their early twenties, and they were passing a paper bag between them that no doubt had a bottle in it. It was just after eleven in the morning, so it looked like they were either starting early or finishing up what had probably been a hell of night.

They were wearing the uniform of unemployed young men all over the city, jeans and hooded faux-down coats that went to mid thigh. The hoods were almost always up. Every autumn they shipped those things over by the boatload from China, and there were so many of

them in the marketplace come winter that some vendors had buy one get one half off or even two for one specials. These coats looked like recent purchases. The coats never lasted more than one winter, and it was only mid November, so the coats still had that shine to them. That'd be gone in a month, and in two the stitching would have started to fray and the stuffing would be falling out. Two of them had gone for the standard black, but one had decided to be original and gone for a very dark blue. He must be the adventurous type. A real rebel. Not a follower, not him. Not-

Stop it, I thought. Leave the kids alone. What have they done to you? Not a thing. Not their fault you're so bored your excitement for the day is buying tomato paste. They're not bothering anyone, and like you'd be doing anything different if you were them. I picked up my pace and headed for the street that ran past the apartment complex. I still had about forty-five minutes before the lunch hour rush. People would flood the market to grab lunch or do some quick shopping. I wanted to get in there before then. I hated having to shoulder my way through the crowds only to stand there with six other people trying to get a vendor's attention.

It took me about twenty minutes to get to the market, which had been built on the ashes of an old neighborhood behind Davis Square. The infamous Brother Bill had bought up a bunch of lots full of burned down homes and bulldozed everything until he had a dirt field about the size of football field. Maybe a little wider. Then he'd started renting out space, and people started putting up the first stalls. For the first couple of months it was all haphazard and chaotic, you had people selling fruit next to a man selling coils of wire and plumbing supplies. But then they kind of organized into sections, though you still found the odd booth that sold electrical wires in the midst of stalls selling lettuce and cabbage. The place was a maze of narrow, twisting alleyways, and there was something about making my way through those muddy, cramped passageways

lined with tables piled high with carrots and potatoes as people shouted and argued that I liked so much better than shopping in a sterile supermarket.

Take the stalls for example. Most of them looked like miniature shacks and were made almost exclusively out of scrap wood and corrugated metal. Though there were a few where the owners had gotten creative. One elderly gentleman sold ladies shoes out of a broken down red van, and even if it did run, with the way stalls had gone up all around it, there was no way you could drive it out of there without taking out half of the market. When someone finally decided they wanted to move it they'd probably carry it out piece by piece. There'd be a line of people hauling it away, probably mostly kids. One would be carrying some seat cushions, another a hub cap, one would be rolling a wheel, and someone else would be dragging a door across the dirt.

I've seen whole houses vanish like that. Just a line of people carrying everything away. The first time was when the Flemming's house caught fire one summer night and Steve and both the kids had been trapped inside and died in their sleep. Faulty wiring or something. Martha had come home from her shift at the hospital to find her house engulfed in flames and the whole neighborhood watching. The fire department still hadn't arrived, and while one neighbor was spraying the flames with a garden hose, it was already far too late for that. Martha ran through the crowd screaming her children's names over and over. She started grabbing every kid she saw by the shoulders and staring at them for a second, and then when she realized it wasn't Tim or Alice, she'd start screaming their names again and run off to the next child. Her neighbor Abigail finally managed to get a hold of her, and she held Martha close while the poor woman stared at her burning house and screamed her children's names over and over again. All these years later and I can still hear her.

After the funeral, Martha just disappeared, and the rumor was she went out to Pittsburg or Cleveland to live with relatives. She just left the house as it was. It's not like there was any insurance that would actually pay out at that point. People avoided looking at the house for months afterward. Blackened, charred, and with only half of it standing, it was like the personification of some ill omen, especially around dusk when the half light made it almost come alive. Some said it was like the killer was still living among us.

So when a cold front came through sometime in January, at least twenty of us stood on the sidewalk in front of the remains of the Flemming's house, with little clouds of breath coming out of our mouths staring at what remained. After a while Jim Connor said that we'd be doing her a favor. The house only held memories she didn't want. Someone else said it wasn't like she could use what was left. It would all have to be torn down anyway. Others said she was never coming back anyway, so what did it matter? After about ten minutes we picked up our sledge hammers, ropes and crowbars and got to it.

We used the rope to pull down what was left of the back walls and the whole house just collapsed in on itself. Then we got the sledgehammers and crowbars and took the house apart piece by piece. People started carrying the wood back to their houses in their arms, but then someone got one of those plastic sleds kids used to race down snowy hills, and soon everyone was dragging the wood across the snow in those brightly colored plastic sleds.

Gas and heating oil prices had been through the roof for years, and at that point most people had wood stoves, either the real ones or jerry-rigged ones of the homemade variety that they'd installed in the living room or kitchen. The wood from the Fleming's house heated some homes for three weeks. For most of us, it was the first home we'd cannibalized, though it certainly wasn't the last. But this is the one that I remember most. Partly because it was the first.

Partly because of Martha. But also party because we'd known this house. It wasn't like we walked ten blocks over to some house we'd never been to before. We'd been there for birthdays, cookouts and potlucks. We'd known it when it had been a home. And after we carted it all away, all that remained was a scrap heap and an empty lot.

As I approached the market, I realized that the fence around it looked like it had been made out of scrap metal and pieces of wood that had been scavenged off the neighboring houses. I didn't want to think about how many structures around the city were made out of those materials.

The entrance to the market was an alley between two charred, but still standing brick buildings. There was an iron gate that could be pulled across the alley when the market closed for the day. Once you entered the market, you stepped into the diamond district of Somerville. Though there were only a few diamonds and it wasn't much of a district. Just a couple of corrugated metal stalls up against the alley wall. The stalls also sold gold and silver, necklaces, rings, bracelets, and all kinds of jewelry. Alisa liked to joke that they put it right out front to tempt you. The food was in the back so you had to walk by everything you didn't need, but might want, just to buy the groceries. It said something about the human psyche that Brother Bill was applying the same marketing strategies to diamonds and gold that convenience stores applied to candy bars.

I made my way past the Diamond District and into the market. The first couple of stalls were like mini convenience stores, selling toilet paper, candy, soda and the like. As I squeezed past people shopping in the narrow alley, my ears were bombarded with conversation after conversation of people haggling over prices and complaining about the quality of the merchandise. A woman to the left of me was accusing a vendor of price gouging because the

price of toothpaste had gone up twenty-two dollars since last week. He told her to look around, his price was the same as everyone else. She threw the toothpaste down on the wooden counter and told him that they were all in cahoots together and that it was disgusting.

As I walked away, I could still hear the two of them arguing and she sounded like she had staying power. She'd probably manage to knock at least eleven or twelve dollars off the price. Ahead of me was a small clearing in the midst of the maze where the Money Crones sat on their thrones. In this case their thrones consisted of bar stools that had no doubt been liberated from some local establishment. The four or five old women sat on their thrones underneath a couple of patio umbrellas, and each of them had a fanny pack around their waist and several money belts hidden underneath their winter coats, both of which were stuffed with cash. All had dollars, Yuan and Euros, and at least one or two of them would have Realis, Canadian Dollars and Pesos.

The vendors in the market liked to indulge in a healthy bit of tax evasion, so many of them only took cash, and those that had e-Registers charged extra for the privilege. I had a fifty Euro note I needed to change. Like everyone else, I converted a good chunk of my paycheck into Euros or Yuan so it didn't all evaporate with inflation. Of course, fifty Euros was way too much money to spend at the market unless I was buying everything they had, so I had to change it into dollars, and the Money Crones gave you a slightly better deal than the banks. Not much of one, but just enough make it worth your while. They made some minuscule amount of every transaction, but god knows how many they made a day.

I walked up to one of the women who was wearing a long brown winter coat and said, "What can you give me for Euros to Dollars?"

"It's 1 to 47 today," she said putting her hand on top of her fanny pack, as if she was guarding it. Like I was stupid enough to try steal from her. These ladies weren't exactly

independent contractors. A couple of them probably worked for Brother Bill, and who knows who the other ones worked for, but either way, these were not people you wanted to steal from, unless you were desperate. Every so often some kid would run up to them, cut the fanny pack strap with a knife, grab the pack and run off. The poor bastard would be chased through the market by Bill's men, and even if they weren't caught right away, in a day or two the rumor mill always claimed they had been. Who knows if that was true or not. I doubted that they caught every single thief. A couple of them had to have gotten away over the years. But there was always a body. You could count on that. Left in a semi-public place like a park or an alley with the Fanny pack sitting in their lap. After a while I half expected them to start mounting heads on spikes at the entrance to market, but thankfully we weren't there quite yet.

Though the things they did to those people. Sometimes, the ears or the nose was missing, or a couple of limbs were mangled like they'd been run over by a truck or put in the gears of some heavy machinery. Sometimes there was just a red spot in the middle of the forehead where a bullet had entered. At any rate, the old woman in the brown coat needn't have been worried. I was not yet at the point where I was contemplating something as potentially life abbreviating as thieving from the Money Crones.

I looked at the woman, who stared back with a look of complete boredom. I glanced over at one of the other women, who had a red hat and matching coat.

"If you think you can get a better deal with someone else, go ahead," she said.

I thought about it for a second and then handed over my fifty-euro note. I used to check everyone's prices, but it was almost always the same. After the woman counted out the cash, I double-checked to make sure it was all there. It was. I thanked her, and headed off toward the back of the market toward the food so I could complete my most interesting task of the day.

As I passed by stalls filled with jeans, t-shirts and sweaters, I realized that I could have bought the tomato paste yesterday when I was buying toilet paper and floss. But I hadn't, and I suspected that part of the reason was that I was making sure I had something to do today. If I'd bought the tomato paste yesterday, what the hell would I have done all afternoon?

Drawn sketches of the memorial, maybe? I'd already started planning it out in my head even though I hadn't agreed to do it yet. I needed to give Robbie an answer soon. As I walked underneath the pieces of corrugated tin that the vendors in this section had put up as a kind of makeshift roof over the path, the afternoon light filtered through the gaps in the tin and made diagonal stripes of light on the ground.

I looked up and saw Dave walking through the crowd. He had his hands in his pockets and was staring at the ground as he walked. He looked as if his dog had just died. What the hell was he doing here at this hour? The lunch rush was about to start. Jenny was no doubt thrilled. Maybe he was probably buying some last minute supplies for the diner? Though, he was headed away from the food section and was empty handed. I thought about calling out and saying Hi, but the thought of having to explain what I was doing in the market at 11:30 on a Wednesday was too embarrassing. Everyone'd find out eventually what had happened, but I didn't feel like having to deal with people's pity or their relentless optimism just yet. I really didn't want to listen to people telling me everything had reason and that it would all work out for the best. Sometimes life hands you a shit sandwich, and all you can do is bite down and chew as fast as possible.

I wasn't the only one getting a raw deal these days. Seemed like the universe was handing those out for free whether you wanted one or not. Timothy Kelly got one of those, and all he'd done was paint pictures some people didn't like. The guy deserved a memorial. He'd actually gone out and done something instead of just complaining... I was going to do the memorial,

wasn't I? Yeah. He deserved that much at least. Besides, what the hell else was I doing with my time?

And as I headed toward the stall of a man who gave fair prices on unexpired to semi-expired goods, I asked myself what was the worst that could happen? And a voice somewhere from deep inside my head whispered, the last guy to do that job got killed for it. Yeah, I thought, but I'll plan on being a little more careful.

\* \* \*

Alisa and Molly had spent most of the evening collecting contributions, as they were now calling them, to fix the water pipes. They only had two more buildings to do tonight, H and I. Alisa looked up at the two entranceways and at the building rising up above her. She didn't want to climb any more stairs.

Molly seemed to have read her thoughts, "So, you want to do them together or split up?"

"I'd rather walk nine flights than eighteen. Let's do them separately and get it over with."

"Sounds good to me," Molly said. "You want H or I?"

Alisa thought about it for a minute. It would be easier, but then she thought, No. I'm a resident of this apartment complex too, and I have a right to walk in public spaces, "I'll take H."

"You sure?" Molly said.

"Yes," Alisa said.

"Ok," Molly said. "Well, at least that gives me Mr. Precyl on the second floor. That should be an easy sell. Haitians tend to me more understanding about these kinds of things."

Molly looked over at Alisa, "You sure you want H?"

"I'll be fine," Alisa said.

"All right," Molly said, "We'll meet back out here when we're done?"

Alisa nodded.

"Good luck," Molly said, and she started walking toward the entranceway to section I.

Alisa walked up to the door of section H and put her hand on the cold metal handle. She stared at the cold metal in front of her for a moment, took a couple of measured breaths, and then she opened the door and stepped into the first floor.

The concrete stairwell smelled faintly of cigarettes, and scattered on the ground lay some empty soda cans, crumpled up fast food bags, and some broken glass. The door to the storage area was covered in red graffiti, and as she started up the stairs to the first floor she passed numerous drawings of penises done in sharpies.

Once she got to the second floor landing, she knocked on all three doors, but there was no response at two of them, and at the other a twelve-year-old girl answered the door and said her parents weren't home. She started up the stairs toward the third floor and heard some people talking in the stairwell above her. Sounded like teenagers. Boys.

On the third floor she had more success. At one of the apartments, a man in his fifties wearing a large brown sweater opened the door.

"Good evening, Sir," Alisa said. She hated this part. Begging for money. Half these people probably thought she was pocketing a percentage for herself. "I'm working with Molly Byrne as part of the Concerned Citizen's Committee and we're asking for contributions to fix the water pipes."

"I thought the city had to fix those pipes," the man said.

"They do," Alisa said. "But we've learned that if we contribute enough the city can expedite the repairs."

"You're talking about bribing someone," The man said.

Alisa had hoped to avoid using the word Bribe. Some people, especially older folks, still didn't feel comfortable engaging in what they thought of as immoral behavior. Alisa figured that her generation had been bribing people regularly for over half their lives, so they seemed to have fewer problems with it. Well, at least most of us, she thought.

"Sir, we're talking about contributions," she said as she launched into her spiel that made it clear they were going to be bribing someone down at city hall without actually saying that's what they were going to do, and she was pleased to see that he was actually interested in what she was saying. He wasn't just waiting for her to finish. He was actively paying attention. It was refreshing to talk to someone whose eyes hadn't glazed over.

When Alisa was done, he said, "You're working with Ms. Byrne?"

Alisa nodded.

"Well, whatever you want to call it, thank God someone's doing something useful. All those meetings and nothing happens. My water turned brown three separate times last week." He shook his head with a disgusted look on her face.

"Well, hopefully this will help get the people down at city hall moving. Are you able to contribute anything?" Alisa said.

"Of course, of course," the man said. "Just give me a second." He walked back into his apartment and came out with his wallet. As the man began pulling out small bills, Alisa thought he looked just like her grandfather had when he'd taken her and her cousins to the movies when they were young. He'd taken them a lot when Alisa was in elementary school. As soon as the

tickets had been bought and they were in the lobby, she and her three cousins would start begging shamelessly. They wanted popcorn, cokes, Mike and Ike's, Skittles, Junior Mints. Grandpa Steve would stand there, with them all crowded around his legs, as he pulled dollar bills out of his wallet and gave them each four. He always had enough for everyone. It had only been years later that she realized he must have planned in advance to have that many ones.

The man had pulled out several small, crumpled bills. "It's only a hundred and twenty, but it's all I can spare at the moment," he said handing Alisa the money, "But every little bit counts, right?"

"It does," Alisa said. It occurred to her that he probably lived on a fixed income and might have to give up something this week to make up for having given this away. Hopefully it was something small, like maybe there'd be no coffee for breakfast.

"I really want to thank you for taking the time to do this," He said. "It's good to see some one doing something." He smiled at her and Alisa smiled back.

"I'm sure you have a lot more doors to knock on," he said. "So, I'll let you get to it. Good luck."

"Thanks," Alisa said. "Have a good evening."

He waved goodbye and then pulled the steel door closed, and as the clang reverberated off the concrete, Alisa found herself alone in the cold, sterile hallway listening to the cursing and shouting of the teenagers coming from the floors above her.

The fourth floor was much like the first. No one answered the door, even though Alisa could clearly hear the T.V. on in at least one of the apartments. As Alisa started up the steps to the fifth floor, she realized that was where the teenagers were. They appeared to be hanging out on the landing, and the smell of cigarette smoke drifted down the stairs. She could finally make

out what they were saying and heard,"....following him down street. And this mothefucker's not saying shit, but he wants to, right? And so Steve's just walking along pretending the guy's not back there. So after a block the guy gets kind a pissed and decides to...."

The man stopped his story when he saw Alisa coming up the stairs. There were three of them, and they all turned and looked at her. They were older than she had thought. Well, one of them was. A man who looked to be in his mid-twenties was seated on the stairs going up to the sixth floor, while two leaning against the wall seemed to be fifteen or sixteen. The smell of tobacco was strong, and Alisa could feel her eyes starting to itch. All four of them were holding a beer, and there were several half crushed tall boys lying on the floor.

Alisa stopped once she got to the landing, and in a moment of silence she looked at them, and each one of them stared right back at her. It was Alisa who broke silence, "Good evening, gentleman. Do any of you live in this building?"

The youngest looking one, who had longish blonde hair and was wearing a red hooded sweatshirt shook his head, but the man sitting on the stairs to the sixth floor said, "What's it to you?" He was wearing a black winter coat and jeans, and he turned to the teenagers leaning against the wall and said, "Is she saying we're not allowed to be here or some shit?"

The teenagers just shrugged. The man in the black winter coat turned back toward her and looked her in the eyes as he took a sip of his beer.

Alisa shook her head, "No, you don't understand. I'm-"

"Oh shit, boys. Look at this. We don't understand," the man in the black winter coat said. The teenagers smirked. The man got up from the stairs and walked over to Alisa. He was taller than she'd expected. She had to look up at him and even from a few feet away, she could smell the alcohol in his breath. He took a moment to look her up and down, and she focused on taking

steady breaths while slipping her hand into her jacket pocket and wrapping her fingers around her pepper spray. She told herself to remain calm. That she had every right to be there.

"Now," he said, "just why is it that we don't understand? Is it because none of us exactly look like the educated type? We don't have pretty little shoes or a fancy pea coat like your cute little self. But I think we do all right." He turned back to his friends leaning against the wall, "You think that's what it is? She's judging books by their covers?"

The kid in the red hooded sweatshirt just shrugged.

The man in the black coat turned back to Alisa, "So, we can't understand. Or is it that we don't have a fancy enough phone to look up the answer? Is that it? Cause I hear if you got a fancy enough phone, you can find out pretty much any answer you want."

Alisa opened her mouth to answer, but he cut her off, "I bet you do though. I bet your phone is fancy enough to look up whatever you want."

He grinned at her, and Alisa wrapped her fingers a little more tightly around the pepper spray. She glanced to her left at the stairs going down. She thought she could make it if she needed to. But if she left now... she looked back at the man in the black coat and slowly, but clearly said, "No, I'm trying to say you didn't-- that I didn't make myself clear enough. I asked if you lived in the building because we're taking up a collection to fix the water pipes. If you don't live in the building, then I wouldn't ask you to contribute."

There was silence as the man looked at her with a confused look on his face. Alisa felt like she could hear her heart thumping away at a thousand miles per hour. The kids leaning against the wall didn't move, and finally the man said, "Oh."

Alisa was pleased to see that she'd momentarily stunned him, so she took advantage of the opportunity to knock on the door that was closest to her. In her mind she was saying, C'mon, Come to the damn door. C'mon.

No one came. When she turned around, the man in the black coat had sat back down on the stairs and was taking another sip of his beer. He said, "How much you asking from everybody?"

"\$300 if they can spare it," Alisa said walking over to the middle door of the three.

"I might be able to part with \$300," the man in the black coat said from the steps.

"Oh yeah?" Alisa said as she was about to knock on the middle door, but before she could knock, the kid in the red sweatshirt said, "Nah, I'd leave that alone if I were you."

"Why?" Alisa said as she knocked, and as the echoes on the knocks bounced around the concrete stairwell, she instantly regretted what she'd just done. Who knew what the hell was going on-

"Yeah," the man in the black coat said. "I could part with the \$300, but you'd have to earn it," the man in the black coat said.

"Excuse me," Alisa said.

"You'd have to earn it," the man in the black coat said, grinning. "And I got a few ideas about how your pretty little self could go about doing that."

The teenagers laughed. She stared at him, and the bastard just sat there with a smug look on his face, waiting. What a piece of shit, she thought. There was a moment of silence as she debated how to respond, but her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the middle door opening.

A shirtless man wearing just a pair of grey sweatpants opened the door. He looked to be in his thirties and he wasn't too tall, but from the size of him it looked like he spent a lot of time in the gym lifting weights, and his chest was either hairless or he shaved. As he opened the door he said, "For fuck's sake. You impatient bastards."

When he saw Alisa, he stopped talking and squinted at her. "Who are you?" he said, "And what do you want? I already got enough religion if that's what you're selling."

Alisa looked him in the eye and said, "No, we're taking up a collection to fix the water pipes."

"How you going to do that?" he said.

"We're going to put our contributions in the hands of some decision makers down at th--" Alisa felt ridiculous. "We're going to bribe someone down at city hall. I'm working with Molly Byrne."

"Oh, you're with Molly?"

Alisa nodded.

"What're you asking for?"

"\$300 if you can spare it," Alisa said.

"Yeah. Sure, just gimme a minute," he said. "And you fuckers, might as well come on in now. Just keep out of the bathroom. You hear me Matt? You get all pervy and try to get a peek and I'll fucking stomp you. Giselle's fed up with that shit."

The man in the grey sweatpants walked into the apartment, and the other guys followed him in, filing past Alisa. On his way by, the man in the black coat gave her a wink before disappearing into the darkness of the apartment hallway.

After a minute, the man in the grey sweatpants came back with a roll of money wrapped up with a rubber band. He undid the rubber band, counted off what looked like about fifteen-hundred dollars and offered it to her. She just stared at it for a second. That fifteen-hundred wasn't even a tenth of that stack of cash. There had to be at least twenty thousand dollars there. Probably more.

Grey Sweatpants continued to hold the money out in front of him. "What," he said. "What's wrong? I'll pay for the whole floor."

Alisa just stood there staring at the money and feeling stupid for not putting two and two together earlier.

"Don't tell me this money isn't good enough for your bribes."

Alisa looked at him and had to laugh.

"No, it's not that. Sorry." Alisa reached out and took them money.

"All right," he said, "Look, have a nice day. Good luck with everything and tell Molly I said Hi."

"I will. Thank you."

Grey Sweatpants shut the door, and Alisa was once again alone in the silence of the concrete hallway. She stared at the money in her hand for a minute, and then she got the manila envelope out of her purse and stuffed the money into it so those hundred dollar bills got mixed up with the rest of the cash and it was impossible to tell which was which. See, she thought to herself, that was fine. It isn't any worse than the hospital. She had four more floors to do. She started up the stairs.

\*

\*

\*

The sky was a solid mass of grey cloud. The mid-morning sun was up there somewhere, but its rays wouldn't reach the ground. At least not today. Maybe tomorrow. Or maybe not. The wind blew in gently from the East and the air still had that cool, crisp smell of autumn. Though Bernard did not seem to notice the weather as he lay on the roof adjusting his air rifle. He had loaded in the pellets and was now making sure the sights were lined up correctly. He lay on his stomach, the barrel of the air rifle propped up on the edge of the roof. Hollis Street lay below him, and there was not a soul to be seen. The shops down below didn't exhibit any signs of life either. All the windows in the Salão da Rosa had been broken for years, and inside it was a mess of broken furniture and garbage. Mike's Subs had holes in the brick wall where it looked like a car had crashed into it. The São Paulo Bakery had all of its windows boarded up, and the Sabor de Minas Gerais had burned down long ago. All that was left of the restaurant was a pile of half charred wood and a part of a side wall which, while blackened, had somehow made it through the fire still standing. That wall looked like one of the last holdouts in Framingham. Everyone else had left long ago in search of riches. The Brazilians had gone back home, and over the years more and more of their neighbors had followed. The rumor was there were jobs enough for all in the Lula. The former residents of Framingham could now be found on oil rigs in the South Atlantic and on freighters shipping up and down the coast of Brazil. They could even be found in Rio in a section of town near the port that locals had started calling Gringolandia. They even said in the next five or ten years, there'd be floating cities out there, drifting around the oil derricks.

But Bernard did not look like he was thinking about any of that. He was focused on a second story window of a red brick building about fifty yards down the street. The window had been broken and none of the glass remained. Inside, you could see a wooden table with a semi-

inflated basketball on it. Bernard sighted the air rifle and centered his sights on the middle of the orange sphere. He exhaled slowly and squeezed the trigger ever so gently. There was a puff of air, and the basketball rocked slightly. Bernard smiled. He aimed again, and gently squeezed, another puff of air. The basketball rocked.

Puff.

Puff.

Puff.

## Chapter Five

The crisp October wind sailed past my face as I pedaled down a street whose homes had burned down long ago. The charred remains of some of the houses still stood, while there was little more than piles of ash on other lots. After being fired, I'd gotten my bike out of storage, and on days like today, the extra mobility was proving invaluable.

I'd ridden out to Magoun Square because virtually no one lived over here anymore. This part of the city had burned in the fires of '15. Whole blocks had been reduced to piles of ash. The wooden triple deckers of Somerville had not held up nearly as well as the brick buildings in other parts of the city. The fire department had been completely overwhelmed. Though on a few of the blocks some of the houses were hardly touched at all. It had been random. The fire had jumped the trains tracks at some points, but not at others. Shifting winds had spared some streets. No one had ever been able to say why some blocks burned and others didn't.

I rode past the piles of ash that where families once ate spaghetti dinners, watched football games on Sundays and put up Christmas trees in the living room every winter. As I rode by some houses that were still standing, I slowed or even stopped to look them over, trying to figure out which ones were unoccupied. The city had never bothered to restore water and electric

services to the neighborhood, so almost no one was left. There might be one or two solitary holdouts from the old days who'd decided that they weren't moving no matter what, but running into a squatter was far more likely, and they could be a little unpredictable. Some were the nicest people you'd ever meet, and others wouldn't think twice about pulling a knife on you to get at your wallet or phone. Most squatters were just people trying to get by, usually for a week or two until they found a more permanent situation. Everyone knew someone who had lived in a vacant for a little bit. But there was a class of permanent squatters. Some holed up in one house or neighborhood for months or years, while others had a circuit of houses they stayed at, living a semi-nomadic existence. Some of these squatters were just mentally ill and others were doing things they didn't want anyone knowing about. It was this latter group I really wanted to avoid.

Eventually I turned onto a block that still had most of its houses. I stopped and looked at a light blue house in the middle of the block that looked sturdy enough but was in greater disrepair than the houses around it. Windows broken, shingles falling off and scorch mark all across one side. If I was a squatter, I'd pick one of the other houses.

Like a lot of the city, the houses around here were so close together there was only room for a driveway between them and not much else. I got off my bike and walked it down the driveway. The windows on the house were boarded up and the paint was peeling, but overall it looked like it was still in good condition. Hopefully it wouldn't collapse on me. I walked into the back yard and then carried my bike up the stairs to the back porch. The lock on the back door was broken. I pushed it open a little and called "Hello?"

No response. "Is anyone here? Don't want to bother anyone." I didn't hear anything moving, so I opened the door all the way and found myself in the kitchen. The cabinets were almost all open, but there was nothing in them except dust and spider webs. This was as good a

spot as any. I chained my bike to the railing of the back porch and hung my helmet on the handlebars. Then I went inside.

The downstairs was pretty much empty except for little bits of trash. A soda can, some newspaper pages, torn cardboard boxes, an open book laying facedown on the ground. No doubt more than a few people had come through here before me looking for anything of value. Either the owner or someone else had cleaned the place out. Probably both. There were only a couple pieces of broken furniture. In what had probably been the dining room there was a wooden table that had broken almost in half, and laying on the floor in the front room there were the remains of a particleboard bookcase that had been broken in several pieces.

At least it wasn't filled with trash, or worse. That had been the case with one of the houses I'd tried earlier. Squatters would use houses down the street from where they were living as garbage dumps. Sometimes you could smell these houses before you got within fifty feet of them. Though some of the squatters just threw the trash in a back room of the house they were staying in and moved when the smell got too bad. When I'd walked inside the house earlier that afternoon, I opened the door and right in front of me was a pile of trash at least five feet high. I looked at it for a second, and then closed the door and went on my way.

As I surveyed the downstairs, it looked to me like no one had ever squatted here for long. None of the telltale odors. I walked over to the stairwell and stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up. Silence. I didn't want to go up there. Hopefully it was empty, just like the downstairs, but you never knew for sure. I called out, "Is anyone up there?" No response. Jesus. My heart pounded in my chest as I put my hand on the railing. I went up the first two steps and the echoes of the creaking steps bounced around the empty house. The next three steps were the same.

Suddenly relieved, I turned around and jogged back down the steps. If there was anyone up there, I'd sure as hell hear them when they tried to come down. Also, I had no desire to see more of the house than I had to. There was no telling what was up there, and there are some things that's can't be unseen. When I got to the bottom of the steps, I took three deep breaths to calm myself down. There was no one here. I told myself that three times.

At what point did cautiousness end and paranoia begin? We weren't quite there yet but give it time. I walked through the downstairs rooms and decided on the back room next to the kitchen. The room was empty except for some dust, a few pieces of crumpled paper and a cardboard box that lay facedown on the ground.

I took off my backpack and put it down the wooden floor. After opening it, I pulled out about seven cans of spray paint and arranged them by color on the floor. The white wall that separated this room from the kitchen had seven or eight holes pretty much in the middle. It looked like someone had either punched the dry wall, or more likely they had taken a hammer to it. Either way, the owner was going to have to re-do the wall, so I figured it was fine to use the wall as a canvas.

I started with the green, spraying the outline of a narrow triangle and then filling it in with different layers to see how many I'd need. I stared at it for a moment. This dark green triangle on a white wall. I hadn't done much with spray paint in a while. I'd need some time to remember the techniques and figure out the colors they'd given me.

The day before Robbie had texted me and told me to meet him at the basketball court behind the apartment complex at seven in the evening. When I got there, it was deserted except for a few people sitting on some of the benches. It was dark and most of the streetlights were out, so there was just enough illumination to make out that a few of the benches had dark, formless

shadows perched on them. However, it seemed that the number one reason people went outside to walk on a cold November evening was to smoke, so in the darkness, little orange lights appeared and disappeared over and over like miniature lighthouses warning others to steer clear. Only instead of rocky shoals, it was morose citizens craving solitude. People who wanted to socialize while they smoked stayed in the well-lit park between the buildings. People came around back to the basketball court because they wanted to be alone.

I ambled around looking for Robbie. I ignored the benches with the tiny lighthouses because Robbie didn't smoke. On my third pass by a bench I recognized Robbie. He was wearing a black overcoat and a scaly cap, and as I sat down I noticed a duffel bag underneath the bench. We made small talk for awhile, and he told me that everything I needed was in the bag and that I had four days to practice before we went down to Field's Corner. Robbie said he had to meet some people, so we said our goodbyes, and he walked off into the darkness. I watched him go for a minute before picking up the bag and heading home.

The white wall with its holes and green triangle stared back at me. The vast expanse of white made the canvas taller than I was and it was twice as long. After a minute, I used a pale blue to start painting a face, and at first it was a man's face, but then as it developed, I realized it was turning into Rocky the Flying Squirrel. So what choice did I have? I finished him as best I could and added his goggles. I looked at my handiwork. Not bad. I thought about adding Bullwinkle but decided to do a couple of other cartoon characters instead. At one point I put Rufus on there. He was the monkey I used as my signature. I wanted to do what I had to do as quickly as possible on the off chance I was interrupted. So I started testing different colors and sketching out ideas for the memorial, and as I stood there in that white room I didn't think about whether or not I would have a job next week, or if Jenny and Dave would lose their apartment,

and I forgot all about people coming down the stairs or breaking down the front door, I just stood there in the soft, morning light that came in through the windows and worked...

Until I heard the sound of my bicycle crashing. Without thinking I rushed over to the back door of the house, and there was a shocked kid standing there looking at me. He couldn't have been more than eight or nine and he was dressed in dirty jeans, a torn green coat and a red winter hat with a pom-pom on top. We stared at each other for moment and neither of us moved. I didn't even breathe.

And then bent down and snatched my bike helmet up and took off running.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?" I shouted and took off after him.

He sprinted across the backyard and through a gap in the fence into the neighboring backyard. I followed him, squeezing through the fence, catching my coat sleeve on a nail or something. I kept shouting at him to stop, but he just ran across the yard, past the house and out into the street. I ran after him, my feet pounding on the sidewalk, watching him as he ran down the middle of the deserted street.

I could hear my feet pounding against the asphalt as I tried to catch him. He ran down the driveway along the side of a yellow house and headed into the back yard and pushed his way through the waist high, dead grass. Usually there would've been a fence there, to separate the yards, but there wasn't, and I began to slow down as I waded through the tall grass because something wasn't right. In front of me was a picnic table of all things, and then I realized that the grass had been trampled down all around it. Someone obviously hung out there. I stopped at the edge of this miniature clearing and stared at the picnic table. It was such a bizarre thing to see, as if someone in this burnt out neighborhood was going to sit down with the family and eat hot dogs and hamburgers. I started to look around and while I didn't see anyone either in the yard or on

any of the three back porches of the triple decker in front of me, I did see cigarette butts littering the ground and a couple of crushed beer cans laying in the weeds next to the house.

I had lost track of the kid. I no idea where he had gone. I suspected he was probably hiding on one of the porches. I had no desire no chase this kid through that house, who knows what or who was in there, but I didn't want to just give up on the helmet. I went and sat at the picnic table. If he saw me waiting him out, he might just give up and toss the helmet onto the lawn from wherever he was hiding, or an adult might come out or something. I also needed to catch my breath. I hadn't done that much strenuous exercise in years, and I had a cramp in my right side.

So I sat there at the picnic table and waited. The sun couldn't be seen through the thick clouds, or smog, or both. And there were no sounds coming from any of the houses. No children running around and yelling, or music, or a television. I watched a blue jay fly onto the lawn and peck at something in the grass. The minutes passed and my breathing slowed, little by little until my chest was no longer heaving. I looked up at sky that was getting darker and darker and wondered how long it would be before it started raining.

Just then I heard a door shut, and a boy walked down the wooden stairs of the house. He was wearing jeans and a red jacket. His brown hair was just long enough to cover his face. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he started walking toward me, and I figured he was about eleven or twelve.

He smiled as he walked up to me and softly said, "Hello."

"Hi," I said.

The kid didn't act like finding me sitting at the picnic table was strange in any way. He just sat down next to me and didn't say anything for a minute. He just sat there, lazily tracing the

outline of a figure eight on his thigh. I waited for him to ask me who I was or why I was sitting on the picnic table in his back yard, but he just sat there, so after a minute I said, "Maybe you can help me. I'm looking for a blonde haired boy of about seven or eight who ran off with my bike helmet. I think he's on one of those porches or maybe he ran inside. Do you know him?"

The boy stopped tracing figure eights and looked up at me and smiled shyly, "You mean Tommy."

I shrugged.

The boy sighed, "Yeah, that's him. He's been doing that lately. Do you want me to get it back for you?"

"Yes, please. That would be great."

"It shouldn't be hard. He's probably watching us right now," The boy said as he looked around at the windows and porches above us. "That's another thing he likes to do now, watch. He's always spying on people when he shouldn't be."

The boy stood up and walked to the middle of the yard, and then with his hands on his hips he said, "Tommy, I know you can hear me. You drop down that helmet you stole and we'll forget all about it. But if you don't, I'll tell Uncle Dave."

For a moment nothing happened, but then I saw some movement from the second floor balcony, and Tommy stood up holding my helmet over his head with both hands and before I could say anything, he tossed it over the edge. It rotated as if fell and then hit the ground with a dull thud. Tommy opened the door the second floor apartment and disappeared inside.

The boy walked over to my helmet, picked it up and started brushing the dirt off it as he walked back toward me. "I knew he'd be up there," the boy said. "He can peep through these small gaps in the wood."

The boy then handed my helmet back to me. The helmet was still good, right? The ground was cold and hard in late October, but it wasn't that hard.

"Thank you," I said.

"No problem," The boy said smiling at me again. He reached out to shake my hand and said, "I'm Ian."

I was about to tell him my name was Branden, but then I wondered if I should go with Mr. Walsh instead. Although I didn't think it was wise to give out my full name around here. Who knew what mischief people could get up to on the internet if they got ahold of your information. So instead I just shook his hand and told him it was nice to meet him. His hand was limp when we shook and I almost found myself giving him the firm handshake speech my Uncle Steve always gave me, but then I figured, who was I to tell this kid what to do?

Ian sat down next to me and sort of looked up at me through his long, brown hair. He had this kind of subdued smile. He just sat there looking up at me as the wind blew fallen leaves across the grass. I looked up at the sky. The clouds, these were definitely clouds and not smog, were getting darker and darker, and it seemed like it was going to rain sooner rather than later. I looked down at Ian, and he was still there looking up at me with that smile. When I made eye contact, he looked as if he was about to ask me something, but then looked down at the ground as if he was embarrassed.

"So, how long have you lived here?" I said.

When he looked up at me, he brushed his hair back behind his ear, "Oh, here? We don't live here. We just come by from time to time."

"Oh, ok." I had no idea what meant. "You guys move around a lot?"

He nodded.

Yeah, they were probably squatters.

"Where do you go to school?"

Ian just shrugged and looked away, his gaze somewhere over the houses. Then he looked back at me through the hair that had fallen over his face and slid over so he was sitting right next to me, his shoulder touching mine. "Did you have fun chasing Tommy around?"

"What? No."

Ian shrugged. "I guess sometimes it's fun. Like tag or something. It's not for me though. It's a bit too capricious for me."

"Capricious?"

"Yeah, I think so. Don't you?" He said looking up from his spot right next to me, and I had no idea why he was sitting so close. I slid over a few inches.

"Where is everybody? Are your parents or someone around?"

He shook his head, through the hair that swayed back and forth across his face I could see a moment of pain flicker in his expression. "My parents? They're not around anymore. And everyone else is probably still sleeping, or just waking up."

"Just waking up?"

"Yeah. People usually get up around now. Uncle Dave says its because we work the night shift."

The night shift? What the hell? Were they salvaging at night? Why the hell would they do that? They'd need flashlights and it'd be cold as hell. Whatever they were doing, they didn't want to be seen, so maybe I didn't want to meet Uncle Dave. Were they breaking into people's houses? Pick-pocketing or mugging people who'd had a few too many? As I ran through the possibilities, I heard someone talking and two people emerged from between the houses. The first was a

teenage girl a few years older than Ian wearing jeans and a pink windbreaker, and behind her was a portly, balding man wearing a black suit without the tie. In one of his hands was a small brown paper bag that probably held a fifth of whiskey or vodka. They headed for the house to the right, and the girl looked over at Ian and gave him a sad, little smile, but the man avoided looking at us, and she led the way onto the porch and then walked into the ground floor apartment. The man followed her in, and then the door closed behind them, and then in the silence that followed, I tried to digest what had just happened as we sat there on a picnic table underneath that grey November sky.

It was as if my mind was empty. I just sat there staring at the door to the first floor apartment, and I remember the wind blowing the fallen leaves across the ground and birds landing on the lawn, but the inner monologue has disappeared from my mind, and it was as if I could only observe my surroundings. I don't know how long I would have sat there, staring, if Ian hadn't put his hand on my thigh.

He looked up at me and smiled, "It's getting cold. Do you want to go inside?"

I leapt up from my seat and shouted, "What? No!" I stood there on the grass looking down at him and a thousand thoughts ran through my mind. The poor kid. How long had he - Jesus Fucking Christ. I looked back over my shoulder at the apartment door the sad girl in the pink windbreaker had disappeared into. My god. I looked back down at Ian who had gotten up from the picnic table and backed off a couple of feet. A slightly confused expression on his face. I'd startled him. There had been anger in my voice, and I scared him. A large angry man, shouting at him. That was something he'd probably had a lot of experience with already.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. I just-"

On that cold autumn afternoon, Ian stood there on the grass, and looked up at me, waiting for me to do something, and I couldn't find any words. I think my hands kept moving, making gestures, trying to convey everything that I couldn't say, but how could a twelve year old interpret the disjointed hand movements of an adult who was just as confused as he was? I didn't know what to do. I just stared at him until I said, "Ian, we need to go. We need to leave here. You need to come with me."

Panic flashed across his face for a second, and he took several steps backwards while saying, "I don't think that's a good idea."

Fuck, that was stupid! I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my fists tightly for a second because I realized how I must look from his point of view. Some strange man comes chasing Tommy around, looking for little boys to- and now this creep wants to take him away.

He wouldn't come with me. What the hell could I do? I could at least give him some money. I reached back toward my wallet to give him some money, but my hand froze in the air midway. I couldn't give him money. What the hell was I thinking? What if the police or someone came by? What would they say? What if Uncle Dave or someone was watching from the windows. Taking photos. Videos. What could a person like that do with a photo of me giving money to Ian? Fuck. I couldn't give him money. What the hell could I do? The police. I had to call the police.

I looked up at Ian, and his eyes got wide when he saw my face. Now I know that the pain and desperation must have twisted my facial expression into something like some sort of demented psychopath, but right then, I was so desperate that in my mind, I was pleading with him to fix all of this. Somehow, someday, he would say something that would give us a way out.

But of course he didn't say anything. He took another couple of steps back and looked over his shoulder at one of the apartments, and I could see him thinking about calling for Uncle Dave.

Uncle Dave.

What would Uncle Dave do if Ian started shouting for help. He'd have a gun for sure. A Glock or a Beretta. Something loud, powerful, and no one around here would hear the shot, and even if they did, no one would report it. The chubby businessman would just run away and pretend none of this had ever happened. Uncle Dave would throw my body in one of the vacant, and he'd pack up everyone and leave. My corpse would rot away in the corner of some abandoned building as the rats and maggots ate my flesh. No one would ever find me. Alisa would go from door to door, asking for me, searching, but never getting close, and Kira would sit there alone at breakfast wondering why her father had abandoned her.

My heart was pounding against the inside of my chest, and my breaths were coming in frantic gulps, but I couldn't calm myself down. Everything was happening too quickly. It was as if I could watch myself panicking, but I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I looked at Ian as he stood there, uncertain. His green eyes staring right at me. His breathing was quick and shallow, and I realized there was nothing I could do.

I couldn't help him here. Uncle Dave might appear any minute. What if he had friends? Fuck. Fuck. What the... how... I had to call... What if someone... Should I...

"I gotta go, Ian. I'm sorry. I have to."

I started to jog back the way I had come and ended up running across that overgrown field, and I didn't stop until I reached the street on the other side. Once my feet hit asphalt, I stopped and looked back.

I could just make out Ian standing on top of the picnic table, watching me.

His hands were in his pockets, and even though I know I must have been too far away to actually see this, when I remember him standing there, I see his green eyes pleading with me to do something.

I stood there in the middle of that broken and cracked street and watched him for a moment. He just stood there, the wind blowing his hair around his face, until he looked back over his shoulder as if someone had called his name.

I took off down the street, running as fast as I could. Eventually I made it back to the abandoned house where I had been painting. Mercifully, my bike and everything was still there. It took me a minute to cram all of the paints into my backpack, and the whole time I was doing it, I kept looking out the dirty back window to see if anyone was following me across the lawn. Each time I looked, the backyard was completely empty, but when I left, I still opened the door a crack to see if there was anyone there before I stepped out, but the only thing moving was the tall grass swaying back and forth in the wind. I opened the door the rest of the way and carried my bike down the stairs of the porch and onto the driveway. Then I got on the bike and pedaled away from the house as fast as I could.

I kept thinking that I had to get far enough away so they couldn't sneak up on me. My legs were pumping as fast as they could and my quads were starting to burn as I sped down the street weaving between the weeds that were popping up through the cracks in the asphalt. After a minute, I went up this small hill and by the time I got to the top, my legs were burning, and I was breathing so heavily that I had to stop.

As I caught my breath, I checked behind me, but the street was deserted. I could still see the cluster of houses, and it looked like a little island in an ashen sea. What the hell was

happening? I was actually running away from a pimp. A child pimp. As soon as I thought that, I imagined Ian standing there on that picnic table, the wind blowing his hair across his face. I had to call the police. I took out my phone and frantically dialed 911. It only took them a second to answer.

"911. Where is the exact location of your emergency?"

"It's um. It's, shit. I don't the exact address- I'm in Somerville, near Magoun Square. Look, there's... there's been... Um, I saw some child prostitutes working for this guy, Uncle Dave they called him. They're in some abandoned houses. You have to send someone."

"Sir, can you be more specific with the address? Where is the emergency exactly."

"Um...." I told her to hold on, and I put her on speaker phone while I brought up the maps and after a minute, I told her where I was, then I tried to retrace my route more or less and tell her what I thought was the right address. She said she was sending someone over right away and then asked me to tell her what had happened. I explained everything about the kid who'd stolen my helmet, Ian, Uncle Dave, the girl in the pink windbreaker, everything. She kept me on the line and kept asking me questions until a patrol car appeared and she told me to hang up and talk to them.

The car rolled up beside me and the officer already had his driver's side window down.

"Sir, did you call 911?"

"Yes, officer."

"What's the emergency?"

"You see those houses down there?" I pointed to the cluster of houses and he nodded, "I think there's some child prostitution going on there. I saw a fourteen or fifteen year old girl in a pink windbreaker go into this abandoned apartment with a middle aged man, and I think I got

propositioned by this eleven or twelve year boy named Ian who asked me to come inside with him, and Ian said there's this guy he called Uncle Dave who runs the whole thing, I never saw him, but-

"Alright, hold on," the officer said as he got on his radio and called for backup. When he was done talking on the radio he said, "Two other cars will be here in five or ten minutes. Now I'm Officer McCormick, what your name?"

"Branden Walsh."

"Branden, do you think you can show me exactly which house they're in?"

I pointed to the cluster of houses and tried to explain which one it was. He asked me if I was willing to get closer and point it out so they knew exactly which house I was talking about. I agreed, and he told me to get in the back of the patrol car, so I chained my bike to a telephone pole and got in the back of the car. The vinyl seats squeaked as I got in, and once I shut the door, he started off slowly down the street. I stared at the metal grille that separated the backside from the front and it was odd just being in the back of the car, like I'd done something wrong.

Once we got about one hundred yards away, he pulled over and let me out of the car, and we approached on foot. We walked down the sidewalk until we got to the house where I'd done the graffiti and then we slunk through the weeds until I was able to point out the house where I'd met Ian.

Then we made our way back to the patrol car and by the time we got there, there were two more police cars parked next to it, and three officers standing on the sidewalk. Officer McCormick explained to the other officers what the situation was and they made a plan to approach the house from different directions. They told me just to wait by the cars. So I did.

They split up into pairs and set out. I sat down on the curb next to one of the cars. The concrete was cold underneath me, and I shoved my hands into my pockets to keep them out of the wind. What the hell was happening? It all seemed so surreal. I mean, you heard about these things from articles online or news reports, and in the office there were always rumors of murders or rapes or drug kingpins, but you never expected to see it yourself. Especially these days. I mean back in the middle teens things had been rough, especially '15 and '16. Two or three murders happened everyday and god only knows how many of them were solved. You couldn't walk most streets at night because it was almost guaranteed you'd get mugged. It seemed like every week in winter they'd find a whole family of squatters frozen to death. This whole thing felt like it should've happened back then. I thought we'd put all of that behind us. As I sat there, I couldn't stop picturing the fearful expression on Ian's face as he backed away from me. He'd been scared.

Of me.

All the things that kid had to be scared of, and I was just another one. Jesus Fucking Christ... the expression on his face was just... I took a series of deep breaths and tried to calm myself. This was getting me nowhere. I tried to think of something else, and I settled on going over in my mind what had happened again and again. I sat there on the curb under that grey November sky and tried to get my story straight, to remember all the details, so I could be a consistent witness. Those fuckers wouldn't get off because I contradicted myself.

When the officers came back, it was just the four of them. What the... I stood up and Officer McCormick walked over to me and said, "There was no one there. We saw signs that people had been there, soda cans, bags of half eaten chips, fresh cigarette butts, but no one. Look

like they took off right after you left. We checked the other houses and no one is in any of the those either."

Fuck. I should've called sooner. I shouldn't have waited until I'd gotten far enough away. Goddamn it. Two of the officers got into one of the cars and pulled away. The other officer stood behind Officer McCormick, who was staring at me.

"One thing I haven't got quite clear," Officer McCormick said, "How did you end up out here in the first place?"

His tone was different. There was a sternness that hadn't been there before. It was then that I noticed the officer behind him had his hand lightly resting on his gun.

Why was I here? Out here in the middle of nowhere. How did I know where child prostitutes hung out? They thought...

"Officer, I know this is going to sound weird," I said and then immediately thought, Don't say that! That's how a guilty man would start, "Look, I was doing some graffiti."

Officer McCormick looked skeptical, "Aren't you a little old for that?"

I pointed to my backpack, which was sitting on the sidewalk, "All my paints are in there."

"Can we take a look?"

"Please, feel free," I said while telling myself not to make any sudden movements. It was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine. Just tell them what happened. It's going to be fine.

While the other officer kept his eye on me, Officer McCormick went over to my backpack and opened it up. He took out all the cans of spray paint and lined them up on the sidewalk until the bag was empty. He checked to make sure there was nothing else in the bag. There wasn't.

"Ok, so, you do have spray paint," Officer McCormick said, "But what's a guy like you doing out here spray painting things?"

Some part of my brain whispered, Oh, I'm just out here drafting an antigovernment mural for a recently resurrected Revolutionary War fraternal society that in the past few weeks has committed several criminal acts and is intent on overthrowing the current regime.

I ignored that, and sighed before saying, "I just got laid off. I'm a... I was a graphic designer. I did the artwork for ads and promotional materials. And for the past week I've just been trapped in the house vacuuming, cleaning the floors, doing the laundry and trying not to think about how the hell we're going to pay the mortgage or save for my daughter's college tuition. I was driving myself crazy. I had to get outside and do something, and I used to do this as a kid, and I already had the spray paint, so I figured why not? It'd get me out of the damn house, and no one would care. No one lives here, and even if someone moves back in and they decide not to tear down the entire house, the walls I painted were already damaged, so they were going to have to fix them or replace the sheet rock anyway. I didn't think it wasn't hurting anyone."

The expression of both the officers softened, and I thought I could see some pity hiding just beneath the surface. Well, better than the alternative. Officer McCormick looked at the other officer, who'd taken his hand off his gun and was holding his belt instead, and both of them kind of shrugged at each other. Then Officer McCormick said, "Can you show us where you were doing the graffiti?"

"Yeah, it's in that house over there," I said pointing at the blue house.

"Let's go see it," the other officer said.

And so we went, with me leading the way. As we walked they asked me how, if I was doing graffiti in this house, had I noticed the kids in the other house. And so I told the story

again, how I had heard the noise of the eight-year-old kid trying to steal my bike, how he had taken my helmet and how I'd chased him and everything that followed. By the time I'd finished we were inside the house and looking at the painting I'd done. Thankfully, it wasn't anything political, mostly just a bunch of cartoon characters. The officers pointed out different characters they recognized and asked me about ones they didn't. The other officer pointed toward Rufus and asked what that was, and I mumbled something about a monkey that hadn't turned out well.

They seemed to believe me, and we walked back to the patrol cars and they took down my information and my official story. When they were done, I asked them what was going to happen next, and they glanced at each other with this expression that seemed to say how much should we tell this guy, and Officer McCormick said, "We're going to give this information to Crimes Against Children Unit, and they'll investigate and add all the information you've given us to their database. Most likely they've heard of this guy or crew before and this will be another piece in the puzzle to help catch these guys."

"So are you guys going to take fingerprints and things like that?"

The other officer rolled his eyes and starting walking over to his patrol car.

Officer McCormick said, "So, you never saw this Uncle Dave guy, right? You never saw if he touched anything?"

I shook my head.

"Do you know what apartment he was in?"

"No."

He nodded, "Look, you know how many prints are in those houses? They weren't the only people in those vacants, squatters are moving in and out all the time, and we have no idea where to even start looking. We don't have the resources or the manpower to fingerprint

everything in there and then check it all. You've given us good stuff here. We have a name, a description of the kids, we know what type of place this guy likes to work in. This is going to help, trust me."

I'm not sure how much either of us believed what he was saying. Sure, the info might help catch them, or this report might just be one of many and get lost somewhere in the filing cabinets down at the station. I'd never know. He thanked me for calling it in and asked if I needed a ride anywhere. I told him I'd just ride my bike. Then he and the other officer pulled out and I watched them drive off down road, past the ashen laws and charred remains of the neighborhood until they turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

I went back and got my bike and just starting riding. I rode by abandoned houses, broken down cars, stores with boarded up windows, and eventually I found myself on a bridge over the Mystic River. I stopped at the midpoint and leaned my bike up against the railing, and then leaned on the railing myself. The river stretched out in front of me, its dark water swirling as it moved downstream. The grey sky loomed over me, and I felt the first couple of drops of rain fall on my arms. I stood there for a while, watching the water slide by. At some point, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. My mother had called a few times, and I had several texts. Alisa had texted telling me to let her know if I wanted her to pick up anything from the store. Kira had texted me a picture of a painting she'd made in Art class. Two cats were sleeping in a tree, their tails wrapped around the branches they were sleeping on. Kira wrote that it was so they didn't fall out. And then there was a text from Robbie asking if I wanted to go out for a beer tonight. He probably wanted to talk about plans for the memorial. I texted him back.

*Can't tonight. How about tomorrow?*

As I stood there, what I kept coming back to was the fact that I had been scared. I had been scared of a little kid. A kid who had to-

And I couldn't help him. He's still out there somewhere, with Uncle Dave. That poor kid. I stood there watching the rain hit the river. Every time a drop hit the river, little concentric circles would ripple out, and I watched those little circles expand and disappear, until my phone beeped. Robbie had texted me back.

*Works for me. 8 at The Lantern?*

I texted back, *Yeah. Sounds good.*

After I sent the message, I stared at my phone for a moment, and then I sent another text.

*Are you still going to those protest marches in the Common?*

*Yeah. Why?*

*I think I want in. When's the next one?*

*Really? You're finally going to come out? What changed your mind?*

I stood there for a minute, my thumbs hovering just above the screen, and after a minute, I just wrote, *I realized doing anything is better than doing nothing.*

*Hahaha. Exactly. There's one this Friday at 5. I'll tell you about it tomorrow.*

*All right. Sounds good. See you tomorrow.*

I put the phone back into my pocket, and I leaned on the railing again. I kept picturing Ian standing on that picnic table. What had he been thinking as he watched me run away? What was he doing right now?

For days afterward I scanned the newspaper for any sign of the arrest, but I didn't see a thing. Which didn't mean anything one-way or the other. Sometimes I picture him standing on that picnic table, staring at me, those green eyes still pleading with me to help him. On that cold,

rainy November afternoon, I stood there on that bridge overlooking the river, and as the rain began to fall harder, I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head, and with that grey sky overhead, I watched the rain fall on the river. Little concentric circles appearing all over the surface of the water and radiating outward before disappearing. Under that grey afternoon sky, the water swirled beneath me as it slid farther and farther away and headed out to sea.

## Summary of the Entire Narrative

I envision *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* as three books. My thesis consists of probably the first 40% of Book I. What follows is a summary of the rest of Book I and Books II and III.

### Summary of the Second Half of Book I:

As the novel continues, Branden gets more and more involved in the Sons of Liberty. He participates in rallies, protests and boycotts and he has run-ins with police. Over the course of Book I, he begins to feel that the Sons of Liberty are actually accomplishing something and that what he is doing is worthwhile.

Branden is still out of work. His boss, Phil, lets Branden know that towards Christmas they're expecting to land a couple of major clients and that he is pushing for Branden to get hired back at full time. Branden debates whether he is willing to go back and work for "corporate stooges" who violate their employees' first amendment rights. He also thinks that he possibly could go back to work and wage a small guerrilla war for freedom from within the company ranks. At the same time, he is considering emigrating to Brazil in order to find work. He has a couple of friends down there, and there is plenty of work in the Lula Oil Fields, which are now one of the largest oils fields on Earth.

Now, while all this is going on, Branden and Alisa are fighting more and more because they are having money troubles, which is exacerbating other tensions in their relationship, and Alisa thinks that Branden needs to get his old job back. At some point, Branden also has to tell Alisa about the Sons of Liberty because she is suspicious of his coming and going at odd times, and that conversation does not go well.

In order to fix the water situation, Alisa ends up bribing the head of the maintenance crew by giving him an envelope full of cash at a restaurant. At the same time Jenny gets money from a loan shark to help stave off the diner closing, and when Jenny can't pay the loan shark, Alisa tries to help her and sees first hand what happens when you don't pay a loan shark. Later, Molly is attacked in her home and ends up in the hospital. The police chalk it up to a home invasion, but Alisa thinks that it has something to do with Molly's political activities because she was pissing off some powerful people and potentially messing with their revenue streams. Alisa's sections turn into something of a detective novel at this point as she tries to find the assailant.

At the end of the novel, Branden refuses to go back to his old job and work under what he calls intolerable conditions, and he has decided to stay in Boston and continue with the Sons of Liberty. Jenny loses the diner, and Alisa realizes that she'll never be able to find Molly's attacker.

## **Summary of Book II**

If this were a Shakespearian tragedy, Book II of *Meet Me at the Liberty Tree* would consist of the second part of Act II, Act III, and the first part of Act IV.

There are two main factions in the Sons of Liberty, the moderates and the radicals. The moderates favor protests, burning effigies, marches, boycotts and more traditional means of non-violent protest, while the radicals think that the only way to get things done is go beyond non-violent protests and use force: assaults, vandalism, destruction of property, occupying government buildings and theft from businesses associated with the Chinese. The more radical factions of the Sons of Liberty begin to operate more like organized crime, domestic terrorists or patriots who have started the beginnings of a nascent government, depending on your point of

view. In this book, Branden has to make a decision on whether to support the moderates or the radicals. Branden at first sides with the moderates, but as nothing seems to get accomplished, he believes that joining the radicals is the only way to actually change things and this sets in motion the events that lead to the climax in Book III.

Alisa is not pleased by all of this. She thinks Branden is acting dangerously and recklessly, and their arguments increase over the course of the novel, until by the end of Book II, Branden has moved out of the apartment and is living with his mother.

During Book II Alisa gets temporarily appointed to Molly's seat on the Condo Board, and she struggles to get anything substantive done because of bureaucracy, Doloris, different cliques and corruption. Eventually new Condo Board elections are announced, and Alisa runs for one of the Condo Board's open seats. At the end of Book II elections are held and Alisa loses.

Also, Alisa's friend Jenny and her family have to sell their apartment and move to Buffalo to live with Jenny's parents because they are broke. So at the end of Book II, Alisa's husband has moved out of the house, she lost the Condo Board election and her best friend has moved to Buffalo to live with her parents.

### **Summary of Book III**

This is the climax of the story and would be the end of Act IV and Act V in a Shakespearian tragedy. Because of their use of violence, Branden realizes that he has made a mistake in supporting the radicals and decides he has to rectify it, while Alisa is trying to create a stable life for Kira. She is also wondering if she should just give up on trying to do anything political.

Things are getting worse in the city of Boston, and riots are happening frequently, the police are out busting heads and members of the Sons of Liberty are found dead in gutters and others simply disappear. Some are leaving because the city is dangerous and others are killed by the police. Some people who have informed against the radical faction have been found dead with a piece of paper pinned to their chest that has the word “traitor” written on it.

Branden is determined to bring down the leader of the radical group because he believes that once the leader is removed from the equation, the moderates will gain power and be able to direct the Sons of Liberty in a more constructive direction. However, Branden doesn't want to turn him into the police because he's afraid the radicals will find out he's snitched and kill him or worse, go after Alisa and Kira as a message to others. There are also other factions of the Sons of Liberty that are still moderate and still fighting effectively against the corrupt municipal government, and he doesn't want to hurt the movement by making it look like the different groups are turning on each other, even though that is exactly what is happening. So, he decides to get the radical faction arrested and possibly make martyrs of them, and he thinks there might be a way to do this without getting himself caught.

The radical group Branden supported has been trying to get Branden to do some anti-Chinese propaganda specifically targeting the president of the People's Republic of China and other government officials. However, Inspector Yang, an “advisor” from the PRC, knows who Branden is and what he does, but as long as he keep the government of the P.R.C. out of it, she has told him she will leave him alone. She is a liaison between the P.R.C., Chinese business interests and the municipal government, so she doesn't care if Branden criticizes the municipal government, which she thinks is a corrupt mess.

However, Branden knows that once he goes after the Chinese President, Inspector Yang will investigate thoroughly, and she has more resources than the local police, so Branden agrees to the radical group's plan to create anti-P.R.C. propaganda, as long as they help him. He plans for this anti-Chinese graffiti to coincide with the climax of the story, a massive city wide protest designed to get Chairman Yonsen fired. Branden and the group go through with their anti-Chinese graffiti. The protest works, and Chairman Yonsen is fired, but Branden and the members of the radical group are arrested a few days later.

As Alisa struggles to create a stable life for Kira, she and Branden reconcile after he apologizes for many things, but he doesn't want to move back in because he doesn't want to put his family in danger, only he can't tell Alisa this. After a period of inactivity, Alisa becomes active again politically by supporting the marches and getting involved in local politics. She also tries to help Branden as she realizes he's gotten himself in over his head, but she can't. He is arrested, convicted and sent to an Alaskan work camp.

## Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.
- Banksy, Robin. *Banksy: Wall and Piece*. London: Random House Group Limited, 2005.
- Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.
- Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: Norton, 1986.
- Butler, Robert Olen, and Janet Burroway. *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*. New York: Grove, 2005.
- Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.
- DRJonGRIM219. "RULES OF GRAFFITI! THE BENCH O)." *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Oct. 2012. Web. 21 Oct. 2015.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: A. Knopf, 1984.
- Hoffman, Michael J., and Patrick D. Murphy. *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1988.
- Howcast. "4 Tips for Beginners | Graffiti Art." *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Aug. 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2015.
- Howcast. "How to Use Graffiti Caps | Graffiti Art." *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 Aug. 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2015.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1946.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
- Jin, Ha. *In the Pond: A Novel*. Cambridge, MA: Zoland, 1998.
- Lee, Chang-Rae. *On Such a Full Sea*. New York: Riverhead, 2014.
- Lowe, N. J. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- Min, Anchee, Jie, Zhang, and Duoduo. *Chinese Propaganda Posters*. Köln: Tashcen,

2003.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949.

Pamuk, Orhan, and Nazim Dikbaş. *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010.

Parzybok, Benjamin. *Sherwood Nation*. Easthampton: Small Beer Press, 2014

Rubin, Louis D. *The Teller in the Tale*. Seattle: U of Washington, 1967.

Stevick, Philip. *The Theory of the Novel*. New York: Free, 1967.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Works of Henry David Thoreau*. Stamford, CT: Longmeadow, 1995.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

## **Vita**

Aaron J. Romano-Meade was born in Rainer Beach, Washington. After graduating from The Berkshire School in 1999, he attended Colgate University and graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in History in 2003. He served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kazakhstan from 2006-2008 where he taught English at School #3 in Aksai, West Kazakhstan Oblast. He taught in New England boarding schools and the Boston Public Schools while attending writing classes at Umass Boston and Grub Street Inc. He then matriculated into the Master of Fine Arts Degree in the Bilingual Creative Writing Program at The University of Texas at El Paso, which he attended from 2013-2106. In the Creative Writing Department, he taught undergraduate courses at the introductory and advanced levels and won the Graduate School's 2016 Outstanding Teaching Award for Master's Candidates.

Contact Information: [ajromanomeade@miners.utep.edu](mailto:ajromanomeade@miners.utep.edu)

This thesis was typed by the author.